

CICADA RISING

Vol. 1

Raea Gragg

She collides with the clouds.

Her F-22 Raptor - the fastest plane left to mankind - cuts through the fading layers of sunset and bursts into a darkening sky. She holds back a smile, but her eyes betray her as a tear slips free and dribbles across the faded scar on her cheek.

Why am I crying?

These things – feelings - drag her down. Shame, adrenaline, and the unspeakable fear that she has just betrayed everything and everyone she has ever known. Her trusted response? Ignore it all. *What are you made of Andy?*

I am Andy.

I am an Air Force cadet.

I am training to be...

Her thoughts stall. Her automatic response isn't working - because it's no longer true. She bites her tongue. The awkward pressure in her lap pins her to her seat. She dares not look down, refuses to acknowledge the claustrophobia of a cockpit built for one, not two passengers. Refocusing on the horizon, she angles west. Not that there is anywhere to go - the only direction that matters is away. Andy forces herself to breathe through her mouthpiece, ignoring the constriction of the beautiful red ballgown she's wearing.

Come on. Focus!

But she can't. The alcohol hasn't burned off yet. Everything's numb - fuzzy, even.

She snaps the jet downward, fighting negative G's, dropping below the cloud layer to reveal an endless darkness below. An impenetrable canopy of rainforest. The last of the sunlight clings to the tallest trees that glow red as the sun sinks ahead of her.

The Wildlands.

Beyond it, coming fast: the Northern Mountains. Limestone spires rise above the expanse of swamp, like long-lost islands. One peak rises above the rest with its snow white summit. Before The Last Day, this land had been desert reshaped by the polar melt. A changed world. A new geological time. Andy's time.

Her father's haunting voice whispers to her. *What are you made of Andy?*

"I don't know!"

Another emotion seeps in, a familiar one: rage. She lets her training take over. She scans the Wildlands below, fists tightening as she pushes the throttle forward and banks left. The last thing she wants is to run into the rumored 'killer of the sky.' *The Taipan*. The engines answer. *3G's.... come on...* The jet thunders forward, leaving an ear-splitting sonic boom in its wake.

Then there's the other problem - the girl. Andy's face flushes. Embarrassment or anger? Hard to tell. She avoids looking down, but the girl's naked, unconscious body is pressed against her under crushing G-force. The bitter taste of clarity slices through her frontal cortex with a sharp stab of self-awareness.

What the fuck am I doing?

Andy checks her perimeter. The stolen F-22 races above the treetops. *Nowhere to land. Nowhere to go.*

"MEOW!"

Andy looks over her shoulder to her lifelong companion, a lovable yet hideous looking creature: Batcat. A mutated hairless feline, hybridized with a vampire bat. He clambers across the dashboard, skeletal tail lashing in disapproval.

"We are not turning around," Andy declares.

"MEE-OOWWRRROW!" He protests, ears folding behind his wrinkled, fanged face as Andy throws the plane into a sharp turn.

The alcohol fades. That warm, intoxicating power gives way to cold clarity. Everything sharpens - along with a panic-inducing flood of memories that Andy tries to shove down.

"MEOW!"

“You’re not helping!” She shouts over the roar of the engine.

“MEEOW!”

This time she looks back. *Oh, great.* Three drones scream toward them. *They’re coming for us.* Andy banks left. The drones mirror her move. *Who sent them?*

For the first time since takeoff, she truly feels the girl’s weight - buckled into the same single seat. She glances down. Limp, pale. Slumped against Andy’s red dress. *Why her?* Resentment creeps in. The girl’s body looks sculpted, untouched. Still-wet, flame-red hair spills across Andy’s arm. Too perfect. Too innocent. Andy can’t decide whether it’s intrigue - or hatred - she feels.

“MEOW!” Batcat paws Andy’s hand that grips the throttle forcing her eyes to snap back to the sky. They’re in the mountains now. Large limestone cliffs jut out like knives. Andy curls the plane into a narrow valley. *How long was I staring at her? A second? Two?* That’s all it takes to make mistakes in the air. Through her fighter helmets visor Andy focuses ahead. *What will they do to us if we go back?*

A red warning light ignites. BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

Shit.

She needs to land. *Soon.* She glances at the unbroken rainforest hugging the sides of storm carved cliffs. *Nowhere to land. Nowhere to go. Alien territory.*

“MEEOW!”

The drones have surrounded her. A static buzz - the intercom comes to life.

“Andrea Tanaka!”

Jade.

The voice of her best friend - usually calm and steady, now shaking in fear. Three drones. One on each side, one on her tail. Andy activates her aux. “Did you send them?”

“Turn the plane around, Andy!” Jade pleads with her.

She answers with motion, not words. She rips the stick, rolling the plane onto its side, slamming into afterburner. The Raptor whips around a cliff edge. BOOM! The left drone smashes into the canyon wall and bursts into flames behind her. Despite herself, Andy smiles. Simulator hours well spent.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?” Jade yells in her helmet’s headset. “You’re destroying colony property!”

“Jade, step aside.” A new voice cuts in over the radio. “ANDY--listen to me. I am your counselor and I ORDER you to stand down!”

Not a chance.

The fuel gauge blazes red. Alarms blare. The canyon narrows. Andy pulls hard, lifting the nose straight upward and shoots for the moon. The two remaining drones stay locked on her. The girl’s body presses tighter - soft, fragile, out of place within the steel of the Raptor as they careen skyward.

Another tear slips free.

“Don’t do this, Andy...” her counselor begs, “don’t do this to me.”

The real question, sir, is how could you do this to me?

She kills the engine. The jet hangs weightless. The drone’s overshoot by milliseconds. She fires. Direct hit. The second drone explodes. The cockpit goes quiet. No alarms. No voices. Just the thin whine of the engine and her own breath inside the mask as gravity herself forgets what to do with her. Then it remembers and she drops.

Batcat, Andy, the girl with the red hair - everything floats as the plane plunges back to earth. Batcat spreads his wings and hisses, flapping against gravity. The final drone dives after them.

Jade again: “ANDY! Stop this!”

But I can’t. Can I?

She closes her eyes. Even Batcat’s wail can’t cut through the ringing silence in her ears. She tunes it all out, ripping off her oxygen mask. She relaxes her neck. Gravity pulls her helmet against the headrest.

I guess this is it.

She inhales. Sweet and sharp... the scent of pine needles. The girl’s hair presses into her nose. Andy breathes the scent of her. A second thought occurs. *What’s the point of saving someone only to end up killing them?* Her eyes snap open. Both hands seize the throttle. She pulls hard, tilting the plane up right before barreling into the treetops.

Coasting. Not for long.

The fuel gauge is no longer flashing—it’s solid red. Empty.

The intercom buzzes to life. Voices colliding. “Let me talk to her—Hold on—What’s happening now—Give it to me—”

A third voice breaks through and it's the last person she expects to hear. "Andy..."
Warning light blares. Batcat screams. The scent of pine fills the cockpit.
"Andy... I love you."

--- One Day Prior ---

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 11 hours, 26 minutes
Until Commissioning

"This is your last day."

Mrs. Ruby Parker, the Commander, paces in front of the Air Force cadets, sipping her artificial coffee. The woman moves silently across the concrete floor; its cold, gray foundation matches her eyes. She studies the teenagers standing at attention. Gray-streaked hair bound back into a headachy bun, firm frown lines etched into her jowl, a fierce woman carved from military might. The only thing that glows is the golden commanders pin on her lapel, a soaring phoenix reborn from its nest of fire.

"This is your last chance to prove yourselves," she continues. "It's true, none of you asked to be here. None of you asked to be born into this world... into this time."

The Commander pauses in front of one cadet. Stubbornly unblinking. Spine locked straight. The girl stands with perfect posture except for the mutant cat squirming on her shoulder whose blood-red eyes are fixed on the Commander.

Andy tenses as Batcat's claws dig through her green flight suit while Mrs. Parker takes another sip of her coffee, studying them both.

Relax buddy, Andy silently begs. His claws retract. She exhales.

"And yet here you are." Mrs. Parker squints into Andy's dark brown almost-black eyes. The Commander is so close that Andy can smell a sickness from her. Something rotting, dying.

Andy forces herself not to flinch under the stare of Utoya Air Base's highest-ranking officer. The one with the power to change the course of her life. She knows why the Commander

hasn't flinched, why they can both taste the distrust hanging in the air. The truth sits in her gut like a block of ice that refuses to melt.

Because one of us is a killer, and the other one knows it.

The Commander peels away from Andy. "All of you have come far," she says to the rows of teenagers. "All of you have sacrificed. All of you understand our oath."

"PROTECT. SERVE. SURVIVE." The cadets recite in unison.

"You understand the danger we face. The world we find ourselves in. As the next generation of humanity, you stand at the crossroads between those who came before you and those who will come next."

Andy studies the Commander. Her body, stiff as rebar. Her words, heavy as iron. A speech like this is? Unheard of. In all her years as a cadet, Andy has never seen the Commander appear in person before the Department of Defense's Air Force Academy. A motivational speech, no less. *Something's off.*

"And for three of you..." She looks at the only other eighteen-year-olds in their class, two boys at the end of the lineup. "Your training ends today." Once more, the Commander stops in front of Andy. "So make today count."

They eye one another.

"HSSSSS!" Batcat growls, leathery wings twitching, fangs bared.

Andy snaps into a salute, shoving Batcat back with her forearm. "YES, MA'AM!" The rest of the class salutes. Batcat's knobby tail swishes against her uniform.

Buddy, what is wrong with you today?

Claws dig into her shoulder; an agitated rumble vibrates through his wrinkled body as Mrs. Parker places a cold hand on Andy's shoulder. Andy constricts, stands tighter, straighter. Batcat bares his needle-sharp fangs at their superior leader. "GRRR!"

The Commander's scowl deepens. She tightens her grip on Andy's shoulder as Batcat raises a paw to strike.

Then Mrs. Parker lets go, turns away, and sips her coffee in dismissal.

With the commander gone Andy drops her shoulders a fraction and shoots Batcat a warning look. "What's wrong with you?" She whispers to the cat.

Sensing a second source of disapproval Andy finds First Lieutenant Officer Conrad Tanner glaring at her. Clean-cut, sharp, twenty-one. He steps forward and addresses his cadets.

“Alright everyone, you heard it from the commander herself, let's finish with a good bookmark on this year's training, let's make today count. You five, grab the M16's. You four, prepare the trucks.”

The formation disassembles to their duties. Andy heads to the trucks.

“Tanaka. A word.” Conrad mutters.

Andy swallows and turns.

“Can you explain that?” he asks, gesturing to Batcat.

“No, sir.”

“You know I allow you to bring...” Conrad swallows back a visible gag as he looks at the hybrid mutant perched on Andy's shoulder. “...your pet to exercises. But if it misbehaves again, I will remove Batcat from any future mission. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

Conrad nods. “Dismissed.”

Andy hurries to the truck, chin tucked, swallowing embarrassment as Batcat licks his paws smugly, as if to prove a point.

Oliver Patel

1 day, 11 hours, 8 minutes
Until Commissioning

“What do you think, Dog? How do I look?”

Bucket runs a comb through his thick dark hair, sweeping an untamed curl out of his brown eyes. He straightens his freshly pressed button-up, sharp against his bronze skin.

He gives a sheepish grin to the four-legged, yellow-painted Dog robot at his feet as it completes a full body scan. The robot opens its mouth. “Splendid master. Your resting heart rate is elevated today. Are you nervous?”

Bucket winces as the stubborn curl drops right back into place. “Diagnostics are good, but yeah, that sounds a little... colonial. A little too old-world English. Let's adjust that.”

He kneels and pulls out his pocket-sized screwdriver. Bucket pops out Dog's control panel and tweaks the wiring, updating the software on the fly. "We're equals, you and I. Friends don't call each other master." Bucket snaps the panel shut and pats Dog's metal head.

"Splendid master," Dog repeats with a robotic tail wag.

Bucket sighs and rubs the crease between his brows. No grease-stained engineering lab coat today, he wears a nice blue button up that nicely frames his six-foot-three height. "Okay. We'll work on that later, huh, bud?"

He heads to the door that leads to the main Air Force Academy training facility, hoping to catch the cadets' morning lineup. But as he reaches for the keypad, the door swings open and the Commander steps out.

Bucket jumps aside in surprise. "Oh! Good morning, ma'am." He bows too quickly.

The Commander nods once then stops. "What is that?"

Dog sits directly in her path. The robot opens its mouth, beginning another scan.

"Good morning, Ruby Parker," Dog announces. "Head Commander of Utoya Air Base, your stress levels are elevated. Your heartbeat is elevated. I detect high levels of aflatoxin aspergi—"

"Did that thing just scan me?" the Commander hisses.

Bucket scoops up the robot. "I'm so sorry, ma'am. This is just my latest engineering project - mobile artificial intelligence for -" Mrs. Parker raises a hand in dismissal and strides down the hall. Bucket bows. "Okay... um... good day to you too."

"Splendid," Dog blurts.

"Okay. We're turning you off for now." Bucket flips the kill switch at Dog's neck. The robot goes limp in his arms, and Bucket slips through the open door.

The facility is bustling. Maintenance staff cluster around a gleaming F-22 Raptor. Bucket lingers on jet number twelve, once again under repair. Even the most problematic plane sits proudly, attended to by a swarm of personal engineers. Only the best of the best get to be that close to the most lethal aircraft humanity every built.

He moves toward the trainee area and ducks as two cadets pass by carrying a plywood cutout of a giant rhinoceros beetle. Others load combat vehicles with training-grade equipment. Rotational junk that Bucket and the other engineering students are always tasked with fixing. Necessary upkeep to keep this resurrected military base running.

Bucket watches a cadet load rubber rounds into a battered M16 assault rifle.

Stone-age murder sticks.

“Oh! Ey! What are you doing?” A sweaty hand lands on Bucket’s nicely pressed sleeve.

“Morning, Peter,” Bucket says, deflating.

“Morning, Nut Bucket.” Peter Montgomery smirks with his ‘pilot’s mustache’ a thin scraggly line of hair growing above his upper lip. He thumps Bucket’s back, wrinkling the fabric. “Did you pack your wittle-wee hammer? Your lubricant?” Peter chuckles. “Looks like you’ve lubricated your hair!”

Insect.

Bucket straightens and shrugs him off before Peter can ruffle his curls. Despite years spent deadlifting, Peter never could match Bucket’s height. “I’m looking for Cadet Tanaka. Where is she?” Bucket asks.

“Over there.” Peter points. “Truck three.”

Bucket catches his breath. *There she is.* Andy heaves a wooden crate over her shoulder and passes it to a cadet in the truck bed. Standard-issue coyote-green flight suit. Thick black hair braided into her usual ponytail. She rolls up her sleeve to lift another crate, exposing faded burn marks from the fire that climb her neck and brush across her cheek. To him, the scar looks like the unfurling petals of a rose.

“Careful. You’re staring,” Peter elbows him.

I’m not staring at her. Was I? Bucket flinches. *No. Definitely not.*

“Thanks.” Bucket nods and starts toward the truck.

Peter holds out an arm, stopping him. “Not today, Nut Bucket.”

“I just need to tell Andy something.” Bucket tries to pry the arm away.

“What do you have to tell Andy?” A booming voice asks.

The boys turn as Jasper approaches, dark skin lit by morning sun, bright blue eyes, easy grin. He carries a two-hundred-pound sack of rubber bullets like it’s nothing. Flight suit tied at his waist, dreadlocks loose, abs exposed. Regulation clearly optional. Jasper’s rebellious streak shows in his laissez-faire smile.

How did he get this big? Bucket thinks, remembering the scrawny kid from childhood. *Good for him... I guess.* Jasper now matches him in both height and size. “It’s nothing,” Bucket shrugs.

Peter claps Bucket's shoulder. "Come on, Loose Screw, spit it out!"

"'Loose Screw'? Really? Have some respect. Oliver Patel here is going to be the future lead engineer of the colony. Maybe even counselor one day. Now go make yourself useful and pick up that rusted bug-gut metal over there."

Peter opens his mouth-

"Scrap. Metal. Go."

"Thanks," Bucket says, watching Peter depart with a groan.

"Peter can be a complete insect sometimes," Jasper says, folding his arms. "So, what's so important you need Andy for?"

"It's nothing, really." Again, Bucket is taken aback by Jasper's size. He may not be close with the guy. Fighting, guns, war... it's not his thing. But he couldn't recall ever seeing such a dramatic change in someone before. "Seriously, what are they feeding you? Do DOD cadets get higher-class meals?"

Jasper laughs. "Nah. Just smog like everyone else." Then, more serious: "With all due respect, Bucket, you should clear out before an officer sees you lingering. Normal civilians aren't allowed on the loading dock."

Normal civilians... like you're all in some special warrior class. You're not even pilots yet. Bucket nods it's a reasonable request. Annoying, but reasonable. He steals another glimpse of Andy. The truck is nearly loaded, and she still hasn't noticed him. He sighs.

He catches Jasper watching her too. *Why is he looking at her like that?* Bucket pushes the thought away. "Can you tell Andy to meet me in our spot?"

"Your spot?" Jasper's eyebrow arches, grin widening at the morsel of information. "Where exactly is 'your spot'?"

"It's our spot," Bucket says, sheepish.

Jasper raises both hands. "Okay, okay. That's cool."

Bucket nods and makes for the exit, taking one last look at Andy before he goes.

Jasper Parker

1 day, 10 hours, 58 minutes
Until Commissioning

I wonder what he's planning...

Jasper keeps his eyes on Bucket, carrying that yellow Dog robot, and watches him disappear through the main entry door. Suddenly Peter slinks up beside him, arms piled with scrap metal.

“Was Loose Screw wearing perfume? Did you smell that? He put on something. I’m sure of it,” Peter laughs.

Not my problem. “I didn’t notice.” Jasper grabs the remaining gear. The two make their way to the loaded trucks, where cadets are already climbing aboard, ready for training.

“And his hair, did you see it? Usually such a disheveled mop. Today it’s combed back. He’s trying to look sexy.”

Jasper suppresses a chuckle. “Get in the truck, Peter.”

“Just say’in,” Peter hauls himself up, “Nut Bucket’s playing the game.”

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 10 hours, 57 minutes
Until Commissioning

“What game?” Andy asks as the young men climb onboard. *What are they getting on about now?* She drops the last case of rubber bullets under the bench seats as Peter steps way too close to her.

“Oh, you know. The mating game.” Peter puckers his lips and kisses the air.

Andy rolls her eyes and takes a seat on the bench. “Grow up, Peter.”

“Oh, dear sweet, naïve Andy. We’re all growing up so fast. Don’t forget our date with adulthood tomorrow.” He leans over her and blows a sloppy kiss.

“Me-rawwwrrr.” Batcat hisses, tail snapping.

Jasper motions to the open spot beside her. “Mind if I?”

“Please.” Andy taps the seat. Jasper slides in, forcing Peter to take the one remaining seat across from them. He drops down with a grunt.

Jasper smiles, that large, unguarded grin he’s always had. Andy’s always happy to see it. She looks down, noticing the warmth where their knees touch.

“Everyone ready?” The cadets look up as Lieutenant Conrad Tanner jumps into the truck. “We’re heading to Training Area 13. The mission is for defense to traverse enemy territory and reach the safe zone.” He scans the cadets. “Right side - offense.” Peter groans. “Left, defense.” Jasper and Andy nod.

“Gear up. We’ll be there in ten. I want your best today. No messing around.” Before he moves to the next truck, Conrad delivers one last pointed stare, first to Peter, then Jasper, and finally Andy. The only eighteen-year-olds. “For those of you commissioning tomorrow this is your last day to prove yourself. Remember that.”

Andy feels adrenaline bubble in her veins.

“YES, SIR!” The cadets salute.

Conrad nods and hops out.

Jasper rests a hand on Andy’s thigh and gives it a subtle squeeze, meeting her eyes.

“Same team.”

Andy can’t hold back her smile. “Same team.” *Like always.*

The diesel engine roars to life. Peter, already applying green face paint for team offense, catches Jasper’s hand on Andy’s leg and suppresses a grin. Softly, under his breath he mutters: “Looks like Jasper’s playing the game too.”

“Say something, Peter?” Andy asks.

Peter drags green paint across his cheek, careful around his beloved mustache. “Nope. Didn’t say a word.”

Ruby Parker

1 day, 9 hours, 56 minutes
Until Commissioning

Where is she?

Mrs. Parker waits, sipping her second coffee of the morning, eyeing the door. It is uncharacteristic of Patricia Wu to be late.

“Where is Ms. Wu?” she mutters to the others gathered in her office. Across from her desk, with an empty chair between them, sit two men. The younger, John Wiseman, Head of the Department of Defense, eyes Patricia Wu’s empty seat beside him. “It’s unlike her to miss a council meeting,” John notes.

“It is.” Mrs. Parker tightens her fists. As Commander, she needs her three counselors present, her advisors, her sounding board, and now one of them is late. *I don’t have time for tardiness.*

“Should we proceed without her then?” Ken Tanner, Head of the Department of Engineering, asks, sounding impatient. “I have much to discuss regarding updates from my department!” His toothy smile spreads across his face. “It appears we’re running low on critical supplies. Dangerously low, I might add. We must start mining the new coal deposit beyond the wall. Soon. To keep up with demand.” He slams a thick fist into Mrs. Parker’s desk and beams, proud of himself.

Every time Ken smiles, his second chin jiggles.

“New coal deposits?” John asks.

“Indeed!” Ken folds his hands across his protruding abdomen. “There is a natural deposit just seven miles from base. If we can access it, the materials will last us years.”

“Years?” the Commander asks, skeptical. Never fully trusting good news.

“Years and some,” Ken adds, winking.

John’s fingers drum at his armrest. “It’s been quiet. Little to no activity. Scouts haven’t seen anything. The pilots haven’t seen anything.”

“You don’t think those bloody dragon-riding insects are actually minding their own business, do you?” Ken chuckles.

John’s silence is answer enough.

“No signs of the Others?” The commander asks.

John nods. “It might be safe to lead a scouting party to the location of this new deposit. I shall lead it.”

Mrs. Parker nods. She always liked John - straight to the point. He nods back. *It's done, then.*

“Well!” Ken sits back with a pleased hum. “Now that that’s sorted out, should we discuss the commissioning ceremony and, more importantly... the succession?”

My retirement, you mean? Mrs. Parker hears her mousey young assistant in the corner scribbling down every word. The Commander presses her fingernails into the underside of her desk. She knows it’s time. Time to step aside and choose someone else to command. The four of them would have to vote. *But Patricia isn't here.*

“We must choose our nominees,” Ken continues. He slaps John’s shoulder playfully. “Have you picked yours?”

“I have.”

“So what about you, Commander?” Ken turns to her. “Do you have a special someone in mind?”

Everyone stares in rapt silence. Her young assistant stops her frantic pen, holding it in anticipation of what she’ll say.

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 9 hours, 45 minutes
Until Commissioning

Are the Wildlands this silent?

Andy moves slowly through the abandoned warehouse of painted rubble, littered with bullet holes. She places her boots neatly, one by one, on the dusty ground. Her ears move to try and catch the sounds of the arena.

Three bus-sized plywood targets shaped like giant dragonflies descend from above. Andy swivels her standard-issue M16 assault rifle and takes aim. BAM! BAM! BAM! The fake insects burst. She hits every paint-filled target balloon - someone’s creative attempt to emulate a dragonfly’s blood and guts. *Stupid insects.* Andy’s skin crawls. She was too young to remember the day the giant dragonflies and their riders stormed over the outer wall and overwhelmed the

base. It seems unlikely a patched-up cadet's gun could stop something faster and deadlier than a fighter jet. She steps over the paint splatters and keeps going.

Fake, table-sized rhinoceros beetles emerge. BAM! BAM! BAM! Andy exhales and refocuses. Another target pops up. BAM! BAM! BAM!

It's too easy.

Her aim is perfect - dead center. She reloads and tries to visualize the enemy in more graphic detail than plywood, creeping along without a sound. *You can end it. A life. By accident or by choice.*

Shut up. Focus. Pay attention.

Two more targets emerge - one left, one behind. Andy swivels the rifle and fires. BAM!
Dead.

Too easy.

Gunshots pop off around her. Andy pauses to listen and catches her reflection in broken glass. Her lower left cheek, scarred from that fateful explosion. Faded, but still there. *Don't forget what you did.* Andy bites her chapped lip until it bleeds.

She lowers the gun and scans. *No more targets. Good. Move.* Andy scrambles through tumbled, cracked concrete. Every slab and wall is spray-painted in nauseating greens. She hunkers down in a crevasse and watches through tangled rebar. A hint of white catches her eye. She turns, and a small smile forms. Someone painted a delicate white flower amid the green graffiti. Five glistening petals. *Cute.* For a long second Andy imagines the work of painting this ancient warehouse into a likeness of the swampy and hostile Wildlands. But the artist, in secret, decided to paint something gentle, hidden away, where no one would ever look.

Gunfire rains nearby.

“MEOW.” A grumpy hiss.

“Over here, you dingbat. Keep up.”

Batcat emerges amid the rubble. He unfolds his bat wings and glides into Andy's hideout, delivering a knowing glare from large, seemingly all-knowing red eyes.

Don't give me that look.

“Maar-oww.” As much as Batcat likes to complain, he sticks to Andy like glue. No matter what, or how dangerous it is. Andy has a job to do. To protect, to serve, and most

importantly, to restore her honor. So here he is, stubbornly by her side, in the middle of combat training. “Moeeww,” Batcat mumbles, tail flicking. Honor be damned.

“Love you too, buddy.” Andy cocks her gun. “C’mon.”

They dart from their hiding spot. Andy keeps the gun lowered and moves low and fast, scanning the sky for an ambush from above. Batcat’s ears swivel. A shadow moves behind them.

Andy slides out of the way just as - BAM! BAM! Rubber bullets smack the wall where her chest had been seconds earlier.

“I see you, Tanaka!”

Andy somersaults as more bullets pummel the spot she’d been standing. She lands on her feet under the cover of a concrete slab. Batcat floats beside her, used to battle. He licks his paw.

“And I can smell you, Peter!” She shouts, baiting him.

“Hah, hah...” Peter’s green painted face pops up from the nearby rubble, “as usual... you’re hysterical.”

Andy circles, staying low.

“Come on out, come on out, wherever you are!” Peter calls. “You know, if I were really a bug person, you’d be dead by now. I would’ve poisoned you. Speared you. Had my dragon chew your pretty face off!”

Andy slips in behind him, pressing her gun to his back. “Bang, bang. You’re dead,” she teases. “And don’t call me pretty.” Andy grabs her nose, gagging. “You reek.”

Peter raises a sweaty armpit. “Behold the scent of a real man.”

She punches his arm. “A dead man.” Andy moves on. *I worry for the woman who has to marry him.* She tunes back in. *I’m not hearing anymore gunfire. The younger cadets must have gotten picked off.* Strange to think this is her last time doing any of this, last day of training, last day with a cadet badge, last day uncommissioned. *Stay present.* The mission. Cut through enemy lines. *Focus.*

Trained for vigilance, Andy scans. Not knowing which cadets are playing offense, pretending to be ‘the Others.’ The warehouse’s ugly paint job and the underage cadets dressed in green is just mockery - caricaturing the real enemy and the deadly terrain she’ll face in actual combat. From what she knows, the Others fight with cunning and stealth. Rarely did you see them until it was too late. ‘*Savages,*’ a war veteran once told her. ‘*Blue-blooded devils.*’

Andy remembers Buck - her friend's nine-year-old snarky response to that: '*Violence is never the answer.*' She knows it isn't. The Department of Defense exists to keep the colony alive. The base wouldn't have built the outer wall otherwise: a thick, fifty-foot concrete barrier lined with rocket launchers and machine guns. Etching a dramatic line between the colony and the vast wilderness beyond brimming with new-world monsters. The dangerous forbidden domain of the Other's.

A target! A spear-holding, black-eyed plywood cutout. Andy takes aim and—PFffff. Nothing. She pulls the trigger again. PFffff... nothing. "Dammit." She drops the useless M16 *Stupid, old, piece of rusted bug guts.*

Andy would love to be issued the newly engineered fully-automatic M27, but she has to commission first. Cadets get whatever weapons can be drudged up from reserves. So she unsheathes her military-grade knife and approaches the target, boots silent on the dusty gravel. She raises the knife when a shadow crosses her face. She turns - too late.

BAM!

The target's plywood's beetle-eyed head blasts clean off its post as Jasper steps into the sun with a wicked grin. At some point, he's lost his shirt. Why he insists on practicing shirtless, skin exposed to rubber bullets, is beyond her. But she can't help but notice how his broad shoulders glisten with sweat.

Her face reddens. Her pulse drums in her ears. "That was my target, Jasper," Andy mutters, lowering her knife.

He strides toward her, rifle loose in one hand. "Relax. I just saved your life from a vicious human-killing buggy." He cups her chin. "Are you bleeding?" He pulls her closer. Flustered, Andy looks into his eyes, brilliant blue against his dark ebony skin. He runs his thumb gently over her bloody lip.

Jasper... what are you...? Andy trembles under his finger as he gently wipes away the blood. She bats his hand away, sucking air through gritted teeth, trying to calm her knotted stomach. She wipes her mouth with her sleeve. "Chapped lips. It's nothing."

Gunshots ring out again.

Focus. The mission.

"C'mon," she says. "Let's finish this so we can be done already."

"I couldn't agree more," Jasper approves with a smile.

They move out - lifelong friends falling into sync out of habit. Andy catches herself looking at him. Everything about him feels newly fascinating, and she can't figure out why. It's been like this for months. Something about him has changed... or maybe something about her has.

"Where's your gun?" Jasper asks under his breath.

"Jammed."

"Figures."

They slide into a corner and lay low as more gunshots pepper the air. Jasper tugs his dreadlocks back. "I only have one round left before I'm out of ammo." Andy watches him reload his last case of rubber bullets, his arms tense as he pulls back the lever and locks the final round in place. His strength is unquestionable. He's bigger, more powerful. Less like a boy and more like a man.

Focus.

She checks ahead. "Look. The safe zone. I can see it."

Jasper raises an eyebrow and sees it. The designated safe zone, the finish line. Only a dozen meters ahead. "We could make a run for it," he suggests.

Andy punches his shoulder. "You're insane. We will totally get killed."

He winks, flashing that big white grin of his. "Insanity is part of the paycheck." He lifts his M16, then offers his spare hand. "So... are you as crazy as me?"

As crazy as you?

He must see the hesitation on her face. "C'mon," he says. "Wasn't it you who led us into the darkness?" Confusion fills her eyes. Jasper can read her face. "You remember," he says softly. "That day on the staircase." He offers his hand. "It was you who was brave enough to take that first step."

That day... a chill crawls over her despite the dusty heat. Fear slithers up her spine. Of course, I remember. But why mention it?

Focus. You're here. This is now.

"Fine." Andy places her hand in his. His fingers interlock with hers, confident, and she forgets her fear of the past as warmth spreads through her belly.

"Together?" he smiles.

"Together," she says.

“On the count of three.”

“One.”

“Two...”

“THREE!”

Ruby Parker

1 day, 9 hours, 45 minutes
Until Commissioning

Do I have a special someone in mind... Mrs. Parker doesn't answer the question. Instead, she stands and lets silence fill her office. She slowly finishes her cup of artificial coffee and stares through the thick glass windows at one of the luxuries her superior rank affords her: the view. Perched up on the highest floor in the commander's tower, she can survey all of Utoya Air Base. Her colony. Her people. Her problem. The source of every gray hair and wrinkle. The base was modeled after humanity's dying hope for Mars. The industrialized compound powered by its central coal plant and snaking concrete tunnels fully engulfed by a massive outer wall

However, this military base isn't stationed on Mars. Perhaps without global fallout during the twenty first century, colonizing space might have been possible. But getting to Mars is no longer the goal. Getting Earth back is. And they are at a distinct disadvantage because the planets evolution has gotten ahead of them.

Mrs. Parker takes a long sip. *Humanity has to start all over again.*

“Ma'am... do you... have a nominee?” Ken Tanner rephrases.

Mrs. Parker doesn't respond. She lifts a hand and traces a finger across a long, deep scratch in the window glass. “Have either of you heard of a creature called a grizzly bear?” she asks her two attending counselors.

“What?” Ken stutters, his smile finally wavering.

“I'm unqualified to answer Ma'am.” John Wiseman decides. “The Department of Sciences would know.” He glances at counselor Patricia Wu's still-empty chair.

The Commander taps the window. “This glass is nine inches thick. It was designed to trap a grizzly bear. A fierce, hairy beast that once used to eat men alive.” She looks at her counselors, then briefly at her young assistant in the corner, scribbling rapidly. Writing down her every word like her life depends on it.

“We locked them up,” Mrs. Parker continues. “These man-eating beasts. We took their land and corralled them into places called zoos. Entire families would visit at their leisure, peering through the nine-inch-thick glass at a trapped wild thing. A creature that evolved to rip us apart, reduced to a pathetic spectacle.” Her gaze wanders over the clawed gashes etched into the glass. She traces the scars left by old wounds of war. “It was a time when we could marvel at nature without the fear of surviving it. But now...” She lowers her hand. “We are the ones trapped behind the glass.”

The room falls silent. Even her notetaker stops scribbling and Mrs. Parker steps away from the scratched window. Marks left behind from the day the dragon riders flew over the wall. The day the skies grew black from their swarm, destroying most of the fighter fleet and massacring more than half the civilian population in a single blow. She remembers it clearly: it’s the day she failed her people.

She turns back to the counselors. “I do have a nominee in mind.”

All heads lift.

Ken leans forward. “Who?”

“I will tell you when all are present.” Mrs. Parker narrows her eyes at the empty chair.

Patricia Wu’s messenger must have malfunctioned.

“We need to decide today!” Ken raises a finger dramatically. “I can tell you who I nominate as our next Commander.”

“Yourself?” John asks dryly.

“Aye. Me.” Ken pats his chest. “I’ve done a fine job leading Engineering. I’ll do an even finer job leading the colony.”

“ENOUGH!” Mrs. Parker slams both hands onto her desk. “We will not discuss nominees until we are all present.”

“Well, where is Counselor Wu?” Ken huffs.

“Not here. And I have other concerns.” Mrs. Parker pulls out a stack of paperwork - bland manila envelopes from the upcoming commissioning class. She rubs her tired eyes.

“Counselor Wiseman,” she says. John rises. “Take a team. Survey this new coal deposit. Leave immediately.”

“Yes, ma’am.” John bows and exits briskly.

She turns to Ken. “This meeting is adjourned.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Ken bows, hiding his disappointment behind a polite smile.

The Commander lifts her coffee mug and watches the men leave. She takes a sip. It’s empty. She curses under her breath.

“Refill?” her assistant asks eager for an excuse to leave.

Mrs. Parker holds onto the cup and studies the girl. So young. *How is she already eighteen?* Bright eyes. Bouncy hair. Too thin. Always too thin. And yet she will commission with the rest of them.

“Ma’am... refill?” The poor girl asks again.

The Commander hands over the mug. She watches her assistant scuttle out. Alone now, Mrs. Parker turns back to the window just in time to see a cloud of dust kicked up by a military convoy passing the experimental fields of newly planted genetically engineered crops. She squints. Three trucks carrying three cadets.

These teenagers... a chilling thought grips her, they are not ready.

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 9 hours, 14 minutes
Until Commissioning

Andy peels off her sweaty bulletproof vest and tosses it onto the locker room bench. Afternoon practice has been canceled. They rarely took afternoons off, but today is an exception because tomorrow is the commissioning ceremony.

She sighs, relieved, *I can’t believe it worked* and bends down to unlace her combat boots. *That final go of it...* The sprint, Jasper’s hand in hers, the victorious whistle as they crossed into the safe zone together. She struggles with the looping knots of her shoelaces as heat rises in her chest, her cheeks burn and it has nothing to do with victory.

“Hey.”

Startled, Andy looks up. Jasper, fresh from the shower, dripping everywhere, with nothing but a towel around his waist, plops down beside her. She doesn't have to remind him that this is the female side of the locker room – he knows, he just doesn't care.

He offers a fist bump. “We killed it today. Conrad's definitely putting in a good word with the Commander.” Andy returns it gently, flustered, as Jasper leans back and closes his eyes. “Andy... after all these years. All this training. We're almost there.”

“I know.” She keeps working on one boot - untying, retying - using the task as a distraction. “We've worked hard.”

Jasper snaps forward, fire in his blue eyes. “We're going to get our wings.”

Our wings. Andy inhales. A smile starts to form, then falters. *Does he not know...?* She looks at him, weighing in on whether to say anything. But Andy lives by the rules of the colony and *'honesty is always the best policy'*. “Jasper... if they select an F-22 pilot tomorrow... there's only one slot. Which mean only one of us can become a fighter pilot.”

She pulls off her boot and reaches for the other - only to realize it's already off. *Get it together.*

Jasper considers this, then leans closer. He rests a hand on her shoulder. His eyes soften. “I just have this feeling.” He squeezes gently. “That we're both going to get what we want. Hell, I'd even take that busted engine on jet number twelve.” Then he laughs, “You know what? I'd learn to ride a giant dragonfly if it meant I could fly alongside you.”

Andy freezes. She doesn't know what to say... what to do... what to feel. His hand is warm, heavy, still damp from the shower. Jasper unsettles her in a way she doesn't have a protocol for. *Breathe!*

Andy inhales and stands, spine rigid, clenching her towel. She forces her eyes to look at him and her heart races.

“Think about it, Andy.” Jasper gets up, stretching his arms. “Tomorrow, everything we have ever dreamed of can come true.”

Everything we have ever dreamed of can come true... Andy tightens the towel around her chest, folding it under her armpits. “Excuse me... Jasper, do you mind?”

He smirks and turns around.

Andy changes quickly beneath the towel. She's done this since she was ten, since she joined the Academy, but today her body trembles. Flooded with goosebumps. *What's wrong with me?*

"Good?" Jasper asks playfully.

"Good." Andy responds, automatically

He turns around and keeps talking while Andy gathers her things from the bench. Her side of the locker room feels smaller and hotter than normal. She holds onto her towel tightly.

"Tomorrow changes everything." They head toward the men's side of the locker room as Jasper keeps talking. "We rank up. Become adults. Tell me you're not excited."

Andy glides down the men's side, as the rest of the boys change out of that day's combat gear. For the last few years, Andy was the only female cadet enrolled in the Academy. Predominantly males train into this career field.

Jasper strides behind her, weaving through the changing cadets, "What do you really want, Andy?"

What do I really want?

The question stops her mid-step. Andy doesn't have to close her eyes to picture it. She's imagined it a million times. Alone. Just her and her Raptor. She straps on her painted fighter helmet. Lining up with the runway. Engines scream as the earth dissolves beneath her with nothing but sky ahead. She's known since she was a child. "You know what I want," she says. "But, Jasper what do you-"

"Hah! I know what I want!" Peter interrupts, turning naked from his locker. "I want to have sex!"

Laughter erupts. Andy's face flushes red.

"Not with you, Andy," Peter adds, winking.

Jasper throws an arm around Andy protectively. "The real question is who would want to pair up with you."

More laughter.

"Who *wouldn't* want to marry me!" Peter spins around. "Look at this ass!"

Groans. Whistles. Travis, only fifteen, snickers in the back, "I can think of a few reasons."

"Enlighten me you little bug," Peter snaps at him.

“Make sure you shower. You don’t want that future wife of yours suffering tomorrow.”

Jasper pats Peter on the back.

Peter pulls on his grey civilian pants, grumbling, “yeah, yeah and what about you two, huh? What are you looking forward to most now that we are finally ‘coming of age?’”

Jasper laughs, “I’m going to get a drink, and then I’m going to get a second drink, and you know... possibly a fourth and fifth!”

Travis squirms his way to the older cadets, hoping to partake in the conversation, despite knowing that he will have to wait years before he commissions. “I heard that the bigger you are, the longer it takes to feel the effects of alcohol. Jasper, you might need more than just five drinks.”

“Oh yeah...” Jasper obnoxiously flexes his ridiculously powerful arm. Andy rolls her eyes and retreats.

What do I really want? Rubbing her temple, she departs for the showers. Eager to repel the sweat and dust and wash away all these uncomfortable feelings. “I hope you insects didn’t use all the hot water.”

Jade Parker

1 day, 9 hours, 13 minutes
Until Commissioning

How many times has she had the pleasure of doing this?

Thousands.

Jade waits patiently as the machine warms up, plucking at her curls and scratching at the nervous goosebumps prickling across her dark skin. She adjusts levers and steam until a bitter froth spills into the cup. *Coffee.* This new-world artificial brew still offers caffeine, which is what the commander’s addicted too.

Jade prefers chamomile tea.

She fills the commander’s coffee mug and slips in her secret touch, a sugar candy. Coveted by the colony for special events for their sweetness. Jade slowly dissolves the sugar down until it blends in with the black liquid. *God forbid the commander taste sweetness.*

She straightens out her customized uniform. Her meek attempt at happiness, artfully sewn by her own two hands since the standard-issue monotone civilian's clothes are utterly hideous in her opinion.

I should get back.

She lifts the mug carefully and hastens back to the commander's high office careful to not spill the black liquid onto her colorful blue shirt she fashioned and dyed herself.

Only one more day... and then I will never have to fetch coffee again.

Ruby Parker

1 day, 8 hours, 52 minutes
Until Commissioning

The commander coughs, violently, quickly sitting back down at her desk. Mrs. Parker gently spits a clot of red sticky blood onto a handkerchief, hating the familiar taste of iron on her tongue.

How arduous it is... dying.

Specks of blood dot the folders scattered across her desk, pulling her back to the task at hand: determining their children's fates. The weight of it lingers. As a second gen herself, she once stood on the other side of this ceremony. Yet now she is the one who decides. Mrs. Parker thumbs through the folders, labeled with the colony's seven eighteen-year-olds and pauses at one name.

Andrea Tanaka.

She pulls the commissioning packet from the stack and studies it.

I wonder... are you ready?

She opens Andy's file, skipping the introductory paragraph and self-reported credentials, moving straight to the information that truly matters: the choice. Two of the three lines are blank. Only one job title is filled in: *F-22 fighter pilot.*

A rare grin breaks across the commander's face. *Such a dreamer... but not everyone's dreams are made to come true.*

She snaps the folder shut. “You’re staring.”

Mrs. Parker looks up at her assistant - tiny, trembling - already irritated that the girl has let the coffee slosh over the side of the mug. She had never wanted this girl as her assistant.

“Sorry, Ma’am,” Jade fumbles, fingers twisting through her curls. “I didn’t mean to— should I call someone? Dr Lee? Your cough... it’s getting worse.”

“No.” The commander growls.

“Coffee?” Jade surrenders the mug.

Mrs. Parker grunts, grabbing the drink. “What I need you to do...” She shuffles through the folders. One is lighter than the rest. Mrs. Parker scowls and lifts the thin document. “I need you to recover Jasper’s paperwork. His file is empty!”

Jade flinches at the mad twitch in the commander’s eye as she slams the folder shut. Then promptly hands the empty commissioning package over to Jade. “Take this to your brother and don’t come back until he has finished his paperwork.”

“Yes, Mom,” Jade bows respectfully and makes a beeline for the door.

“It’s MA’AM!” Ruby slams both hands on the desk.

Jade nods. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Mrs. Parker coughs again, swallows a swig of coffee and clears her throat. “While you are at it,” she adds, “find Patricia Wu. Make sure her messenger is working. Tell her she missed a very important Council meeting.”

“Of course, Ma’am.” With that, Jade scurries out. When the door shuts, her mother lets out a sigh.

Mrs. Parker slumps into her chair, her head dropping into her hands. *Jade... Jasper... Andrea.* She looks again at the remaining folders spread across her desk. Pain lances through her chest as another cough builds.

These teenagers are going to be the death of me.

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 8 hours, 38 minutes
Until Commissioning

Andy enters the girls' bathroom adjacent to the locker room. It's her quiet place for she's the only one that ever uses it.

"Mar-oww," Batcat informs her. Of what, she has no idea.

She holds the door open as he plods in after her, tail swishing. "Batcat," Andy asks, "is it hard for you? Having only one word?"

"Mew." He confirms, spreading his wings and flying onto a janitor's cart, knocking over a stack of toilet paper rolls. Andy stacks them back on the cart. When she was younger, she'd wished her father had engineered a human voice in him. But he never did research on humans. Its forbidden. But still, it would be fun to finally figure out what her little buddy was trying to tell her. "Mew, mew, mew," Batcat mutters, flying up into the rusted pipework above.

"Buddy," Andy sighs with a soft smile, "I don't know what you're complaining about." Her smile fades when she catches her reflection in the mirror. Andy turns to the sink and squares off with her own image. Objectively beautiful. Slightly damaged. Mostly, it disturbs her. Because her face reminds her of what she is.

She doesn't want to meet her own gaze, but she has to. Carefully, she leans over the sink and removes her contact lenses, setting the thin plastic shells aside. She'll put in a fresh pair after showering.

She peers into her eyes. Without the colored contacts her real eye color gleams back at her: golden. Like the sun.

"MEOW!" Batcat yowls from the back of the bathroom.

"What is it?" Andy mutters.

But Batcat is gone, vanished into the shadows.

Jasper Parker

1 day, 8 hours, 31 minutes
Until Commissioning

"SIS-STAR!" Jasper bursts from the locker room door.

Jade clutches her paperwork. "Don't YOU DARE!"

“HA-HAH!” Jasper swoops her up in a mighty hug. Jade’s paperwork scatters in all directions as he spins her around. Calm and orderly civilians give the twins a wide gait, avoiding the nonsense.

Jade huffs. “Put me down. Now.”

“Good morning to you too.” Jasper grins and plops his petite sister back onto the floor.

“You’re SO annoying!” Jade mumbles, bending down to pick up the fly-away papers.

“I’m a professional at being annoying.” Jasper hums as he snatches up some of the papers. “But only for you.” He holds the extra documents hostage, dangling them over her head.

Jade inhales, summoning her inner peace. “Give me those.”

“How about another power boost?” He winks.

Jade glances at the passersby in the corridor. “Would you shut up?” she whispers.

“Please?” She holds out a hand. “And the papers... please.”

Her tone - sharp, disappointed - sounds exactly like their mother’s. He ignores the resemblance and slams the papers into her hand. “And what does Her Royal Queenship have you running around doing today?”

“Funny you should ask...” She glares at him, “because it turns out a certain someone forgot to turn in his ENTIRE commissioning packet,”

“Hmm...” Jasper grins, “I wonder who?”

Jade rolls her eyes. “You do realize you can’t commission until you turn in your dream sheet.”

“Last I checked, I have a full day and a HALF to turn it in,”

“You do realize it was due THREE WEEKS AGO?”

“You do realize a certain Lieutenant Conrad Tanner was looking very handsome today?”

“Jasper!” Jade barks, red with embarrassment.

“You should have seen how good-looking and -”

Jade swings at him, “shut up!”

“- how dreamy and steamy-”

But suddenly Jade stops smacking him. “Shhh...” Jade lifts a hand, serious. “I heard something.” Then Jasper hears it too - A woman screaming. The twins look at one another, fear darts in their eyes.

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 8 hours, 35 minutes
Until Commissioning

“Batcat?” Andy calls.

Silence.

Andy rolls her shoulders, cracks her neck. It wouldn’t be the first time Batcat vanished on a side quest of his own. Rodentia had unfortunately survived The Last Day, and Batcat has taken it upon himself to singlehandedly keep the colony’s rat population in check.

Andy heads to the shower stalls tucked in the back. She’s in no hurry to go back to the locker room and rejoin the boys and their conversation on sex and destiny. *All this talk about tomorrow’s commissioning ceremony...*

She should be elated.

She isn’t. She’s uneasy.

Andy has spent her life counting down the days, wistfully imagining the moment she crosses the stage and learns what fate has assigned for her. *Tomorrow is the day everyone and everything changes. The question is how and to who.* Andy bites her chapped lip, angry at herself for even thinking it. *I deserve what’s coming. Whatever it is.*

A chill creeps over her as she removes her towel. *I bet the boys used all the hot water.* She shivers, pulling the shower curtain shut. The rusted metal rings shriek as they scrape along the rod, the sound splintering up her spine. She grits her teeth and twists the shower handle hard. Freezing water slams into her shoulders. The pain is sharp, biting, familiar.

The cold burns like fire as it pours over her scalp and races down her arms and across her scars. She rubs her marked arm, feeling what the explosion and her own bad decisions have done to her. Andy closes her eyes. For a moment, all she can hear is the pounding of water across her face, splattering across the tiles, drowning out all thought.

Hot droplets strike her face. *Hot water?* She opens her eyes in surprise.

Above her, Batcat hangs upside down from a pipe, hooked feet clamped tight. Something dark dangles from his mouth. At her feet, warmth spreads, leaching between her toes.

That better not be what I think it is.

She squints through the spray. She wipes her cheek. Red smears her fingers.

Blood.

“Mar-ow!” Batcat declares proudly, dropping his prize.

A severed human hand hits the tile beside the drain, landing with a wet slap in a red pool of hot blood.

Andy screams.

Jade Parker

1 day, 8 hours, 30 minutes
Until Commissioning

“Move! MOVE!” Jasper pushes the boys aside as he barrels down the locker room aisle.

Jade races after him.

“What’s wrong?” Travis calls as the twins hurdle past.

“Nothing! Stay there!” Jade snaps.

The younger cadets freeze as the twins sprint for the girl bathroom. Jasper reaches the door first and grabs the handle. “Jasper, you can’t go in there! That’s the girls!” Jade yells.

Her brother thrusts the door wide open, and turns to her, blue eyes fiery with raw determination. “Andy’s in trouble.”

He goes in.

Jade lingers at the threshold, trying to steady her breath. She does not want to go in there—toward that scream. *But Andy...*

She swallows hard and steps inside.

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 8 hours, 34 minutes
Until Commissioning

Andy cuts the scream short, snapping her mouth shut. Showing weakness is a dishonor.

But the severed hand, it lays palm-up, right between her bare feet. She twists the handle off. The water dies instantly, leaving a thick silence as blood oozes across the tile.

Fresh. Warm.

It's coming from the next stall.

“Mew.” Batcat purrs from above, encouraging her to go see for herself.

Her knees tremble as she steps carefully out of the blood puddle, leaving red footprints. Each step toward the adjacent stall feels heavier than the last.

The plastic shower curtain is closed.

Andy raises her wet hand, letting it hover inches from the plastic. She draws in a breath, summons what courage remains - and yanks the curtain back.

Jasper Parker

1 day, 8 hours, 28 minutes

Until Commissioning

Please be alright! The bathroom door slams closed behind the twins, “Andy!” Jasper yells. Jade listens intently. The siblings stare into the dimly lit, damp bathroom. No response greets them but the leaking dripping pipes.

“There!” Jade points to a figure standing alone in the back.

“Andy!” He reaches her in seconds, barely registering her nakedness as he grabs her shoulders. “Andy?” He says again, softer this time. “What’s wrong?”

Andy doesn’t move - just stares into one of the shower stalls. “Jasper...” The sentence dies on her lips.

He follows her gaze. His gut tightens. ... *is that?*

Jade quickly bundles Andy up in her towel. “Andy, are you alright? We heard you scream!” But Jade freezes as she, too, sees it.

Patricia Wu, head of the department of science and one of the three counselors to the commander, lays slumped in a pool of her own blood. Stab wounds littered across her chest. Above her, smeared across the tile in blood, a message written unevenly across the wall.

Jasper and Andy stand speechless as Jade reads the message aloud, her voice shaking, barely audible. “I’m coming for you all...”

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 7 hours, 52 minutes
Until Commissioning

Andy squeezes the remaining water from her hair and braids the thick black mass into her signature twisted ponytail. The one and only trick she knows how to do with her hair. Sitting beside her, knees tucked to her chest. Jade nervously picks at her own hair, twirling a bouncy curl in her fingers. *She always does that when she's scared.*

“Hey,” Andy says quietly, resting a hand on Jade’s knee. “It’s going to be okay.” She has always had a soft spot for Jade. Protective of her small friend.

The twins were born premature, thin boned, weak. Unlike her brother, Jade never outgrew her fragile frame. Andy knew her true strength however was her sharp mind, but even that seemed to be a curse. Riddled with anxiety, extensively overworked, whatever misery plagued the people always ended up on Jade's overburdened small shoulders, manifesting in that constant nervous picking of her black curls.

“Is it?” Jade exhales shakily. “She was murdered, Andy. There has never been a murder before.”

“I know.” Andy looks around the locker room, now filled with somber adults. The response hadn’t taken long. As soon as Jade pulled out her messenger and notified the commander, Ruby Parker arrived along with top officers and doctors within minutes.

Andy watches the Commander question Jasper at the end of the row of lockers, the last of the three to be questioned.

“What do you think happened?” Jade whispers.

“Stabbed,” Andy says. “Tortured.”

Jade swallows. “Do you think it was the Others?”

“No.” Andy shakes her head. “We would know if the walls were breached.” Her voice lowers.

The implication settles between them.

“Then it was...”

“One of us,” Andy finishes quietly. *Someone inside Utoya has done this. One of our own.* Andy can’t help but flash a look at the commander. *One of us is the killer...*

Jade presses her lips together, fighting tears of hysteria. Andy places her hand back on Jade’s bouncing knee, grounding her.

“They’ll find who did this,” Andy isn’t sure if she believes it, but she says it anyway. Jade attempts a nod but doesn’t seem convinced. If she was being honest, Andy doesn’t feel convinced either. “We can focus on our duties. That’s all we can do.”

Jade nods again, though her eyes drift to the taped-off bathroom door.

“What do you have today?” Andy asks, trying to distract them both.

“Jasper’s paperwork.” Jade lets out a weak groan. “Ceremony logistics. Seating arrangements. Lighting. Cutlery...”

“And this is why I shoot things,” Andy says.

That earns a small smile.

“I’m sure it’ll go smoothly,” Andy adds.

“I’ve planned every detail.” Jade nods, “I can’t envision anything going wrong...” But then she glances back at the crime scene.

The girls go quiet.

“So...” Andy hesitates. There are two uncomfortable conversations to be had, she chooses the lesser one. “...you don’t know the results... do you?”

“No.” Jade shakes her head. “That information is classified - even for me.” She pauses. Fiddling with her feet.

“What is it, Jade?”

“I saw the Commander looking through your file this morning.”

She was looking at my file... Silence stretches between them as Andy gestures on that new information. *...I mean of course she was. That’s her job. Mrs. Parker will decide our fate. Our lives are quite literally in her hands. That’s how this system works.*

Batcat digs his claws into Andy’s shoulder and lets out a low hiss. “It’s okay, Batcat.” Andy scratches under his chin. “What about you? Did she look at your file?”

“I don’t know. She kicked me out of the room. I may be her assistant - her daughter - but I’m still just another uncommissioned minor.”

“Not for long.”

“True.”

“You will not be a mere assistant for much longer, Jade. You’ve worked so hard all these years.” Andy has known Jade her whole life. She knows exactly what Jade wrote as her top career pick on her dream sheet. “You’ll be nominated as the next commander. It’s obvious.”

Jade beams and fumbles to speak.

“Yeah.” Andy grins. “You know I’m right.”

Jade sheepishly nods, curls bouncing. “Let me guess... Fighter Pilot?” she asks with a smile.

Andy can’t help but smile back. “You know it.”

Andy stares hard at the laminate floor and for a second, it becomes the cockpit, with vast endless skies beyond. The friends share the moment - allowing themselves, briefly, to dream of what could be, until a stern voice interrupts.

“Andrea Tanaka. Jade Parker. Rise.” Hands on her hips, eyes sharp, the Commander assesses the three teenagers before her as Jasper and the girls bow before their leader. “Do not speak of what happened here. To anyone.”

Batcat hisses.

You want us to... lie?

“You are safe within the colony walls. There is no danger here.”

She can’t believe that?

“You are dismissed.”

The twins bow once more but Andy hesitates, eyes drawn to a medical gurney as it wheels past, carrying the body bag of the dead counselor.

“Is there a problem, Andrea?” The commander asks, eyes narrowing.

Andy meets her gaze. That familiar tension hums between them. They’ve done this dance before - eight years ago. Different body. Different crime scene. Same unspoken truth.

“No, Ma’am.”

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 7 hours, 48 minutes
Until Commissioning

Free time is a curse.

Andy strides down one of the many reinforced corridors winding through the colony. The thought of returning to her dormitory feels unbearable. What would she even do there? *Clean?* Her quarters are pristine. No wrinkles on the comforter, no dust on the dresser, She doesn't have many belongings besides a small shoe box of personal affects.

Andy never entertained the idea of wasteful impracticality. Everything has its place and its purpose - including her. That mindset is woven into the culture. Survival of the human species doesn't allow space for sentiment.

Her stride is strong, precise, a soldiers cadence. So ingrained, she doesn't even realize she's doing it. *What is everyone else doing right now? Jade's probably planning. Or getting ahead on tasks no one asked her to take on.* Andy winces. Jade lives to earn approval from a mother too busy to give it. It's sad that Jade tries so hard to prove herself to the Commander... *I guess I do the same. Always proving our worth.*

At least Jade isn't trying to restore her honor.

Andy nods politely to a pair of second-class civilians as they pass, then retreats into her own head. Not that it's somewhere she likes to linger. Too many unpleasant memories wait there. She's trained herself to stay present. The past is a bad place to wander.

What about Buck? Andy smiles. Bucket has nothing in common with the twins - or anyone enlisted in the Air Force Academy. A student of the School of Engineering, he's different. Always buried in experiments too complex for her to follow. "The robotics lab," she murmurs aloud, remembering the way he overexplains every invention with childlike excitement.

Peter? Probably masturbating in his dorm room. The image arrives uninvited and unwelcome. She shuts it down immediately.

And Jasper? Lifting weights. Disobeying the rules. Painting. *Whatever he's doing, I bet he is trying to forget what we just saw...* Andy feels heat rise in her cheeks. *Does he ever think about me?* She widens her stride, boots striking concrete with sharp intent, as if she can outrun her thoughts.

"Your eyes are showing," a raspy voice says.

Andy stops short. *My eyes?*

“You should do something about it.”

“Excuse me?” Andy blurts. Her left ear swivels instinctively.

“Your ear moves,” the voice adds, mocking.

She pivots toward a concrete column. A stench of garbage disposal overpowers her. From behind the column out steps a man. Late twenties. Missing his mandatory nameplate. The unnamed man parks himself uncomfortably close. Andy recoils from the heat radiating off his filthy lab coat. The grime doesn't match his face, which is... perfect. *Too perfect*. His gorgeous face is framed by his balding head which glows under the fluorescent lights. The man pops a sugar candy into his mouth. One of the colony's rare sweets, reserved for special occasions. *He must have stolen it*.

Andy's fists tighten.

“Your eyes,” he chews loudly, leaning in. “They're showing.”

Spit hits her cheek. Andy wipes her face - then realizes. *My contacts. I never replaced them after the shower*. “Thanks,” she says stiffly. Batcat hisses from his perch on her shoulder, baring his fangs.

The man glares at her like she is the scum of the earth and leaves.

“Wait,” Andy snaps. “Do I know you?” It's unlike her to forget a face. With only 5,609 people in the colony, familiarity is unavoidable. She glances at his rank, *only third class*, which either means he is unwed, or support staff, or both.

He chuckles, low and unpleasant. “I'm surprised you don't remember.”

Batcat's tail flicks. “Mar-rooww!”

“You know that thing was a failed experiment.” The man sneers at Batcat. “An ugly hybrid.”

“How dare you.” Andy's tenses like she's ready for one-on-one combat. She could handle indecency... but mocking her cat, that is one step too far.

“I said...” he speaks like he is talking to an illiterate child. “Ugly. Hybrid.”

Batcat launches from Andy's shoulders, claws out, prepares to strike. “BATCAT, STAND DOWN!” Mid-air, Batcat veers sharply, narrowly missing the man's eyes before looping back to Andy's shoulder with a furious growl and flap of his wings.

The man straightens his soiled lab coat. “Like I said.” He turns away. “Failed experiment.” He disappears down the corridor, yet his smell lingers.

“MEOW.” Batcat complains angrily.

“Don’t listen to him,” Andy says. “He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.”

But the man’s words echo anyway.

‘I’m surprised you don’t remember.’

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 7 hours, 46 minutes

Until Commissioning

“A failed experiment.”

“Ugly Hybrid.”

“I’m surprised you don’t remember.”

What? That last bit eats at her, *what should I be remembering?* Andy ruminates on the smelly man. *How do I know you?* Her memory has never been reliable, unlike Jade’s whose sharp enough to resurrect an entire conversation with brutal precision. Andy has always struggled to recall because she forgets on purpose.

Lost in the deafening echoes of her own mind, Andy doesn’t realize how far she’s walked until she reaches the mural. *The Wall of Remembrance*, centrally located in the heart of Utoya Air Base. She feels their presence, hundreds of painted eyes bearing down on her. Her broken promise. The guilt. The shame. And the unnerving sense that a wall of dead people know something that she doesn’t.

She never looks at it.

But it’s hard to ignore a fifty-foot tall, hundred-foot-long painted wall: a tidal wave of color against the domineering gray of the colony. Andy tries to glide past with her gaze pinned to the cracked concrete floor, but the faces tug at her anyway, beckoning her to look.

She gives in - just one quick glance – and instantly regrets it.

Andy is met by the countless stares of colonists who are no longer living. The mural being a memorial for the deceased. *I wonder how long before they add the counselor...* Andy bites her lip... *How long until the Commander notifies the colony that a killer walks among us?*

One portrait catches her eye.

His watchful eyes stare back at her. Gray threading through black hair. A crisp white lab coat. The artist captured his essence: that stern face hiding the brilliant mind that's always measuring your worth in this world. Andy tightens her chest, afraid to breath. There's a reason she doesn't look at the mural, for else she be reminded of what she did, *to him*.

"I'm sorry... Dad."

She tears her gaze away, finding relief in the blank floor. That same cold blank gray that dominates her life. She keeps walking, quickening her pace, but under her breath she forces a whisper across her lips, "May they be remembered."

She reaches the med bank before she realizes it.

Andy pulls the heavy doors open and enters the colony's main pharmacy, adjacent to the base hospital. She moves along the shelves of neatly packaged medicine, fixes for common ailments, then heads for the counter in the back. What she needs is specific, not something she can grab off the shelves.

She waits.

No one comes.

Typical third-class support staff...

Batcat hops off her shoulder, plops onto the countertop, and yawns with a stretch. They look at each other. "No one's here, bud." Andy scratches behind his ears, much to his delight.

"Meow." He agrees with a loud purr.

Andy sighs. She does, technically, have all day, but standing idle isn't her strong suit. "We don't need to wait for a clerk." She motions for Batcat and slips behind the counter into the private backroom: a maze of shelving stocked with personal medicines and medical files. Drawers line the walls, names labeled in alphabetical order. Out of curiosity, she opens one.

Male. Dr. Brendan Lee. Occupation: surgeon. Age: 56. Andy lifts a vial: *serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors*. Antidepressants. She immediately puts the prescription back. Heat creeps up her neck, deep shame. She shouldn't poke around in private records. Still, she

can't help the thought: *I bet half the colony is prescribed something.* It's an anxious life living on the edge of a new era or perhaps participating in humankind's final chapter.

She moves deeper, scanning names. *Mariana Hamada. Laurel Hartman...*

"Please!"

Andy stops cold. Batcat freezes too, his giant bat ears perking up, listening.

"PLEASE!" a girl's voice cries again.

Andy follows the sound deeper into the shelves. *What's going on?* Pain tightens in her chest at the panic in the girl's voice.

"Ahhh!" The girl cries again with raw desperation.

Andy pulls her knife and runs, zigzagging through the narrow aisles. Batcat sails overhead. Her heart hammers. A loud SMASH! Medicine scatters across the floor. *Someone's getting hurt!* Rage hits fast. Her hatred towards injustice. The overwhelming desire to protect and defend. The image of Patricia Wu's mutilated body flashes across her mind.

"OH MY GOD! AHHH!" the girl screams.

Andy rounds the last corner, knife ready.

And stops.

There, pinned against the wall, is Acacia. Hair tussled, forehead sweaty, moaning. "YES please! Ah!"

Jefferson, naked from the waist down, thrusts between her open legs. Pill bottles and boxes fall off the shelves with every slap of motion. Neither of them notices Andy standing there, paralyzed, mouth open, knife in hand.

Acacia groans with peaked euphoria. Andy can't help but stare at her face as her green eyes dilate from pleasure. Her limp head rests against the wall with release. Batcat drops to the floor and purrs loudly, thoroughly entertained. Acacia notices Andy, blinking -once, twice - then the two girls lock eyes. Andy has the courtesy to close her gaping mouth.

Acacia pats Jefferson on the back, "Jeff... babe..."

He doesn't stop, burying his face into her neck. He bites her shoulder gently. "Mmm," he moans.

"Babe!"

Jefferson finally looks up. His expression hardens. "What in the world are you doing, Tanaka?" he snaps, shifting to shield Acacia with his body.

Andy slides the knife away and turns around out of decency. “What am I doing?” Andy asks, voice tight. “What the hell are you two doing?”

Andy hears the pair disentangle themselves, hears the shuffle of clothes being placed back on bodies. While Andy stands stiff and straight, eyes pinned to the floor, her entire body radiating uncomfortable heat.

“Loosen up, Andy.” Jefferson places a hand on Andy’s shoulder, making her jump. He smells like sweat and sticky sweetness. “We’re just doing our part for the good of the colony.” He laughs. Charming as ever, pushing his loose hair out of his eyes.

Acacia steps around Andy, still irritated. “So, are you going to go tattle-tale?” she asks with a sharp thorn in her tone.

“You know it's...”

“What? Wrong?” Jefferson asks. “Grow up, Andy. We’re commissioning tomorrow. What difference does it make?”

Andy can't hide her discomfort. “You could get pregnant! What if you’re not paired together? The risk!”

Jefferson pulls Acacia into his arms and playfully nibbles on her earlobe. Their gray uniforms still mostly unbuttoned; Acacia pulls her blouse over her breasts.

“The risk.” Andy stresses.

“We’re meant to be, Andy,” Acacia says simply, like that settles it. Out of the corner of her eye, Andy sees Jefferson’s hand slide under Acacia’s shirt again.

“I apologize for my intrusion.” Andy exhales, stiff as a board. “It’s none of my business.” Hoping to put an end to this already incredibly awkward encounter.

“Don’t worry about it,” Acacia smooths out her thick brunette hair. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I mean, Andy, come on... have you never... like... you know?” Jefferson winks, finally resurfacing from nibbling Acacia’s collarbone.

“Babe. Don’t be rude. It’s ANDY. Of course, she hasn’t” Acacia smiles sweetly at her. “This one is a good, loyal, rule-abiding citizen.”

“A virgin.” Jefferson grins.

Andy wishes she were anywhere but here. “I’ve come for my prescription. That’s all.”

“Just one last day working this job.” Acacia disentangles herself from Jefferson. “One final order.” Acacia looks around the wall for Andy’s drawer. “Well, let’s see then...” She inspects the floor where medicines litter the ground, knocked off the shelves from the passionate encounter. Acacia kneels and fumbles amongst the items.

“Don’t worry, Andy.” Jefferson leans in, taking advantage of Andy’s discomfort, “you will find love.” He gives her a thumbs up.

“Here we go: Andrea Tanaka.” Acacia picks up a small box, proud of herself. “Looking for these?” She holds up a fresh pack of contact lenses.

“Yes.” Andy nods, still burning.

Acacia hesitates before handing them over. “Contact lenses? What, do you have bad vision or something?”

“No. They assist with my vision.”

Acacia flips opens the box, poking at the colored plastic lenses. “Huh.”

“My prescription.” Andy extends her hand. “Please.”

“What do you mean they assist with your vision if you have good vision?” Acacia asks, genuinely curious.

“They just do,” Andy says, patience thinning. “That’s all.”

“Wait...” Jefferson takes a moment to really get a good look at her, “Since when are your eyes golden? Do the contacts cover that up?”

“Excuse me?” Andy’s stomach tightens.

“They hide your golden eyes, am I wrong?” He motions to his own, a common shade of chestnut brown. “yours’s are gold.”

Acacia steps right up, cupping Andy’s face with both hands and peers in. “He’s right.” She beams. “Very pretty.”

Andy flushes and pulls away. She snatches the box, pops it open, and with practiced speed slides in fresh lenses. Black floods her irises again, dark and uniform. When she looks up her eyes are matching, solid and dark. “It’s just an eye color.”

“I don’t know anyone with gold.” Acacia states.

Everyone has different eyes. Jade are gray, smoky almost, like her mother. Jasper’s are a brilliant blue. He told me once he inherited his grandmother’s eyes. Buck’s are a warm reddish

brown. My eyes aren't... remarkable. They're eyes. Good for seeing. She had been using contact lenses for as long as she could remember. Her dad used to help her insert them as a child.

“I don't know anyone with gold eyes either.” Jefferson thinks hard.

“Well... gold must just be rare, like me. You didn't know anyone with green eyes until you met me.” Acacia reminds him with a cute grin and a flick of her long hair. Andy takes note of her eyes, they are, in fact, green. A seemingly unnatural vivid green like one of the shades painted in the rubble of training area 13.

Jefferson leans into Acacia, “That's true, I love your green eyes.” He kisses her passionately.

“I'm leaving now.” Batcat flies to her shoulder and Andy departs to the sound of their happy moans.

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 7 hours, 18 minutes
Until Commissioning

Andy steps out of the med bank. Trying to shake off what she just saw. But the bumping bodies and sounds of ecstasy poison her thoughts.

“OUT OF THE WAY!”

Andy jumps to the side as two nurses barrel past, wheeling a gurney through the emergency doors of the hospital wing. Blood soaks through the white sheet draped over the patient. Before the hospitals double doors close Andy recognizes the poor soul strapped to the bed as their eyes meet. Her breath stutters.

John Wiseman.

Andy knows him.

Not as the head of the department of defense, but as the 18-year-old cadet who looked out for her during her first year in the Academy. His kindness meant everything.

So, against her better judgment Andy slips through the double doors into the emergency room hugging the wall as nurses crowd John's gurney, hands press to wounds, barking orders, fighting the bleeding. A young assistant rushes in with IV lines, snapping them into place.

"What happened out there?" A doctor demands.

"It was an ambush!" John manages to croak, "The Others!"

"Take off your shirt sir!"

The counselor lifts the fabric with shaking hands. Andy sees it immediately - a black, branching stain creeping outward from a puncture near his ribs.

Poison.

John looks down at his abdomen registering his fate, his face turns ghostly white as Andy weaves through the chaos to John's bedside.

"Any other survivors?" The doctor presses.

"No." John lowers his shirt in dismay. "None."

Andy crouches beside John. The counselor sees her and grabs her hand and gives it a squeeze. "Hey kid."

Andy's Memory

"Hey kid."

Andy opens her eyes to blinding fluorescent lights.

Everything hurts.

The smell hits first - burnt flesh. She tries to speak but her mouth is sealed shut with adhesive tape.

"Don't move child." A nurse leans over her, adjusting the IV in her small arm. "You're in the hospital," she says gently. "You're going to be okay."

Why am I in the hospital? Andy feels her heart racing as the vivid lights blind her. She blinks, one of the few movements she can muster amidst the mounting pain and panic.

“You were badly burned.” The nurse continues softly.

“Daddy?” Andy manages to mumble the one word.

The nurse gently rests her hand on Andy’s non-bandaged arm, sympathy dripping out of her like the teardrops sliding down Andy’s face. “There was an incident.” The nurse whispers to her.

An incident? Andy freezes, suddenly she knows. The tears stream, hot and heavy, wetting the bandages that cover her cheek. She knows exactly what she’s done. *What she is.*

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 7 hours, 13 minutes
Until Commissioning

“Call the Commander!” someone orders. “Tell her there was an incident!”

Andy jolts back to the present as John squeezes her hand.

“Get this man on morphine. Now!” Dr. Brendon Lee, the surgeon, rushes to John’s bedside. Andy recognizes him instantly. The same name. The same face from the medical files she shouldn’t have seen. He yanks the blood-soaked sheets back, revealing the damage beneath. Andy looks away as a pair of nurses apply ointment to the poison spreading on his skin, while another nurse bolts for the medication.

“Clear this room. NOW!” Dr. Lee shouts. The doctor finds Andy idling in the chaos. “Um, excuse me, who are you?” He demands. Andy opens her mouth to speak but Dr. Lee runs off, no time for her. “Remove this young lady! I want this man prepped for surgery in five!”

No wonder he takes drugs for anxiety. Andy thinks. A spare nurse looks at Andy but chooses to help the other nurses push the gurney, shuffling John away to surgery.

“Wait,” John croaks. The nurses stop dead in their tracks. “Andrea.” He motions for her to come closer.

“John...” Andy’s voice shakes. She would never forget the first thing he ever said to her, years ago, when her uniform was five sizes too big. *It’s not the uniform that makes the soldier.* he’d said, laughing as he taped her gear tighter. *It’s the soldier that makes the uniform.*

“What happened to you?” Andy whispers. She knows her presence in the emergency room, daring to ask these questions, is prohibited. But Andy has this sinking feeling in her gut. She simply has to know.

“The Others...” John croaks, the blood stains expand across the white sheets.

“What about the Others?” He was always the one who calmed her fears. But now he trembles.

“They’re coming.” With that, the nurses pull him into surgery.

Someone grabs her shoulder, “You can’t be in here, miss.”

Andy nods and turns to go, with only one thought occupying her mind.

I need to find Jasper.

Oliver Patel

1 day, 7 hours, 12 minutes
Until Commissioning

This isn’t illegal... is it? Bucket waits until the coast is clear before sliding up to the engineering department’s storage-room door. *I’m doing nothing against the rules... technically.*

He gets out his keycard, grateful for his role as an engineering student that has granted him such access. He unlocks the door and enters. *This is completely fine... it’s just... unorthodox.* *If anything, I’m upholding a longstanding human tradition.*

Row upon row of mechanical components tower over him, supplies hauled up from the reserves, the vast underground bunkers beneath the colony. Bucket knows exactly what he’s looking for. It doesn’t take long to find it, tucked against the back wall: a large, locked metal chest. He drags it out and scans his keycard. Internal locks unwind. The chest pops open.

He has only opened this box a handful of times before. The contents are rare and to be used sparingly. Inside, a mixture of raw metals and alloys, some coiled up in strands, others as solid bars. He filters through them one by one. *Radium. Titanium. Copper. Nickel. Palladium. Platinum. Tungsten. Atomic numbers 45, 22, 29, 28, 46, 78, 74 Aha here we are. Gold: 79.*

He lifts a gold bar out of the box. Waxy, heavy, obnoxiously yellow, it glistens in his hand. He turns the soft metal over, enjoying the shine. He has used the metal before and knows it well, it's useful in electronics, in circuitry, in chips. But today is not about function. Using a pair of metal clippers, he snips off a corner of the gold bullion.

No one will know.

He smiles, holding the pea-sized chunk of pure gold, excited about his 3D software, printing a mold, casting it. He has created recreationally before, albeit, not with rare metals and not with no technological purpose. This is new territory. He's excited.

He folds the nugget into a scrap of paper and slips it into his pocket. Then, carefully, he rearranges the remaining metals exactly as he found them and seals the chest shut.

A bad feeling spreads through his chest.

Is someone watching me?

Bucket stands, surveys the empty storage room. He is alone, and yet, he can't shake the feeling he's being watched. "Hello?" his voice reverberates amongst the high walls. "Anyone there?"

Nothing.

Bucket feels like a fool. He turns to head back to the main lab, back to his desk and computer where he can start 3D rendering. As he goes, he could swear he hears footsteps behind him, so he turns once more.

"Hello?" *This is creepy.* He frowns, suddenly angered, "Peter... is that you? If it is, we are not small children anymore and I..." Bucket stops, something white has fluttered to the floor. A piece of paper.

He bends down to pick it up. Flips it over and his thumb immediately smudges the fresh pen ink. *Someone just wrote this.* He squints, deciphering the hasty and sloppy print.

What is project cicada rising?

He rubs the ink stain from his thumb against his lab coat, curiously flips the lost note in his hands. Re-reading the scribbled text. *I've never heard of a cicada project...*

It's nothing. Someone just dropped a note. It doesn't look important. Still, he folds it carefully and slips it into his pocket - right beside the gold.

Jade Parker

1 day, 6 hours, 22 minutes
Until Commissioning

“Mom can fuck off.”

How mature... “I don't think our mother would appreciate your tone,” Jade sighs with impatience while carefully burning off loose silky strands with her pink lighter. It's her latest masterpiece; a beautiful red ballgown gently laid across her dormitory bed.

“Since when does she give a shit about what we do?” Jasper muses, plopping onto Jade's mattress with a heavy sigh. He snatches up his sister lucky pink lighter and playfully flicks the flame on and off. “There has never been a single moment in our entire lives that that woman has cared,” he continues.

“She does care, just in her own way.” Jade grabs for her needle and thread, but instead pushes Jasper's large leg away, pretending not to notice that his weight is crumpling the red fabric she's spent weeks perfecting.

“Why are you defending her?” He snaps the lighter flame shut, “You hate her just as much as I do.”

“I don't HATE her. Jasper, she has a hard job. She commands the entire colony. We're at war with the Others. The fate of humanity is on the line and...” Jade stops as Jasper mocks her with an imitating blabbermouth hand. Jade's face falls flat, “Okay yes, from time to time I wish she would care, pretend to care even. About us.”

Jasper nods, “Good thing I've got you.” He playfully slaps his sister on the back. “Best sister ever.”

Jade stops sewing. It's pointless. She's going to ruin the seam with him bouncing all over the bed. She sets the needle aside and glares. “I still think you're an idiot.”

“Well, if one of us must be. Might as well be me.”

Jade can't help but laugh at that.

“One. More. Day.” Jasper leans back and lays his hands under his head. “Then the future is ours.”

Good riddance.

The twins sit in silence for a moment, both ruminating on their own vision of what’s to come. Both playing entirely different scenarios in their minds. The outcomes of which couldn’t be more different.

“You don’t think... She knows, right?” Jasper sits up, the thought suddenly occurring to him. “You don’t think...”

He better not say what I think he is going to say... “What... that our mother is planning some ominous plot?”

Jasper frowns, not following, “Uh... what?”

Jade folds her hands neatly in her lap. “Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed how she’s been acting lately? Paranoid, aggressive, meaner than usual... she has been repeatedly forcing me on these silly, meaningless errands – just to get me out of her office, mind you. It’s weird.”

“She’s stressed, were commissioning tomorrow.” Jasper points out. “Or that maybe she is freaking, because one of her counselors was literally stabbed to death this morning.”

“You want my honest opinion?” Jade lowers her voice.

“Sure, you’re the smartest person I know,”

“She’s hiding something. It’s just the WHAT that I’m not so sure of.”

“The only thing she is hiding is tomorrow’s results.” Jasper grunts.

Jade slams Jasper’s paperwork on his stomach, “Speaking of which, are you going to fill these out or not?”

“If I fill them out, you’ll leave. Then I’ll be bored” He flashes that maddening grin. “And who knows what kind of mischief I’ll get up to without you around? Think of all the extra paperwork you’ll have to do if you need to write me up.”

“Could you just, like... for ONE single day... be normal?” Jade groans.

“Normal is boring.” He grins.

Jade’s bedroom door busts open. “There’s been an ambush!” Andy huffs, bursting through, having run the whole way from the hospital ward.

Jasper sits up, excited, “What?”

“John Wiseman...” Andy catches her breath, “was hurt badly...”

“Meow.” Batcat confirms plodding into Jade’s dormitory bedroom.

Jade stands on her feet. “And how do you know this?”

“He told me.”

Jade frowns, “What?”

“I was leaving the med bank. They were wheeling him into the ER. I overheard - and John told me -”

Jasper gets to his feet smelling adrenaline and danger, his calling card. “What did he say?”

Andy sucks air into her lungs before exhaling the truth, “He told me the Others are coming.”

The twins freeze. Jade nervously starts springing her dark coils, “There hasn’t been a confrontation in months. What do you mean by an ambush? What do you mean their coming!”

“I don’t know.” Andy leans against the wall, her eyebrows creased with worry.

“Don’t stress, Andy. Don’t fret little sister.” Jasper claps his hands together, standing tall.

“You know I’m seven minutes older than you right?” Jade comments.

He ignores her and looks at Andy, “What did we spend the better part of the last decade training for? To kill these damned dragon-riding insects.” Jasper tightens his hands into a fist. “They’re the ones who should be worried.”

He’s wrong.

You win by knowing when everyone else is being lied to. Jade dashes to the doorway, “The commander needs me.” But she stops on her way out, clocking her brother with a glare, “Jasper if I come back to my room and see you’ve made a mess of it, I’ll...” She can’t think of anything. “I’ll be very, VERY, mad.” She tosses his folder at him, “and FINISH your PAPERWORK!”

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 6 hours, 16 minutes
Until Commissioning

Jasper barely catches his paperwork as Jade angrily slams the door. “And there she goes. Sometimes I wonder if it’s me or her who is more trained in the chain of command.” Jasper yanks one of his sister’s perfectly fluffed quilted pillows and shoves it under his elbow. “Jade may just win this war with her worry.” He uses a foot to push Jade’s half-complete red dress to the side.

“You should try being nice to her sometimes.” Andy suggests.

“Nah... where is the fun in that?” Jasper plops his papers to the side as well and looks at Andy, leaning against the wall, her arms folded around her. “Oh, Andy don’t tell me you’re worried too?” He hops off the bed, and places both hands on her forearms. He uses his thumbs to rub gentle circles into her skin.

Andy holds her breath at his sudden touch.

“We’re going to be okay.” He speaks softly. The real him. Not the person he tries to be, with all the teasing and acting tough. *His goodness*. It’s Andy’s favorite part of him and sometimes she wonders if she is the only one that ever sees it. He bends over to smile into her eyes, while Andy picks up her chin to meet his gaze. “We got this. Whatever comes next. It’s me and you. Nothing will ever change that.”

“Thank you, Jasper,” Andy exhales, she hadn’t realized how badly she needed to hear that.

“What are friends for?”

Friends...

“Let’s go to my place.” He suggests.

“Are you forgetting something?”

“What?” Jasper asks innocently.

“Your dream sheet.” Andy points toward Jade’s bed at the open folder and the blank lines.

“Oh.” Jasper snatches his paperwork.

“Why haven’t you filled it out?”

“The heart wants what it wants.” He shrugs. “Writing it down will not make a difference.”

Andy steps around Jade’s neatly packed belongings, ready for the move. Strange to think they’ll all be leaving the dorms - the place they’ve lived since they were twelve, after they

moved out of family housing. Except Andy. At just ten, after her hospital stay, she moved straight into the dorms. There was no family unit for her to return to.

“It does matter.” Andy says as they step out into the hallway and into Jasper’s room next door. “It’s your chance to tell the Commander what you want.” She’s prepared for the mess, but still, it fascinates her. Like peering inside the twin’s minds. Jade’s room - methodical and clean. His? Chaos and creativity.

“My mother already knows what she’s going to do,” Jasper mutters, shutting the door. “The dream sheet won’t change that.”

“Still,” Andy says, scanning his dorm room, filled with paint spills, canvases and half-finished sketches. “It would be worse if you didn’t at the least give yourself the chance.”

“It’s the illusion of choice, Andy... the whole thing. This ritual... our whole lives... It was never about choice. It’s about control.” Jasper drops onto his chair and flips open a sketchbook, already doodling Andy as she moves through his gallery. She’s used to this - being his subject. He likes to draw from life.

Her gaze drifts to the wall of scavenged photographs. Landscapes and faces. Smiling strangers from before The Last Day, used as reference material for his paintings. Andy pauses at one image tucked into the corner. A young woman with freckles and fiery red hair. She’s striking. “Where did you find her?” Andy asks.

“Old moldy magazine,” Jasper says.

“She has red hair,” Andy murmurs, touching the photo.

“Yeah. Isn’t that wild? That was a real thing once.” He gestures to the wall. “They all were real.” His voice softens. “And now they’re gone.”

Andy doesn’t know what to say. She doesn’t linger on the past the way he does.

Jasper reaches for his framed family photograph by his bed. Andy knows it well. It’s Ruby Parker holding her scrawny, sickly, screaming newborn twins. And the twins father, Quinn Parker, smiling proudly over his family. A week after that photo was taken, he was killed, and the war with the Others began.

“Sometimes I wonder how different it would be if my Dad was still our Commander.” Jasper stares at the photograph. “Second gens are always telling me how kind he was.”

“Like you.” Andy notes.

He sets the frame back carefully. “I wonder how many first gens are still alive today.”

They would have lived two lives in one lifetime. Andy tries to wrap her mind around that. “They’d be very old,”

“They would have memories of Old Earth, from before The Last Day.” Jasper adds.

Andy sits with that, *they would... wouldn't they?*

London Graham

1 day, 5 hours, 56 minutes
Until Commissioning

How fascinating...

It's morbid, but London loves chaos. Nurses bark at one another. People zip in and out of the emergency room. Whispers of an ambush beyond the wall, the stabbing of a counselor in a bathroom.

What a day.

With her neon-green hair tied in a messy bun, London keeps her head down, and scrubs blood stains off the floor. She volunteered for it. Strategically planting herself in the middle of it all. To her ongoing benefit, no one ever pays attention to underage minors. Plus, it felt good to help, save the poor janitor from having to deal with it.

Look who's decided to join the party... London wrings out the bloody sponge into her mop pail as the Commander strides into the ER, followed closely by counselor Ken Tanner and her assistant, Jade. *You look like shit.* London notes the other girl's dark complexion bleaching paler by the second. *Stress, fear? Hard to tell...* keeping her eyes on the floor London plops her sponge down and listens.

“I came as soon as I heard.” The Commander's voice is flat. “How is he?”

“The good news?” Dr. Lee, fresh from surgery, peels off his bloody medical gloves, “Mr. Wiseman is alive, for now. The bad news? He is in critical condition. It's up to him to pull through.”

“John is strong!” Ken declares, “The lad will pull through.”

London watches red turn to pink as she moves her sponge through the blood. She steals a glance at the Commander. The stern woman doesn't flinch. "Thank you, Doctor. Message me immediately if Mr. Wiseman's state changes."

"Of course." Dr. Lee bows to their leader.

London works the blood puddle on the floor. No one notices the small smile on her lips.

What a day indeed...

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 5 hours, 53 minutes
Until Commissioning

"Oh! I know!" Jasper snaps his fingers, "the old lady who paints the mural! She must be a hundred years old. At least."

Andy knew exactly who he was talking about. "You mean the one who talks to herself pushing her art cart around?"

"Yes! She must be a first gen," Jasper concludes.

Andy sits down on the edge of his bed, "I hate that mural. All those faces."

"I thought you loved art?" Jasper lifts his sketchbook, showing her a quick drawing of Andy staring at the red-haired woman's photograph.

"I don't hate art," Andy says. "I hate what it remembers. You're getting faster by the way."

"Practice," he taps his 4B drawing pencil against the edge of his sketchbook. "Do you ever miss your dad?" He asks softly.

"Every day." Batcat presses a paw against her leg sensing the heaviness in her soul.

"And your mom?"

Andy thinks of her painted face that never changes. "Sometimes."

"What happened to them is unforgivable."

Andy feels her chest squeeze with a jolt of pain; she stiffens.

Jasper pulls her close, "Andy, are you alright?"

She doesn't answer.

"Breathe." His rubs her back, gently caressing between her shoulder blades until his hand reaches the base of her neck. "Just breathe." He holds her there, steady and familiar. "We can't get them back. But we can fight for them."

He doesn't know what I did.

"We just need to find the hive." Jasper concludes, "end the war."

Andy's mind is not on the mysterious location of the nesting grounds of the Others. Her thoughts are closer to home. *The Others were responsible for my killing my mother but...*

"I have this... one regret." She confesses. The terrible memories she has kept away all these years, now threatening to slide back to the forefront of her mind. She doesn't know if she's strong enough to keep them at bay any longer.

"What's that?"

"The staircase." Her voice stings, "The day I led you down into the dark." She closes her eyes at the admission. The vulnerability; it's unlike her.

Jasper holds her close, "I remember."

"The day my Dad..." Andy can't even say it.

"Oh." His face tightens. "Yeah. That day."

"I wish we never went down that staircase," Andy mutters.

"We were kids, we can't change what happened."

Andy tucks her chin to her chest, her head suddenly extremely heavy.

"Don't be so hard on yourself." He lifts her chin up, "What happened was an accident. It's not your fault."

An accident.

An incident.

A murder...

"I'm glad we went."

What do you mean?

"That's when I knew who you were. Your bravery." Jasper smiles at her, they're so close; their foreheads almost touch. His thumb gently runs over her eyebrow. The simple gesture sends shockwaves and heat across her body all the way to the pit of her stomach. "I knew right then and there that I wanted you by my side. Always."

Andy bites her lip, betrayed by this sudden weakness, unsure where it's coming from.

"Remember how little I was?" He adds, "I wasn't strong back then, but when you got into the Academy, I knew I had to join you. I did whatever I could until I passed."

It's true, at ten Andy easily passed the requirements to enlist, becoming the youngest cadet in colony history. The DOD tried to enlist Bucket flagging his strength and size, but his heart was sold on Engineering. Jasper meanwhile struggled. Scrawny. Weak. But the desire to serve – his big heart - overpowered his limitations.

He has come so far.

She feels the weight of her cadet badge.

I guess we both have.

"You know...it's not too late to change career paths." Andy chuckles, "You can paint the mural. You're better than the old lady."

He laughs. "And stay third-class forever? No. I want to fight. I want to fly - with you."

Andy's heart threatens to break free from her ribcage.

"It's all I want," Jasper squeezes her hand.

Andy tastes happiness. A forbidden sweetness, like she's sucking on one of the colony's coveted candies, but like all nice things, she doesn't trust it. She pulls her hand away. "There is only one pilot slot..." She can't even look at him. "And we aren't both getting it."

John Wiseman

1 day, 5 hours, 53 minutes
Until Commissioning

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The heart monitor hums in time with the ventilator, the bag swelling and collapsing against John Wiseman's chest.

He breathes - barley.

Bruised eyes sealed shut, drugged, morphine dripping into his veins via an IV. The room sits dark and quiet, Doctors orders to let the poor counselor rest.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

A shadow crosses the bed. A calm voice in his ear, "I'm sorry you have to die."
Under his closed lids, John's eyes flicker but the drugs hold him down. A blade rises beside his throat.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

"If it's any consolation," the voice murmurs, "you were my favorite."

The knife cuts deep. Slashing across the neck. The heart monitor flutters. BEEP! Beep.
beep....

The ventilator inhales one last time as John breathes his last breath.

Then a silence reigns.

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 5 hours, 28 minutes
Until Commissioning

Say something. Anything. Andy can't stand the silence. "Aren't you going to pack?" she finally asks.

"Pack?" Jasper asks, bemused. "Why?"

For someone so perceptive, you can be incredibly dense.

"This is our last night in the dorms." Andy folds her arms and leans against the wall, deliberately keeping space between them. Afraid to get close. Afraid of what else might slip out.

Jasper blinks. Then laughs under his breath. "Wow... I just realized the next bed we sleep in will have someone else in it." He shrugs. "That's kind of exciting."

Andy fights the urge to roll her eyes, but the thought occurs to her, *who is it going to be? Who is going to be in Jasper's bed?* Andy shakes her head, ordering the thoughts to leave her alone. "Yes. It's... um... anyways... what will you bring with you?"

Jasper looks around his room, taking it all in. The chaos. The color. "Definitely this." He holds up the framed family photo. "Everything else is trash."

Andy is surprised by that. His life's work, the paintings, the drawings. "Even this?" She points to a charcoal sketch of a Taipan. Bloated, exaggerated, ridiculous, a silly cartoon.

Jasper's cheeky grin returns. "That one's priceless. The depth. The contour." He traces the clumsy lines.

"And the terrifying eyes," Andy points to its disjointed googly gaze.

"And the black jaws of death." He pokes the absurd gaping blackhole of a mouth.

"If I ever meet one of these out there," Andy says dryly, "I hope your scientifically accurate rendering saves me because I'd just poke it here and it'll deflate like a balloon." Andy chuckles but can't help but wonder about the true beast. Able to pluck fighter jets from the sky, a monstrosity that even the Others fear. *'The killer of the sky...'*

"Too bad birds evolved back into dinosaurs." Jasper mumbles. "But don't worry, this is exactly what they look like, you know, from my personal eye-witness account."

Andy snorts. No one has ever seen a taipan and lived to tell the tale. What little they know came from fragments of a juvenile male, just enough to humble the colony. Females are believed to be even bigger. She moves along the wall of reference photos. "And what about your people? You can't just leave them."

"I'm afraid I must." Jasper plucks the portrait of the redhead from the wall. His humor evaporates. "They're gone," he says quietly. "Their stories are gone." He crushes the picture in his fist and drops it into the trash.

"May they be remembered." Andy says automatically.

"No... we've been saying that our whole lives. Without even thinking!" Jasper's voice booms with that passion that always grips him. "It's not 'May they be remembered'. It's may they be honored."

"What are you saying?"

"The time before now is ancient history. Yes, honor those who came before us, but now... we are living and breathing a brand-new era, Andy. The future is our future."

The future is our future. "You're right," Andy nods. Batcat flutters to Andy's shoulder, sensing a call to action.

"We need to think about today," Jasper says. "About tomorrow." He steps closer. "We need to think about us."

Us.

"Oh!" Jasper's eyes brighten. "I almost forgot."

Andy stiffens. "What?"

“Your spot.” He snaps his fingers. “Bucket wanted me to tell you to meet him there.”

“Oh.”

Buck...

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 3 hours, 1 minute
Until Commissioning

Andy heads to the commissary.

“Excuse me lady!” a child slams into her legs. The kid, a young girl, bounces off her scrambling for cover behind a concrete pillar. The little girl hides, holding a finger to her lips, “Shhhh.”

“THREE! TWO! ONE!” Andy looks down the corridor as a boy counts down. “Ready or not! Here I come!” The boy peels off from the wall and begins his search.

Hide and seek.

The boy runs Andy’s way. Eyes full of mischief, “Have you seen- “

Andy points down the hallway... the wrong way. The boy whips around and darts that direction. With the boy gone Andy looks back to the little girl. They exchange smiles.

Andy keeps going, but a wave of vertigo overcomes her. She closes her eyes, battling it, fighting it, but the memory wins.

Andy’s Memory

“Five... four... three...” Jade’s squeaky voice sings into the black void.

Andy can barely make out Jasper in the shadows. The whites of his eyes give him away and as silently as he can, he puts a single finger to his lips. “Shhhh.” Andy nods and scooches deeper underneath the desk. Batcat, just a scrappy kitten, hides beside her.

“... two... ONE! Ready or not, here I come!” Jade’s voice calls out across the DNA sequencing lab.

Two years ago, when Andy was eight, she unlocked the secret to this game: *never look the seeker in the eye*. Putting this to the test she lowers herself to the floor and glances under chair legs as Jade’s pair of squeaky-clean sneakers trot across the laminate tiles.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are!” She teases.

The shoes shift with a happy skip.

She’s heading toward Jasper!

Andy peeps under the underbelly of the desk and motions for him to come to her. Like a crab, Jasper scrambles across the floor on all fours and slithers underneath the desk on his belly. Andy and Jasper silently fist-bump.

“I can hear you!” Jade climbs on top of the desk, right above them. Andy feels the weight of the desk shift, questioning the structural integrity of the ancient wooden furniture. The pair holds their breath and wait until Jade leaps off the desk and her footsteps trail off into the dim-lit lab. The concealed ten-year-old’s exhale in relief.

“Aren’t we too old for hide and seek?” Andy whispers.

Jasper grins, “Never,” and then scampers off, “this way!”

“Go that way. To Mr. Rogers.” Andy motions for the boy to head to the other side of the lab. To a large cage holding the furry mass of a sleeping new-world marsupial.

“What? Why?”

Andy slides through the boney legs of a model human skeleton. “If we split up, Jade will have a harder time finding us.”

“No way! I’m staying with you,” he insists.

Andy looks around the large room there's plenty of hiding spaces amongst all the equipment and experiments. They had agreed on ‘expert mode’ by turning off the lights and the resulting darkness provides lots of cover. A large storage closet, perfect. Andy silently darts

across the lab. Batcat tries, unsuccessfully, to take flight, flapping his underdeveloped bat wings. “Come on!” she calls to her kitten. The pair slip inside the cabinet and she shuts the door.

“Hey!” Jasper’s small hand stops it from closing.

“This is my hiding spot!” Andy pulls.

“But your hiding spots are always the best!” Jasper pleads.

Andy tries to shut the door on him, but he holds it open.

Footsteps. *Jade’s coming back.* “Get in!” She yanks Jasper inside the cabinet just as the footsteps draw near.

The kids hold their breath. Andy watches her friends shadow fill the gap in the seam. *She’s... right... there.* Jasper shuffles nervously beside her. Andy grabs his hand, squeezes it, unspoken code for: *don’t move!*

Andy feels the dust settle on her eyelashes.

“Will you marry me?” Jasper whispers into her ear.

What? Andy blinks the dust away, disbelieving.

“Will you?” Jasper’s blue eyes are huge, inches from her face. Andy suddenly feels squished and hot.

“We can’t get married.” Andy hisses under her breath. “We’re not old enough.”

“I know but... I love you.”

I love you.

“No, you don’t” Andy says, a bit too loud. “We’re best friends.”

He moves in close enough to kiss her. “You’re supposed to marry your best friend; that’s how it works.”

“We don’t get to pick,” She argues, pushing him back.

“Mew,” the kitten agrees.

“Yes! We do!” He pecks her cheek.

“Eww!” Andy wipes the wetness away immediately. Stepping backward the cabinet shift behind her.

“I’m going to pick you Andy.” Jasper speaks softly. “Are you going to pick me?”

“FOUND YOU!” Jade thrusts open the cabinet doors, revealing her closeted friends.

“DANG IT!” Jasper groans.

“I found you, I found you, I found you!” Jade chants poking her brother in the stomach.

Andy sighs in defeat and leans backwards. The unexpected happens: the wall behind her moves, just a little.

“I FOUND YOUUUU!” Jade sings triumphantly curly ponytails bouncing as she prods her twin.

“Move it Jade.” Jasper pushes her, trying to break free of the cabinet. “I’m seeker now!” He declares. Andy is squeezed behind them, the space inside the cabinet is just too tight for all three of them.

“You move!” Jade complains as their wiggling arms and legs are tangled. The cabinet gives way and the kids tumble through a secret doorway crashing on top of one another.

“GET OFF YOU SLUG!” Jade cries out.

“STINK BEETLE!” Jasper shoves his sister.

“Guys...” Andy whispers as a series of automatic lights flicker on, revealing the cabinets hidden doorway while illuminating a spiraling steel staircase that descends into darkness below them. They stare silently into the abyss and slowly disentangle themselves as a cold draft washes goosebumps over their skin.

“I don’t like this.” Jade slinks behind the other two.

“A SECRET PASSAGEWAY.” Jasper claps his hands enthusiastically. “Cool.”

Only Andy stays mute, digesting the discovery. She looks at the twins, at the cabinet they just came through and the creepy staircase to who-knows-where. She thought she knew every nook and cranny of the colony... but this... is the unknown. It invites her.

“Mew!” Batcat coos softly, flicking his large ears towards the stairwell. Echolocation stirring his curiosity, no doubt. Andy stands and scoops up her kitten stepping forward.

“Andy!” Jade grabs her arm. “No! What are you doing?” Her voice hyperventilates. “We weren’t supposed to play in the lab. I know for sure we are not allowed... not allowed...” her voice tremors with fear. “Down... there.”

Jasper nudges past his sister. “I want to see what’s down there.”

“NO.” Jade insists, grabbing her brother’s arm too. “We’ll get in trouble!” she squeaks.

“Fine then! Stay here and be a cockroach!” Jasper teases her, pulling out from under her grasp.

“I’m not a cockroach!”

Jasper grins, “Sure sound like one to me, scree-scree!”

The twins push back and forth again. While Andy places her foot down onto the first step. “I’m going.”

“WHAT?” Jade yelps. Andy begins to descend the loud steel steps, one at a time. Jasper gleefully hops after her. “WAIT!” Jade squeals, grabbing nervous fistfuls of her dress.

“It’s okay Jade. Stay here. I’ll come back.” Andy gives her friend a reassuring smile. “I promise.”

“Okay.” Jade whimpers softly.

“Yeahhhh! Don’t worry Jade!” Jasper sticks a tongue out to his sister before grabbing Andy’s hand. Normally Jasper holding her hand wouldn’t stir anything in Andy but as the two descend she feels suddenly self-conscious. “This is so cool! A secret tunnel! What do you think is down here?”

The air grows colder with each step. “I have no idea.”

The darkness thickens until Andy can’t even see Jasper beside her. She dares not let go of his hand. His question, however, is all she can think about.

Will you marry me?

Ruby Parker

1 day, 2 hours, 44 minutes
Until Commissioning

“Is he dead?”

“Afraid so.”

Dr. Lee and the commander stand over the cloaked body of John Wiseman.

“The surgery didn’t work?” Mrs. Parker is impatient, there are plenty of other things she has to do that don’t include a second trip to the hospital wing.

“It did.” Dr. Lee gets straight to the point. “That’s not why I called you back.” He pulls away the cover on John’s face revealing the fatal slash across the young man’s neck. “Someone killed him.”

Eyebrows furrowed the commander fumes, “That’s two of my counselors in 24 hours! Someone...” Her jaw tightens. “A traitor is trying to weaken us from within.” She grinds her teeth, trying to stomach her rage. “This colony has stood for nearly a hundred years without a single murder and now we have a serial killer.” Her voice sharpens. “Ten soldiers were ambushed today. Dead. All of them. That’s twelve deaths in one day! At this rate, there will be no humans left by the dry season.” The commander begins to wheeze, unable to catch her breath.

“Water?” Dr. Lee offers, holding a cup.

“I’d prefer coffee.” The commander rubs her chest and clears her throat. “No one can know about this.” She points to the body. “I will not incite panic, not with the commissioning so close. The last thing this base needs is the idea that a killer walks among us.”

Dr. Lee nods, understanding the gravity of the situation. He sighs. He has more bad news. “I know this is not an ideal time,” he says, eyes softening. “But I have your results.”

“I’m dying.” She looks Dr. Lee straight in the eyes, “tell me: how much time do I have?”

“Days... maybe weeks... if you’re lucky.”

The commander purses her lips. *There is still so much to do.*

“I’m sorry, Ruby.”

Ruby. She hasn’t heard her first name spoken aloud in years. It was always ‘Ma’am’ or ‘Commander’ or ‘Mrs. Parker.’ No one calls her Ruby, not since she was a teenager, before she commissioned. There is something so final about it.

“I don’t want to... overstep...” The surgeon carefully covers up John’s face. “But I would pick a successor.”

The next Commander.

“Don’t worry... I have someone in mind.”

Andy's Memory

"Mew?" Batcat crawls up the back of her neck, his little winged arms scratch at her scalp. Andy wishes she too could use echolocation to see in the dark. Jasper and Andy step off the final stair. Neither kid is brave enough to admit it but – *We shouldn't be here.*

Jasper's hand tenses in hers, his palm is sweaty. Or maybe it's her hand that's sticky? Andy lets go of Jasper to wipe her hand on her pants and forces her eyes to adjust to the dark.

A faint blue glow pulses ahead.

Mechanical humming, a consistent buzz persists in the space. Andy knows the room is vast. Her lifetime confinement inside the walls of the colony, she knows what large interior spaces feel like.

"Are these the reserves?" Jasper asks, "where they store all the stuff from before The Last Day?"

"No." Andy says. "My dad took me there once. This... isn't it."

Batcat slips from Andy's shoulder and flutters to the floor, baby wings still clumsy.

"I'll, uh... I'll look for a light switch."

"Good idea. I will too" Andy takes her first quiet steps forward, gravitating to that eerie blue glow ahead. She inhales, tasting the air. Damp concrete. Oil from greasy pipes. Heavy metal salts. She listens, that warm buzz, its louder.

Batcat meows insistently, Andy follows him, guided by the sound of his little paws scampering across the cold floor. *What a weird place. It's so dark. And cold. Why is it hidden away? It better not be the sewer.*

Her dad's voice low and steady calls out in her head, *what are you made of Andy?*

My name is Andy. I am strong. I am brave.

EeerrrrraaghHISS! Pipes hiss in the darkness.

Maybe I should go back.

“Mew!” Batcat encourages her.

“It’s spooky, Batcat.”

“Mew.”

“I know.” Andy swallows, “I’m coming.” Her eyes adjust as the blue light grows stronger. She can make out large shapes, circles lining the walls. Each with a locked handle. Vaults.

The blue light intensifies making Batcat’s eyes glow in the dark. She scoops him up and settles him on her shoulder. She finds comfort in the way he tucks his knobby tail around her neck. “What is this place, Batcat?” Despite whispering, her voice echoes in the chasm of space. Metal walls rise fifty feet, organized and linear, yet covered in dust.

It’s a place frozen in time.

Has anyone been down here since The Last Day? The thought excites her. She can tell her father about her discovery. She stiffens. *He’d be furious that I was playing in his lab...*

Andy approaches a corner. The glow spills from beyond it.

I shouldn’t go farther.

Her kitten leaps off her shoulder. “Batcat wait!” With a tail flick he disappears around the corner. “Come back!”

Curiosity and fear overlap. She recalls her father’s bedtime story. The ancient Greek myth of the minotaur, a half bull, half human monster that lived in a dungeon-like maze beneath an evil king’s castle. *It ate children.*

What if there is something down here?

What If it eats Batcat!

“Wait!” Andy moves her feet, rounding the corner, and screeches to a stop.

She gasps.

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 2 hours, 16 minutes
Until Commissioning

That was over eight years ago...

Andy shovels smog onto her tray. The commissary's daily offering of bland sludge. *You should be ashamed of yourself.* She grimaces. *Don't let your mind wander.* Andy scoops up the last item of her third-class rations: a pink mystery meat. Third class civilians, like herself, always get the worst food. Andy steps away from the serving station and scans the dining hall. It's packed, peak dinner time. Tables crowded with higher-ranking adults, commissioned, and partnered off. People who have settled into their purpose.

Her thoughts drift to the kids she passed in the hallway earlier. Children mean success, proof of survival. Every new generation born is hope for a future where humanity can regain a stronghold on the planet once again. *Could those kids be fourth generation?* She wonders. *Or are they third generation, like me?*

Andy smiles to herself, imagining those kids trapped in the same lectures she endured. Forced to memorize the history of Old Earth, of The Last Day. How the forefathers emerged from underground after millennia in cryochambers. They'll be told again and again how miraculous their existence is. How lucky they are. The importance of the legacy they carry... all while being served cold slop.

She threads through the tables, ignoring the whispers and glances shot her way. Andy winces at the attention, it makes her skin crawl. *Discussing the fate of my future no doubt.* Placing bets – on her life. Nothing fuels gossip like an approaching commissioning ceremony.

She tries not to look, but she can't stop herself.

At the best table in the hall sit the pilots. All men. Tactical green flight suits. Trays stacked with real meat and greens. First-class rank badges gleam at their shoulders. Most sport identical mustaches - the only facial hair compatible with a pressure mask seal. Andy watches as one of the pilots chews on a coveted candy.

Andy thinks about it, if she earns the single pilot slot, she will become the first female fighter in colony history. A few of the pilots turn heads and whisper. *They're watching me.* Andy drops her gaze to the floor and keeps moving.

What job will she be assigned, and with it, what rank? There are three classes. First class: The commander, counselors, officers, and pilots. Then the second class and bulk of the

population, regular jobs hailing from the three departments of defense, engineering, and science. Then the third: the unwed, support staff, and children. Marriage can raise rank. A third-class maintenance worker becomes second-class the moment they're paired. Upward mobility comes from promotion, marriage... or commissioning.

And people love to speculate.

Not just about what Andy will become - but who she'll be assigned to. Andy tries not to think about the drama of who she will have to wed. She could care less about spacious housing, higher rank, and better rations. Only one thing matters: getting back what she lost eight years ago.

"Virgin." Someone whispers from a table nearby.

Andy whips her head around but whoever commented is lost in a sea of faces. People smile, laugh, snicker. Mouths full. Bets made.

They may be her people but... they are not her friends.

She bypasses the empty seats and heads straight for the exit. The moment she's clear of the commissary, she checks both directions, then slips into a side closet. Balancing her food tray in one hand, she slides aside stacked boxes of excess dinnerware, revealing a rusted ladder hidden behind them. With practiced ease, she climbs, one ladder peg at a time, until she reaches a roof hatch.

Andy grips the thick metal lever and pushes.

The hatch creaks open.

Andy's Memory

"Took you long enough!" a brown-skinned boy with a head of wild curls grins at her.

"Hi Bucket!" Andy rises from the commissary roof hatch and presents her prize. "Look! PIZZA!"

“I got one too!” Bucket triumphantly holds up his own slice.

Andy plods across the rooftop. It wasn't just the pizza that's exhilarating - being out in the open is as well. Wind runs through her long black hair; it smells of the wild beyond the wall. She joins him, plopping down on the ledge. They sit, dangling their small legs over the edge of the four-story building. “Sorry I'm late, the line was really long!”

“Me too!” Bucket exclaims. “I had to wait forever! I was worried they would run out of pizza for third class.”

Andy closes her eyes and lets the breeze play with her hair. The air is rich in fresh oxygen produced from the vast rainforest beyond the wall. The mythical place that only lives in her imagination. When Andy opens her eyes, in the far distance, she can see the peaks and limestone cliffs of the northern mountains. The tallest crowns the horizon: Mount Baldy, a four-thousand-foot peak that harbors mysterious year-round snow at its summit.

“I love pizza nights.” Bucket happily chomps on his slice, kicking his legs.

Andy is ravenous and chomps down on a mouthful, “Me too!”

“Did you know that my parents grew the wheat, the tomatoes, and the basil?”

Andy rolls her eyes at him. Bucket hushes and nods. Andy has trained him to not say anything she doesn't already know. And yes, she already knew that Bucket's second-generation parents are part of the Department of Science.

Andy swallows her mouthful. “This is my favorite spot in the whole colony.”

Bucket nods, “I'm so glad we found it. You can see everything from up here.”

Andy smiles, overlooking the base with its bulky buildings and web of protected concrete passageways. Warehouses, central coal plant, and the commanders high tower guarding it all. Her gaze shifts to the flightline with its hangars and mile long runway. But even better than that?

The sky.

Andy tilts her head back. *It's so blue today.* Fluffy cumulonimbus clouds layered with icy stratospheric streaks, glitter with a faint circular rainbow of a thousand frozen prisms suspended in light. A tapestry of sunlight and vapor. The heavens sing of freedom.

Andy signs, *I want to fly.*

Bucket closely watches Andy as she shuts her eyes again, feeling the wind dance along the back of her neck. He loves when she is like this, happy, and more importantly, herself. It's why this spot is his favorite, though he would never tell her this.

This is their spot.

They eat until only crust is left. Andy rolls hers in her fingers. "I did a bad thing today."

Bucket sets his leftovers down, "What did you do?"

"I was playing hide and seek with Jade and Jasper," Andy begins.

Bucket tries to hide his disappointment at not being invited. "Did Jasper do something stupid again?"

"Not really." Andy shrugs.

Bucket squints, "not really?"

"No we..."

"We? YOU and Jasper did something stupid?" Bucket raises his eyebrows, liking this story less and less.

"No... we..." Andy huffs, her whole face turning red. Bucket notices a pain enter her eyes, confusion, worry, and... maybe even a bit of excitement. "We found something."

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 1 hour, 54 minutes
Until Commissioning

"Hey Buck." Andy pushes the hatch open and peers over the rooftop.

"Looks like my messenger was reliable." Bucket grins sitting in his usual spot, long legs dangling over the edge of the building. He pats the empty space beside him.

"What? Were you worried I wouldn't come?" Andy laughs pulling herself up onto the commissary roof. "When have I ever skipped dinner?"

Andy studies him, always big, the strongest of their class. The DOD was so disappointed in his fourth declined offer to become an Air Force cadet. "*I'm a lover, not a fighter,*" is what he

had once told her. *A shame.* As Andy walks over to him, she wonders how different it would have been if they could have spent every day together in the same career field, like her and Jasper had. She cherishes her time with him; there's no one she trusts more.

As Andy approaches, she senses something different about him. His smile still has familiar dimples, his eyes still shine with warmth, his shoulders still broad and powerful.

"Your hair." She eyes the combed back hair and tidy clothes. She can't exactly tell what level of nice the outfit is supposed to be, but she can tell he put thought into it. *What is that? Perfume?*

Bucket smiles, touching his hair nervously. "Oh? You like it?"

"No." Andy plops down beside him and tussles a fistful of hair, shaking it loose, letting his wild curls fly free. "There. Now you look like yourself."

Bucket holds his breath at her touch.

Andy leans in and gives his shoulder a good sniff, "I do like the smell. It's nice."

"Thank you." He huffs with a delightful choke.

The lifelong friends hang their legs over the roof's edge and begin to pick unenthusiastically at their smog. Andy sets it aside, uninterested. Her shoulders relax and her lungs expand with the fresh air. The true feast is the land stretching out before them. Bucket smiles, registering her comfort and ease. It's all he wants.

"I came to see you today," he starts.

"You did?"

"This morning. I tried to catch you before roll call. But... that plan was thwarted. I'm just glad that Jasper was reliable enough to relay my message."

Andy never understood why Bucket and Jasper never got along. Her theory had always been that they were just too different. Jaspers attracted to adrenaline, always dabbling in the gray areas of the colony's rules. Bucket's sensitive, weighing consequences before acting. Both are deeply passionate, Jasper for freedom, Bucket for innovation. Their equally kind hearts always inspired her.

"Jasper is scatterbrained for sure, but not forgetful."

Bucket grips his metal spork a bit too hard.

Andy rests a hand on his, "Do you ever wonder why I don't sit with the twins?"

He looks at her. He has wondered that for years.

“Because you’re family to me.” Andy smiles, genuinely.

He sits up, red in the face and shifts his focus to the horizon. It’s a clear day and they can make out the mountains in the distance, including Mount Baldy with its white peak. “This is a cicada summer.”

“What?” Andy asks.

“Every eighteen years after the rains end, cicadas emerge from their long hibernation underground. They sing, looking for a mate. Millions of them, apparently, you can even hear them over the wall.”

“Did your mother tell you this?” Andy smiles.

“Maybe.” Bucket grins, “But they should be emerging any day now.”

Andy nods, it will be the first time they will experience the song of the golden insects.

“How are you holding up?” He asks.

She doesn’t answer. Eyes glazing over.

“What is it?”

“I’m not supposed to talk about it.” Andy whispers. The wind plays with the loose strands escaping her tight ponytail.

“Then you don’t have to tell me-”

“I found a dead body this morning.”

“What?” His eyes widen. “You mean the counselor who was killed? I thought the other student engineers were messing with me.”

Looks like rumors are spreading... “I found Patricia Wu’s body in the girl’s locker room Academy bathroom.”

Bucket frowns. “Why there?”

“Mm?” Andy raises an eyebrow.

“I mean...” Bucket sits up, thinking, “why that bathroom?”

“I’m the only person who ever uses that bathroom.” Andy shrugs, “It’s a good place to hide a body.”

“That’s what scares me, Andy” he adds. “Everyone knows you’re the only female cadet. What if the killer put the body in there for YOU to find? Trying to frame you.”

Andy’s jaw tightens. “I had nothing to do with it, Buck.”

“Of course not.!” Bucket shakes his head, “I just... it feels intentional.”

I'm not the killer. She swallows nervously.

"I know you're not the serial killer, it's just weird. That's all."

Serial killer? "What do you mean serial killer?"

"Did you not hear about John Wiseman?"

"He was ambushed beyond the wall." Andy says.

Bucket shakes his head, "No... um... the nurse I overheard... said something like... his throat got slashed after surgery."

"WHAT?" Andy's mouth falls open, horrified. She didn't know counselor Patricia Wu at all. Just some quiet advisor from the science department. The woman who took over her father's position. But John... he's different. Andy looked up to him. "Let's talk about something else." Andy mumbles, trying to stop the tears before they start.

"Like the commissioning ceremony?" Bucket suggests.

Andy groans loudly and plops her heavy head on his shoulder.

"Ahh... I see." Bucket pats her shoulder. "The stress of imminent change?" He leans back on his palms, enjoying her warmth against him.

"Do we have to talk about that too?" Andy moans.

"No, but..." Bucket begins.

"No but... what else is there to talk about?" Andy rubs her forehead. "I just... I just want..."

"The pilot slot?" Bucket guesses, glancing to the flightline where the raptors sit dormant in their hangars. "You mean the only thing you obsess over, ever since we first met? Don't worry. Andy, everyone in the entire colony knows what you want. The Commander included. You turned in your dream sheet - which I proofread - a year early. You have a real shot."

He slowly... cautiously... raises his hand to rub her lower back. "I have faith we will both get what we want tomorrow..."

"But... Jasper," Andy murmurs.

Bucket freezes. His hand tightens, then pulls away.

"Jasper wants it too," Andy continues. "We can't both get it. Maybe... maybe it would be better if neither of us got it."

"You're kidding, right?" Bucket scoffs. "Jasper will be fine. He could end up in janitorial support and still somehow make it work."

“He’s not stupid.” Andy shakes her head. “His scores match mine. And his mother is the Commander.”

Bucket composes himself. “Don’t ever discredit yourself, Andrea, you are beyond brilliant, and you know it.”

“Thanks.” Andy smiles softly. “You have always believed in me.”

He looks away, hiding his own smile. “Oh!” Bucket brightens, “there’s someone special I want you to meet.” He WHISTLES loudly and something scrapes underneath the weight of the commissary roof hatch. Andy winces. Batcat growls. The hatch erupts open and a bright yellow, four-legged robot bursts through, tail wagging.

“Andy, meet Dog.”

“What does it stand for?” Andy doesn’t know what to make of the thing.

“Oh! Well...” Bucket scratches the back of his neck, “you know uh... Dependable... Operational... Gadget.”

Andy raises an eyebrow as the yellow robot struts up to them and obediently sits, tail wagging. Batcat hisses at it.

Bucket grins, “What? Come on, you don’t remember me telling you about it?”

Oh, Buck, don't ask me that... I don't want to keep remembering.

Andy’s Memory

“What did you find?” Bucket asks.

The kids are interrupted as the whole roof shakes. Bucket and Andy crouch, steadying themselves. Bucket shuts his eyes and tucks his chin. His hands press tightly over his ears. He knows what’s coming.

Andy does the opposite; she opens her eyes wide and cranes her neck to the sky.

mmmMMMMMMMM!

A rush of air, a huge uplift of dust, as a loaded F-22 raptor roars pass! The fighter jet soars only three stories above their heads. Speeding faster than sound.

“WOO HOOO!” Andy punches the air, thrilled. Andy stares at the glint of the shiny camouflaged metal, just barely making out the rounded black eye of the pilot’s helmet in the cockpit. The plane's shadow passes faster than she can blink. The raptor curls, flips, and climbs a few thousand feet. Vanishing into the clouds above.

“Wow.” Andy’s mouth hangs open in awe.

ROAAAAARRR! The jets sonic boom slams shockwaves through the marrow of their bones.

“Here comes the second one!” Bucket winces, tucking himself into a tighter ball, ears still ringing from the first pass.

Andy jumps into the air, arms spread wide. She grabs in invisible throttle as if piloting the plane herself. The air parts, making way for the second Raptor as it speeds overhead, before climbing, banking, and disappearing in the sky above. Gone in milliseconds. Andy lands back on her feet just in the time for the sound to slam into them.

ROAAAAARRR!

The only proof of the pass is the settling storm of dust left in its wake. Andy tingles. *I’m getting my wings. I’ll decorate my helmet. I’ll get a callsign.*

I’m going to fly.

Bucket rubs his poor ears and looks up as the air cools off. He sits up, still shaking from the fly-by. “Are you excited?” he asks, already knowing her answer and yet always happy to hear her response.

“I’m so excited. I am going to be a fighter pilot.” Andy uses both hands gesturing to the heavens beyond. “Just like them.”

“You are going to be a great fighter pilot, Andy.”

Andy grins back, *I am going to be the BEST fighter pilot.*

Feeling the excitement her kitten MEOWS loudly, spreads his baby wings and launches himself off the roof!

“Wait! Batcat!” Andy reaches to her kitten, “NO!”

“ANDY!” Bucket grabs a fistful of her shirt, holding her back from plunging over the edge. Andy watches in horror as her hairless kitten plummets to the ground... and then WOOSH he unfolds his wings! The kids hold their breath as Batcat hovers, wobbly, in midair.

Flying.

“Batcat!” Bucket exclaims. “You’re... you’re... flying!”

A wisp of air sends the mutated feline higher. Carried by the wind, he soars over the kids’ heads, flapping his little wings proudly. The two cheer him on with little fists bumps and shouts. “Let’s go Batcat!”

“WOO HOO!”

The last of the sunlight glistens on his leathery brown wings, Andy can’t help but smile.

We both want to fly.

“I always wanted a pet.” Bucket exclaims as they watch Batcat dance in the fading sunshine.

“A pet? What do you mean?” Andy only has eyes for her soaring kitten.

“A pet. You know, people had lots of them before The Last Day. They even had a species called dog.”

“What’s a dog?”

“A dog was like a best friend who follows your commands and does everything you say and is loyal.”

“Batcat doesn't listen to me.” Andy giggles, watching the kitten readjust his wings in the currents above them.

“Do you think your dad could make me a dog? Like how he made you Batcat?”

“I can ask him!”

Then, a bad feeling washes over her. Something wrong. *Very wrong.* But what? Andy freezes. Bucket missing nothing, looks at her, “What’s is it Andy?”

“The keys...”

“What?”

Andy beelines for the roof hatch. Batcat swoops in from above, sticking a landing on her shoulder and clings to the fabric of her shirt. Bucket follows closely behind. “What keys?” He calls after her.

“THE KEYS! I forgot to lock it! Dad’s going to be so mad!”

Andrea Tanaka

1 day, 59 minutes
Until Commissioning

“That’s okay if you don’t remember talking about dogs,” Bucket smiles warmly.

“I remember.” *How could I forget... those keys...*

“Really? Oh, I didn’t mean for that to sound insulting. It’s just that... you have a terrible memory.”

“A lot of things are coming back to me today.” Andy sighs. “Well... what does it do?” She motions to the robot, trying to distract herself from *that day*.

“Dog is a human companion. Like a pet. Like Batcat. Except Dog will listen. He can pretty much do whatever you ask of him. He knows a bunch of tricks. Watch.”

“Sit.”

The robot sits.

“Roll over.”

The robot retracts its arms and legs, drops to the ground, and rolls.

“Stand.”

It creepily erects itself, becoming bipedal.

“Now speak!”

Its mechanical mandibles open, exposing a hidden speaker. Bucket’s pre-recorded voice says, “Hi. I am Dog. I am your friend.”

Bucket beams, very proud of himself.

“Nice...” Andy forces a smile.

“Isn’t he? I programmed him myself! The design is supposed to emulate a real dog. You know, the species that died out with The Last Day.”

Andy nods, only half tracking, but proud of him anyway. Dog turns and conducts a full-body scan of Batcat, then opens its mouth. “Hi, Batcat. I am Dog. I am your friend.”

Batcat hisses, fangs bared.

“Eh, don’t worry Dog, Batcat will warm up to you.” Andy hides a smile. *Batcat hates that thing.*

“Yeah, I wanted to build something positive, something helpful. Everyone is so preoccupied with the war, but we have forgotten about having... company. I figured technology had a solution.”

“I’m pretty sure technology is what killed humanity.” Andy points out.

“Technology is also what saved us.”

“Valid point.”

He’s not wrong. She can’t imagine life without innovation. When you strip everything else away, it is the only real advantage humans have in the new world. The raptors are proof enough. She looks at the neatly organized hangars, her eyes land on jet number 12 sitting alone under repairs.

I’m going to get that slot.

Andy shakes the intrusive thought away, “You are totally going to get the engineering position. It’s obvious Buck; the colony would be swarming idiots if they decided otherwise.”

“Swarming idiots!” Bucket mimics Andy’s voice.

“WHAT? I don’t, I don’t sound like that!”

“Yes, you do! SWARMING IDIOTS!” He shouts from the rooftop.

“Shut up! Someone will hear you!”

Bucket opens his mouth wide to scream at the top of his lungs, but Andy clamps it shut. “You’re a swarming idiot!” she laughs.

Bucket, smitten, watches Andy snort. She can’t control her laughter. The sun is sinking, casting the horizon with color and washes Andy’s face in gold.

Right on cue, the evening anthem calls out from every loudspeaker across base. *The Call to Arms*. Played every sunrise and sunset. Its long lyrical notes hang in the air, hauntingly

beautiful. The pair dutifully stand, resting hands over hearts as is protocol. It fills Bucket with the courage he needs.

“Oh, look!” Andy beams. “The sky is turning orange over there. It's gorgeous.”

Bucket gazes at Andy's face, lit by the setting sun. He breaks his stance and lowers himself onto one knee. “Andy...” it's the tone of his voice that tells her something's off. She pulls her eyes away from the sunset, hating to miss it.

“What are you doing?” Andy asks. She doesn't remove her dutiful hand from her heart. You must always stand for the anthem. It's illegal not to. And yet Bucket kneels awkwardly, teetering on the ledge. He sucks in air, waiting for the final note of the anthem to fade before speaking.

“Andy... I have to tell you something.”

“Okay?” Andy gives him her full attention as the anthem fades out. “What is it?”

Why is he kneeling like that?

Bucket bites his tongue. All the words in the speech he'd planned, over days, months, years, collapses. Andy blinks, tempted to turn around and catch the last of the light burning the sky red, but she doesn't. She holds Bucket's gaze. Waiting for him to speak. Sensing the importance of whatever it is he needs to say.

“I have so much I want to say,” he admits with a nervous laugh. “But... okay. Here we go...” He fumbles in his pocket. “I, um... I wrote it down. What I wanted to say.”

He pulls out a piece of paper with a shaking hand.

You're weirding me out. “Buck... are you sure you're, okay?”

“Hah, no I'm...” he fumbles, catching his breath. He holds up the note tightly. “This is the only thing that matters.” He opens the crumpled paper and is stunned by what he sees.

“What is it?” Andy grabs the note from him.

“Hold on!” Bucket lunges for it.

But Andy is already reading, “What is... project cicada rising?”

Oliver Patel

23 hours, 34 minutes

Until Commissioning

That's not! Bucket's heart prepares to burst. *NO!*

Andy, confused, flips the smudged note around for him to see. Sure enough, the handwritten sentence is the same one he's seen before: *What is Project Cicada Rising? It's that same stupid note I found in the backroom!* Bucket's stomach twists with embarrassment.

Andy looks at the note again, "You know I'm no help with your projects, Buck."

"That's not—I—I—" *That's the wrong-*

"I'm sorry I can't help you." She hands over the slip of paper, "You know my brain doesn't think like yours."

"I—" Bucket fumbles in his pocket. *Where did I put it? I know I brought it!*

"Sun's down. Want to head in?" Andy checks and sure enough, darkness rises in the east.

"Um..." Bucket deflates, his chance gone, "alright..."

"I'll see you tomorrow then? For the big day?" Batcat swoops in and lands on Andy's outstretched arm, tucking in his leathery wings with a purr. Bucket stares into those knowing red eyes of his, which glean smugly, like he is laughing at him.

"For the big day," he mumbles in defeat.

With that, Andy heads to the roof hatch and descends. Closing it behind her with the familiar CLICK of the lock.

Bucket holds perfectly still, making sure Andy is well out of earshot. Then finally he exhales.

"STUPID!"

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

He looks down at the lost note in his hand and crushes it into a tight ball. *I should have thrown this away immediately. Why do I still have it? It's meaningless!* He hurls the crumpled paper over the edge of the building and watches it fall into oblivion. Disappearing in the tangle of pipes and concrete below. His hand dives into his pocket again. This time, he pulls out the *right* note.

The one he intended.

The one he planned.

The one he practiced.

He slowly unwraps his handwritten love note and tucked inside the folds of the paper: he unveils the beautiful engagement ring he made. The glittering gold catches whatever remains of the light.

There's still tomorrow.

Andrea Tanaka

21 hours, 53 minutes
Until Commissioning

Andy pulls the bed cover up to her chin. The thin cardboard-stiff sheet provides little warmth. As if purposefully designed to be uncomfortable. Andy never minded. Nothing about this existence is comforting. Except Batcat who plops on her chest, purring loudly. Finally victorious in getting Andy right where he wants her - in bed.

“Sorry bud,” Andy sits up, she stretches her arms, her sore muscles bulge, “I just... I can’t sleep yet.” The anxiety of what’s to come vibrates through her veins.

Batcat mumbles.

Andy slips out of bed and paces her dorm room. She glances at her cadet flight suit hanging from the wall. *They’ll upgrade me with my own pressurized flight suit and a helmet custom fit, just for me.* Andy thinks about the decorated helmets of past pilots, thundering stars, angry fists, screaming eagles. *My flight team will give me a callsign.* You don’t pick your callsign; your team does. It could be a funny one with an embarrassing backstory, like *Mayhem* or *Squirrel*. It could reflect flight technique like *Houdini*. Or anything, really. *I wonder what mine will be.*

She catches a glimpse of yellow in her dresser drawer: fluffy frills threatens to spill out the contrast is stark against her gray civilian clothes. Andy pretends the bright yellow ballgown isn’t there. She looks over her dorm. There’s nothing noteworthy about it, besides the single box of personal items neatly packed at the foot of her door. She looks inside the shoebox at all her worldly possessions: a portrait Jasper drew of her, a small woven friendship bracelet from Jade, and a small 3D printed knife holster that Bucket made for her. That was it. She never hung the

drawing up, she never wore the bracelet, jewelry is out of regs for her uniform. Bucket's holster though... at least that's practical. Still, it collects dust in her to-go box.

Batcat grumbles irritated that Andy still hasn't come back to bed.

"Sorry bud, not tired."

If there's one thing, she wished she had, it'd be a photograph of her dad. Like Jasper's family photo. Yet she has the next best thing, Andy bends down and retrieves the last item in her personal box. A burned piece of printer paper, singed at its edges. A child's drawing of two stick figures holding hands.

Dad and me.

Her father used to keep it framed on his desk. The frame is what saved it from the blaze.

What are you made of Andy? Her father's voice echoes.

She gently puts the drawing back and sits on her bed. The tightly folded sheets barely crease as she leans back. Batcat hobbles over, excited for cuddles. He rubs his face against hers. Her restless mind spins, voices from the day rolling in one by one, in rhythm with her heartbeat.

"C'mon, wasn't it you who led us into the darkness?"

"Your eyes, they're showing."

"I saw the Commander looking through your file."

"The mating game."

"You are beyond brilliant Andrea, and you know it."

"A virgin."

"I'm coming for you all."

Andy bolts upright. She starts to sweat. The question is pressing: who's going to die next?

Andy searches her bedroom for a distraction, these cinderblock walls have contained her since *that day*. Yet this is her last night here. The last time she will be alone like this. And yet tonight the space feels suffocating. Andy rises to her feet, mindlessly reties her combat boots.

"Mar-ow?" Batcat asks.

"I can't stay here bud, I need... I don't know what I need, but it's not here."

He grumbles as she grabs her keycard. Batcat gets up and yawns lazily, and stretches his wings, then launches off the bed, landing on her back. For wherever Andy goes, he goes.

Andy smiles. She may not have much, but she's glad she has him. She scratches his knobby chin.

"Thanks, Batcat."

Andy's Memory

"What is it?" Andy's small finger pokes at the incubator.

"A hybrid." Her father, the esteemed Dr. Tanaka, head of the department of sciences, takes a moment to clean his work glasses before setting them down next to the framed drawing Andy made of the two of them. "The latest in a series of experiments." He sighs. Clearly disappointed by the results.

"A hybrid is when two species mix!" Andy proudly announces, bouncing up and down in her chair.

"That's correct."

"Why do you make hybrids?" Andy asks, looking around her father's DNA sequencing laboratory as if seeing it for the first time. A state-of-the-art facility, retrofitted with newly engineered equipment has a dozen experiments underway. Plants under grow lights, petri dishes piled in neat stacks, various animals lined up against the wall in different sized cages. And lastly, Andy looks over at the upside-down horseshoe crabs being drained of their healing blue blood in the corner.

"Well Andrea... I make hybrids to help us survive."

Andy blinks like she is listening, but doesn't follow. Dr. Tanaka adjusts his explanation for his daughter. "I'm trying to study life on Earth as it is right now, compared to how it was 2.3 million years ago, when humans used to control the planet. Eons of evolution and radiation have created an enormous concoction of mysterious mutations. Mutations that I would very

much like to understand. So that the food we eat, and the animals we domesticate, and we, the people, can adjust to this new world. Hybrids are a good starting place for understanding how far I can push my studies of those mysteries.”

Andy nods, already losing interest and peers inside the incubator. “So, what is he?” She reads the creature’s ID number, branded into his neck: *F1-16*.

“This specimen, a hybrid of the now extinct *Felis catus* commonly referred to as just Cat.”

“Cat.” Andy repeats, liking the word’s simplicity.

“The paternal side of the specimen is an unidentified new-world species of bat.”

“Bat” Andy giggles. Another simple word.

“I believe this new bat species evolved from, *desmodontinae*, or the leaf nosed bat. Notoriously known as: vampire bats. They also, I assume, became extinct...”

“...Before The Last Day.” Andy finishes for him having heard that last bit a thousand times.

“Correct.” The doctor nods, pleased with his prodigy.

“What are you going to name it?” She asks.

“Well, you get to name it of course.”

“Hmmm...” Andy ponders the proposition, looking around the lab at all the other experiments her dad let her name. Bobby, the baboon mixed with a new-world species primate. Spiky, the juvenile rhinoceros beetle. Big Stuff, the largest creature in the lab, a terrestrial mammal whose only common ancestor was the now-gone Atlantic bottlenose dolphin.

“BATCAT!” Andy proudly proclaims.

“Excellent name. Very fitting.” Her father beams. “Would you like to hold Batcat?”

“YES!” Andy grins.

Dr. Tanaka opens the incubator and reaches in for the small, wrinkled winged kitten before placing the baby in Andy’s small hands.

“I love him.” Andy smiles fondly as the kitten sleeps in her palms. “Do you think Batcat will fly?” Andy gently unfolds one of his black leathery wings.

"It's possible," Dr. Tanaka smiles.

"I'm going to fly someday." Andy says while her father straightens out his lab coat and tidies his notes on the table.

"You don't want to be a scientist? Like me?" her father fake-frowns.

"No. I want to fly." Andy says.

Her father scratches at his chin, stubbly from a week of hard work in the labs without bothering to shave. "That's a very dangerous job, Andy."

"I'm not scared of anything," she puffs her chest.

He sighs, tired from work, but his eyes are still warm, "I want to show you something."

"What is it?" Andy asks, delighted.

"Something I should have shown you a longtime ago."

"Wait!" Andy holds up the small kitten. "Can I keep him?"

Her father ponders the idea before smiling, "I see no harm in it. He is all yours. Now come on, let's go. There is someone I want you to meet."

Andrea Tanaka

20 hours, 28 minutes
Until Commissioning

Andy traverses the dark hallways, keeping quiet. She's out past curfew and she knows it; Scandalous at best, illegal at worst. With the honor to her name already precarious. It would be utterly damning to be caught making *another mistake*. But then again, she has been making lots of mistakes as of late. Entering the emergency room. Prodding around in the pharmacy's backroom. Dinners on the commissary rooftop?

I'm not innocent. She never was.

So, she keeps going, retracing the steps from her past. Only this time Batcat and her walk alone.

Andy's Memory

Andy grins at her kitten peacefully asleep in the nook of her arm. The doctor and his daughter make their way down one of the many winding concrete hallways of the colony.

"We're here."

"What?" Andy looks up. She's seen this a thousand times before. She glances at her dad, unable to hide the disappointment in her voice. "The Mural?" Andy drags her feet, planting herself before the painted faces of the dead.

"I've always wondered, Andrea, where this... daring personality of yours comes from. This attraction to dangerous things. It certainly isn't inherited from me." He gets down on one knee. "Every day you grow, you become more and more like her."

"Like who?" Andy asks.

He smiles, "I want you to meet your mother, Andrea." He motions to the wall.

Her eyes widen. Her heartbeat rings loudly in her ears. *My mother?* Andy desperately scans the faces now. *Which one? Where? Who?*

Dr. Tanaka points to the center of the mural. A woman's portrait.

"Mom?" Andy gasps.

"Yes, meet Dr. Kate Tanaka, a biologist. She and I were... partners."

Andy stares at the paint strokes, memorizing the warm brunette hair, the pointy nose and the illuminating smile that shines with... could it be... love? Her mother's smiling eyes look straight at her and Andy can't help but smile back.

"Your mother was a remarkable scientist." Her father continues. "She was an important member of the colony, and just like you, she had a wanderlust."

"What happened?" Andy knows the purpose of the *Wall of Remembrance*.

A heavy hand settles on her shoulder. A sadness clouds her father's eyes. "She was conducting field research... another one of her spontaneous adventures... when..." He swallows, trying to steady the rising tremor in his voice. "Andy... your mother was killed."

Killed? A heavy tear slips from her eye. Her father pulls her into his arms and rubs her back. She cries for the mother she never knew, the one her father never spoke of... until now. Andy chokes on her words, her whole body shaking. "H... how. HOW?"

Dr. Tanaka lets Andy battle her emotions until she gains control of her breathing. "She was killed by the Others."

The Others. The bug people? Her gaze flick back to her mother's smiling eyes. *They did this?*

"All these people," Dr. Tanaka says quietly, "died for the colony."

Andy takes a step back. There are *hundreds* of faces.

Dr. Tanaka gathers his emotions, presenting facts over feelings, his chosen language as a scientist. "Your mother died for the good of the colony. She understood this world is dangerous. Every single man, woman and child..." He glances at Andy, checking to see if she is absorbing the lesson he is presenting. Andy's large watery eyes are locked onto his. "This existence has a singular mission. To make this world safe again. This includes you."

Andy gulps under the weight of his words.

"You are growing up, Andrea. At eighteen you get to choose who you become, It's your choice. But if you decide to fly, you must understand what, and who, you're flying for."

Andy stares again at the Wall of Remembrance. A spark of purpose taking root, solidifying into the fiber of her very being.

"What are you made of Andy?" her father asks.

She clutches Batcat and meets her mother's painted gaze.

"I am Andy Tanaka. I am brave. I'm going to become a fighter pilot." She turns to her father. "And I'm going to save us all."

Andrea Tanaka

20 hours, 27 minutes
Until Commissioning

Such a stupid kid thing to say. Andy cringes. "I'm going to save us all."

It's delusional to think that she alone could save the colony. The only thing she can promise is that she'll try her best to protect the people from total annihilation.

Andy looks up into the eyes of her dead parents. Painted side-by-side. Immortalized on concrete. *"What are you made of Andy?"* Her father's voice echoes in her skull. Andy looks at his deep dark analyzing eyes. Andy looks both ways, truly making sure she is alone in the night.

"My name is Andy Tanaka." She whispers to the wall. "I am an air force cadet. I am going to be..." She pauses.

I have no idea what I will become...

She gazes at her parent's portraits. She's never done this before. Sneaking out afterhours. Commencing with the dead. *What am I even doing?* It feels ridiculous. *They're just paint on a wall. They're gone*

Anger swells inside. Her night shirt presses uncomfortably tight on her tensed shoulders. Her nostrils flare. Batcat yawns loudly, tail flicking against the cold concrete floor. Confused by the nighttime stroll, talking to walls; but mostly he's grumpy at the lack of sleep. Andy clenches and unclenches her fists. Fights the urge to scream, to hit something. These *damn feelings* and these *damn memories*. She looks yet again at her parents.

These bug people.

Andy scans her mother's smiling eyes.

Take everything from us.

"We're leaving." She snaps her fingers and Batcat dutifully flies to her shoulder. Andy can't look at the mural anymore. All those faces staring back at her. These People counting on her to be the person she'd promise them she'd become.

The air shifts. *What is that...?*

Andy pinches her nose. *That smell!*

Footsteps.

Andy jolts. She's not supposed to be out this late. After curfew. No citizen without a permit is. Consequences are steep. She could lose her chance to commission, the moment she has waited her whole life for. She can't afford to lose that mere hours before it finally manifests.

The footsteps draw near.

"Shit." Andy curses under her breath, glancing around. There aren't many places to hide in the colony's concrete corridors, only steel beams and thick pillars, offering just enough space to crouch behind. She slips behind the nearest pillar and crouches low, eyes fixed to the floor. She drops her gaze, practicing her old rule: *never look a seeker in the eye*.

Andy's Memory

"ANDYYY!" Jasper shouts at the top of his lungs, voice booming from down the hall. Standing before the Wall of Remembrance Dr. Tanaka and Andy turn their heads as a pair of fluttering footsteps race towards them full throttle. Jasper comes speeding around the corner, arms out wide. "ANDYYY!" The scrawny boy skids to a halt in front of them, shoes squealing. "Want to play hide and seek?" he asks, breathless.

Jogging up behind her brother at a much more controlled pace comes Jade, curly pigtailed bouncing. "Come play with us Andy!"

Andy looks up to her father for permission. Their tender moment before the mural and the revelation of her mother's portrait has passed. He nods, "Go ahead. Just remember the off-limit areas."

Jade lifts a pragmatic finger, "No laboratories. No commissary. No hospital."

Dr. Tanaka smiles at Jade, "I can always trust this one."

Jade beams, her constant hunger for acknowledgement momentarily satisfied. She opens her mouth to speak-

"LET'S GO!" Jasper yanks his sister before she can savor the moment and snatches Andy's arm in the process. Andy wave goodbye to her dad as they turn the corner. She steals

one last glimpse of her mother's portrait. It strikes her all at once: both of her parents, side by side, watching her. As her dad waves back, for the briefest moment she can picture it: both of them waving goodbye.

“What is that thing?”

“Huh?”

Andy snaps out of it as the three kids skip down the corridor. Jasper leans over Andy’s shoulder, “What is that thing?” He points to the kitten in her arms.

“Meet Batcat!” Andy grins holding up the new hairless, winged mutant.

“Mew!” Batcat announces.

“Batcat is uuugly!” Jasper laughs.

“He’s PERFECT.”

“Who is going to be the seeker?” Jade interjects.

“Not me,” Jasper grumbles. “I was seeker last time.”

“I can be the seeker,” Andy volunteers. “I’ll count down from ten! Ready?”

“Ready!” the twins bolt, scrambling for a head start down the corridor.

Andy tucks herself behind a steel beam, keeping her little kitten close, and begins the countdown. “Ten! Nine! Eight...”

Andrea Tanaka

20 hours, 19 minutes
Until Commissioning

Three... two... one. Her countdown continues, on beat with the approaching footsteps. A pair of legs glides by with a flutter of lab coat. Andy keeps her eyes fixed on the floor until the person passes. The smell gives him away.

It’s you.

The man who insulted Batcat. Andy lifts her head as he heads down the hall. *He's changed...* previously bald, now he sports idealistic thick, wavy hair. *Is that a wig?* Andy steps out of her hiding spot, watching through narrowed eyes. The distaste, the distrust. It comes from somewhere. *I know this man... and somehow, he knows me.*

Reflexively, Andy follows. Trailing closely. Calculating his moves as he winds his way through the passageways. *What is he doing out after curfew? Does he have a permit? What for? What could he be working on?* Andy keeps her distance. Utilizing her Academy stealth training. The man ahead of her clearly has no military training - his posture's sloppy, his feet shuffle, his lab coat rubs against his calves. He walks with noisy purpose.

Where are you going?

Suddenly, he stops. Andy halts, flattening against the wall as the man looks left, then right. Satisfied he's alone, he opens a door. A door that Andy thought would never be opened again.

No...

Dread engulfs her. She can hear the hiss of flames in her ears. The taste of chemical burn. The heat of her own melted flesh, of being lifted and catapulted into the far wall.

It can't be...

And yet the door shuts behind him.

I thought they said it was non-operational...

She closes her eyes, composing herself and catches her breath. She ventures forward carefully approaching the double doors. Andy feels the echo of the explosion that left its mark on her body. Mindlessly, her hand reaches for her cheek. Her fingertips trace over the scars born from a flame that nearly killed her.

What does this man want?

Andy stares at the entrance of what had once been her father's old DNA sequencing laboratory. The doors are different, replaced at some point. The burn marks along the walls, long since painted over. However, the mismatched paint colors are the only indication that something sinister happened here.

The incident.

“Andrea?” A voice bellows behind her. Andy spins so fast nervous sweat flicks from her forehead. She freezes. *The Commander.*

The imposing woman hovers in half cast darkness, hands on her hips, lips pressed in an angry scowl. Her gray eyes glean from the shadows. “What are you doing out past curfew?” Mrs. Parker demands.

Andy’s mouth falls open, but no words come out. Even Batcat stays silent, curling tighter against her neck, claws digging into her skin. Andy plants her feet, tightens her fists, ready to flee- or fight. The commander takes a domineering step closer, glaring at the teenager, before examining the double doors in front of them. Mrs. Parker's demeanor shifts, softens, “I see.”

Andy lets out the breath she didn’t realize she was holding.

Her heart hammers as the Commander’s unreadable gaze traces the doorframe. Finally, she speaks. “I miss your father as well. He was a valuable citizen of the colony.” The Commander signs, turning to her, “He was my friend.”

Andy blinks. She hadn’t known that.

“I understand this is hard for you,” the Commander continues, “but rules are rules. You must return to the dormitories at once.”

“Of course, Ma’am” Andy bows. A panic gripes her, she may have just destroyed her one chance to redeem herself. Before she can say more, the Commander registers the turmoil behind Andy’s eyes.

“You are not in trouble.”

Andy can’t believe it. This uncharacteristic generosity. Even Batcat’s claws retract, unsure of what to make of the situation.

The Commander’s falls back into her usual scowl. “But you will return to your dormitory. Immediately. Otherwise, I will write you up.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Andy nods obediently and turns to leave.

“What did you see?”

Andy stops, “what?”

The commander stands rigidly, arms crossed behind her back, expecting compliance. “What did you see?”

Andy fights the urge to lie. *Honesty is always the best policy...* “I saw someone go in there,” she confesses.

Her eyes narrow at the corners. “Who?”

“A man.”

“Garret, the janitor,” The Commander nods and briskly opens the double doors Andy flinches, not wanting to peer into old nightmares. Using the light from her messenger device the commander reveals what's inside. No more experiments or equipment. Gone are the animals and model human skeleton her dad had propped in the corner. Boxes, cleaning supplies. *Storage space*. “Janitorial closet.” The commander says, shutting the doors.

Andy stands still, unsure of these feelings storming inside. Batcat grows uneasy, a rumble forming in his chest, directed at the Commander.

“You may go.” The Commander motions, “Go. Before I change my mind.”

Andy bows and walks at such a brisk pace; it could be described as fleeing. With the Commander safely out of sight, Andy thinks about what she had just seen. And one surprising question surfaces. *Why would the Commander ask me what I saw? Why would she want me to see inside that room?*

But Andy has learned a name: *Garret*.

How do I know you?

Andrea Tanaka

19 hours, 43 minutes
Until Commissioning

Andy stops. *‘Authorized personnel only.’* It's the exit door that leads outside onto the flightline. Batcat grumbles at her feet, too tired to fly. His tail flicks in annoyance that they aren't continuing their dorm and going to sleep.

I shouldn't.

Its treason.

Yet Andy hovers by the door.

If the commander finds her again... if she discovers she disobeyed her direct order... Andy doesn't want to consider the possibilities of her punishment. *The dishonor...*

Ignoring the risks Andy pushes the door open and lets wild air hit her face. With the fresh gust of wind Andy breathes in a smile as she looks skyward. Constellations crystalize space

above. Her gaze studies the flightline with its hangers, and mile long runway and large exterior wall keeping the wilderness at bay.

“Mar-ow.” Batcat complains.

Andy scoops him up into her arms, “Shh... we’re not supposed to be out here.” She carries him in her arms out onto the tarmac. Staying silent, keeping to shadows. Andy doesn’t know why she’s risking it all. *Maybe it's my mother's daring personality that I've inherited.* She’s never done this before – disobeying direct orders, sneaking out onto the flightline, getting close to a jet.

She could be killed for this.

Andy slows as she approaches Jet number 12 sitting alone in the maintenance hangar. She’s never gotten this close to a real F-22. Gleaning in the moonlight, its razor blade edges cut deep shadows into the asphalt underneath, its dramatic lines smooth into curves designed for speed and stealth. It sits silently, two rocket power engines waiting for activation. It's a harbinger of death and ruin. But Andy does not see a device designed for destruction. She raises a hand, touching the cold steel, and runs her fingers along the pointed nose down the length of the raptors powerful body.

It feels like freedom.

Andy pulls a maintenance ladder over and gently props it against the plane. Before she realizes it, she’s scaled the ladder and tiptoes across the wing. Andy lifts the glass canopy and climbs inside the cockpit. Instantly she’s hit with a distinct smell. Metallic and immortal. Andy settles down into the pilot’s seat. Filling the cushions, she scans the controls and only then does it hit her.

“What am I doing?”

“Mar-ow.” Batcat agrees with a tail flick.

Andy exhales. Locking the canopy, she closes herself in and sits back. Her hands climb the throttle. The jet teases her with possibilities. Encased in glass and steel she looks out the curved window in front of her. Before her is the nose of the jet and the open hangar doors hinting at the night sky beyond.

But Andy can envision it: blue skies, fluffy clouds, endless horizons. She tilts her head back against the headrest as Batcat settles into her lap, tucking his head under his leathery wings. The only sounds are Batcat’s purs and the persistent ringing of tinnitus, the unfortunate side

effect of a lifetime's exposure to gunfire and jet engines. *Will I become a pilot? I've worked hard. I've proven myself...* she forgets to breathe. *But... after what I've done?*

Do I really deserve it?

Andy doesn't move. Careful not to wake Batcat as he snores curled up in her lap. Andy closes her eyes. She allows the ringing to resume, hoping it'll silence her worries. She doesn't want to think, or wonder, or remember. She just wants to sit here and pretend she's something she's not.

Sensing her tiredness, that one question comes, whispering to her from the forbidden places in the back of her mind.

Who are you?

That moment.

Her discovery down in the darkness.

The secret beneath the base.

Andy's Memory

Andy turns the corner and gasps.

SHE'S NAKED!

Andy, paralyzed in the shadows of the underground bunker, stands frozen, illuminated by the warm blue glow of the cryochamber sprawled out before her. She remembers to breathe, sucking air back into her lungs.

Who? What? She blinks – once – twice - not believing her eyes. Embarrassment floods her, "I'm sorry!" She covers her eyes. "I didn't mean to... I... I!"

"Meow" her kitten rubs against her legs while she keeps her eyes firmly shut.

Don't look. It's inappropriate.

But the image is already there, burned into her mind. The glowing blue. The cryotube. The body. Andy keeps her eyes closed, trying to erase it. But it's still there – clear and sharp. Andy sneaks a peep between her fingers.

She's real.

In her decade of life, she's never seen anything like this. Awash in the blue light, Andy steps closer, mouth agape. Before her, a large horizontal glass cryochamber ejects from the wall. Inside, suspended in clear blue liquid is a young woman, completely nude. A mix of small tubes and wires preserve her like artificial umbilical cords.

Andy inches closer. Entranced. Unable to look away.

The young woman's face seems peacefully asleep. Thick, long black hair lazily floats around her head. A button nose, skin a shade darker than Andy's olive colored tone.

She's pretty.

Andy watches, fascinated, as the young woman's black hair swirls around in the soft flowing current inside the cylinder. A new person. She wonders how long she's been inside this tube. *Trapped.* Andy almost expects her to open her eyes and wake. To look back and see her.

"Mew," Batcat murmurs beside her.

Andy picks up her kitten and holds him tightly to her chest – her flat chest. Andy can't help it, but glance at the girls' whose are fully formed. Andy immediately drops her eyes to the floor embarrassed by her own childish body. Embarrassed for having looked and even more embarrassed for wanting to look. Andy ponders it. Will she look like this someday? When she's grown? But there is something else. Something new. Something has shifted inside her - something she can't name.

That question though, it burrows itself under her skin making her itch. Andy whispers to the girl in the glass. "Who are you?"

Andrea Tanaka

19 hours, 34 minutes

Until Commissioning

Andy's eyes flare open; she sits up inside the glass-encased cockpit. "Mar-OW!" Batcat snarls sliding off Andy's lap. His sleep rudely interrupted. Ignoring her cantankerous feline, Andy tries to regain her composure, chest heaving. Her inky black hair disheveled. The images of the past are bright in her mind's eye. She shakes her head, as if that will help her forget *her*.

"Please..." Andy fights the frustration and exhaustion. She presses her thumb against the stress wrinkle that's formed between her eyebrows and harshly rubs the spot. "Please..." She chokes on the tears that betray her. "Stop haunting me." The words fall into the darkness of the fighter jet. But there it is again clear as day in her mind's eye.

The girl in the glass.

Tears slide across her cheeks and drop, warm and unwelcome, into her lap. Batcat sniffs her face as anger wraps around her bones. Her hands dangerously find their way to the stick. Her hands hover over the trigger. She closes her eyes for a moment, trying to regain control. *Why am I remembering all of this? The game, the staircase, the bunker, the girl in the glass. All of it.* Shame slithers down her spine and settles in her stomach.

Why am I remembering... her?

She fights this new weird, hot ache inside her, a longing for something.

Answers.

All Andy can do is grit her teeth. *What is wrong with me? Why? Why her? Why now? Today of all days.*

Andy checks the window, the only reliable indication of the hour. The Call to Arms anthem hasn't begun, the sun hasn't risen. It's still dark along the flightline. The main constellations hold tight with a few planets shining brightly, but dawn is coming for them. Instinctively, she knows she should get out of the jet and go home.

What even is home? Andy's never left base before. Inside the walls of Utoya is the only world she's ever known. Andy sits back in the pilot's seat, painfully aware of what the daylight will bring. *I could just leave. I could fly away and never come back.*

She could leave it all behind. Her mistake. This obsession – this curse - formed the moment she laid eyes on the young woman trapped in glass.

Who are you?

Batcat settles into her lap with a sigh. He folds his knobby tail over his eyes surrendering himself once again to sleep. A luxury Andy can't afford now. She's wide awake.

Andy gazes out the plane's window and watches the sky lighten beyond the hangar. *There's still some time left.* Time to get this over with. She tightens her fists, throws her shoulders back and fixes her posture. Her maddening mind made up: *let's just get this over with.*

Andy closes her eyes, instead of shying away from the past she calls out to it. Daring the memories to come forward and show themselves.

Andy's Memory

Andy reaches tentatively for the glass. The curved surface is smooth. Warm. Listening intently, she hears soft aquarium-like bubbles and beeping electronics. Advanced technologies keeping the young woman alive in a perpetual slumber. "Who are you?" Andy whispers again, nose practically touching the glass. "Why are you here?" The older girl's face turns over gently in the current, as if she's listening. Andy stares, hypnotized.

"Wow."

Andy jerks back, almost bumping into Jasper as the boy steps forward into the blue light. Mouth agape. Astonished. He parks himself next to her, eyes sweeping over the entirety of the naked body.

Andy flushes red. "Don't look at her."

"You're looking." He leans over the glass, "is she dead?"

"She's not dead!" Andy snaps, "She's breathing; her chest is moving."

"Boobies." Jasper giggles.

Footsteps.

Both kids freeze and look back into the darkness behind them, sure enough, someone's coming. "The decision has been made, Garrett" A man's voice echoes in the large underground chamber. A second set of footsteps approaches. "Doc, think about it. Wouldn't it be a shame to toss all this out?"

With nowhere to go, the kids duck underneath the girl's tube as two pairs of legs enter the sphere of blue light, both in lab coats. One voice is all too familiar to Andy. Jasper nudges her, thinking the same thing, "Andy... is that?"

"Shh..." She puts a finger to her lips. Andy peers upward through the glass, past the suspended body, to the blurry faces of the two men. One, the esteemed counselor to the Commander. His lab coat, white, clean, polished. Those familiar intelligent dark eyes scan over the documents in his hand.

Dad.

Andy looks to the other one, a gangly acne-ridden teen. With thinning hair, an unfortunate odor, and an unwashed lab coat. *Dad's student.*

"Doc... the research! We are so close to a breakthrough. It's right here!" The young man smacks a hand on the glass. It reverberates, ruffling the peaceful buoyancy of the young woman trapped inside. Andy and Jasper flinch at the slap. Andy finds herself clutching the arm of her friend. Jasper is as stone cold as she is. She can't help but narrow her eyes at her father's rude assistant.

"A breakthrough that will have to wait." The doctor remains firm and calm closing the folder in his hands.

"Why? Why wait?"

"Please, Garret," Dr. Tanaka signs, patience waning, and hands over the folder. "Put the subject away."

"Your research is revolutionary!" Garret groans and activates a control panel. The cryotube containing the young woman begins to retract, slowly, returning to its vault in the wall.

The kids tense as their cover disappears. Andy catches a last glance at the girl's face before the wall absorbs her.

Jasper gestures to what appears to be a satellite laboratory, complete with computers and an exam table. The underground makeshift lab offers one thing for the kids: hiding spots. Jasper makes a break for it, diving underneath a nearby desk. He frantically waves for Andy to follow.

“I’m not testing human subjects until I get the Commander's approval.” Dr. Tanaka sets his foot down, “I’m well aware this could change everything.”

Jasper motions again.

Andy doesn’t move.

I can’t leave her.

Her father’s polished shoes pass inches from her face. “Cultivate patience Garret. It's your greatest acquaintance in this profession.”

Garret drops the folder on the desk, “Sure Doc.”

The vaulted door seals firmly shut. Andy’s exposed, she breaks her rule and looks up. Dr. Tanaka eyes immediately lock with Andy’s. “Andrea.” Dr. Tanaka’s voice does not hold back his disappointment at the discovery of his child.

“Mew.” Batcat pokes his head from underneath Andy’s thick hair.

“I’m sorry Dad.” Andy jumps to her feet, standing at attention, understanding the depth of her misconduct.

“What are you doing down here?” Dr. Tanaka crosses his arms in disapproval. “Were you playing in my laboratory?”

Andy tucks her chin, guilty. “Sorry.”

“Sorry?” Dr. Tanaka fumes, the pen he grips leaks, staining his fingers. “You were unsupervised!” The pen SNAPS.

“Hey! Don’t touch me!” Jasper shrieks, as Garret yanks him from his hiding spot.

Garret thrusts Jasper into the open. “Doc! Another one!”

“The laboratory...” The doctor picks his words carefully, “You know my laboratory is dangerous! You are never, under any circumstances, allowed in there unsupervised!” His neck veins throb. She’s never seen him this mad.

Andy gets in front of Jasper. “It was my idea.”

“Was it?” Her father narrows his eyes and looks around the underground bunker.

“Where is Jade?”

“She is a cockroach.” Jasper says.

“She didn’t want to play with us.” Andy translates.

Dr. Tanaka exhales, exhausted. “Let’s go.” Dr. Tanaka places a firm hand on each child’s shoulder and steers them away. As they march through the underground bunker Andy looks back at the hundreds of vaults lining the walls. All cryochambers.

“Dad?” Curiosity overcomes her as they approach the stairwell. “Who was that girl?”

“Yeah! What is this place?” Jasper looks around too, knowing perfectly well this may be the last time he sees this hidden underground catacomb. “How many tube-people are down here?” Jasper’s eyes widen again, “are they all NAKED?”

“When you come of age.” Dr. Tanaka says. “I will explain.”

He marches them up the first flight of stairs, Leaving the secrets buried beneath. But that question, it stays with her.

Who is she?

Garret Widget

17 hours, 2 minutes
Until Commissioning

Garret cracks open a beer, pleased with himself for swiping it from the commissary. The colony has been brewing and stockpiling alcoholic beverages for the upcoming festivities. It wouldn’t matter if a couple cases went missing, right? He clears his desk, pushing candy wrappers aside, and drops into his chair, kicking his feet up. Playfully he runs his free hand through his new thick hair, delighted by the custom swoop it forms over his forehead.

I’m fucking brilliant.

Garret crushes his first can and chucks it behind him. It clatters across the concrete. He burps loudly, satisfied by the profound emptiness of the space and the way his noise echoes off the vaulted walls. Cryomodule sector 30. With radiation shielded concrete walls and specialized homogenic gallery. *The underground reserves*. He scans the circular cryochambers, hundreds of them, spiraling off into the deep labyrinthian catacomb. *Trapped souls*. Forgotten for millennia. The centuries have been unkind. Compromised sealants. Water contamination. Mold. Yet still, it's a miracle, with a 60% survival rate. A remarkable feat of preservation and technology.

Garret entertains a second drink, rolling the tip of the can against his lower lip. *Unused, unappreciated, unloved*. He could relate. "Cheers, losers." He lifts his drink high and salutes the vaults. "I'm all you've got." He drinks to them.

Garret turns to his cluttered workstation. His eyes land on the poorly illustrated logo for the project. His greasy figure traces the design of a golden winged insect. *Ironic*. "Like I'm trying to make you bug people," The project name hadn't been his decision.

"What are you blabbering on about now?"

Garret nearly falls out of his chair as a figure emerges from the darkness behind him, hovering at the edge of the light. Only the whites of her eyes catch the glow. "Jesus Christs and Budda's of a bygone era! You scared the living crap out of me." Garret moans.

"Why are you talking to yourself?" Her voice judges, always *judging*.

"It gets lonely down here." Garret shuffles at his desk, attempting to look busy. "Talking aloud helps my creative process." With his foot, he scoots the liquor behind a computer. "What are you doing down here in the dead of night?" he asks, irritated, always annoyed by her spontaneous check-ins.

"Nice hair."

"Thanks," Garret flips his new locks. "Do you like?"

She ignores the question, "I came to warn you."

"Warn me about what?"

"Miss Tanaka."

Garret gulps the beer he'd been holding in his cheeks. "Doc's daughter?" Garret scratches at his scalp. "Last time... she..." His mind wanders back – to that day. To the moment inspiration struck.

Garret's Memory

"Are they all NAKED?" The scrawny boy's voice echoes across the underground reserves. Garret watches his superior drag the two children away by the scruffs of their necks. He waits until they round the corner, disappearing behind the bend, heading back toward the hidden stair to the lab above.

"Stupid kids." Garret mutters. He waits till the sounds of the doctor and the brats have dissolved, much preferring the dark quite solitude of the underground bunker. Away from the prying eyes of the colony above. Garret likes being alone. Except, down here - he is never truly alone.

He glances up at the countless circular vaults. Every single one a time capsule from before The Last Day. There's two ways one could end up in the new world and he's looking at one of them.

The first generation. Not all of them had awakened seventy-plus years ago. Their history lessons omitted that little bit of information. Only a pre-selected few – whose cryochambers were preprogrammed to unlock once Earth's radiation levels stabilized, were released. The so-called *forefathers*. The rest were left behind, sleeping until those already freed deemed it safe enough for everyone else.

The truth? They've been forgotten.

Garret, like everyone alive today is a descendant of those first-generational forefathers. *Born into this world, rather than brought.* Finally eighteen, he's weeks away from commissioning and ranking up. Soon he will be able to conduct his own research and *have purpose*. His life will have meaning. Garret frowns, he knows his conception was a mistake. A product of two careless bodies. But these people from before The Last Day?

They were chosen to be here.

Nobody has ever chosen him. No one cared. No one noticed. He's used to it, prefers it even. It meant he could do as he pleased... Garret's eyes fall on *her vault*. He's grateful the doctor trusted him with access to the underground reserves. He has accumulated years of careful study into the stories of the forgotten left behind in storage. Their names, their reasons for being picked. But finding *her* was pure luck. He vault happened to be on ground level. Easy access.

He shifts in his seat, his belt suddenly feeling too tight. A smirk spreads across his face. His hands reach to loosen his belt. *Oh, what I would do to-* suddenly Garret sits up, an idea interrupting his nightly routine. His gaze drifts to the doctor's folder sitting on the desk. He hasn't filed it away yet. He takes note of the name: *Project Cicada Rising* and its golden insect logo. He entertains the idea, mulling it over in his mind.

He'll never do it.

Garret thinks of his mentor - the famed, deeply respected Dr. Tanaka. *A coward in a lab coat, running off to deal with his entitled little demon spawn.* Garret understands the colony's need for reproduction. You need bodies if you're going to retake earth, especially if it means taking it back from the Others. He rubs his pants, he wouldn't mind participating in the cause...

I'm commissioning soon. The promise of it, both exciting and nerve-wracking. *Maybe I will replace Dr. Tanaka.* He pokes at his pimply chin again. *I could become the colonies head scientist. I could become a counselor.* Garret spins in the chair the dangerous idea... it's taking hold. *Some people are born, some are chosen... but with this research...* A sheepish grin fills his face as he looks over the research in his hand. *What if I could change people?* His finger traces the logo of the winged insect taking flight. *Project Cicada Rising. With this...* He glances up at the vault, the one containing the girl. *Oh, the things that I could do...*

"Hello Mister Widget." a voice booms from the darkness. Garret startles, dropping the folder, documents flutter across the floor. The figure bends down, picking up one of the loose papers.

"Of course, you're here." Garret mutters at his unwelcome visitor, "you aren't supposed to be here."

“And you aren’t supposed to have this, are you?” She waves the research paper over her head. “I’m intrigued,” she taps the document, “What is project cicada rising?”

“You can read?”

“You can science?” She snaps back.

Garret sits down, knowing when he’s met his match. “It wouldn’t make any sense to you.”

“Go ahead.” She chuckles, a deep, trilling giggle. “Doubt me.”

Garret Widget

16 hours, 58 minutes
Until Commissioning

Garret blinks, “that was the night we met,” he recalls grabbing a sugar candy from his secret stash in his desk drawer.

“It was.”

“That was the night Doc died,” Garret adds carefully, sucking on the sweet.

“It was.”

Garret pauses, taking in her icy tone and proceeds with a smirk, “I’ve always wondered about that... What really happened to him? How that fire got started...”

“We both know what really happened,” She replies, “because you wouldn’t be doing what you’re doing otherwise.”

“You mean a toilet-scrubbing,” Garret puffs, “slop-mopping janitor?” His deranged laugh fills the underground bunker. “Do you know what it’s like scraping up literal shit for a living?”

“If you’d commissioned into the role of head scientist, you’d be obligated to adhere to the colony’s guidelines.” She says coolly, “Your work would be constricted. Morality a main barrier. You’re wise enough to realize that.”

Garret holds his tongue. *She has a point.*

“Our greatest asset is our obscurity. Which was threatened earlier with Miss Tanaka following you.”

Garret opens his computer and begins loading new software. “You don’t think Ms.-Wannabe-Pilot is going to be a problem, do you?” He makes a motion with his finger like he is slicing his neck, “You don’t think...?”

She doesn’t hesitate, “No. But her presence tonight is a reminder why we need to hurry.”

Garret sighs. “For the millionth time, it’s ready.”

“Then let me see.”

“You mean...” Garret looks up from his computer screen, “like now?”

“Yes now!”

Garret begrudgingly rises from his chair and tosses the candy wrapper to the floor. He presses the eject button on the control panel. A mechanical hissing, the cylinder emerges, venting cold cryo-steam. Garret sucks noisily on his candy and drags his greasy index finger along the glass as it slides free of the wall. His finger leaves behind an oily smudge. He can’t help but smile at what he sees. Ever since he found her, one among hundreds, he became fixated. His target. His subject. *His chosen one.*

“So...” Garret asks, “is he not joining us tonight?”

“No. I haven’t told him yet.”

Whatever. Garrett doesn’t care either way.

“I wanted to see her one last time,” His boss joins him at the cryochamber, peering into the glass as the blue light illuminates her calculating eyes. “In her originality.”

Garret nods, chewing loudly, lost in thought, staring as the young woman peacefully buoyant inside her glass cage. “True, for she sure as hell isn’t going to look like this tomorrow.”

The woman huffs with annoyance, turning on her heel to head out. “I don’t want to know the details, Garret. Just tell me if it works. Leave me out of your boyish fantasies.”

She disappears into the darkness.

Garret waits a long moment, calculating the distance to the stairwell, the approximate number of steps it takes to leave this place.

Alone again.

He places a hand on the glass. There isn’t much left for him to do, he wasn’t lying about the experiment being ready. His new hair has proven that.

“There is no one to interrupt us now,” he murmurs softly. Grinning, he unbuttons his pants.

London Graham

14 hours, 27 minutes
Until Commissioning

London Graham loosens a screw – just enough to question the structural integrity of the jet fuel tank. She delights in this kind of silent debauchery. Holding a middle figure to the war machine that controls her life. She smiles, *it's not like I'm killing anyone...*

She organizes empty oxygen tanks and pushes her cart forward; they need refilling. Despite the mundane drudgery London never minded working night shifts, she learned a long time ago that the dark is the best place to hide your secrets. She enters the maintenance hangar. Missiles and bombs are stacked along the walls, metal crates full of jet-ready ammunition. London knows a far greater weapon: the human mind. She understands that the military base, their society, is built on carefully crafted lies – some of which London quietly cultivates herself.

She passes by jet number 12 with its faulty engine and leaking hydraulics. Senior engineers have been mulling over the problematic plane for months now and yet it sits, collecting dust, just like her teenage dreams. The maintenance ladder propped against the plane's however shouldn't be there. It's glaringly obvious that *someone's used it*.

London isn't one to let incongruencies go.

She climbs the ladder and steps onto the wing of the aircraft. London approaches the protective glass dome of the F-22 and peers inside at the raptors unauthorized guest. Her signature black hair is noticeable through the glass as she rests, slumped, peacefully asleep in the pilot's chair.

“Andrea Fucking Tanaka.” London mutters. *Of course, it's you.*

London holds a special spot in her heart for Andy. A certain disdain for the way men look at her. A disgust for her fake innocence and how people she cares about suffer in the wake of her carelessness. Everyone in the colony lives with the consequences of their actions - except her - and London hates her for it.

London knocks aggressively against the glass, “Get up sleeping beauty,” she yells prying the canopy open, “unless you’d rather die.”

Andrea Tanaka

14 hours, 25 minutes
Until Commissioning

Andy jolts awake to the sound of loud knocking.

Where the hell am I?

Blinking rapidly her vision clears and fills with the familiar yet forbidden sight of the inside of a F-22 fighter jet. Andy sits up at the controls, throttle between her legs, Batcat on her lap. Horror settles in her gut; *did I fall asleep in here?*

The canopy opens and London leans over her with her messy green hair and tired bagged eyes, “unless you’d rather die.”

“What?” Andy panics.

“Do you have a death wish or something?” London sneers, “You know sitting authorized in a jet like this is a type-A criminal offence.”

Andy blinks, she understands all too well that this level of misconduct could incite the death penalty. So why had she done it? Andy turns to London, desperate. *The commissioning... my honor... everything I’ve worked for...* “What are you doing here?” She asks.

London flashes her night permit badge, “and what are you doing here?”

Andy doesn’t have a good answer for that. She looks around, dawn approaches. Andy scrambles from the seat and steps out onto the wing. The girls idle on top of the fighter jet as London blocks the way to the ladder. “You want to know something real interesting?” London cocks her head to the side and really takes her time to stare down Andy.

Andy doesn’t want to stall, she wants to get out of here, back inside the base, before anyone else sees her. But London stands in her way. “What?”

“I saw you. Yesterday, in the ER... right before John Wiseman died.”

Andy swallows.

“And then I heard Patricia Wu got murdered... in your bathroom.” London crosses her arms, “isn’t that interesting?”

“It’s coincidental.” Andy mutters - a bit too quick.

“Is it?”

“If you don’t mind.” Andy shoulders past with Batcat riding her forearm and grabs the top of the ladder. Andy begins to climb down but looks up at London, unsure of what to make of the weird girl with the green hair as she looms over her. “I was never here.” She tells London.

“Don’t worry.” London chuckles, “I’m good at keeping secrets. Just like you.”

Andy freezes on the ladder, eyes widening, *what does she mean by that?* Andy’s heart skips a beat. *She doesn’t know about... about what I did. Does she?*

London grins, “I know you’re a killer Andy.”

Andrea Tanaka

13 hours, 42 minutes
Until Commissioning

‘I know you’re a killer Andy.’

Whose does London think she is?

Andy swirls her smog, half-heartedly letting the cold ingredients plop back into the bowl from the lip of her steel spoon.

It’s early.

She slipped back inside and made it to the mess hall before the morning anthem, patiently waited at the commissary doors for morning staff to let her in. Achieving no sleep from her fragmented night of illegal activities and wandering memories leading her back to places she should never have ventured too in the first place. Fatigue coils tight in her chest, ready to snap as she stabs her spoon into the bowl. Oatmeal splatters across her cheek. She takes a deep breath.

I am Andy Tanaka.

I am a cadet in the Air Force Academy.

Today, I will be commissioning with the rest of my class to be assigned my lifelong position and partner. I am brave. I am worthy. I am a good candidate for the one pilot slot to fly an F-22 Raptor.

Andy carefully picks the oatmeal off her face. *I will not let past mistakes cloud my future.* She pinches a single oat between her fingers until it crushes. *What happened a long time ago... doesn't matter.* And yet, her face is all she sees, arching brows, long black hair drifting in the current, peacefully asleep in her suspended glow.

Get your shit together, Andy.

She drops the spoon and rubs her face freeing herself from the mental image. Her hand glides across her neck, fingertips touching skin that should never have felt flames. A permanent reminder of her biggest mistake. She shovels another cold spoonful into her mouth and forces herself to swallow.

“Looks like I’m not the only one who got plenty of beauty sleep.”

Andy looks up as Jade takes a seat across from her. “Couldn’t sleep,” Andy mutters, calibrating her tone of voice to sound less angry than she really is.

Jade lets out a defeated sigh, “same.” She anxiously twirls a strand of hair, that same meek attempt at containing the undercurrent of fear pulsating through her. “I kept having nightmares about the killer. Like he was going to barge into my room and murder me.”

“You think it’s a he?” Andy stiffens, she doesn’t want to think about... *the killer...*

“Statistically. It’s likely to be a man.” Jade adds, “are you having nightmares too?”

Not those kind of nightmares...

Jade fearfully scans over the few patrons of the mess hall. Narrowing her eyes at them like she trusts no one, “I told my mom to give Ken Tanner bodyguards. She hated my proposal of course, but he’s the last counselor left,” The friends sit in silence as Andy surveys the room - technicians, lab coats, night-shift nurses. Everyone looks ordinary. Typical. Routine. *Yet someone’s hiding something.*

“She wouldn’t listen to me of course, but I advised my mom to TELL people. Send out a notification. Call an emergency assembly. You know, get ahead of this thing because rumors are spreading. Oh! But no, she just sits in the high tower doing nothing.” Jade looks up from her cold smog. “Two counselors are dead Andy.”

“It’s unfortunate.” Andy shovels more smog into her mouth. She really doesn’t want to talk about it.

“It’s terrifying!” Jade squeals, eyes wide. “Are you not scared? The body. What we saw...”

Bucket’s warning echo’s, “*What if the killer put the body in there for YOU to find.*”

“I used to be scared of the bug people...” Jade continues, “but now...” She looks around suspiciously. “Now... I’m scared because one of US is a killer.”

Andy swallows nervously.

“Two counselors. Dead.” Jade whimpers. “What are we going to do?”

“We aren’t going to do anything... we’re uncommissioned minors. Solving murders... isn’t our job,” Andy points out.

“‘Criminal investigator’ is not a job that exists Andy. So, who is left to figure out what’s going on? The commander sure isn’t doing anything about it. What if it’s about the succession?”

Andy stills.

Jade keeps her voice hushed, “they were supposed to vote today. But with two counselors dead, that’s two votes gone.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Andy says. “You’re the only viable nominee. You’ve been your mother’s personal assistant for six years. You’ve been training for the job.”

“What if... what if... someone is trying to stop that?”

“You’re the only person with the right credentials.” Andy adds.

“Well... maybe my mom wants to hold onto her power or perhaps her counselors stood in the way of something.”

That sparks a thought. Andy leans over the table and whispers, “I did see your mom last night.”

Jade’s eyes sharpen. “Where?”

“My father’s old laboratory.”

“What are you saying?” Jade sits back, “That place burned down.”

“It’s a janitor’s closet now.” Andy plays with her food, “Just supplies and cleaning carts—” *Cleaning carts.* Andy stops twirling her oats, her mind flashing back to the bathroom, before discovering the body, there was a janitor’s cleaning cart. Batcat had knocked a toilet paper roll from it. *But that’s just a coincidence... right?*

“You don’t think the passageway’s still there?” Jade asks quietly.

Andy’s spoons clatters loudly on the metal tray. Heads turn. Andy flushes white. “You remember that?” She asks, out of breath.

“Obviously. Who wouldn’t forget a secret passageway?” Jade looks around before leaning in, eyes widening with curiosity. “What were we? Ten? I’ve always wondered what you and Jasper found down there. He will not tell me a thing.”

Jasper never told you? Andy looks pale and chokes nervously. *Should I tell you?* It feels too personal. A betrayal. Like she owes it to the girl trapped in the glass, this promise that she never made. To protect her. *But from what?*

“What did you find?” Jade probes.

“The sewer,” Andy lies. “It’s just... um, an underground wastewater treatment plant.”

“Literal shit?” Jade frowns, “Well that’s disappointing...”

Andy pivots, “What do you know about the Janitor?”

“What?”

“The janitor... first name Garret.”

“Uhh...” Jade thinks on it, rummaging around for information inside that smart mind of hers, “I don’t know anything about him.” Jade squints her eyes, trying to puzzle it together, “You’re asking me this... because you saw my mom last night standing outside this new janitor’s closet? And you think this is connected to the murders?”

“Before I found the body, I noticed a cleaning cart in the bathroom.” Andy adds.

“Janitors clean bathrooms.” Jade points out.

“Trust me.” Andy gives her a look, a look to take her seriously. “This man is acting strange.”

“Hmm.” Jade raises an eyebrow. “That message, written on the wall in blood -- ‘I’m coming for you all’ -- it’s a threat. You think the janitor did that?” The girls sit in terrible silence until Jade can no longer take it. “Is anyone else acting strange? You know besides this janitor, and my mother?”

Andy decides to keep her conversation with London to herself. It’s not out of character for London Graham to be weird. There’s a reason the green-haired girl has no friends. But there is one other person that comes to mind and a part of Andy’s heart shatters for even considering it, “Buck’s been acting strange...”

“Bucket?” Jade looks horrified. “What do you mean?”

Andy shrugs, “I don’t know... there is something off with him lately. Maybe it’s the comm-“

“Andy,” Jade rolls her eyes, “he’s in love with you.”

Suddenly Andy loses whatever appetite she had. “What?”

“Do you not see the way he looks at you?” Jade can’t help but laugh, “It’s good old-fashioned infatuation.”

He is my friend! Andy’s heart stutters, *But... could he be more?* Somewhere deep-down Andy knew Jade’s right. Andy wasn’t imaging it; she’s buried it, and she prefers to keep it that way. Andy promptly gets up grabbing her tray. “You done?”

Thankfully, Jade doesn’t press any further, “Yes.” The friends walk to the trash conductor, Jade doesn’t know what to say. “So... what are you going to do until tonight?”

“I have no training. So, I really don’t know. I’ve learned I don’t do well being taskless.”

“You can always help me. I have loads of work to do today to set up for the ceremony.”

“I could help you.” A flutter of excitement builds in Andy. Folding and unfolding chairs all day seems like a benign way to pass the time. Give her something to do. To not think about serial killers, and buried secrets, and boys.

“Actually...I don’t know if that’s allowed.”

Andy’s shoulders drop, *nothing is ever allowed.*

The friends stand for a moment, not sure what to say next, clinging to the relative comfort of having the other one there. “... are you ready for your life to change?” Jade whispers, trying to delay their departure.

“I... I don’t know. Are you?” Andy asks back. “Are you ready for your life to change?”

“Excuse me ladies.”

Andy and Jade step out of the woman's path, glimpsing her second-class badge. *Electrician.* Andy checks her name plate *Rosaline Welsh*, a few years older than them. She remembers watching her commissioning ceremony, recalling her walking out onto the stage in a brilliant orange dress.

Jade politely nods to Rosaline, “Goodday to you too ma’am.”

“Goodday.” Andy nods.

The girls watch her find a table. It's not her job, or her rank, that catches their attention – it's her stomach. Rosaline places her tray down and settles at the nearest empty table. With both delicacy and discomfort the young woman lowers herself onto the bench, the tabletop edge pressing into her large pregnant stomach.

Andy and Jade try not to gawk.

“I don't know if I'm ready for THAT,” Jade says under her breath.

“Out of everyone from our class you would make the best parent.” Andy offers.

Jade huffs.

“The best parent AND the best Commander.” Andy adds,

“I don't know if it's possible to do both, to lead and parent,” Jade remarks. Andy shuts her mouth, it's a stab at her mother. Jade readjusts, nervous about coming across as disrespectful to their superior leader, “what about you?” Jade asks.

“Me?” Andy shudders at the very concept. “I'm not going to lie, Jade; I don't know.”

“You've never thought about it?” Jade is shocked. “We're female, Andy...”

“I know! It's just that... I guess... I guess... I never thought about it before. Being a mother, creating a family.”

“It's a part of the job, Andy.”

“I know it is... I just...” Andy is at a loss for words. “I'll have to postpone pregnancy. Otherwise as a pilot I'd be grounded for nine months. I'm not going to take a break like that if I'm given a chance at wings.”

“Fair.” Jade nods. “So what? Are you just going to avoid getting pregnant?”

Andy feels heat rush to her face at the very idea of it... the mechanics of it.

Jade doesn't press any further and instead squeezes her friend's hand. “Hey... when I'm nominated as Commander, I'll give us the choice.”

“Oh yeah?” Andy lets out a chuckle and holds the cafeteria door open for Jade, “And how are you going to do that?”

“As commander I could literally just snap my fingers and change the laws. There's got to be a better way. Plus, who says pregnant women can't fly?” Jade smiles. “I'll have Bucket design a flight suit that fits pregnant woman.”

The girls laugh.

“But what about you and Conrad?” Andy has known about Jade’s crush on her officer for years. Her brother teases her endlessly about it.

“Well...” Jade’s face reddens as she giggles, “I actually think we would make cute babies,” she smiles despite herself.

“Well, you know...” Andy laughs and gives her a playful nudge. “He is not married yet.” Andy winks.

“Shut up.” Jade grins.

They laugh – and when they finally catch their breath they realize their moment together has passed. It’s time to get back to their duties. “Well,” Jade sighs, “I’ll guess I’ll see you later.”

“See you later then.”

“Oh Andy!”

“Yes?”

Jade stands there for a moment, the fear tingling in her gray eyes. “Be careful...”

Andy nods, she doesn't need to be reminded.

Andrea Tanaka

12 hours, 14 minutes
Until Commissioning

What to do, what to do.

Idling in the cold silence of her dormitory is not an option. Neither is pacing the halls only to be tormented by countless whispering glances. Her fate being today’s hot topic. Nowhere on base can distract her from her own dangerously spiraling thoughts so Andy heads to the one place she can be alone and to blow off steam: *the centrifuge*.

Andy unlocks the steel hatch doors to ‘the Vault’ The main training complex for the Department of Defense. Sure enough, when the doors hiss open, they reveal an empty facility, it's too early for most DOD personnel.

Andy walks up to the centrifuge. A special flight simulator attached to a large mechanical arm that spins around so fast it breaks the sound barrier, imitating real speed. Andy is already 9G certified, having trained in it many times, yet nothing silences the mind more than speeding nine

times the force of gravity. Andy climbs inside the imitation cockpit, under the seat she finds the trainee-grade pressure mask and helmet. She locks in and grabs the throttle.

Just breath.

Andy exhales, finds her center, then, she pushes the throttle forward, her screen populates with the runway. Her imaginary jet picks up speed as the centrifuge spins.

Just breathe.

Andy's Memory

Dr. Tanaka angrily tidies his desk. The same desk Andy and Jasper hid underneath earlier that day. However, playing hide and seek in the lab feels like a lifetime ago. Her father is quiet, he hasn't spoken a word since he told Jasper to leave. That too was a while ago, Andy has been left waiting for her father to say something – anything. Instead, he barely even looks at her.

Always a quiet man. Her father never troubled himself with needless speech, he only wanted results. A true scientist, parenting wasn't exactly his specialty.

The silence though, it's eating her up inside, this not-knowing. Andy wants – needs – answers from him.

“Dad.” The word falls out of her. She steps forward, committed to speaking her mind now. “Why aren't you telling me what's going on?”

Dr. Tanaka paces his laboratory, adjusting DNA data, stacking petri dishes, inspecting experiments. Batcat waddles over to a cage, containing a mutated snake, ID band reads: S-2550, a human ear grows out of it the serpents back. “Its... complicated.” He signs, adjusting grow lights and irrigation to mist genetically modified pea shoots. “My research is controversial.”

“What does ‘controversial’ mean?”

“It means some people have a hard time accepting change - embracing growth.”

Andy looks at the smallest pea plant on the corner of the table and gently taps its leaflet. A single droplet of water slides off. She's listening intently, curious about her dad's softening demeanor. Always so serious, so strong. But now her father looks... tired? He seems older, hair grayer. Defeated.

"The colony has certain policies in place that are precautionary. To prevent mishaps. But we find ourselves stuck between progress and precaution. I'm currently prepping a project for a preview with the Commander, maybe she will or won't sign off on it."

"What is the project? Is it fun? Like Batcat?" She scoops up her kitten.

Dr. Tanaka pulls up a lab stool, finally relaxing after the incident in the secret bunker below and smiles warmly. "Not as fun as creating Batcat." He playfully scratches the kitten's bat ears. Batcat purrs. "No. This research is groundbreaking; it will change everything. Our people will be able to survive. We will be stronger. We will be... better." He leans forward and cups his daughter's hands in his. "The future – your future – will be brilliant."

Andy smiles, leaning into her father's embrace.

He whispers softly into her ear, "What are you made of Andy?"

She laughs, annoyed, by his constant question. Her head melts into her father's chest. "I am Andy!"

"But what are you made of?"

Andy groans, "I'm Brave. I'm strong. I'm going to save us all."

"Good." Her father whispers into her ear, "you are going to change the world Andrea." He stands abruptly, "It's late. Feed Mr. Rogers and help your old man lock up." He throws her the master key set. She catches it with one hand.

Dr. Tanaka stands to grab his things as Andy skips over to Mr. Rogers. ID brand reads: M-57. The mutant, only a juvenile, rears happily, standing well over five feet tall. "Here you go." Andy opens the food funnel and lets the creature feed on the provided pellets. Andy skips over to the cabinets and locks them, one-by-one with the keys.

"Ready, Andrea?"

"Ready!" Andy bounces back to her father and grabs his outstretched hand. "It's pizza night tonight." Andy grins.

"Excellent news," her father chimes.

“Can I have dinner with Bucket?” Andy asks as father and daughter enter the hallway. “I promised him I would.”

“You know his name is Oliver Patel. You’ve been spending a lot of time with him, haven’t you?” Her dad winks at her, “Do you like him?”

“What? Ew! No Dad!”

The labs double doors close shut behind father and daughter. Inside the laboratory automatic motion-sensor lights dim before shutting off entirely. Only the rustling of caged creatures fills the dark space. That is, until a slow and sudden CREAK can be heard.

One of the cabinet doors slowly sways open, the set of keys, completely forgotten, dangle from the lock.

Andrea Tanaka

11 hours, 57 minutes
Until Commissioning

Those damned keys.

Andy checks her speed gauge, 5... 6... 7... the centrifuge spins impossibly fast. Andy slides back into her seat. Helmet cemented to the headrest. She fights for focus as the screen before her shows her soaring through imaginary clouds. She hits 8g’s. Her lungs crush under the weight of her ribs from the pushback. She locks her core, straining her legs as hard as she can to maintain blood flow to the brain.

“Morning.”

Travis? The headset inside her helmet fills with his voice.

“Butt tight!” The younger cadet laughs over the aux. “Remember! Squeeze those cheeks!”

Goddammit. She doesn’t care to respond. To press the speaker and yell at him to get off the line. Instead, she pushes harder on the throttle. Escalating into forbidden territory: fly faster

than nine. Because not only would it break a jet - it could kill you. The speed ticks up, 9... 10... 11... no human has ever lived in these limits. Lungs constricted; she fights passing out.

Somewhere in the background she can hear Travis screaming at her to stop. She doesn't care, she catapults herself into 12gs.

Just breathe!

Her controls lock. The centrifuge spins down, rapidly descending. Her imaginary screen becomes transparent, losing its artificial sky, returning to an ordinary glass window. With every slowing spin she sees the younger cadet, Travis, manning the emergency outside controls.

"Are you grounding me?" Andy growls into her speaker.

"Are you trying to kill yourself?" Travis snaps back.

The machine comes to a full stop. Andy rips off her helmet and mask. The cockpit door releases, and Travis looms over her, hand on his hip. "You just hit twelve. That's not possible."

"Machine must have malfunctioned." Andy shoulders past him.

"Why are you still training? You're commissioning today."

"As everyone keeps reminding me." Andy groans, "Why are you here?"

"I was heading to the gym but then I heard someone powering up the centrifuge. Wanted to check it out. Hey, have you ever seen Jasper use the gym?" Travis proceeds to flex his unimpressive forearm.

Andy chooses to ignore him, heading for the exit. *The vault is big enough for the two of us to train in peace and quiet... separately.*

He parks himself in front of her, blocking the way out. "Have you?" he asks again.

"No. Not for a while." Andy mutters trying to get past.

"Yeah... same... how do you think he got so big, so fast? Without using the gym?"

Andy groans, she doesn't care, "I don't know Travis."

"Are you excited about sex?"

Andy feels her entire body burn, "You've been hanging around Peter too much. What are you, twelve?"

"I'm 15," he snorts, irked.

"Well, you shouldn't be thinking about that. You're years away from any kind of copulation." Andy shoves past.

"And you're hours away. So? Are you thinking about it?"

Andy feels her face flush. Heat in her stomach. Palms sweating. “No.”

“What... have you never like... done it yourself? I do it all the time.”

Andy shakes her head, mortified. “TRAVIS... why?” She heads straight to the door.

“It, feels good, a de-stressor.” He follows her, “God forbid we all need a de-stressor in this world. It’s self-care.” Andy angrily taps her keycard to the door, internally screaming at the metal locks hurry up and let her out.

Thank you. The steel unlatches, swinging open. Andy flees.

“You should really try it sometime!” Travis calls after her. “Might make you feel good!”

Andy departs, without a goodbye.

Oliver Patel

10 hours, 5 minutes
Until Commissioning

“Alright, let’s try this again. Dog, sit.”

Bucket points to the floor. Dog, with just one back leg installed and an open stomach of internal wires spilling out, sits. “YES! Give me a paw!” Bucket fist bumps Dog’s mechanical foot. “The reboot is working!” He slides out of his chair to kneel on the floor beside the robot, poking and prodding into the depths of the electrical intestines.

“BOY! What are you doing?” A voice booms.

Bucket sits up hard, banging his head on the underside of his work desk. He looks up only to see a large round stomach protruding over him. “Oh!” Bucket scrambles to his feet “Good morning, Sir!” He bows respectfully to his boss, the head of the engineering department, Counselor Ken Tanner.

“Boy... if you’re meddling around again...” Ken huffs.

“I...” Bucket glances over his student’s work cubicle: to the absolute crime scene of Dog’s discombobulated body parts strewn across the floor. “It’s just a small side project... sir.”

“Does that... thing, even work?” Ken motions to Dog’s detached limbs.

“It will.” Bucket smiles “as soon as-”

“As soon as you repair these.” The counselor drops a heavy wooden crate on his desk. He taps the lid proudly, “Special request from my son. The Academy needs them in an hour. Be a good boy and shine these up will you?”

Bucket forces a smile, “Of course Sir.”

Ken nods and waddles off across the department floor, where he is greeted by the many cordial bows of commissioned engineers stationed at their state-of-the-art cubicles. All working on much more interesting and important projects. *How did he even become a counselor? Have I ever seen Ken Tanner do... anything?* Bucket shakes his head, snuffing out the intrusive thoughts. There’s no point in deciding what’s fair and what isn’t. Students always repair... they never create. Bucket sighs, checks inside the crate, broken flamethrowers and malfunctioning 40mm high explosive hand grenades.

Always weapons. He rolls his eyes, *Throw a rock at it. See if that works! Let’s blow it up. Blast it out of the sky. Sure! How fun!* Bucket carefully lifts a M320 hand grenade. His eyes drop as he sighs. The monotony of it. The boredom. The pure lack of ingenuity.

“So... are you going to sit there and do as you're told? Or are you going to ignore that old fat fart and do the thing you really should be doing?”

Bucket sits up, “Hello?”

“Congratulations... by the way,” the unfamiliar voice quips.

Bucket blinks, looking around, “I’m sorry?”

“I’ve been watching you.”

Bucket turns, meeting mischievous muddy brown eyes staring out from a pale face framed by dyed neon green hair. The spunky girl stands confidently, hands on her hips, wearing purposefully mismatching clothes - The more hideous: the better.

Your... from my class. Bucket realizes quickly. *What’s your name again...?*

“London Graham.” She holds a hand for a handshake - old school cool.

Still holding the grenade Bucket extends his free hand. “Oliver Patel... um, that’s me.”

They shake.

“I know who you are.” London smirks, leaning against his desk. “Yet, you don’t remember me.”

Bucket bites his tongue.

“It’s alright if you don’t. I keep to myself. Avoiding the usual bullshit by working night shifts.” London states. “And from what I’ve gathered, you are a typical day-time person. Which is fine, to each their own.”

“OH!” Bucket laughs nervously. She’s offered him a talking point. “Are you an apprentice? Student? Cadet?”

“I’m double-enrolled. Both a student with the School of Engineering and an apprentice of the University of Life Sciences. I dabble in everything... well until, you know. Until tonight.”

Bucket remembers her now, the girl in the back of the classroom during their elementary years. The girl who hugs the corners in the hallways. The girl who never bothered to make friends. “You’re commissioning tonight.”

“Yes, Oliver. Like you, I’m old enough to be granted some soul-sucking job and get laid; The divine pillars of our community: purpose and procreation.”

Bucket chuckles nervously, “that’s one way of framing it.”

“Put the grenade down, you’re making me nervous.” London gestures to the weapon.

“Oh.” Bucket gently sets it down, “right.”

“Why do they call you Bucket?” London asks. She already knows the story but for some reason, she wants to hear it from Bucket himself.

He sits back on the palm of his hands, tired of this old tale, “I was a little kid, and I had this little blue bucket and would go all over base looking for loose screws and nuts to collect. People started to call me ‘little bucket boy’. It’s better than some of the names the other kids would tease me by like ‘little loose screw or little nut sack.’”

“Why didn’t you just beat the shit out of them? You’re big enough,” London suggests. She starts picking up and examining stuff on his desk.

Bucket frowns. “Violence is never the answer.”

“Well, I like your real name.”

“Thanks?” Bucket winces as London breaks a circuit. “So... what about your name? Does ‘London’ mean anything?” He asks politely, while brainstorming a way to make her leave.

“Apparently, I was named after some great city that my great-grand-parents came from.” London drops to the floor and pats Dog’s metal head. “This!” her eyes dilate with excitement, “this is badass! I’ve been watching you put this together for a while now. Every night I come in and it’s more complete. More perfected. When are you going to finish?”

Bucket sits up, no one has complimented his work before. It's startling – and reinvigorating. “This one is just a prototype but... maybe someday every colonist will have their own personal Dog.”

“I believe in you.” London smiles, genuinely.

Buckets heart stutters, “Well...uh... do you have any exciting... projects?” He asks.

“If you mean mopping blood off the floor, fixing broken pipes, restoring electrical panels, rewiring grid systems, wiping patients' dirty butts... then no. I fix shit and this ancient RUIN we live in...” London sighs, “...needs CONSTANT fixing.”

“Even during the night shifts?”

“Especially during the night shifts. People go to sleep and expect it all to be repaired by morning.”

“I see,” Bucket nods. He looks to the box of weapons he is supposed to be repairing. The clock on the wall ticks by and he expects London to depart. Yet she lingers by the foot of his work bench, just watching him. He doesn't know what to say. What to do. *I mean who is this girl, really?*

After the longest pause London blinks, “Well... did you ask her?”

“What?”

London leans over and plucks an unassuming little black box from his littered desk.

“Oh! That's!” Bucket lunges for it only for London to pull away.

“Careful Oliver, hand grenade.” She points to the explosive on the desk between them.

Bucket gently steps back, remembering the weapon. “Please... that's... it's... I...” his words fumble and flop.

“Your poor fangirls...” London laughs with a mischievous grin and juggles the black box between her hands. “You're secret lovers! You don't even want to know how many times I've found your name written on the walls of the girl's bathrooms.” She pops the lid open revealing the golden engagement ring inside. “What a heartbreaker you are!”

I shouldn't have made the ring... he knows it's wrong, using precious gold for personal use, wasting colony resources. *Wait?* He sits up, *how does she know I made a ring?*” Bucket looks at her, horrified. *She's really has been watching me!*

“So...” London smiles, “did you measure her finger?”

“What?”

“Don’t be dumb with me. You got her size before you made the ring? Right?”

Bucket’s mouth hangs ajar, “uh... no?”

London plucks the ring from the box and slides it onto her own finger. “Hmm, look at that. It fits me just fine.”

That’s not meant for you! Bucket steps forward, hands balled into fists.

London doesn’t notice his rage. Distracted by the little band on her finger. “So... did little-miss-chosen-one say yes?” London holds her hand up higher, letting the gold sparkle in the fluorescent lights of the Engineering Department.

“Can I have that back... please.” Bucket demands, standing rigid, hand stretched. He glares at her, “you’ve been watching me.”

“I watch everybody.” London shrugs, “despite what your fangirls think; you’re nothing special.”

“You shouldn’t spy!” Bucket grits his teeth. “It’s wrong. People have private lives.”

“The people with private lives are the ones keeping secrets.” She smirks through her side-eye, “Most people aren’t who they say they are. Most people lie.”

Bucket doesn’t back down, “and what are you lying about?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” She blows him a kiss with the ring still on her finger.

“Project Cicada Rising.” Bucket declares.

London’s eyebrows shoot up with intrigue.

“Your note,” Bucket continues. “I’m not stupid. You tricked me, making me swap your stupid note with my love letter?” Bucket eyes her.

London’s jaw locks.

She really has been watching me.

“Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t.” London smiles, twirling the ring on her finger.

“What does it mean then? The Cicada- “

“Don’t speak about it.” London tosses him the ring before he can say more.

He catches the engagement ring. “Why not?”

“You’re smart. Figure it out.”

Both their heads turn as someone struggles to enter the engineering department. The doors unlock, buzzing the visitor in. London gives him a sly grin and pats his broad shoulder.

“Juliet’s coming. Good luck Romeo.” She blows him a kiss. “Oh, and if you tell anyone about the note... I’ll kill you.”

Dumbfounded, Bucket grips the ring. “You’re lying.”

She turns with a devious grin, “am I?”

Andrea Tanaka

9 hours, 53 minutes
Until Commissioning

I hope he doesn’t mind the intrusion.

Andy is buzzed in. She enters the engineering department, immediately feeling out of place in the foreign facility. She feels it, a pair of eyes prickling up her body; studying her.

Someone’s watching me.

Andy locks eyes with the head of the DOE, Counselor Ken Tanner. He stares from the back of the floor surrounded by a group of engineers; his eyes slowly roam over her body.

I shouldn’t be here. Instead of turning around, like she should, she takes another step in. She matches the counselor’s gaze. *Where are his bodyguards...? The commander didn’t take Jade’s advice then... somebody really ought to be protecting him.* The counselor breaks eye contact, turning his attention back to the engineers circling him and laughs with such delight it jiggles his entire body. Andy doesn’t want to be unkind. But the counselor’s physique and jolly personality wouldn’t win in a fight to the death.

To her relief she spots him. “Buck!” Rattled, Bucket looks up from his messy workstation. He’s shocked to see her. Andy’s never dropped by for an unexpected visit before.

“Andy!” Bucket nervously glances around. “What are you... What are you doing here?” He looks over his shoulder checking to see if someone else is there. Andy looks too but it’s just engineers minding their own business.

He seems flustered... “I’m sorry I shouldn’t have come. I don’t want to get in your way.” She turns back the way she came in.

“Oh! No, no! I’m not busy at all.” Bucket quickly uses his foot to slide all the mechanical projects deeper under the desk and carefully places the hand grenade back in its crate.

“You sure?” Andy asks.

“Yes. Yes, of course, none of this is important.” He pivots his attention solely to her. “What’s up? I um, I mean, what’s the matter?”

Andy lets her shoulders drop. “Nothing. That’s the problem. I guess I just wanted... to see you?” Bucket’s heart skips a beat, his cheeks burn. “What’s that?” Andy points.

“What?”

“In your hand?”

“OH! Hah, this is nothing. Nothing at all.” He shoves the ring into his back pocket and focuses all his energy on her. He can tell she’s troubled. Andy’s relationship with her emotions is complicated, but as good as she is at hiding from her own feelings, her eyes betray her.

Bucket looks at Ken Tanner bossing around second-class engineers. “Want to sneak out of here? Go for a walk?”

Her eyes brighten, “That... sounds nice.” She smiles.

“Great, let’s go.” He offers her a friendly hand, and the pair depart. But before the department door closes Andy feels his hand tighten in hers. He glances over his shoulder as if checking to see if someone else is watching. Andy looks as well, but the only person who stares is the counselor. Andy is relieved, she doesn’t belong in the engineering department anyways.

It's a good thing were leaving.

Andy’s Memory

Bucket, missing nothing, looks at her. “What’s wrong Andy?”

“The keys...”

“What? What keys?” Bucket sets his pizza plate down on the edge of the commissary roof. Their normal sunset dinner watching the fighter jets is cut short as Andy runs for the roof hatch. Her kitten swoops in from above landing on her back, clinging to the fabric of her shirt.

“THE KEYS! I forgot to lock it!” She shouts.

“What are you talking about?” Bucket yells following

Andy heaves the heavy hatch open. “Dad is going to be so mad!” She hustles down the ladder, two rings at a time. *He’s already mad with me playing in the lab and going into that weird basement!*

“Why will he be mad?” Bucket’s ten-year-old voice cracks. He peers down the ladder but Andy has already hit the floor running. He climbs down and accelerates after her trying to close the gap between them, but Andy is fast. The pair shoot down the hallways, one turn after the next.

Andy knows the way, winding through the congested concrete guts of Utoya Air Base. She sprints as fast as her legs allow as Batcat glides over her head with ease, *why can’t I have wings like him?* It would be so effortless, so weightless... so freeing. *To fly.* Andy closes her eyes, imaging her feet leaving the ground, her torso lifting, her arms spreading wide to catch the sky.

SMACK!

“ANDREA!” The commander barks in surprise as the child collides into her at full speed. The Commander fixes her golden phoenix badge with an unflinching frown, she towers over Andy. “What are you doing?”

Panting hard, barreling around the corner, Bucket stops dead in his tracks at the sight of their supreme leader. Mrs. Parker looks at the children irritation making her eyelid twitch. “You know the rules! No running in the halls!”

Bucket throws himself into a submissive bow. “Yes, Ma’am! Of course, Ma’am. I’m sorry Ma’am.” He puffs air, not inhaling enough of it.

“Sorry Ma’am.” Andy performs a little half-bow. She’s so close to the labs. All she needs to do is lock that last cabinet. Her father will never know... unless... *he already does.* She begins running again.

“Andrea Tanaka what did I just say about running!” The commander marches after her.

There's the lab! Andy spots the double doors and reaches for the handle.

FWOOSH!

Time slows. The double doors boil as the lab EXPLODES from within in an angry eruption of fire and gas. Burning air catapults her. The fire sears up her outstretched arm and SMACK! Her head, followed by the rest of her body collides with the far wall. Andy crumbles... into nothingness.

Andrea Tanaka

9 hours, 13 minutes
Until Commissioning

“How about... the greenhouse?” Bucket suggests.

The presence of his hand on her waist snaps her out of it. Andy looks up. *How long have we been walking?*

“You okay?” He asks as he opens the door to the greenhouse conservatory. “You’re lost in thought. It’s unlike you.”

“I’ve been feeling unlike myself lately,” Andy bemuses and enters. The two are hit with thick, humid air. Unlike the main agricultural growing units, this overgrown greenhouse is zoned recreational space. A rare entity in a community where every square foot is utilized for survival. Plants grow freely here, overwhelming the space. It appears claustrophobic and unordered to Andy.

“I forgot how wild it is here.” Awed by the organic chaos, Bucket raises his head to the stained-glass ceiling shrouded in new-world tropical species.

Andy never really liked the greenhouse. Too hot. Too sticky. If anything, it’s a haunting reminder of what is in store for her beyond the wall. *The Wildlands*.

“What you just said Andy... that you have been feeling unlike yourself lately... what do you mean by that?” Bucket motions for her to sit on a stone bench. The friends sit. Only the

artificial humming of gentle irrigation sprayers can be heard, the warm water mists the space around them, wrapping them in a protective cloud of vapor.

“Moments that keep me awake at night. That’s all.” Andy plays nervously with her hands, a movement not missed by Bucket.

“What moments?”

“One particular moment.” Andy lets her tired eyes close for a second.

Andy’s Memory

“Andy! Andy, wake up!”

Andy’s eyes flutter open. Alarms blare, ash rains down upon her face and the horrific smell of smoke and chemical burn scorch her eyes red.

“You’re ALIVE!” Bucket squeezes her tightly, hugging her closely to his chest. Her left side burns with a rawness at his embrace “I thought you died!” He chokes on tears. The air tingles with embers.

“Daddy?” Andy blinks. Her arm burns. Her eyes burn. The painful smoke trickles deep into her lungs. Her hair, her clothes, and everything in front of her, is charred. “DAD!” Andy pushes Bucket to the side, barely registering her own pain as panic engulfs her.

“Wait Andy!” Bucket tries to grab her, “Don’t go in there!” but it’s too late, Andy bolts stumbling through the remains of the double doorway into and torched debris of what, only moments before was her father's laboratory. Reduced to a blackened, melted, ruin. Nothing recognizable remains. Fire smolders on tabletops, burning papers flutter through the air, molten glass puddles on the floor.

“DADDY!” Andy screams. “DADDY!” Heavy, ash-streaked tears pour down her face as Andy hunts through the destruction. She dodges a light fixture as it comes crashing to the

ground, erupting into flames around her. "Please..." She begs, choking on smoke. It's hard to breathe. It's hard to see. A horrific smell floods her nostrils. *What is that smell?* She looks to her right, burned alive inside its cage sits the melted corpse of Mr. Rogers. Andy steps backward, away from the torched cage.

CRUNCH.

Andy looks under her foot. A human bone. A *humorous* bone to be exact. Charred and blackened, it's accompanied by pieces of white fabric, *lab coat*. She spots the shining glint of the name tag on the burned fabric, *Dr. William Tanaka...*

Andy feels a heavy hand fall on her shoulder, she looks up through her tears and the smoke, *the Commander*.

Mrs. Parker doesn't say anything, just stands there, squeezing her shoulder, dark eyes watching. Andy can't help but glance at the cabinet she forgot to lock... the melted keys still stuck in the door frame. The warning label seemingly so obvious now: WARNING: FLAMMABLE CONTENTS. Her knees no longer support her, she drops to the floor. She embraces the burnt bones, gripping the seared lab coat. His name plate hits her forehead.

I killed him!

"NOOOO!" Andy wails. The Commander overpowers Andy, plucking her up with ease. Andy cries inconsolably as the Commander tosses her over her shoulder. Andy can't stop looking at the corpse of her father, whose skull is spilled open... like he died screaming. "NOOO!" She howls reaching for him with her blistered arm.

"DADDY!"

Andrea Tanaka

8 hours, 58 minutes
Until Commissioning

“I killed him.” Andy wipes a stray tear from her scarred cheek.

Bucket lifts a hand preparing to rub Andy’s back. “Oh, Andy...”

“Please don’t.” Andy stands.

“Talking about it helps.” Bucket hangs his head, but his eyes never leave hers.

“I killed my Dad.” Andy fights back the onslaught of tears. These crushing emotions, *these feelings*. “All day, I’ve been thinking about THAT day. The day he died. The day I killed him. It’s been haunting me: the entire series of events.”

Bucket opens his mouth.

“No! Don’t tell me it was just an accident like everyone else. You and the Commander are the only people who were there. You saw what I did.”

Bucket nods heavily, choosing not to fight her over the truth. “I know.”

“Please just don’t say anything...” Andy hums, muscles trembling. Bucket drops his gaze, freeing her from his warm brown eyes with an understanding nod. The artificial mist grows heavy on her eyelids. Batcat lands in a nearby tree and watches her with his all-knowing red gaze. She feels empty. IS empty. And that voice, *his voice*. Her father's haunting phrase whispering out from his black, fleshless, screaming skull. She answers him, once and for all.

I am Andy... and I am a killer.

Bucket stands, upset with himself for allowing the silence to go on so long. Unable to watch her suffer, he bursts, “Yes. He’s dead! But look at his legacy. Your father was a brilliant scientist, an exceptional colonist, a humanitarian for change. And above all else, he was an amazing father. For the best thing he ever made... was you.”

Andy turns to him.

“And I know without a doubt he would be proud of who you’ve become.” He smiles. “Because I know I am.”

“Meow” Batcat agrees from the overgrown canopy.

Andy wipes the wetness from her face, unsure if it’s her tears or the sprinkler system. “How is it you always know the right thing to say to make me feel better?”

Bucket steps closer, taking her hands in his. Andy can smell the sweetness of brassy metal. His scent smells like home. His smile widens with a tint of mischief, “it’s almost as if I know you.”

Course you do.

“Andy... I didn’t get a chance to say this last night on the rooftop but... I simply can’t wait any longer to tell you...”

“What?” She asks. Bucket gets down on one knee and reaches into his back pocket, digging for the engagement ring. *Is he?* Before he can unravel what's in his hand Andy throws her hands up. “Buck... stop.” Andy bites her lip, *what if Jade’s right?*

“Andy...” he looks at her, with so much *love*.

“MAR-ow!”

We’re not alone. Andy jolts, scanning the greenhouse, plants cover everything. Her cat calls again in warning.

“What is it?” Bucket asks.

“Somebodies here.” Andy says flatly, her hand finds the hidden military grade knife she keeps strapped to her leg. She unsheathes it and the blade glistens in the light. “Get behind me.”

Bucket doesn’t get behind her. He gets in front, fists drawn, scowling, he scans the plants around them. “LONDON!” He shouts angrily. “Are you watching me again?”

London? Andy keeps her knife out and ready, yet her face flashes with anger. *Why would she be here?* But as she scans the greenery only one person concerns her. *The serial killer.* Andy extends an arm for Batcat, who swoops down and lands on her bicep. She checks her feline friend, his wrinkles relax. Eyes dilating, fixed on an object.

“We know you’re there.” Andy faces the overgrown vegetation. “Come on out.”

Stepping around a bushy corner wearing a tiny pink apron with a pair of garden shears, is Jasper. “Hi friends.” He grins, adjusting cute little jasmine flowers tucked into his dreadlocks.

“Jasper?” Andy lowers her knife.

“Hello.” Bucket fumes through gritted teeth. Seemingly more upset than he was about London.

“T’is I.” Jasper beams and bows.

Oliver Patel

8 hours, 23 minutes
Until Commissioning

Jasper? “What are you doing here?” Bucket demands.

“What? I can’t have hobbies?”

“Since when do you have hobbies?” Bucket crosses his arms.

Jasper’s smile fades, registering his sour mood. “You’ve never bothered to ask.”

“You’re... a... gardener?” Andy points to Jasper’s ridiculous pink apron complete with gardening shears peeking out from frilly embroidered pockets. Batcat jumps from Andy’s shoulders onto Jasper’s and sniffs at the sweet-smelling flowers tucked into his dreads.

“New-world jasmine. Aren’t they lovely?” Jasper scratches Batcat’s chin, coaxing out a happy purr. “Gardening is like art, it’s freeing. Well!” he claps his hands with delight, “Since you’re both here, let me give you a garden tour!”

Oh great... Bucket tucks the engagement ring back into his pocket and watches, unamused, as Jasper plucks one of the jasmine flowers from a vine. “Here.” He carefully tucks the flower behind Andy’s ear. Bucket resists the urge to smack Jasper’s hand as he runs his fingertips across her cheek.

“So beautiful.” Jasper smiles.

Bucket gets between them with a forced smile, “the flower does look really nice.”

Andy inhales the floral sweetness. “It’s... remarkable.”

“Isn’t it?” Jasper edges around Bucket and loops his arms with Andy’s “Come, come, there is so much I want to show you.”

Bucket grinds his jaw, with no other option but to follow them through the garden.

Andrea Tanaka

7 hours, 20 minutes
Until Commissioning

Color explodes from all corners in bursting blooms. Ethereal beams of light cascade from the glass ceiling, illuminating the narrow footpath as Jasper recites botanical names, guiding Andy and Bucket along through a tunnel of towering flora. He delightedly describes each plant, likes it’s his child. Andy can barely keep up. The names, the flamboyance, the passion.

“I love this one! Started it from seed. I call it... the Moonflower! It only blooms at night. Someday I would like to see it bloom, but you know... the curfew.”

“It’s beautiful?” Andy feigns interest in the plants un-opened white bud.

“Listen it's full of nectar on the inside.” He rattles the flower bud. Sure enough, a faint splashing can be heard within.

“Very nice.” Andy nods and points at another plant. “This one is also nice.”

“Don’t touch that!” Jasper yelps. “It’s poisonous! See the red droplets forming at the end of its stems? Ten times worse than cyanide. It would kill you instantly if you ate it.”

“Why the hell are you growing poisonous plants?” Bucket interjects.

“Because it's so pretty! Oh, look at this!”

Jasper takes Andy’s hand, guiding her underneath a canopy of brilliant vining flowers. Each bright red-purple bloom holds a splash of yellow and orange radiating from the center. Unquestionably gorgeous. “Wow.” Andy is taken aback at the beautiful other-worldly plant.

“My favorite. A hybrid between old-world pincushion protea and some unknown new-world species of passion plant.”

“Your creating hybrids?” Bucket looks up at the cascading flowers, “and you don’t know what you mixed it with?”

“Nope! Unlabeled tissue stock collected from the field. The science department threw it away. Dozens of samples and seeds from the Wildlands! I rescued them from the incinerator. Guess who they belonged to?”

“Who?” Andy peers deeper into the colorful spiral hovering before her. Bewildered that Jasper has kept gardening a secret from her.

“Your mother,” Jasper finishes.

“My mother?”

Jasper gently strokes the pincushion stamens and runs a finger down the soft velvety interior, collecting pollen on his fingertip. “Yes, Dr. Kate Tanaka. She had all these samples she collected during her... well during her career.”

“Before the Others killed her, you mean.” Andy deflates.

“I couldn’t watch them destroy her discoveries – especially the mystery ones. I planted them. Kept them alive.”

“Why?” The hybrid flower dangles before her. Intoxicatingly sweet, it makes her dizzy.

Jasper cracks another smile. “I love it! You sprout a little seed and watch it grow into this complex individual that does whatever the hell it wants. Grows how it wants. Reproduces when it wants.” He chuckles to himself. “Plus, there is the added benefit of hiding from my sister and mother of course. They would never look for me in the greenhouse.”

Now that makes more sense. Andy watches him lovingly pick up a spray bottle to gently mist the hanging hybrid. *All these years I thought you were pulling pranks when you were just... gardening.* A surprised smile finds its way onto her face. She’s happy for him, the same way she is happy when Bucket shows her one of his new inventions.

“Can you guess what I named it?”

“What?”

“Andrea’s pride,” Jasper announces proudly.

Andy can’t move. Can’t breathe. It’s like she is spinning in the centrifuge.

“I named it after you,” he explains. “The parental tissues came from a mystery plant of your mother’s and the protea seeds were a gift from your dad. You see? This hybrid... it’s you.” He gently strokes one of the purple flower buds, trying to coax it to bloom with a kind smile. “I could make clones by grafting it, but I love it being one-of-a-kind. It’s so brave and bold... and beautiful.”

Bucket rolls his eyes.

Andy doesn’t notice Bucket’s discomfort, unaware of the floor beneath her, she forgets all the flora that engulfs her. Her soul only see’s one thing, and that’s *him*.

I’m so stupid.

The single pilot slot... she can’t stop looking at Jasper. Will you resent me if I get it? This is my one chance... to redeem myself. But... Jasper... Her heat pounds wildly in her chest. Andy has spent so many years consumed with the concept of who she wants to be... she never really considered the other half of the equation. Who do I want to end up with?

“You know Andy doesn’t like flowers.” Bucket wedges himself between Andy and Jasper.

“What?” Jasper chuckles.

Bucket puffs his chest. “You don’t know that?”

Jasper scoffs. “Everyone loves flowers.”

“Not everybody.”

“I don’t... dislike them.” Andy interjects.

“Ah, look at that!” Jasper grins, “She likes flowers.”

The boys glare at each other. *Why are they acting like this?* Only inches apart, they square off. Both towering, strong, unstoppable. “Would you two just... knock it off.”

“Knock what off?” Jasper smiles as Bucket fumes.

“I like flowers they’re pretty, alright?”

Jasper smiles. “I think Bucket is just jealous of my Andrea’s Pride.”

“I’m NOT jealous.”

“You can have some cuttings. I could get them started for you.”

“I don’t want your pet plants.”

“It’s therapeutic and with the right rooting hormone- “

“And what rooting hormone are you using Jasper?” Bucket narrows his eyes.

“Organic.”

“You sure? It seems over the last few months the plants aren’t the only thing growing.”

“What are you getting at?” Jasper grumbles, his voice holding back a tint of warning.

Andy steps to the side, letting the boy’s bicker to their heart's content.

“I mean, look at you, since when did you get so big? It’s almost like... you’ve been taking... oh I don’t know...” Bucket steps closer to deliver his final word, “...steroids.”

No way. Andy shakes her head, *if Jasper used performance enhancement drugs, the DOD would kick him out. He’d lose everything. Jasper’s not that dumb. But...* Andy thinks on it, *yet... his body has changed.*

“What can I say?” Jasper obnoxiously flexes his bicep, “puberty.”

“Grow a pair, Jasper.”

“Already did.”

“OH PLEASE!” Andy has had enough. “Stop it. You’re about to become MEN.”

“You’re right,” Bucket backs off. Horrified he let his feelings get the better of him – especially - in front of Andy. “That was immature and inappropriate. I apologize.”

Jasper shrugs, he doesn’t care.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

The eighteen-year-olds freeze. It’s not an unfamiliar sound. But it’s not a normal one either. Panic runs through each pair of eyes as they glance at one another. No one speaks. Andy

feels her messenger, a thin rectangular communication device, vibrate in her pocket. Every colonist is mandated to carry one – for emergencies.

“It’s probably nothing,” Bucket suggests.

Andy nods, “It’s probably just a commander’s call.”

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

Andy jolts at the second wave of beeps. Every time the device goes off it triggers dread in her gut. Is the commander summoning someone to her office? Or is Utoya Air Base under attack? Those are the two options and there’s only one way to know for sure.

Jasper makes the first move and fishes his large hand into the pink apron and pulls out his messenger. “A commander’s call.”

Andy and Bucket let out a sigh. Everyone lives in fear of the day that the Others might invade again. No one speaks of it, but everyone fears the colony wouldn’t survive another large-scale attack.

“Well, that’s good news. I was nervous because of what I saw yesterday in the hospital wing,” Andy says.

“It’s not good news. Andy, the commander’s call...” Jasper hesitates.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

He turns the messenger around so she can see his screen. “... it’s for you.”

Her stomach drops as she reads the text: *Andrea Tanaka, please report to the commander’s office.*

Andrea Tanaka

6 hours, 44 minutes
Until Commissioning

With vivid accuracy Andy recalls the last time she sat in this chair. Small, bandaged, her feet didn’t reach the ground. She had just been released from her hospital stay. The doctors had whispered how lucky she was to be alive. ‘*One step closer to the doors and she’d be dead,*’ they had said. ‘*A terrible, terrible accident,*’ they had said. But Andy knew full well - *It wasn’t an accident. It was her fault.*

All those days staring up at the hospital ceiling grieving the mother she would never know and the father she would never see again led to a punishing numbness. She had no more tears to cry and more importantly – no more will to live. Because she is *a killer*.

And there was only one other person who knew it.

“Andrea.” The commander takes her seat across from her, snapping Andy back to the present. She presses her feet firmly and squarely on the ground. This is *now*; this is *here*. *No more drifting into the past*.

The dead air in the commander’s high office feels oxygen deprived as both women analyze the other. The only sound is the steady drum of a clock. Andy studies the powerful woman, for the first time, she notices the silver hairs streaking through her tight bun. The tired lines etched into her face from years of scowling. Yet, those wolfish gray eyes haven’t changed since childhood; they possess the same steely glare.

Andy bows her head, a cordial display of her respect. “Commander.”

Mrs. Parker taps a finger on her desk, eyes darting up and down, evaluating Andy. The commander’s high office is drab and dark just as Andy remembers it; sunlight stays away from this room. “I bet you are wondering why you are here,” the commander begins.

Yes. Andy sits rigidly in her chair... what did I do this time?

BANG!

Both Andy and the commander turn as the door flies open. Jade enters carrying an armful of papers. “I’ve sorted out the seating arrangements for the-” Jade’s eyes widen when she sees Andy. “Oh.” Her face flushes, “I can...” Some papers flutter from her grasp.

The commander’s face tightens with impatience. Andy watches the dynamic between the supreme leader and her assistant, but simultaneously, the scorn of a mother disappointed with her daughter.

“I can come back...?” Jade suggests, already trying to flee, fumbling for the door handle.

“Put those away and sit quietly, OVER THERE,” the commander growls and points to the darkest corner of her office.

“Yes C...c...Commander.” Jade ducks, a pathetic half-bow before darting to the corner with the filing cabinets. She begins hastily shuffling papers into drawers. Jade doesn’t intend to be loud, but her ruffling drowns out the ticking clock. Andy watches her friend through her peripheral vision, it’s as if she can see Jade’s heart racing inside her chest. Andy knows that both

of their rule-following and obeying has always been ... for approval. An approval the both desperately crave.

The commander coughs violently, clears her throat. "Andrea..." Andy snaps back to attention, giving the commander total focus. "... I heard what happened," Mrs. Parker begins.

Andy's Memory

She knows I killed him. Andy clutches the sides of the metallic chair. *She knows I killed my Daddy.*

"Andrea..." The commander leans forward across her desk, staring at the young child seated before her. "I know what happened..."

She is going to kill me. Andy doesn't cry; she has spent the last few weeks in the hospital waiting for it. Waiting for justice to be delivered. The punishment for murder is *the death penalty*.

"I had personnel investigate the scene in your father's laboratory. They found the cabinet. You left it unlocked?" Andy does not speak as guilt radiates from her. "Did you and my son leave it unlocked when you were playing in there earlier that day?"

At the mention of Jasper, a shred of emotion comes back. Something deep from inside her tummy. She shifts in her seat uncomfortably.

"I'm going to ask you again Andrea and it's very important that you tell me exactly what happened so something like this will never happen again. Do you understand?"

Andy nods.

The commander leans in. "I need to know, Andrea, if it was you and Jasper who left that cabinet open."

That cabinet... of all the cabinets inside her father's lab she had forgotten to close *that one. The flammable one.* Andy thinks back to the game of hide and seek and... the secret passageway... the spiral staircase and... *I wonder if the Commander knows about... that OTHER cabinet.* Andy looks at her leader. *Of course, she does, she is the Commander. She knows everything.*

Andy makes up her mind and for the first time in weeks, she opens her mouth to speak.

Andrea Tanaka

6 hours, 42 minutes
Until Commissioning

Andy grips the chair tightly and presses her shoes firmly into the floor. *Pay attention.*

"I heard you did well in the arena yesterday. The officer in charge gave you high marks. Your training has come a long way at the Academy."

"Huh?" Andy can't believe it. *She's complimenting me?*

"I said Andrea..." The commander raises an eyebrow, "you have come a long way."

Andy tucks her chin in. "Thank you, commander."

"Your father would be proud."

Andy starts to hear ringing in her ears. *'Your father would be proud.'* *Would he?* If her father were alive today, what might he say? What would he think of her?

The commander leans across the desk. "And for the record..." She grabs Andy's hand and offers a gentle squeeze. "I am proud of you too," Andy's heart pounds, she dares not move her hand.

Forgotten, kneeling on the floor in the corner amongst all the files, Jade looks up. She watches her mother squeeze Andy's hand. "Proud of you..." Jade scoffs under her breath. It's a stab to her heart. Jade turns back to the paperwork littering the ground, teeth grinding.

Andy bows her head respectfully, “Thank you, Commander... that is... a very high honor coming from you.”

The commander leans back in her chair and folds her hands together. “That is not all I want to say.”

Andy’s Memory

“I... we didn’t” Andy chokes.

“You didn’t what?” The commander presses.

“Jasper. He... we, it was just a game! We didn’t. Jasper didn’t unlock the cabinet.” Andy looks her dead in the eye, “Because I did... the fire was my fault.” The commander is motionless, says nothing, just stares. Andy nervously fills the empty space with words. “Dad and I were leaving the lab... and he asked me to lock things away and...” Andy trails off.

“And you forgot to lock that cabinet. The one containing explosive materials? Can you not follow instructions? Can you not read?”

A fresh tear falls down Andy’s cheek. The vast nothingness of before is slowly replaced by the overwhelming horror of what she’s done... of what she is.

“I killed him.” Andy confesses.

Andrea Tanaka

6 hours, 40 minutes
Until Commissioning

“I want you to fight for us,” the commander declares. Andy looks at her, *she wants me to fight?* This time Andy isn’t given space to speak. “There was an ambush. I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors by now. I need to know what’s going on beyond the wall. Why are they coming so close to our territory.”

The Others. Andy’s heart skips a beat.

“I have already given the assignment to the officers and an elite team is being put together as we speak. However,”

Andy hangs on her every word. A small fire grows in the pit of her stomach. *Is she really?*

“I want you, Andrea, to join them. You have proven yourself.”

Andy looks at the commander, in shock. *This is it. This is my chance.*

Andy’s Memory

“Perhaps, but Andrea... did you mean to?”

Did I mean to kill my dad?

Andy looks at her leader, “No! No, I didn’t mean to... it was a...”

“An accident?” the commander suggests.

An accident.

“This was without a doubt a terrible accident and don’t think for one second that you are to blame. You are a child. We all make mistakes.” The commander slaps both her hands on the edge of the desk. “But the colony cannot afford any mistake! We lost one of our most valuable scientists due to your negligence! His loss weighs heavy in our hearts and on our community. The world we find ourselves in is unforgiving. Tell me: what do we say?”

“Protect. Serve. Survive.” Andy robotically recites the colony’s creed.

“That’s correct.”

Andy refuses to cry, to show any weakness in front of their great leader.

“You are more than your mistakes, Andrea, but you have to prove it.”

Prove it?

“You want to become a fighter pilot?”

Andy catches her breath. *I do.*

“Then show me you can be one. You may be a bit young, but you may move into the dorms and start training immediately in the Air Force Academy. You can become what you’ve always wanted to be, and we can put this incident behind us. Would you like to do this, Andrea? Can you prove yourself, to me?”

Andy shuffles her feet nervously. *I will make no more mistakes. I will follow the rules. I will be good.* Andy looks up at the commander and for the first time in months, experiences a new feeling, a new direction, a new purpose: hope.

“Yes Ma’am.”

Andrea Tanaka

6 hours, 39 minutes
Until Commissioning

“Yes Ma’am.” Andy nods as a flicker of hope burns inside her chest. She will do what she was born to do. *To protect. To serve. To survive.* This is the moment she’s been waiting for. The reason she’s been training so hard all these years. *I can reclaim my honor.*

“Very good then.” The commander smiles. The room lightens, becomes breathable.

Andy stands and bows. “Thank you, Ma’am, for this opportunity.”

The commander nods. “I am confident you will not make any mistakes.”

Mistakes... no. Never again. Andy turns to leave and grabs the door handle.

“Oh Andy.”

Andy? She pauses. *Using my nickname?* Andy looks over her shoulder. *So informal.* It was strange.

“You will not be going alone,” Ms. Parker concludes. “Your friends will be joining you,”

Jasper.

Her heart skips a beat.

Jade Parker

6 hours, 38 minutes
Until Commissioning

“Ouch!” Jade winces under her breath as a paper cut slices the tip of her thumb. She was listening so intently to their conversation. She wasn’t paying attention to the task at hand. *Jasper and Andy...* Her mother is sending her brother and best friend on a mission beyond the wall. *It’s a death wish.*

Jade sneaks one last peak at Andy as she hovers by the door. There is gratitude on her face. *Pride.* It makes something squirm inside Jade. Andy nods a goodbye to the commander and leaves without acknowledging Jade crouching in the corner, pressing her thumb. *My mother is sending you beyond the wall... She respects you. Or perhaps...?* Jade quickly steals a second glance at her mother, so imposing, so important, behind her big desk. A spark of anger spreads from her thumb to her gut.

... or perhaps she’s hoping you never come back.

Andrea Tanaka

5 hours, 28 minutes
Until Commissioning

The Humvee rolls past the flightline. The hangars drift by one by one. *This is really happening.* Andy is leaving the colony, for the very first time. They pass the last hangar, where ground crew work on the engine of jet number 12. Giddy with excitement she grips a

commission-grade, fully-automatic, M27 assault rifle in her lap. The two other selected cadets match her mood.

“Ah hell yeah! Let’s goooo!” Peter hoots as the looming outer wall and the main steel door of the west gate comes into view.

Yes, this is really happening. Andy smiles.

They are a team of eight, not including the driver and guardsman in front. Second Lieutenant Conrad Tanner, their decorated officer, leads the mission with five veteran fighters - commissioned adults. The older, seasoned men keep to themselves. This is not their first rodeo and is unlikely to be their last. Occasionally, one of them will turn their head with mild amusement, entertained by the rookies in the back.

As for the cadets, it is the three eldest: Andy, Peter, and Jasper. Andy is acutely aware of the fact that Jasper’s leg is touching hers again. She smiles at him and Jasper smiles back. “You excited?” She asks him.

“We’re finally going beyond the wall.” Jasper takes her hand in his and squeezes it with pure joy. “I’ve always wanted to see the Wildlands. I can’t believe that my mother of all people allowed this. Signed off on it.”

True, I can barely believe it myself. “She’s realizing we aren’t little kids anymore. After tonight – legally - we’re adults. She must think we’re finally ready to prove ourselves.”

“Took a million years,” Jasper jokes through his wide grin.

Peter leans in, wanting a part of the conversation. “Who do you think it’s going to be?” he asks them.

“Oh, you mean tonight?” Jasper shrugs, “Who’s really to say?”

Unsatisfied, Peter doesn’t stop there. “Who do you think you’re going to get, Andy? Tell us, who’s on your list?” Peter snickers, this is the dirt he hounds for.

Andy flushes, forgetting all about the mission, about the rattling of the vehicle or the deadly commission-grade guns in their laps. *WHY? Just when I’ve forgotten about the commissioning ceremony for three seconds.*

Peter probes her further. “Did I make your list?” He blows her a sloppy kiss.

“The lists are private, Peter.” Andy jabs back with a kick, “and therefore, none of your concern.”

“Alright, alright.” Peter raises his hands, surrendering with a smirk, “but... you can’t help but wonder now, can you?” He winks.

You insect. Bringing locker room talk here - on our first mission no less.

Peter turns to Jasper, “What about you Big J? Who are your top three ladies?”

Andy grips her gun, suddenly uncomfortable. *Who has he written down?* But then she gives him a playful nudge. “Jasper here hasn’t finished filling out his dream sheet.” Andy teases.

Jasper huffs with a pained smile, “Thanks for the reminder.”

That’s a no then. He hasn’t turned in his top three choices for future spouse. Andy sits back, letting that sink in as the Humvee hits a pothole, rocking her in her seat, her body presses closer to Jasper’s.

“And who is on your list, Peter? Care to share?” Jasper chuckles.

Peter crosses his arms, “Over my dead body, man.” But then he tosses his arm out, annoyed, “Not like there are any good choices! Look around! The male to female ratio is total bug guts!”

“Well,” Jasper groans, “... it’s practically decided for us anyways.”

“Bro, think about it, we know the lineup. Jefferson and Acacia, obviously. That’s a given. That girl is so hot, she is the only ten. Plus, Jefferson and Acacia have for sure listed each other as their number ones.”

The only ten? The passive insult does not go unnoticed by Andy. *So, what am I then? A six?* She avoids thinking about her appearance. There’s nothing she can do about it anyway. But she grimaces. *Maybe... I’m not... likable? My scars. My ears.* Andy bites her lip. *Why do we need to categorize ourselves based on looks? It’s stupid. There is already enough ranking in our lives.* But the damage is done. Her rigid posture drops, suddenly acutely aware of her above-average height. *I’ve never been... normal.*

Peter tosses his hands in the air. “So, who does that leave, huh? Your sister? Andy? That other girl?” He snaps his fingers trying to remember her name. “You know who I’m talking about, the one with the green hair.”

Jasper nods. “I have a strong hunch I’m going to be paired with her.”

This news jolts Andy forward. “London?”

The boys look at her, registering her over-sized reaction. “Yeah.” Jasper tosses his head back. “I can totally see my mother pulling that kind of move. Picking ‘an intellectual prodigy’ as

my match. She's double-enrolled with impressive creds." Jasper looks at Andy, "I wish you could just pick the person you are going to marry the old-fashioned way: with love."

Peter snorts, sounding cheated.

Love. Andy stares at Jasper. *What is it then... physical attraction? Lust? Connection? Is it a fairytale from the past? Did my parents even love each other? Had they specifically chosen each other? Written both of their names down as number one? Or was it decided for them by higher authority? I've never... I mean, what is love... really?* Andy spirals, feeling the presence of a phantom pen in her hand and the clean crisp paper under her fingertips. She had spent a year staring down at that document. The first part of her commissioning package was easy to fill out - her desired job. Bucket reviewed her personal essays for her, explaining why she would make an ideal candidate for the fighter pilot position. It was the only job title she bothered to write down out of her three choices.

But the other half... the spousal paperwork... all she had to do was write down three names. Or at the very least, just one. And yet... every time she had sat down, every time she had picked up the pen. She couldn't decide. She left it blank.

Peter puffs his cheeks. "We don't live in that kind of world, man, and you know it." He sinks back into his seat, resigned to whatever fate lay before them. Jasper leans back too and sighs.

They ride in silence.

"If I had the power to choose." Jasper speaks softly, "To really choose... well then..." He looks far off dreaming of things out of sight. "Think about it. The power of choice. What kind of world we could have. Real freedom. Jade is about to become the next commander; she can write new rules. Our generation will be the ones making all the decisions. We're the ones destined to inherit the world, the WHOLE world. We can be anything."

"We have to survive first, Jasper," she reminds him. But inside she chews on that dangerous and intoxicating idea. *Real freedom?* She wonders about Jasper's 'Andreas's Pride' growing in the greenhouse. *How big could it grow... if it was growing free in the Wildlands?*

"Nah, I'm sick of just surviving." Jasper gets animated, "I want to THRIVE. Forget the rules, this is our one and only life. Why not just... just LIVE it. Create our own way."

Sick of just surviving... Andy ponders the concept. *What would my life look like if I just... lived? If I could make my own rules...* It's hard to conceptualize. Indulgent to even ask herself such a question, yet she can't stop thinking about it.

Jasper looks at her with that goofy smile of his. Confidence, with a side of mischief. "Pondering possibilities?" He playfully bumps her shoulder. That feeling creeps up in her. The unrecognizable emotion that's been festering for months, maybe years. "Contemplating real freedom?" He leans in close, "Wondering what you would do with yourself if you didn't have to follow all the rules?"

It's treason to think this. Andy looks away, her face hot. *Why does he have to look at me like that?*

They pass under the west gate. *Focus! You are here to prove yourself. Pay attention.* Andy's whole-body vibrates with nerves. *We're outside the wall.*

The Humvee and its passengers silence themselves as they leave the protection of the colony. Wheels bumping along unmaintained dirt roads that snake into enemy territory. The veteran soldiers tense. Andy angles her neck to look out the back window, as the large, reinforced steel gates close behind them. She feels a temperature difference, a sudden darkness as the sky disappears above, hidden behind 300-foot-tall trees.

Peter lightens the mood using his hands to shoot a finger gun. He imitates getting shot, killing the enemy, and winks. The camaraderie of: *we got this.*

Andy nods to Peter, but it's Jasper's voice in her ear that fills her soul with fire. "I'm glad I have you, Andy."

Andy smiles, a real smile, "I couldn't imagine doing this without you, Jasper."

He nods, "it's me and you. Always."

Andrea Tanaka

4 hours, 58 minutes
Until Commissioning

"We're here." Conrad grabs his gun.

Andy picks up her M27 and hops out the back of the Humvee. Her steeled-toed boots hit earth, she's surprised how uneven and soft the ground is. She doesn't have time to think about squishy mud as the men unload, rifles out and ready. "We are missing grenades." one of the soldier grunts, rummaging in the back of the truck bed.

Conrad ignores him, "We have what we have." He looks at the rest of the men, "Now... John and his men were ambushed yesterday about a quarter mile from here. Stick together and follow behind me."

They fall into a single file line. As the lowest rank Andy and Jasper take the rear with Peter falling in line in front of them. Andy steals one last look at the Humvee parked at the end of the dirt road. The driver and guardsman stand ready to make a hasty exit. She focuses forward, on slugging her feet through the dense vegetation as the men in front of her disappear one-by-one under the thick veil of plants. There's a darkness in this forest. Unlike the cartoonish greens of training area 13 and the colorful rainbows of Jasper's greenhouse. No, there's something sinister about the hungry shadows of the jungle.

No going back now. Andy allows herself to be consumed by darkness.

Military boots pad along the forest floor, each step placed with delicacy. They move swiftly, Andy, overwhelmed, finds it hard to breath the humid over-oxygenated air. A different world, an inhuman realm. *We don't belong here.*

They march. Heads low. Eyes swiveling. Dappled sunlight dances across the muzzle of her assault rifle that's loaded and ready to fire. Complex sounds filter in through the understory, a concoction of creatures. Chirping, thrilling, humming. *What's in here?* She can't deny that the rainforest is most certainly... alive.

Did Dr. Kate Tanaka feel this out of place?

She wonders about her biologist mother. How did she react entering this new world for the first time? A pang of guilt squeezes her chest, *the Other's killed her.* Andy inhales. *Focus. Pay attention to the familiar.* The only thing familiar in her line of sight is Jasper.

He holds back a green branch for Andy to step around and scans the forest ahead, ears listening, eyes watching. The filtered light dances across his dark skin. No longer shirtless he wears the proper camouflaged combat gear. *Thank goodness.* Andy smiles to herself. Their officer would have chewed him out otherwise. Yet Andy finds herself missing the familiar sight

of the muscles that outline his back. His contours are still defined through the camo, with tense bulges and creases. Coiled up, ready to spring at a moment's notice.

"Look." Jasper lowers his gun.

Andy anxiously checks for danger, but instead, an enormous dinner-plate-sized butterfly flutters through the canopy above. Its majestic blue wings glitter through beams of sunlight. Batcat swishes his tail along her back, fascinated. Jasper too stares in awe.

"C'mon." Andy nudges him to keep moving. *We don't want to get left behind.*

The group travels through the thickets until they lower themselves to a crouch. All eyes, locked onto their officer as they gather round. "We're five minutes out," Conrad whispers in a hushed tone.

Five minutes out from where John and his men were ambushed... Andy swallows.

"You three," Conrad points to the cadets, "hang back, hold our exit. The rest of you, follow me. Reconnaissance, I repeat reconnaissance. Do not engage." All the soldiers nod in unison. *Understood.*

Andy watches with a sudden flare of nerves as the older men spread out and vanish from sight, leaving Peter, Jasper, and Andy all alone. The three eighteen-year-olds eye one other. *This is it. Show time.*

Andy cocks her gun and scans the greenery, Jasper and Peter do the same beside her.

No mistakes. She silently reminds herself trying to steady her heartbeat. Intermittently checking on her comrades. The minutes tick by. Andy listens. Breathes. Watches. Everything seems like a threat. A leaf fluttering to the forest floor, the click-click-buzzing of some oversized insect thrumming nearby, and most unnerving? The spasming movements of wind playing with the foliage, teasing her with their sudden jerks. In fact, she is so acutely focused on her surroundings she doesn't hear his whisper.

"Pssst. Andy. Hey Andrea... psst."

Andy turns, taking a calculated step back to Jasper, gun at the ready. "What is it, do you see something?" She whispers.

"No. We're going to fan out."

"What?" Andy hisses under her breath, "We need to stay here, together."

Jasper smiles his don't-worry smile, "We need to check if this area is free, remember? Secure our exit."

Peter takes that as his cue to leave, dipping into the undergrowth. Jasper heads out next but Andy grabs his arm. “Don’t be an idiot.”

He chuckles, “Come on... Insanity is part of the paycheck.”

“Shit.” Andy curses under her breath before following the boys deeper into the jungle.

Andrea Tanaka

4 hours, 50 minutes
Until Commissioning

She’s heard the stories. Adults whispering amongst themselves in the commissary. Veterans murmuring as they shuffle about the corridors. Scars left behind from the day of The Infestation. The toxic fear of when they might strike next. *The Others. The Bug People. The Blue-blooded devils.*

Her species: *Homo Homo Sapien.*

And their species: *Homo Homo Ceterus.*

Despite all the speculation, they remain a complete mystery. How their societies work. How many there are. What they want. Andy knew the mecca from which they originate her people call *the hive*, it’s location unknown. Even their faces remain unseen, hidden behind thick exoskeleton armor. Some people really believe they are insects. But Andy knows better. They’re hominids. It what makes them so scary – because they can think.

We should turn around. They’ve gone too far. Andy’s sure of it. She scans the underbrush; a sinking sensation settles in her stomach. *It all looks the same!* She does a double take. That tree, and that tree, and that tree over there. *It all looks the same! But how can that be? We can’t have moved more than fifty feet.*

Each step feels like a deeper betrayal to her people, to the mission, to their very survival.

“Jasper, we need to turn around.” Andy’s not joking.

“Look.” His hushed tone doesn’t conceal his surprise as he drops to the ground. Peter, barely visible in the dense thicket quietly drops to the ground beside him. The boys point their

guns ahead. Andy doesn't hesitate and slides in beside them, rifle ready. Materializing before her are the stories she's heard her whole life.

We found them.

The forest is being kept at bay by a small clearing with intricate dwellings clustered in the middle. The dwellings have been skillfully twined together with complicated interweaving's of vines, branches, and leaves. Freshly constructed, the ground recently cleared. Its new.

An establishment.

Smiling Peter playfully takes aims at the encampment with a silent finger gun. He fakes fire. Andy glares at him; *this is not the time to mess around!* Yet, despite herself, she looks onward with suspicion, this is the closest she has ever been to *the Others*.

Voices - there, emerging from one of the dwellings comes a figure. Andy holds her breath, finger on the trigger. *A female*. Taller than the average human, her body is covered in thick metallic insect scales. Her elongated ears protrude from her face covering, a black mask, fashioned out of the single eye of a *magni dynastinea* - the giant rhinoceros beetle.

Those large, curved ears whip around, scanning her surroundings. *If we move just one muscle, she will hear us.*

But there is one other important discovery about this Other, *this woman*: she's pregnant. A muzzle of a gun comes into Andy's peripheral, and she looks to her side, Peter has his gun cocked and ready.

"Don't. Shoot. Peter." Andy hushes in the quietest and yet most pragmatic tone she can muster.

"The target is right there," Peter mutters. He places a hand on the trigger. Andy looks at Jasper for assistance, but he stares onward, mission-focused, eyes locked ahead.

"Reconnaissance." Andy whispers to the boys. *I shouldn't have to remind them!*

The hair on the back of Andy's neck rises. Her ears tingle. She senses it before she understands it. *MOVE!*

Andy picks herself up and whips the gun around. Materializing out of the jungle a large male pounces from the treetops! The three cadets scramble backward spilling out into the open.

"Bugging hell!" Peter screams, firing bullets. BAM! BAM! BAM! Ammunition rain down on the greenery. The male disappears as quickly as he appeared. "Shit!" Peter yells. The

three cadets swing their guns, Andy anxiously checks all around. Caught in the open, they've been discovered.

"Incoming!" Jasper shouts.

All at once, the enemy descends from the sky and emerges from behind dwellings. Four giant dragonflies swarm from above, their riders wear the giant winged insects like backpacks, their torsos wrapped up by the dragonflies' front legs, their feet clasped by the pinchers at the end of the dragonfly's tail. Arms free to fire their poison-tipped arrows, which they let loose upon them as they fly over.

Jasper pushes Andy out of the way just as a poison tipped projectile careens at her, missing her shoulder by millimeters.

WOOSH! WOOSH! Andy dodges more arrows. Getting up on one knee she locks her gun, finger at the trigger, yet hesitates, unable to pull. To aim. *To kill.*

I don't want to make any more mistakes...

BAM! BAM! one down, two down, Jasper fires at their targets as they swarm, "ANDY!" More bug armored warriors emerge on foot, cornering them in. Spears javelin straight for them. "ANDY, NOW!" He screams.

Protect, Serve, Survive.

Andy steadies herself, levels the gun. She does not think, only reacts. The sounds stop. The motions slow and she pulls the trigger. A dragon rider flies above her. BAM! *Dead.* Andy pivots as another spear-clad warrior approaches from behind. She takes aim, BAM! *Dead.*

She is a good shot, always has been.

She is a good soldier, always has been.

What are you made of Andy? Her father's voice whispers to her above the deafening sound of her own artillery.

She stands back-to-back with Jasper, breathing hard. They are surrounded by maybe seven bloody bodies, their blue blood oozes into the tropical red soil. Some of their bug wings flicker in the final stages of death.

A war cry rings out overhead.

"Shit!" Jasper cusses as a second wave of warriors descend on them.

“Take cover!” Andy screams as spears strike the ground where they’re standing. Andy grabs Jasper's arm and they fling themselves behind the protection of a woven wall. THUNK! THUNK! Arrows strike though the wood at their backs.

“There’s too many of them!” Jasper huffs and reloads his M27.

“Where’s Peter?” Andy looks around.

Jasper scans too, “I don’t see him.”

A flurry of gunfire pops up behind a rock nearby. “There,” Andy points.

The two breathe in relief as Peter's bullets pelt the enemy. A horrid screech from a dragonfly pierces the air as gunfire enters the creature's screeching fanged filled mouth.

“I can’t do this.”

“What?” Andy looks at Jasper.

Jasper shuts his eyes tight. “I’m not strong enough.” He whimpers.

“Look at me.” Andy grabs his face. “You are strong.”

“I’m not.” The fear in his eyes kills her.

“You are.”

An arrow nearly impales his head through the wood. “No! I’ve always been weak.”

He hated being scrawny as a kid. But we aren’t little kids anymore. “Do not give up.”

She grabs hold of his arm. “That’s what being strong is.” She looks him dead in the eye, “and you, Jasper Parker, never give up.” He looks at her, wipes his tears away, a desperate rawness in his sky-blue eyes. “That’s who you are, Jasper. It's who you’ve always been. That’s why...” she stumbles, her heart racing.

That’s why...

“That’s why what?” He blinks.

Her mouth is open, but her words escape her. They are so close... she can smell the salt of his tears. *Say something!* She gives his hand a squeeze, “That’s why I respect you so much.”

Jasper nods, a thank you, and gathers his courage, “On the count of three then?”

Andy nods. They silently count, *one... two... three.*

Jasper and Andy leap from their hiding spot, guns out, take aim, and spray bullets into their insect-armored opponents.

“Three a-clock!” Jasper yells.

“I see ‘em!” Andy shoots the target.

“PETER!” Jasper yells as he hits a blade-wielding warrior with the butt of his gun. “Over here!”

“Coming!” Peter leaps from his cover, firing at another dragon rider.

SHANK!

Andy freezes.

No.

Peter’s assault rifle drops from his arms as a spear slices through his skull. His body falls forward. Skewered into the ground.

“NO!” Andy yells. She spins around to face the attacker. The pregnant female. BAM! Andy watches her stagger backward, shot right through her chest, BAM! Again, through her abdomen. BAM! Through her forehead. Bullets penetrate armor, reaching flesh. Andy watches as Jasper guns her down. BAM! BAM! BAM! Tears spill from his eyes, as blue blood oozes from the female’s body into the dirt.

“Jasper, she’s dead.” Andy holds out a hand to stop him from firing more rounds. She takes a moment to scan the blood-soaked earth around them. “They’re all dead.”

He swings the rifle around, unsatisfied, needing to check for himself.

“These INSECTS!” He growls. “They got Peter!” He drops to the ground to inspect their fallen comrade. The spear’s venom slowly turns Peter’s body black.

“Don’t touch him.” It’s hard for her to look. Hard to quantify his killing.

Jasper wipes the tears away. Peter was their childhood friend. Same age, same class. Third generation born into this world. He was supposed to commission tonight and yet here he lies bleeding across the ground. His whole life snatched away in a single second. Andy knees forget to support her as she sinks to the ground beside the body.

“These... *insects*, killed him.” Jasper hisses. He punches the ground “They killed my Dad. They killed your mom. They’re killing us all, Andy.” A wisp of motion interrupts them. A flutter of movement inside one of the dwellings. Jasper grabs his gun and carefully steps over Peter’s impaled body. Andy rises. The two cadets enter the hut, guns raised.

“AKKKhhh!” A figure lunges with a knife. BAM! BAM! BAM! Four more bodies crumble under the shots fired by Andy and Jasper.

Stillness resumes. Bodies lay motionless on the floor. Andy lowers her gun. *That's the last of them.* "It's over," Andy declares. Jasper huffs, unable to stifle his rage. Andy looks at him. "It's OVER Jasper."

Jasper lowers his gun but gives her a new look, one she has never seen on her friend's face before, one she can't even name. "You know it's not over." With that, he turns and steps out of the hut, leaving Andy alone with the bodies of the Others. She wants to crouch down, to peel back the layers of insect skin. To gaze upon the face of her enemy, to see what's really under all that armor. But she doesn't want their diseases. Protocol says don't touch - leave them where they lay.

She prepares to step out of the hut when something rustles behind her.

Andrea Tanaka

4 hours, 4 minutes
Until Commissioning

Andy raises her gun.

A juvenile.

It's just given itself away. The small creature hisses at her, popping its bug-eyed head out from beneath woven matts. Andy aims.

"Andy," Jasper calls from outside, unaware of the confrontation unfolding inside the dwelling.

Andy doesn't take her eyes off the creature. It hisses at her again.

Footsteps approach, the rest of her team no doubt, the veteran soldiers emerging from their hiding spots in the forest. She can hear Conrad's congratulatory pat on the back, "Well done Jasper. Tanaka, come on out here."

But the juvenile. What should I do with it?

Andy looks back ... but it's *gone*, a rip in the back of the hut. *It got away.*

"Damnit." Andy curses to herself. *Why didn't I just shoot it when I had the chance? I was weak.*

Andy lowers her gun and exits the dwelling. Sure enough, the other men have arrived. Jasper gives her a look. They have gathered around Peter's body.

"A fallen hero." One of the soldiers begins, "may he be remembered."

"May he be remembered." They all bow their heads in a moment of silence.

Andy feels Jasper take hold of her hand and give it a small comforting squeeze and only then does it really strike her, so obvious and clear.

My dream sheet... why did I never write your name down?

Jade Parker

3 hours, 49 minutes
Until Commissioning

I swear. Jade pushes her unruly hair out of her eyes. *I should just chop it all off!*

Jade drags her feet, dutifully conducting her twelfth trip from The Great Hall to her mother's high office. Every detail for the ceremony is finally *finished*. She just needs to report that everything's ready for the ceremony tonight, and just in time too. Jade has some last-minute touch-ups to the red dress she's making. She's anxious to get finish it.

Jade braces herself. *She better not assign me one more meaningless task.* Jade takes the staircase to the ninth floor, two steps at a time.

When I'm commander I'll redecorate the office. Clean, bright, modern. I can have children paint me something to decorate the walls. That will send a great message that I am of and for the people. She snickers. *Children's art is so ugly it will brighten my days.*

The people would be fools to not love me. I will do a better job than my mother. Because I would CARE.

Jade pushes the last door open and enters the top floor of the commander's high tower. Out of habit she hastens her pace. Perpetually in a rush, no matter what the present circumstances.

Oh! Jade comes to a stop. *Oh...*

A dreaded warmth spreads out between her legs. "No!" she scoffs under her breath. *Not now!* Jade awkwardly fumbles with the boxes she's carrying. *There's only one bathroom on the*

top floor. And it's exclusively used by her mother for all other female personnel are too scared to use it. Jade sets down her boxes neatly along the hallway wall and hurries toward the restroom. *I'll be quick. She will never know I was here.*

Jade pulls the door open, it's empty. A dreadful thought makes her stutter. *A counselor was brutally murdered in a restroom.* The vision of Patricia Wu's mutilated body slumped in the shower stall comes to mind. The bloody warning written across the tiles. But the wet warmth worsens. Jade dips into the furthest stall and quietly shuts the door. She quickly shimmies her handmade skirt down to her knees and sits on the cold porcelain toilet. The smell of blood fills the tight space. It drips everywhere. She shudders. *Cursed periods.* She turns and looks to her side.

Fuck.

No toilet paper. She inhales, *Calm. Be calm.*

The bathroom door creaks open slowly. Jade holds her breath as someone enters. Heavy footsteps and squeaky wheels. And a stench, a rotting of internal organs. She gags and holds her breath. *Who is that?* The new person opens the stall next to hers. Jade listens as the toilet flushes and a scrubbing sound scrapes the insides of the toilet bowl.

Garret. Her stomach drops. *The Janitor.*

Jade thinks back to what Andy told her that morning... about the janitor's cart being at the crime scene in the woman's academy restroom and how Andy saw her mother lingering outside the janitor's storage closet in the dead of the night.

Jade grits her teeth. *It's... coincidence.* Jade scans the stall, searching for something she could use as a weapon. *Just in case...* Jade inhales, listening to the man scrubbing in the stall next to hers. He is probably going to come clean her stall next. *What do I do?*

Garret stops scrubbing, he shuts the stall door and locks himself inside.

He's hiding? Why?

A second set of furious footsteps enters the bathroom. Heels striking tile. The mightiness of it. The pretentiousness. The way she carries herself, is unmistakable.

Mother.

The commander's feet come to the foot of Jade's stall. "I know you're in there." Mrs. Parker hisses, stifling a cough. Hands pressed over her mouth; Jade doesn't let out a sound. She

sits knees pressed together, embarrassed, vulnerable. Bleeding from between her legs. Jade finally unfolds her hands from her mouth.

“Just doing my job Ma’am,” The janitor mumbles in the stall next to hers.

“Garret, my restroom is perfectly clean, no one but I uses it,” the commander states, irritated. “Do you wish to speak with me? You know every civilian must schedule a one-on-one appointment. Sign up for the waiting list and escort yourself out - immediately.”

Jade listens closely as Garret unlatches the lock from the stall next to hers, pushing his cleaning cart out with him. “You’re right, you’re the only one who uses this space. It’s a perfect place to chat. You know perfectly well why I’m here, Commander.” Jade can hear the smirk in his voice.

“Is that so?”

What the hell is going on? Jade watches the two pairs of shoes square off with one another below the lip of her stall. A pair of dirty slacks full of holes and the pair of polished black leather boots with hard rubber heels.

“You know what I want, and I have something you want.”

“Enlighten me, Garret. What is it that I want?”

“Information.”

“Is that so?”

“I can give you the details, if you give me what I want.”

A moment passes as the commander considers. “So then, tell me: what is it that you want?”

“I want to commission again. Tonight. With this new class. Promote me as head of the science department. Make me your new counselor. And... I want a wife. I’m done being single and I am done scrubbing shit off toilets.”

What is he talking about?

“We’ve talked about this.” The commander’s sighs, growing increasingly annoyed. “You know exactly why you are in the position that you are in.”

“Well, you don’t know what I am about to tell you! The information I have.”

Jade holds her breath.

“May I remind you of the opportunity I’ve already given you? What I’ve pardoned you for?”

Pardoned him? For what?

“I spared you from the death penalty. You’ve already been given a second chance. You don’t deserve a third.”

Garret’s fist slams into Jades door, rattling it loudly. “It was that danm KIDS Fault and I’m fucking done being punished for messes I never made in the first place.”

The commander isn’t having it, “please, see yourself out this instant.”

Jade holds her breath.

“I’m an innocent man! But you already know that...” Garret jabs, “makes me wonder though... who else have you killed?”

Wait. What? Who else have you KILLED?

“Get out,” the commander orders.

Fuck it; I’m not scared anymore. Jade pulls up her skirt and swings her stall door wide open, she cruises out. Not caring if her menstrual blood is soaking through her skirt. Her mother stands in mute horror at the sight of her. Garret hovers over his cleaning cart with the same surprise. Neither knew she was there.

Jade idles in their shock, taking her sweet time to glare at them both. She lets her smoldering eyes burn a hole in her mother. “That stall is out of toilet paper.” Jade helps herself to a fresh roll from Garret’s cart. “Mother, I came to inform you that all the preparations for tonight are complete and presently, there is nothing more I can do for you.”

She leaves them both, with nothing but the shock on their faces. She catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror as she departs the bathroom, her curly locks bouncing girlishly behind her.

I should shave my head.

Andrea Tanaka

3 hours, 42 minutes
Until Commissioning

Jasper’s head hangs heavy. The Humvee rattles back through the west gate, returning to the protected confines inside the wall. The large steel doors automatically close shut behind them. Andy doesn’t want to look down, but she does. Peter’s body, wrapped in a spare tarp, lays

slumped at their feet. His lifeless head wobbles with every bounce on the road as they switch from mud to gravel. No more locker room gossip. No more teasing. No more smiles.

He's gone.

Andy doesn't allow herself to cry. Not here, not in front of the older soldiers. Not in front of Jasper, who stares wordlessly next to her, his thigh pressed into hers. Of all the disturbing thoughts that pass through her, one stands out as strikingly perverse: *If Peter's dead, then... that's one less person in the matchmaking pool tonight.*

Andy tries to focus on the present but can't stop replaying the nightmarish moments from their confrontation with the Others. She closes her eyes and watches each one of her bullets strike targets... living targets. Not paint-filled balloons or plywood cutouts. Not rubber bullets hitting cadets painted green. *I killed a lot of people today... if you can even call them people.* She lingers on her one mistake. *The juvenile... I let him go.*

Why are they so close? She bites her lip. What are they planning?

The war has raged since her birth. Each side slowly picking the other apart. A punch for a punch. But the day of the Infestation was different. It had begun like any other day – or so she had been told – Andy has no memory of it. A thousand dragon riders stormed the outer wall, overwhelming their defenses. They swarmed, slaughtering everyone in their path. If it hadn't been for their fighter jets, and their grit, humanity would have lost that day.

Only minor attacks have occurred since. Exoskeleton-clad warriors picking off any colonists who wandered beyond the walls. An unspoken agreement between the two species: stick to your side of the wall. Their territory encompasses all the Wildlands domineered by swampy lowland flood plains and the towering northern mountains. If they have all that space, all that land, all those resources. *Why are they coming so close?*

“We're here.” Conrad stands.

Already?

Andy looks up, sure enough, the Humvee has made it home to the loading docks. Jasper wordlessly stands and exits. Andy follows suit, careful not to step on the body destined for the incinerator.

Jasper waits for more orders from their officer, Andy does the same. Conrad sticks his head out from the vehicle. “Parker. Tanaka. You two are dismissed.”

He's sympathetic - doesn't want us unloading the body. “You're sure, sir?” Andy asks.

“Yes, go. Get ready for tonight.” He nods politely to them both, “you’ve done enough for today.”

“HEY!”

Jasper and Andy turn as Jade runs up to them. Her eyes are wild with adrenaline. “What is it?” Andy asks as Jade draws to a dramatic halt before them.

She grabs both of their arms, pulling them in closer, “I need to talk to you two,” she whispers urgently.

Andy and Jasper glance over their shoulders as the trio wordlessly heads to a more private corner away from the other soldiers who busy themselves with the body. “What is it?” Jasper whispers, there’s concern in his voice, a certain protectiveness found only in a brother. Andy studies him, it’s the first time he’s spoken since the battle. *Since the death.*

“It’s... well...” Jade begins as if she can’t quite decide where to begin. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

“I agree.” Andy nods. “Something’s wrong. Doesn’t feel right.”

“What’s wrong?” Jasper asks bluntly, clearly not on the same page as the girls.

“It’s our mother,” Jade whispers. “She’s done something. Something bad.”

“Done what?” Jasper asks.

Batcat hisses a warning from Andy’s shoulder as the Commander enters the loading dock. “Speak of the devil herself,” Andy mutters.

The commander enters, heels clicking across concrete. Jade snatches Andy’s wrist with her small hand and gives it a tight squeeze. “She’s up to something,” Jade whispers. The commander passes the three of them, barely regarding the teenager’s existence before positioning herself in front of the Humvee as three men lower Peter’s body on a gurney.

“A casualty?” The commander asks.

Conrad nods.

Jade’s mouth falls open noticing the body bag for the first time, “Who?”

Unable to say his name. Jasper just shakes his head and leaves, crestfallen. Jade and Andy watch him sulk, lingering by the doorway in an weak attempt to hide his tears.

“No.” Jade’s horrified. “Peter?”

Andy nods. Tongue tied as well.

“Prepare the body for cremation.” The commander waves her hand dismissively, turns on a heel and strides past them once more. This time her stare lingers, specifically, on Andy.

Batcat hisses, fangs bared.

“You did good, Andrea. You proved yourself.” The commander says in passing, her comment accompanied with a rare smile. Out of conditioning, Andy bows respectfully, a proper, submissive bow. Yet discomfort squirms in her gut.

Jade watches her mother turn her back on them. “She didn’t even acknowledge me.” Jade mutters. Realizing she said that aloud Jade wraps her hands over her mouth and turns to Andy. “Andy, my mom’s hiding something. Tell me: what did you and Jasper see that day... down that staircase.”

Andy is shocked to hear her ask that. “Why?”

“It feels connected. Somehow.” Jade insists.

“You three!” The commander calls out. “Go prepare for tonight.”

The commissioning ceremony. Andy’s hands clench. *There’s not much time left.*

Jasper dips out without a goodbye.

Jade squeezes Andy’s hand again and whispers. “Tell me later what you really saw, and I will tell you what I know.” She leans into Andy’s ear, “I’m just... I’m sorry Andy.”

Sorry for what? Andy wonders. But then she remembers what. Peter. *Sorry for my loss.*

She looks over at the lifeless body being carted off to be incinerated.

Andrea Tanaka

2 hours, 30 minutes
Until Commissioning

Is it too late to change my mind?

Her feet slowly drag her home. Back to her dorm room in the barracks. She must clean up, get dressed, get ready. But she doesn’t want to. She wants time to stop for a moment. Pause just for her. She’s not ready for... *Adulthood.*

So, when she comes across the old woman with the long, white hair, she stops. *Maybe Jasper prediction is true... maybe you are a first gen.* Andy watches the artist, sitting peacefully

on her mess matt beside her palette of oil paints. She's ancient: a remarkable feat considering the length of the war and all the violence. *I wonder what she's seen.* The old woman mixes her paints. Dipping various sized brushes into different cans of pigment, delicately combining colors together, and then, as if by magic, she gently sculpts brushstroke by brushstroke the likeness of Peter onto the Wall of Remembrance.

Andy says nothing, there's nothing to say. She doesn't want to interrupt the old woman's process.

It happened so fast. Preparing the body for transport, gathering intelligence from the dwellings. The more Andy had seen of the area, only one word fit: *A village.* She didn't dare tell her team about the juvenile who slipped out from under her. Searching the jungle was futile. It was long gone. So as quietly and quickly as they came, they dispatched back to Utoya Air Base. Not everyone comes back, not everyone survives. It's the risk you take for being alive. Death can come to anyone, at any time.

Andy looks over the mural. Many more faces have been added since her childhood. Dozens of individuals who met untimely fates, most at the hands of the Others. Two portraits are missing: John Wiseman and Patricia Wu. *Maybe they will be added once their deaths have been solved... but who killed them?*

Andy thinks about the commander's passing words, that strange approving smile, "*You did good, Andrea.*" Andy has done it, *proven herself.*

Hopefully it will enhance her positioning tonight.

But Jade's concern rises in Andy's mind. The commander. This individual who controls her life. The woman capable of anything. *The commander is not a killer.* Andy shivers, *I am.* But what does the girl in the glass, have to do with it? Surely, that is what Jade really wants to know.

What I found.

Andy slowly walks along the mural. She looks at the faces, some she recognizes, some she does not, and stops. Embarrassed from last night. How often does she pass by? Too afraid to sacrifice a moment to stand here and remember. To look them in the eyes. But right now, in her final moments of adolescence, it feels important to do so. To reconcile with her childhood. And more than that... she wants someone to talk to, someone who really understands her.

Hello Dad.

She looks at the portrait of her father beside her mother. Her same shining, smiling eyes forever entombed onto the wall. And his, intelligent and calculating. Andy stares at her parents, a blend of emotions swirl inside, threatening to escape.

I went on my first mission today. Yes, off-base. It wasn't perfect but... we eliminated a threat on the border. Andy shuffles her feet gathering strength to continue her internal monologue. *I'm commissioning tonight. I'm hoping to be assigned to the only pilot slot. But nothing's guaranteed, is it?* She looks into her mother's shining eyes, then her father's steady ones. She wishes they could say something, anything. She feels so... lost.

"Whispers on the wind. I hear them."

Andy turns to the ancient artist as she dabs highlights into Peter's eyes; the finishing touches. The old woman sports a wicked toothy grin.

"Excuse me?" Andy asks.

"They're not gone, love." The artist winks.

Ah, right... yes, Andy's eyes flatten. *They live on through me and here I stand... still surviving.* "May they be remembered," Andy states. The phrase hits a little harder than usual.

"May they be remembered." The old woman smiles again.

The fresh scent from Peter's wet eyes follows Andy as she leaves her childhood behind to dry up like the paint on the wall.

Jasper Parker

2 hours, 18 minutes
Until Commissioning

Jasper sits and let's go of his anger.

He looks around his dorm room at the mess he made. Torn canvas, broken ceramics, bedsheets ripped from the mattress all flung in a fit of despair. *I was not strong enough to save him.* Jasper fights the tears that threaten to come. Again, and again the sound of Peter getting impaled fills his eardrums, which drown out the sound of his pounding heart.

I'm not strong enough.

He tosses his head into his hands and forces himself to breathe, to dig deep and find his core. Inhaling, he pulls his head out of his hands and looks to his dresser. A sharp black suit waits for him. The future he was promised. *I'm not that little kid anymore.* Carefully, gently, he begins to fix the wrongs of his room. Placing spilled pencils back onto his desk, putting sketchbooks back in order, he settles his troubled soul with a single thought. *I'm not weak anymore.*

He picks up his commissioning package, so carelessly dropped to the carpet, his fingertips slide across the envelope feeling the weight of the papers inside. The heaviness of the choices he never turned in. *My dream sheet.*

Jasper selects a favorite drawing pen. Whose crispy ballpoint tip he saves for only the finest of details. Carefully, he opens the folder, pulling out the last sheet of paper: the spousal document with its three nameless slots.

He writes a name down.

I hope it's not too late.

Andrea Tanaka

2 hours, 18 minutes
Until Commissioning

I wonder what twelve-year-old will get my room

Andy passes doors in the dormitory's long hallway. Each room filled with the colony's youth. Tonight, seven rooms will be cleared out. Batcat flies before her but stops at Jasper's door. His ears pick up on a scribbling sound coming from inside. Andy comes to a stop. *I should check on him. After what happened...* She raises a hand to knock. *...I should see if he's alright.*

Yet her hand hesitates, hovering just above the door. *Maybe he doesn't want me...* she lowers her fist. *Maybe he wants to be alone.* She whistles to her feline, "Come Batcat."

"Mew." Batcat waddles down the hall and sits patiently, tail flicking, at the foot of their door. Andy turns the knob and enters. She shuts her door and releases a big sigh. She's alone now with nothing but her worries.

"Mew!" Batcat announces like he's found something.

“What?”

The cat emerges from under the bed, tail flicking with disapproval. Andy ignores him, not sure what he is upset about and heads to the dresser, with a pull she opens a drawer.

Batcat hisses angrily.

“I’m with you their bud, this...” Andy pulls out the hideous frilly yellow dress she’s been issued to wear. “...is rather unfortunate.”

Jade Parker

2 hours, 18 minutes
Until Commissioning

I’ve worked so hard for this.

Jade sits on her bed, legs neatly folded under her, it's the finishing touches and she doesn't have one second to spare. Weaving her needle up and down, she sashays the dress together. Tightening the last strands, cleaning up the loose ends she hems it to masterful perfection.

“It’s finished!” Smiling Jade holds up the red ballgown, the silky fabric glistens under the florescent lights of her dorm room. A knock beckons at her door. “Come in!” she calls cheerfully. When the door swings open Jade catches her breath and shoves the dress behind her as a ripple of dread streaks up her spine.

Mother.

“Jade,” The commander nods to her at the foot of her doorway.

Jade holds still as her mother shuts the door behind her and enters her room. *What do you want?* Jade’s blood boils. She looks at this woman, the one responsible for giving birth to her, yet also the one with the power to end her life. *I know what you are...*

“I brought you this.” Her mother presents a box of menstrual pads.

Jade looks at it, shocked. An uncharacteristic motherly gesture.

“I prefer tampons.”

The two stand still for a moment, not knowing what to say. Finally, with shifting feet, the commander speaks. “I know a relationship between a mother and daughter can be...” her voice is strained, pained even. She sucks in her breath. “Complicated, at best. But I wanted to speak with you.” The commander places the box of menstrual pads next to Jade on the bed.

“Okay?” Jade’s heart skips a beat.

“I want...” the commander falters again, “I want to congratulate you in private for all the work you have done for me these last few years. Having your assistance has been... welcomed.”

She is trying... isn't she? It's painful as hell, but... are you thanking me for my service? Jade reaches for the box turning it over in her hands skeptically. *Is it possible? Is it possible that she came here tonight... to tell me...?*

They linger in a heavy silence. The commander gazes at her, fidgeting with something else in her hands.

Jade jumps in to fill the void with something – anything - to end the awkwardness. “I appreciate that.” *But this doesn't change what I now know about you.*

Mrs. Parker nods. “I have something else for you. Something my mother gave to me the night before I commissioned.” She seems tired now, aged, the gray hairs overpopulating the black strands that had once dominated her scalp.

She has never talked about her mother before. Jade’s thoughts hum at the sudden realization that she’s never once wondered about her mother being 18 and commissioning. Someone who was once a teenager with her own mother.

The commander opens her palm, in it appears a small red stone pendant attached to a simple yet elegant gold chain. “I named you and your brother after stones for their strength. In tradition with my mother naming me after this stone. It’s a ruby. It belonged to your grandmother who was gifted it by her own mother.” The commander hands over the ruby necklace. “I thought you might like it and that your maternal ancestors would approve.”

Jade extends a hand, feels the weight of the necklace as it falls into her palm. “May they be remembered.”

“May they be remembered,” Mrs. Parker nods.

Does she love me? “Thank... you.” Jade tries not to choke.

“Would you like... help... putting it on?” Her mother asks.

Jade turns around, letting her mother's hands access her neck, the cold gold chain, its blood red stone hangs over her collar bone. Jade realizes she can't remember the last time her mother touched her. *Had she ever?* She fights the urge to turn around and pull the woman into an embrace. "There." Her mother pulls back. Jade looks down at the shimmer of the gemstone on her neck. The boldness of the angry red. The confidence in it. She soaks that energy into her skin.

"It's beautiful."

"I will see you soon. On stage." The commander says, a formality in her voice, the touching moment is over. Jade nods, watching out of the corner of her eye as her mom leaves, disappearing out her dormitory door like an apparition, a delusion. *Had she even been here at all?*

But she had, the necklace around her neck proves it. Jade touches the sharp faceted edges of the ruby, feels its power. She questions herself. The story she's invented to try and pick apart the lies from the truth. *What if I'm wrong?*

Ruby Parker

2 hours

Until Commissioning

Will I ever be good enough?

Mrs. Parker steps out of her daughter's dorm. She marches down the long dormitory hallway filled with kids she has sworn an oath to protect. The inheritors of the future. Her own children. Has she prepared them? For what's to come? Has she done enough? Has she *been* enough?

She heads to the Great Hall, but her heeled boots feel heavier than normal, a certain dread fills each step. She's become the very thing she vowed to herself she'd never become; it sickens her. She never wanted this. Never wanted it to be this way. There was little choice in the matter. Her life was pre-determined just the same as all these kids.

I can't protect them anymore.

Andrea Tanaka

1 hour, 44 minutes
Until Commissioning

Andy stares down the dress. It's banana-yellow frills bubble over the bedframe like a boiling pot of third-class smog. *It's hideous.* “How did people ever wear such a thing?” Andy pokes the fabric.

“Mew.” Batcat angrily plucks at the dress with his claws.

Andy notices dirt under her nails as her hand grazes the fabric. A souvenir from the mission beyond the wall. Andy bites her lip, tries not to think about it. About *Peter*.

She sighs, it's time get on with it. She slips off her combat shirt and unbuttons her OSP pants. Neatly folding her tactical gear on her bed. She stands there in nothing but a black sports bra and spandex. Andy eyes the yellow dress, trying to understand how the contraption works. She pulls it over her head. It envelops her shoulders. fluffing out in a plume of yellow, the dress drapes over her like a heavy cloak. She tugs the smelly, mildewy fabric that itches her skin.

I feel ridiculous. She turns to her mirror, *I LOOK ridiculous.*

Whatever. It's just another uniform. If this is what she's been issued - then so be it. She twirls for the mirror and winces. *Will my fiancé like this?*

Andy tries to picture it. After the ceremony, she will move into martial housing with her assigned fiancé. For five days they will live together in what colonist's call ‘the honeymoon period.’ It's dishonorable, unheard of, to back out of the engagement and in just five days Andy will once again cross the stage in the Great Hall to be wed.

I know nothing about being married or engaged. The concept feels absurd. *Maybe I will not be assigned a partner tonight.* Some people wait years to be matched. But she's female. Women always get matched.

“What in the abomination is that?”

Andy turns around to find Jade standing in her doorway wearing a magnificent black gown. “Take that off right now.” Jade orders.

“Good to see you too.” Andy grins, happy her friend has joined her. “Wow... did you make that yourself?”

Jade spins, showing off her sleek black ballgown, fitted to her slim frame. The ruby necklace shines from her neck completing the outfit with a glimmer.

“You and Jasper are so creative. It’s not far.” Andy laughs. “Your dress is incredible.”

“I know.” Jade grins and presents Andy with a box, “Don’t worry I made one for you too.”

Andy takes a step back from her bedroom mirror, “What? You didn’t have to-”

“TAKE IT.” Jade thrusts the box over. Andy opens it, pulling out the blood-red ballgown. The silk swoops down with a seductive sparkle in the dimly lit room. Its daring and dangerous. “You made this for me?” Andy can’t believe her eyes. *It’s stunning.*

Jade smiles, “You deserve something just as bold as you are. Plus, red complements your skin tone. Now please, I can’t stand it any longer. Take off that garbage.”

Andy can’t hurry out of the yellow dress fast enough. She flings the ugly gown onto the bed. Batcat pounces, claws out, he tears at the yellow dress in a satisfied grumble. Smacking where it drapes over the bedside.

Andy gratefully slips her legs in and shimmies the soft crimson silk over her stomach and across her chest. *It fits perfectly.* Andy gazes into her reflection, barely recognizing the confident young woman staring back.

“Turn around! Let me see!”

Andy turns around for Jade, “What do you think?”

Jade covers her gaping mouth. Speechless.

“Is it... does it look good?”

“Andrea Tanaka!” Jade can’t believe the glory of her own handiwork but more so the gorgeous girl she is so used to seeing in a coyote-green flight suit.

“Meow!” Batcat yells loudly from underneath the bed.

“Let’s fix your hair.” Jade gently undoes Andy’s signature ponytail by running her hand through Andy’s twisted braid. The obsidian black hair falls loose over Andy’s shoulders. “Look at you!” Jade turns her friend around to look in the mirror.

Andy stands speechless. *Is... that? Me?* With her hair down and the way the dress displays her curves. She looks like a stranger. One thing remains the same: *the scars.* Suddenly

self-conscious Andy pulls her arm behind her back and tilts her head so only her good side shows.

Jade helps zip up the zipper on her back. “Anyone would be lucky to have you.”

“Would they?” Andy runs her hand across her burned arms. ...*would he?*

“Meow!” Batcat mumbles in warning.

“What is it?” Andy asks the cat. He sits on the bed tail flicking like he knows something they don’t.

“You want help with your makeup? I was going to head to the bathroom and put some on.” Jade holds up her handy-dandy makeup bag and hair curler.

“No.” Andy shakes her head, “I think this is enough change for me.” She looks back to the mirror, at herself, at the girl in the reflection. No - not a girl - a young woman whose life is about to change. “Thank you for the dress, Jade. I mean it.”

“Course. I’d do anything for you, you know that.” Jade embraces her, “I love you.”

Andy hugs her friend back, “Love you too.”

“Meow!”

“Can I ask you something?” Andy asks.

Jade squeezes her tighter, “yeah, sure.”

“Do you think... there's a chance...” Andy can’t believe she is even saying it. She pulls away from Jade. “That we will not get what we want?”

“Stop worrying. You're going to be a pilot.”

“No... um,” Andy stutters, “do you think we will not get... who we want.”

“Wait...” Jade raises her eyebrows in shock, “do you like – LIKE - somebody?” Jade gasps. “WHO?”

“MEOW!”

Jade and Andy turn around just as something large crawls out from beneath Andy’s bed. Batcat hisses as *a man* lumbers to his feet. Ken Tanner stands, gripping a knife in his hands, a sick grin plastered across his face complete with a touch of madness in his eyes, “Good evening, ladies.”

Andy feels Jade freeze up next to her, “Counselor?” Jade mumbles in fear. Andy protectively gets in front of her friend. Shielding Jade from the man she never suspected had

been lying in wait under her bed. “It's you?” Jade’s astounded. “You killed the other counselors?”

“Of course.” Ken steps forward, knife raised. Andy looks at the only way out of the room – the door - but Ken blocks the way. “Those two imbeciles weren’t going to vote for me.”

“You killed them... over votes?” Andy looks at him, truly puzzled. Where’s the harmless happy-go-lucky head of Engineering? He stares at them with soulless eyes making Andy’s stomach churn.

“How did you do it?” Jade whimpers, as the man steps closer. Andy knows why Jade is asking so many questions, *she’s trying to buy time*.

It works because Ken keeps talking. “There was no assignment for Patricia, no coal deposit for John. Those insects never saw it coming. That’s how.” He grins.

“You want to be the next commander?” Jade figures.

“Of course.” The counselor corrals the girls into the corner of Andy’s bedroom.

“Then why are you here?” Jade asks.

“What do you want?” Andy adds.

Ken looks right at Andy and chuckles like it's obvious. “I want you.” He lunges, knife out.

“BATCAT!” Andy yells. In a flash of feline fury. Batcat sinks his dagger-like fangs into Ken Tanner's cheek.

Jade Parker

1 hour, 17 minutes
Until Commissioning

Jade covers her head as the cat swoops over and attacks! “GAHH!” Ken’s yelps as Batcat bites him. “YOU FLYING RAT!” He violently swats Batcat away.

“Jade GO!” Andy shoves her to the door.

“No!” *I’m not leaving you!*

Andy doesn't hesitate, as quick as a striking snake she clocks him with a square punch to the jaw while snatching his wrist that grips the knife. They wrestle over the blade. "RUN JADE!" Andy yells.

No!

Instead of fleeing to the exit, Jade pulls a drawer free from Andy's dresser and swings it around. She SMACKS the back of Ken Tanner's knees. The man stumbles over. But he regains his momentum, summoning an impossible strength Ken kicks Andy back. Andy stumbles over her ballgown and topples to the floor.

No! "Andy!" Jade rushes to her. "Get up!"

Ken Tanner picks up the drawer and spins around, facing Jade, "You!" He raises the drawer.

Oh shit.

Ken Tanner hurls the drawer down over Jade's head.

Andrea Tanaka

1 hour, 16 minutes
Until Commissioning

SMACK!

"No!" Andy watches Jade crumble as her body hits the ground.

"Mar-Ow!" Batcat howls with a limp.

You're hurting them! Andy's pissed. She tries to rise to her feet, but the dress prevents her from finding a good footing. Taking advantage of her fumble Ken launches himself onto Andy, crushing her to the carpet. He fights to pin down her hands.

"Got off me!" Andy throws her weight, twists her spine, but she can't shake him. *He's impossibly strong!*

He has her pinned. "Looks like it's just the two of us now..." he hums delightedly, whispering into her ear as his hand roams for a way into her dress.

"GET OFF!" Andy bites him. Hard.

“Grr!” Ken grunts and sticks the cold edge of his blade against her neck “Be still!” With one hand holding the knife to her neck, the other wanders along the thin of her waist, his fingers reaching across her exposed stomach. It sends a jolt up her stiff spine. “I always thought you were the prettiest,” he breathes hotly in her face.

This isn't right. This isn't you.

“I can't stand the idea of you being given to someone else tonight.” Ken pulls her closer to him, tighter. Andy closes her eyes for a moment as the blade presses against her skin. “Not even to my son.”

Lieutenant Conrad Tanner? Andy blinks.

His fat fingers slink under the fabric, spreading over her ribs.

“Meow!” Batcat pounces on the man's back and claws fiercely at his shirt. Red blood drips from the cuts yet he doesn't feel any of it. Andy knees him in the groin, he doesn't flinch, just grins. He presses down harder, cementing her to the floor.

“It's going to be fun, killing you.”

He leans in to kiss her.

Jasper Parker

1 hour, 15 minutes
Until Commissioning

Jasper buttons the last clasp of his suit. He stares at the paper, at his dream sheet. At *her name*, written down on his top spot. “It's time,” carefully he folds the piece of paper and neatly tucks it into his coat pocket.

He stands at the exit, a silent goodbye to his home for the last six years. Gently he closes the door to his dorm room for the very last time. But as his hand lets go of the doorknob, he hears something down the hall. Scuffling.

It's coming from Andy's room.

“Andy?”

Andrea Tanaka

1 hour, 14 minutes
Until Commissioning

I'm not going to die like this.

Andy stares up at the puckered lips reaching for her face. “MarrRR!” Batcat bites down hard on Ken’s shoulder, it does nothing to deter the man as his lips hover closer to hers.

Dazed and confused, Jade lays in a helpless heap in the corner.

Desperate, Andy reaches for the knife at her neck. She grabs it, twists it, pulling it free from the man’s grasp. Caught by surprise Andy spins him around and plunges the knife deep into his ribs.

“Guhh!” Ken gags. Andy pins him down with her knee. She rips the knife across his chest, again and again she plunges the blade into his skin.

“Andy?” Jasper stands at her open door, wide-eyed.

Andy doesn’t stop. She stabs away, unrelenting.

“Andy, stop!” Jasper rushes to her and yanks her off the dead bleeding body. “What are you doing? That’s Counselor...” his voice trails off as she folds into him. The fear in her eyes. The trembling of her body. It makes him rage, “did he hurt you?”

“Meow.” Batcat answers by smacking the dead man with an angry paw.

“Andy...” Jade rubs the sore spot on her head and finds the strength to get back on her feet. “...what happ-“

“What happened here?” A loud voice booms behind the teenagers. The three look up, spotting the commander’s stone-cold face as the powerful woman comes to a halt in the doorway.

“He...” Jade huffs catching her panicked breath, “tried to KILL us.” She points to the Ken’s dead body bleeding out all over the floor.

“Mar-ow!” Batcat confirms.

“He KILLED the other counselors.” Jade steps over the body “This sick perve wanted to become the next commander!”

“What?” Jasper gasps, “Counselor Ken Tanner is the serial killer?” He protectively wraps his arms around Andy. But Andy brushes him off, she doesn't want anyone touching her. Clutching the bloody knife, she stands and doesn't bother to bow to their leader.

Quickly, Mrs. Parker shuts the dorm door. Containing the scene and preventing anyone else from looking in. She surveys the dead body sprawled across the carpet and avoids stepping in the growing blood pool with her polished shoes. The commander analyzes the three teenagers, then gestures to her daughter. “Jade, go clean up.”

Jade looks at herself, her curly hair disheveled, bits of blood flung onto her face, scratches on her arms. She nods and silently, shaking, she picks up her makeup bag and curler. With a pitiful and panicked glance, she looks back at Andy.

It's okay. Go. Andy nods to her.

Jade nods back, quickly she steps over the dead body and scuttles around her mother. Jade closes the door gently, leaving behind a germinating silence.

With her daughter gone Mrs. Parker turns her attention to Andy. Her voice, a deadly unreadable calm. “Andrea, did you kill him?”

Did I kill him? Andy looks at the stab wounds and the bloody blade dripping in her hand. She feels Jasper take a step away from her.

“I did.” Andy nods, “I killed him.”

Jade Parker

59 minutes

Until Commissioning

Sequestering a full-body panic Jade trembles over the chipped porcelain sink in the girl's dormitory bathroom and fiercely scrubs blood off her face. Anxiously fumbling through her makeup bag she pulls out foundation. She swirls her brush, ready to dab the powder onto her face to hide the bruises and blemishes. She winces as a wave of period cramps overpowers her.

This is the worst day of my life. She bites down on her tongue to suppress the event that just took place in Andy's bedroom. She dabs away, trying desperately to cover up her flaws. *It's not working!* She tosses the makeup down and looks at herself in the mirror.

Why am I like this?

She nervously picks at her hair.

"Fuck it."

She grabs her razor from her bag and holds down that familiar strand of hair. The one she plucks excessively. She scrapes off the lock. She holds up the twisted black curl with a smile and chucks it into the trash.

Andrea Tanaka

55 minutes

Until Commissioning

"Thank you, Andrea." The commander pulls Andy into a fierce hug. Shocked, Jasper stands back as Andy stiffens in the commander's arms. "Thank you, for being strong."

Andy nods, unsure of the affection.

"Don't worry about this mess." Mrs. Parker takes out a neckerchief and uses it to clean the blood off Andy's hands. "I'll have someone come clean it up. Now... both of you. Don't mention this to anyone. I don't want to dampen the festivities with another murder. But I can't thank you enough for ending this nightmare." She shuffles them from the room and shuts the door, pulling out a key.

"Ma'am... I..." Andy stumbles to find the right words.

"It's alright, take a moment to yourself." The commander finishes locking Andy's door. Closing off the crime scene. "I'll see you both on stage."

The commissioning... She'd forgotten about that.

"Jasper, go check on your sister. Make sure she's ready for the ceremony."

Jasper doesn't want to leave Andy, but his mother eyes him. He shrugs, "sure." But then he straightens up, "Actually... Mom... I have something for you."

Andy watches Jasper pull out a single piece of folded paper from his coat pocket. “My dream sheet.” Andy watches the exchange. The commander unfolds it, skimming it quickly, before glancing back at her son. “It’s my choice.” He adds, his eyes meet Andy’s. “It’s the only decision that matters.”

Is that...? Andy tries to read the paper from the back. The spousal document?

“A little past the deadline.” Mrs. Parker, pockets it. “But I accept your submission. Now you two, not a word about this... incident. The past is in the past, focus on what’s to come.”

Jade Parker

50 minutes

Until Commissioning

It’s time for plan B.

Jade stares at her reflection, emboldened by the first cut, she raises the razor.

Gliding the blade over her scalp Jade removes her hair one strip at a time. She keeps at it, unflinching as the blade nicks her scalp freeing a drop of blood to drip down her cheek. The same bloody red as the ruby resting on her neck. She scrapes away until no hair is left. Admiring her handiwork, she steps back from the bathroom mirror. Her reflection finally looks like the person she’s always wanted to become. *The face of a leader.*

Her brother comes barreling in through the bathroom door. He stops at the sight of her shaven head. “Are you unwell?” He asks.

Jade ignores that comment. “How many times do you need to be told not to go into the girl’s bathrooms?”

“It looks good.” He gives her a thumbs up.

Jade smiles: she knows she looks good, “Thanks.”

“Seriously... are you okay?” He protectively parks himself next to her. “Andy’s pretty shaken up.”

Jade whips out mascara. “Andy was almost assaulted and murdered by a madman of course she’s shaken.” She gently applies the last touch-ups to her face. Hiding the bruising.

“Did he hurt you too?” He inspects her closely.

“Just a bad bop to the head.”

Jasper signs, relieved.

“How much time do we have?” Jade zips up her makeup bag.

Jasper checks the bathroom clock, “48 minutes,”

“Good. I have one more thing to do.”

Andrea Tanaka

27 minutes

Until Commissioning

Nicely dressed for the once-a-year occasion civilians chatter happily amongst themselves as they head to the Great Hall, but their whispers are silenced with stolen glances. A mother ushers her child along as the little girl gawks and points.

Andy doesn't notice. She presses her shaking hands firmly at her sides and fights the images in her mind. Patricia Wu's mutilated body. The cutting of John Wiseman's throat. Peter being speared. Counselor Ken Tanner bleeding out on her bedroom floor... with the bloody knife in her hand. She shuts her eyes hard. *Make it stop. Make it stop. Make it stop.*

“Andrea Tanaka...”

Buck. She instantly recognizes his deep voice. With a cute little blue bowtie and charming suit Bucket stands amongst the herd with a sheepish grin. Dog sits beside him with a matching bow fastened around the robot's neck. She's so relieved to see him she could cry. Andy runs to him, wrapping his body in a tight hug. “I'm happy to see you.” She buries her face into his broad chest.

Bucket embraces her, “I'm happy to see you too.” Onlookers don't miss the warm exchange. Andy pulls back - it's not proper. But Bucket doesn't care what anyone else thinks, he smiles, “You look... amazing.”

The dress. “Jade made it.” She examines him, “you look.” She searches for the right word. *Nice. Mature. Grown-up.* Yet he still carries that childlike sparkle of someone with all the love in the world. Andy's breathless. “You're wonderful.”

“I heard about Peter.”

Andy does not speak. Tired of talking. Tired of thinking. Tired of feeling. Something about her is off. He can tell. Bucket holds her shoulders as his own shoulders stiffen, “Are you okay?”

“I killed someone.” Andy lets the truth spill out in a dreadful whisper.

“What?” Bucket folds his arm around her waist and guides her away from the traffic to the corner of the hallway. “What are you saying?” He breathes.

“Ken Tanner. He tried to take advantage of me. He confessed to killing the other counselors.”

Bucket scratches his curls, letting the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. “Ken Tanner?” He asks, “He was the serial killer? I would never have suspected...”

“Me neither,” Andy says. “But... there was something wrong with him.”

Bucket tries to stifle a wave of anger. “Obviously... if he... if he tried to HURT you. If he mutilated and killed people.” Frustration boils inside him, “I should have! ...maybe I could? I will reprogram Dog to guard you. So that...”

“I don’t need protection.” Andy shakes her head, “No, Buck... listen to me, there was something WRONG with him.”

“What?”

Andy’s stumped - she doesn’t know what. She just *feels it*. Something wrong, something not quite right.

“Okay well... let’s forget all that for now. I’m glad you’re okay. That’s all that matters.” He pulls her close. Andy melts into his arms again as Bucket strokes her hair. “I got you something.” He turns to his robot. “Dog, would you please?”

Dog gets up on its hind legs and opens its metal jaws unveiling a glass flower. “Thank you, Dog.” Bucket takes the glass flower and proudly presents his gift. “I made this for you.” He blushes.

Andy cradles the delicate flower. A brilliant Red, just like Andy’s dress. Its stem made from soldered aluminum wire and intricate silver leaves. The glass petals melted into a delicate swirl. It’s a red rose, a species from before The Last Day. So iconic that even Andy recognizes it.

“Thank you, Buck.” Andy twists it in her hands so the red glass shines. “That’s very sweet. But you didn’t -”

He takes her hand. “I wanted to.”

Andy looks at him closely. The friend who was always there for her. The one who always listened. The one she trusts. Bucket's hand is getting sweaty. *Why are you so nervous?* But Andy knows why. Deep down she's always known - yet she can't tell if she wants to pull away or pull him closer.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

The messengers. Andy and Bucket let go of each other to pull out their devices. 'All civilians report to the Great Hall' the notification reads.

"Well... I guess it's time." Bucket offers her a gentlemanly arm. "Shall we then?"

Andy signs. "I guess so." She threads her arm through his and they begin to make their way to the backstage assembly room.

Bucket leans over. "Whatever happens tonight nothing they can do will change you, just... trust your instincts. Everything that is destined to be, will rise" She twists her glass rose in her free hand as every instinct in her body tells her to turn and run.

Andrea Tanaka

13 minutes

Until Commissioning

Bucket and Andy join the other eighteen-year-olds waiting for the ceremony to commence, who idol in the backroom behind the stage. Andy scans the dark space of familiar classmates as Jefferson skips over. "Oliver! Andrea! Looking utterly marvelous tonight!" He sings, "you ready?"

Bucket cheerfully smiles. "Ready as I'll ever be."

A wisp of pungent perfume. Flipping her long brown hair Acacia strides over to them and lovingly wraps her arms around Jefferson. "I'm so excited!" Acacia squeals happily before balancing on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on Jefferson's cheek. "Babe, are you excited?"

"So excited." Jefferson kisses her back.

For a fast second, Andy remembers their bodies intertwined, synchronized hips, heavy breathing. Flustered Andy blinks as Bucket entertains the pair with small talk. Jefferson and

Acacia's relationship isn't exactly a secret, the two have been attracted to one another since they were old enough to leave the child's chamber in their family housing units.

Andy spots a girl lingering in the corner, *is that?* "Excuse me." She leaves Bucket with the lovebirds and heads across the room. Andy's transfixed. The ruby necklace shimmers from her nape as the sleek black dress is darker than the shadows. But it's her hair. *It's gone.* Andy doesn't recognize her friend as she stands proudly, with confidence.

"Jade." Andy bows as if she is already their leader. "I like the new look, it's very..."

"Commanding?" Jade grin widely.

It's a whole new you. Andy studies her with a smile. "I love it."

Jade's painted black nails delicately glide over her scalp. Andy notices the makeup, a dark gold painted over each eye. It's subtle - yet striking. *She really looks the part of a leader* The friends embrace and don't speak about what's happened in Andy's dorm room.

"I'm not going to lie." Jade giggles "it's weird seeing you wearing anything other than your flight suit."

I guess the feeling is mutual then.

Andy lifts the dress revealing her military combat boots hidden beneath the gown, "don't worry, I'm not totally different." *I could ever wear high heels.*

Jade sees the boots peeking out under the red dress she so sensibly crafted. "If I had extra time, I would have made you some matching - comfortable - shoes." Jade lets out that familiar high-pitched chuckle

Andy can't help but laugh. "Don't worry about it." *There's the Jade I know. I guess some things don't change.* The girls reign in their laughter.

"Good luck tonight, Andy."

"You too."

"So... before we were so rudely... interrupted. You were about to tell me..." Jade leans in to whisper in her ear, "Who do you like?"

Andy bites her lip.

"Who is it?" Jade asks. She needs to know. Jade watches intensely as Andy scans the room. Bucket is still talking to Jefferson and Acacia, London crouches alone in the corner with a constipated frown. Peter is not among them - but someone else is missing.

He should be here?

“I don’t know who I will be getting engaged too tonight.” Jade comments, “But... does it REALLY matter? We all have a job to do, so it’s no use to absorb oneself in matters that are out of our control.”

Andy considers this. “You can decline the engagement.”

“In theory yes,” Jade huffs, “but nobody does that.”

‘It simply does not matter’ - she’s right. We all have a role to play. “But you wouldn’t be upset if it was Conrad... would you?” Andy teases, then tenses. *I just killed his dad.*

Jade doesn’t notice Andy’s blank face as she blushes, “Well...”

“AYYYE! Good evening, ladies.” Jasper emerges, wrapping a meaty arm around each girl. “Wow! What happened to your hair?” He stares at his sister.

“I chopped it off.”

“And why would you do that?” He asks.

“Because it was annoying me.” Jade wriggles out from under his arm. Jasper turns his attention to Andy, his eyes widen in surprise.

“Oh wow...” he gasps before falling speechless.

Andy cheeks burn. A sensation. A knowing. She looks at Jasper. Really looks at him. Something is different. Something is off. *Something’s changed.* Yet she can’t quite pin it.

“I got a little something for my favorite ladies.” From deep in his suit pocket, he pulls out two stunning Andrea’s Pride flowers.

Jade is horrified. “Did you STEAL these from the greenhouse?”

“No... I grew them.”

“Bullshit.”

Jasper answers her by grabbing her shaven head to plant an obnoxious kiss on her scalp.

“Ew!” Jade pushes him back. “I’m done talking to you.” She huffs off... but snatches a flower to take with her.

I must be making stuff up. Andy gives Jasper a look. *He hasn’t changed at all.* “Why are you always teasing her?”

He shrugs, “what’s the point of having a sister if I can’t bug her.” He looks at Andy. “You like your present, right?” He offers her a flower.

Andy takes the specimen into her hands. The devotion. The love. It's very existence. *One-of-a-kind*. Andy looks at her two flowers, the crimson glass rose and the otherworldly Andrea's Pride. "I love it."

"For some uncanny reason... it reminded me of you." He winks.

"Jasper... I..." She grabs his wrist. "I... need to tell you something."

"What is it?"

Andy looks at him, really looks. She tries to speak it through her eyes, through the way she squeezes his wrist. She wonders if he can hear her heart pounding inside her chest. She needs to tell him, once and for all. "It's you Jasper... it's always been you."

He kisses her forehead. "It's me and you, always."

"LINE UP!" All heads in the waiting room turn as the commander opens the door to the stage. "It's time."

They line up by birth order and as the youngest of their class Andy is last in line. Jasper looks at her, his brilliant blue eyes shining with pride.

Jasper...

Everyone wordlessly takes their places. They march, deathly quiet onto the stage, and into the bright lights of their future. Andy, however, doesn't hear the applause of the colony. She doesn't notice the decorated stage of the Great Hall. The only thing she keeps her focus on is the back of Jasper's head as he steps out into the blinding light of the stage.

I choose you.

-- The Commissioning Ceremony--

"It is with great honor that I welcome you all to the 77th commissioning ceremony!" The commander's voice booms across the Great Hall. All 5,609 members of the colony watch with rapt curiosity from the edge of their seats as beaming lights pour onto the illuminated stage igniting each of the colonies surviving 18-year-olds.

Andy squints into the blinding floodlights, glad for the glare as it blurs out the faces of the spectators. *However: they can see me.* She shifts in her seat, pulling the dress around her knees, tucking her legs she hides her combat boots from the audience.

“It is with great reverence that we are here today to carry on the legacy of humanity. As everyone in our community is aware, great sacrifices have been made. It is from this mindset that I would like each of you to pay your respects to our recently fallen citizens. Please rise.”

Everyone stands. Andy gets to her feet and bows her head. For Peter, for the counselors, and for all the soldiers they lost beyond the wall. The silence amid thousands is eerie. Then all at once, everyone speaks the rehearsed line. “May they be remembered.”

“Please, be seated.”

Every citizens lower themselves, Andy uses the distraction to steal a glance at Jasper. Andy notices his tightened jaw, tense fists, the scowl of anger he unsuccessfully tries to contain. They haven’t gotten the chance to talk. About Peter, about the Wildlands, about the man she killed... or what she just told him.

“I’m certain most of you have become aware of a traitor in our midst.”

The crowd murmurs.

“This threat from one of our own – has been dealt with.”

The murmurs grow.

The Commander straightens her back, “Ken Tanner, my counselor and head of the Department of Engineering, has been served the death penalty for the murder of John Wiseman and Patricia Wu.”

“Ken Tanner is a murderer?” Jefferson mutters a few seats away.

Mrs. Parker takes a moment to steal a glance at Andy. Who lowers her head to the floor; she doesn’t want the attention. She doesn’t want the validation. She doesn’t want another death to her name. Mrs. Parker turns back to the people, “in the wake of these recent tragedies, it pains me to have to call upon others to fill the shoes of those we valued so dearly in our community. But without further ado, I would like to ask Conrad Tanner to the stage.”

Heads turn as a lone finger stands; the spotlight finds him amongst the crowd. Andy bites her lip. Conrad stands there in mute horror, not just about being called upon but because his father is now dead and a murderer.

“Isn’t that the fat counselor’s son?” Acacia whispers back to Jefferson.

All eyes follow Conrad as he slowly walks up to center stage. Andy feels a ping of sorrow for her officer who's always fair to her. Mrs. Parker grabs Conrad's shoulder and makes him square off with the audience. People whisper. Someone shouts, "a traitor's son!" Someone else yells, "he's innocent!"

Mrs. Parker raises a hand to silence the comments. "Conrad Tanner led a mission beyond the wall today that ended with the successful elimination of a nearby threat. Conrad Tanner has led the cadets at the Academy from their earliest years to their commissioning. Conrad Tanner has proven himself as a leader. It is therefore my order to promote Conrad Tanner as the new head of the Engineering and counselor to the commander."

Andy gasps, *he is going to replace his father*. Conrad bows as the crowd dutifully applauds his promotion.

Conrad salutes the people. "PROTECT. SERVE. SURVIVE."

As Conrad makes his exit from the stage, Mrs. Parker continues with the ceremony. "Now, this commissioning is special, as you can see, we have seven talented individuals. Among them, my very own biological children." The commander glances at the twins. Jade smiles. "May they help lead our people into the future and create a safe space for all those who follow behind them. Now without further ado, Jefferson Hartman, please rise."

Andy's heart starts thumping again.

"Jefferson Hartman from this day forward you will be a base guardsman."

That's good. A second-class position.

The audience claps for Jefferson who smiles and bows proudly, accepting his new rank and job title.

Bucket, who sits beside her, whispers. "Watch, Acacia will get pharmaceutical staff."

"Acacia Ortega, please rise." Acacia gets to her feet, giddy with excitement, she waves cutely to the audience. Someone whistles. "Acacia from this day forward you will be pharmaceutical staff." Clapping ensues, but Acacia's cute wave falters as she tries to hide her frown.

Ouch, same position she has now... only third-class support staff.

Bucket mouths the words: *called it*.

"London Graham, please rise. London Graham from this day forward you will be a lab technician."

Andy watches London sit back down. London notoriously keeps to herself. Andy realizes she knows little about her. *Where have you been these last eighteen years?*

“Jade Parker, please rise.”

Andy focuses back to the stage as Jade rises from her seat. All that confidence in the waiting room has evaporated. She looks ready to faint as anxiety washes over her tiny body. Standing smaller now with all her hair gone. Her knees shake as she holds her breathe.

“Jade Parker from this day forward...”

The commander ruffles her paperwork on the podium. The pause lingers as the commander considers her daughter.

Come on, nominate her! Andy sits at the edge of her seat. *Make Jade the new commander.*

“You will be a logistics and operations officer.”

What?

Jade is just as shocked as Andy. Standing there, hovering, drowned out by the congratulatory clapping of the audience. *She’s not bowing.* Still digesting the news, *Jade’s not accepting.*

“Bullshit.” Jasper’s mutters a few seats over.

The applause dies down. Jade’s rigid. She glances at her mother who stands firmly at the podium, relishing her continued position of power.

Then, with great resignation, Jade bows and sits, shoulders slumped, dreams crushed. *Jade should be the one leading us... not you...* Andy stares at the back of the commander’s head.

“Jasper Parker, please rise.”

Jasper leaps to his feet.

No, I cannot listen... I cannot know... the sole pilot’s slot...

“Jasper Parker from this day forward you will be the Head of the Department of Defense.”

Andy blinks. *Head... of the DOD? Replacing John?* Andy’s mouth drops open. *Wait... if Jasper is going to be the head of the DOD then...*

Jasper bows, accepting his powerful position with a beaming grin. The audience roars. Only the best of the best become a head of a department and counselor to the commander.

That means...

“Oliver Patel, please rise. Oliver Patel from this day forward, you will be an engineer.”
Bucket bows with great respect, accepting his second-class position.

“Andrea Tanaka, please rise.”

At first, Andy does not hear her name. She is frozen, stuck to the seat.

Bucket nudges her, “You can do this Andy, trust yourself.” He whispers, “It will be okay.”

Somehow, Andy gets to her feet, and squares her shoulders to the crowd. Standing at attention, blinded by the lights. A long second passes as she squints into the spotlight, feeling the heavy stares of her whole world watching.

“Andrea Tanaka, from this day forward you will be a pilot, flying the F-22 Raptor.”

YES! Andy’s heart skips a beat. Andy bows, accepting her position before wobbly sitting back down.

“Careful,” Bucket helps guide her back into her seat. He squeezes her hand, whispers excitedly under his breath. “Andy! You did it!”

Andy wants to cry, but she must not show weakness. Not here, not in front of the whole colony. She nods and whispers back, “Congratulations to you too.”

I’m going to fly!

The commander takes a moment to catch her breath and reshuffles the paperwork on the podium.

It’s not over. The second part is about to begin. The part Andy is not prepared for. *But how bad can it be? I got my wings. I’m going to fly. I am going to be the person I’ve always wanted to be.*

“Jefferson Hartman, please rise.”

Jefferson leaps to his feet and stares long and hard at the commander, almost demanding she hurry up and tell him what he already knows.

“Jefferson Hartman, your partner is Acacia Ortega. Do you Jefferson Hartman accept this matrimony?”

“Yes. I do.” He grins, “I accept Acacia Ortega to be my wife.”

Andy watches from her seat as Acacia is told to rise, is partnered with Jefferson and cordially asked the same question. “Yes!” she squeals in delight. “Yes, I do. I accept Jefferson as my husband!”

By marriage Acacia will get second-class privileges.

The pair delightfully smooch on stage. Laughter and a rambunctious applause drown out the commander's voice who instructs the couple to sit back down. Jefferson and Acacia sit with hands and arms tangled together. The gap between their chairs is nonexistent.

Andy leans back in her seat, hot and bothered, a new festering panic cultivates inside her gut.

“London Graham, please rise.”

London, with little enthusiasm and signature frowny face, lets out a long sigh of resignation as she stands to attention.

Looks like I'm not the only one dreading this.

“London Graham, your partner is Jasper Parker. Do you London Graham accept this matrimony?”

WHAT? Andy nearly falls from her seat. *Her?*

“I do.” London sits down, crossing her legs with contempt. She turns to Jasper and mockingly blows a kiss at him. Jasper fumes.

London and Jasper? He predicted this! Did his mother not read his dream sheet? Andy thinks about the piece of folded paper that Jasper handed to Mrs. Parker. She... she is just pairing us off with who SHE thinks is best for us. Who even IS London? Why would the commander pick her over...

Andy squeezes the side of her chair. Anger boiling. But the ceremony has already moved along.

“Jade Parker, please rise.” Jade, still defeated from her job assignment, gets to her feet.

“Jade Parker, your partner is Conrad Tanner. Do you, Jade, accept this matrimony?”

Jade's unfeeling overcast eyes stare onward. “I do.”

'It simply does not matter.' Andy regurgitates Jade's words. *But this is a good thing? Right? Conrad's your crush?*

“Jasper Parker-” Jasper is already on his feet, hands clenched into tightly balled fists. *Attack mode.* His mom glares at him,“- please rise. Jasper Parker, your partner is London Graham. Do you Jasper Parker accept –“

“I do not.”

Andy catches her breath and so too does the entire colony. London, evidently embarrassed by such an unspeakable public rejection, folds her arms in her lap and mumbles something no one hears.

Jasper only has eyes for his mother. The two glare at one another. This audacious lack of respect is a slap to the face of her authority. Their cultural tradition. Their rules - in front of everyone, no less. Jasper sits, without being told to do so stunning the crowd further. The commander coughs, sending a trill through the microphone, stinging everyone's ears.

The commander quiets the mic, stifles her cough, and continues the ceremony, restoring a level of professionalism to the service. But that doesn't prevent her from shooting Jasper a disapproving look.

He doesn't care.

It's unheard of to reject a matrimonial partner, much less onstage. The nuanced approach would be to accept and go through with the engagement period before the marriage ceremony. Five days to test your commitment with someone. If it doesn't work out, settle the issue in a private meeting with the commander. There would be some other solution – a widow, an unmarried adult, a younger teenager to wait around for.

But if Jasper rejected London... who does he want to marry?

Andy struggles to breathe.

“Oliver Patel, please rise.” Andy feels, more than sees, Bucket's body stand up next to her, her eyes have trouble focusing on anything other than Jasper's face.

Who does Jasper want to marry? Who's on his list? Andy can't stop thinking. Her loud thoughts are bellowing and potent. They consume her. Does he... love someone else? Does he love... me?

“I do.”

Wait, what? So lost in thought Andy forgot to listen. Bucket sits beside her as the audience applauds for him. *Andy, focus!*

“Andrea Tanaka, please rise.”

Shit.

Andy does not hesitate this time, she stands to attention. Andy can feel the incessant stare of everyone she has ever known.

“Andrea Tanaka, your partner is Oliver Patel. Do you, Andrea Tanaka, accept this matrimony?”

Andrea Tanaka

4 days, 22 hours, 52 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

What?

Andy freezes. Speechless. There was always a possibility of this happening, but now, in the moment, she’s numb. Andy doesn’t know what to say... how to feel. The pause is too long. The audience is too quiet, fascinated by her every twitch as they wait for her response.

One particular stare stabs more than the rest. It pierces through her, from behind, from Bucket himself. *He’s waiting for me to say, ‘I do.’*

Andy bows. It’s stiff, rigid, forced. Neither an acceptance, nor a rejection. She sits back down, no longer caring if the audience can see her military boots beneath her ballgown. Bucket leans over to her. Andy can’t bear to turn her head to look at him, to face him. He reaches for her, resting a hand on her arm, she barely feels it.

“Andy...”

“Thank you all for attending and have a wonderful evening celebrating and welcoming these new adults into our ranks,” concludes the commander. A roar of applause. People rise. The masses manifest by the exit doors. Andy picks herself up, still numb. Bucket quickly scrambles to his feet, “Andy I – “

“I just need... Bucket,” Andy fumbles, hitches up her dress, “give me one second... I have to...” She makes a run for it, weaving among the excitable crowds.

Andy jostles amongst the bodies. Voices congratulate her on her commissioning. Hands pat her shoulder. Andy politely nods, applies ‘thank you’s’ where appropriate and pushes forward. Batcat swoops from the rafters above, planting himself on her shoulder as they navigate through the afterparty. Food is rolled out on carts. The few children that exist make themselves known as they dart around the chatting adults. There are very few instances where the colony gets to come together and celebrate. The coming-of-age commissioning's are a great

excuse to let one's guard down and rejoice in the fact that they are still here, still alive. Having survived yet another trip around the sun.

Andy runs into a roadblock.

"Mew." Batcat murmurs at her ear. Andy scans the table before her, decorated with a white tablecloth, bottles and cups of all sizes adorn it.

Alcohol.

Andy reaches for a bottle, of what variety, she is unsure. She's heard countless tales of the fermented liquid. A scarce commodity, a delicacy, only available to adults – of which she is now one. "Fuck it." Andy uncorks the bottle and tips its contents to her lips. It's cold, piercing, fruity and foul all at once. Almost immediately the poisonous effects seep in. *Wow*. She takes another sip and focuses on the funny warmth spreading through her body.

"Andy."

Andy whirls around, who dares sneak up on her like that? Jade pours herself a glass. She raises the cup and swishes the purple liquid around, curious. "How is it?"

"Nasty." Andy swallows two more mouthfuls of the stuff.

"Would expect nothing less. Just another disappointment of adulthood." Jade drains her bubbly glass in one gulp and sets her cup down with dignified grace.

"It's unfair, Jade..." Andy continues to drink straight from the bottle, "you should be the next commander and you know it."

Jade sighs, accepting defeat. "And somehow Jasper, of all people, got made counselor." She hangs her head, "I guess... it was not meant to be. Plus, would I have been the strong and confident leader we need?"

You are kind of weak. Surprised by her rude thought, Andy takes another sip.

Jade pours herself a second glass and lifts it up. "To adulthood."

Andy offers her bottle. "To adulthood."

They clink.

"Andy, your father would be very proud of you." Jade smiles. "I would know," she adds.

Andy lowers the glass; Jade's words touch her. *I think... yeah, I think maybe he would be.*

Then Andy suddenly remembers the loading dock. The thing, the very important thing Jade needed to tell her. Andy is suddenly feeling more bold than mere moments before. It feels

important. Urgent. And more than anything she wants her mind to be elsewhere. “Jade... I lied to you.”

“What?”

“It wasn’t a sewer at the bottom of those stairs.”

Jade’s eyes widen with clarity, “the secret passageway?” Jade sets her glass down, immediately intrigued. They glance around at the loud chatter of hundreds. It’s safe. They can only hear one another. “What did you see?” She asks.

“We found... people. A person.” Andy whispers.

“What?” Confusion spreads on her friend’s face.

“Jasper and I...” Andy thinks of the girl in the glass, her restful face, her floating body. “We found a girl.”

Jade takes a contemplative sip, her mind racing behind strained eyes. “A girl?”

Andy leans in, “Yes.” she lowers her voice, “so, I told you what I know... what do you know?”

Jade sighs, her fingers tremble. Andy watches her closely. There’s desperation, sorrow and panic in her eyes. “It’s your father, Andy. I know who killed him.”

“I killed him.”

“No, it wasn’t you.” Jade shakes her head, “it was never you. I overheard my mother speaking to the janitor. She accuses Garret of killing your father. She made him the janitor as punishment for it even. Blaming him for not properly maintaining the labs the night Dr. Tanaka died.”

“What?” Andy fumbles. “That makes no sense. The fire was my mistake.”

“You made the parameters more dangerous, sure, but Andy did you actually ignite something?” Jade looks at her begging Andy to put the puzzle pieces together to spare her from having to say it aloud.

“What are you saying?” Andy asks, voice rising.

“Hello, hope I wasn’t interrupting anything,” Conrad steps in and grins at Jade. Jade looks at Andy, defeated. She sets her cup down.

I guess it would have been Garret’s job as my father’s assistant to make sure the DNA sequencing lab was cleaned up properly. But... he wasn’t even there... I was the last one to leave the lab... wait... no I wasn’t...

“Officer Tanner. Hi.” Jade fumbles in front of her new fiancé.

“You can call me Conrad... if you want to,” the twenty-one-year-old awkwardly begins.

“Okay.” Jade nods.

Andy doesn’t register the newly engaged couple before her, as the truth becomes obvious... *I wasn’t the last person to leave the lab... the Commander was.*

Conrad offers a hand to Jade. “Would you like to walk with me?”

The girls lock eyes. Jade silently nods. They’re on the same page. The truth - it’s always been there, right in front of Andy’s eyes. Andy nods back. Neither needs to speak. Jade takes her husband-to-be’s hand, and the couple are quickly absorbed back into the party.

Thunderstruck, Andy leans over the beverages, head spinning. *The commander left the lab right before the explosion... she is the only one who could have set the room on fire....*

Andy’s whole life unravels: *The commander framed Garret and killed my father.*

“Something bothering you soldier girl?” London chortles and materializes out of nowhere and inspects the drinks lined up on the serving table. “So, this is the stuff, eh?” she picks up a bottle and takes a sip of the selected beverage.

Andy turns to go. London’s the last person she wants to talk to.

London laughs. “What? Are you scared of me?” But her voice drowns in the chatter of the crowd. Andy wanders aimlessly among the attendees, feeling claustrophobic in the crowded space. She rehashes every interaction she’s ever had with the commander. Batcat, seemingly telepathic, digs his claws into her collarbone. His knobby tail swishes on her back. *Is that why Batcat never trusted the commander?*

“Andy!” She hears his deep voice behind her. *Buck!* “Andrea!” Her assigned-fiancé shouts above the noise of the after party.

Andy pretends not to hear, twisting the other direction. She zig-zags through the crowd in hopes of losing him. She looks over her shoulder, the coast is clear. *How am I ever going to face him?* Suddenly, inexplicitly, laughter bubbles up. *This is absurd! How am I supposed to marry Buck?*

“What’s so funny?”

Andy looks up, Jasper towers over her and takes a sip from his own procured bottle of beer.

“How many of those have you had?” Andy points to the drink.

“Uh? Six? You?”

Andy holds up her nearly empty wine bottle. “Just one of these.”

Jasper nods and inspects the vessel, “Hmm” he reads the label, “Cabernet Sauvignon? Eee-non?”

Andy smiles, empowered through intoxication. She laughs again, which makes Jasper laugh too. He leans in and drunkenly taps the tip of Andy’s nose. “You will always be my partner. You know that. Me being the head of the force doesn’t change anything between us, all right?”

Oh. She hadn’t considered that. Jasper will be... my boss as head of the DOD.

“Andy!”

She stiffens and looks behind her.

“Andy!” Bucket waves as he makes his way to her. “There you are! I’ve been looking- “

“I want to get out of here Jasper.” Andy pleads to him.

Jasper notices Bucket’s approach, “Good news, I need to pick something up from storage. Want to come?”

“Yes, please.” Andy grabs Jasper’s arm and pulls him away, walking as fast as she can manage, despite the floor seeming to wobble on its axis.

“Wait, Andy!” Bucket’s call is lost in the cacophony of the crowd.

Andrea Tanaka

4 days, 22 hours, 45 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

Andy and Jasper trot down the hallway, playfully checking behind them as the noise of the afterparty dissipates with the growing darkness. The corridors are empty, night patrol is only half-staffed. It feels like the entire base is theirs, the whole world belonging just to them.

Andy skips across the concrete, giddy. Ceremony forgotten; emotions erased. She feels like a silly kid, before mistakes were made and lies were told. When innocence was all she knew.

“You know what?” Jasper says loudly, “You NEVER got to be the seeker...” he hiccups.

“That’s because YOU were always it,” Andy drunkenly laughs.

“But you were always so damn good at running and hiding!” Jasper grins as he stumbles along the hallway, “Okay, go... go. You be the seeker; I’ll hide!”

“O-KAY!” Andy laughs, covering her eyes. “On the count of three. ONE! TWO! THREE!” Andy opens her eyes just in time to see Jasper trip and roll.

“Again, again! I wasn’t ready!” He laughs summersaulting across the floor.

“Okay fine!” Andy giggles, she hasn’t had this much fun in years. *Alcohol’s great!*

“Come on! Don’t cheat, close your eyes!”

Andy rolls her eyes, then closes them and begins, “ONE. TWO! TH...”

“WAIT! I’m not ready! Again! Again!”

“Well!” Andy shakes her head with a laugh, “Get ready then! ONE...TWO... THREE!” Andy opens her eyes and-

“BOO!” Jasper stands right in front of her. Andy almost falls over, but he grabs her, “I gotcha!”

“What are you doing?” Andy smiles shyly. “I’m the seeker. You’re supposed to run and hide.”

Jasper leans in real close, “do you remember when I almost kissed you?”

“What?”

He steadies her, “in that fateful closet.”

“You said you wanted to marry me,” Andy recalls, cheeks flushing.

“I did, didn’t I?” He smiles.

The two stand a breath apart, holding onto one another. Jasper blinks, something in him remembering. Reprogramming. “What do you say? One more round? For old times’ sake?” he suggests, “I’ll hide for real this time. I promise.”

Andy, cheeks flush, “Sure.”

He darts off. Andy closes her eyes and counts. When she opens them, the hall is empty. She snickers. *I may have been a good hider for all those years... but I’m a better seeker.* She slowly walks the corridor, eyes wide, ears awake, listening, breathing, smelling.

A rustled sound. “Mew.” Batcat flicks his ears forward... to a double door, with its mismatching wall paint.

Andy hesitates, *here?* She winces at the memory of the explosion, the fires licking her face. She bites her lip. *The past is in the past. Focus on the future.*

Andy pulls the door handle and steps inside her father's old laboratory. Jasper stands in the center of the converted storage room, a smug smile on his face, "Ah! You found me."

"Jasper..." Andy voice trails off, eyes scanning the space. Extra storage, janitorial space. Dusty crates and boxes, miscellaneous stacks, broken down equipment waiting for repair and a thick chokehold of dust covering everything. A newer, state-of-the-art lab was rebuilt elsewhere, no lab technicians or scientists wanted to work in a grave.

"What are we doing here Jasper?" Andy creeps forward as Jasper shuffles crates around. Batcat tenses on her shoulder, possibly remembering the place he was created and the man that made him.

Andy stops and gazes at a familiar burn mark left on the floor. "Dad." Andy chokes at the vision of his burnt bones, his screaming skull. It's the spot where he died. *I'm sorry*. Andy blamed herself for his death, but her jaw tightens as she remembers the truth. *The commander is the killer. But why?*

"Andrea."

The sound of her full name jolts Andy back to the surface, to the present. She turns, backing away from the cursed spot. Jasper waits by the wall, hand on a loosely tacked up tarp.

"What are we doing here, Jasper?" Andy asks for a second time. Overwhelmed with the urge to go home, back to her dorm room, and crawl under her stiff sheets on her bed. *But my old bedroom is an active murder scene. Plus, I couldn't go back there if I tried... that room no longer belongs to me... I must report to my marital quarters... where Bucket....* she knows he'll be waiting for her.

"Aren't you tired? Tired of how things are? Wouldn't you like to make your own decisions?" Jasper begins.

Andy rubs her forehead. *Again with the destiny shit*. "Jasper this is reality; we can't just change it."

Jasper ignores her comment, "Andy, we can change everything, together."

'Together'. Hah, we could never be together, Jasper... unless. Unless I decline my match with Bucket and... Jasper and I declare each other as... partners... as... husband and wife.

Jasper rests a hand on the tarp. "Do you trust me?" He offers her his free hand.

Andy takes it. "I do."

He whips the tarp to the side and reveals a burnt-out tunnel. *It's the passageway that used to be hidden behind the cabinet. The same one that...* "Jasper?" Andy whispers as he enters the space.

"So, as it turns out, Andy, there is a LOT more about this place – the colony – than they're telling us."

"What do you mean?" Andy steps forward. Maybe it's liquid courage, or resurrected childlike curiosity, perhaps it's the dread of returning to her fiancé. But Andy knows, this precious, fleeting moment, is the last she will spend with Jasper before she is forced to succumb to her future, and the forbidden knowledge that her life is subject to the control of a murderer.

"They've been lying to our faces," His voice echoes in the dark stairwell. "We've been ignoring progress, not willing to take the risk to change things. These rules are suffocating us." They descend the spiraling stairs quickly this time, propelled by longer legs and drunkenness.

"What do you mean?"

"We could have everything we dream of and more," Jasper concludes, as they reach the bottom of the stairs. He turns to look at her, "Andy, I brought you down here because you are the only person I trust. It's me and you, always."

Andy follows him into the underground bunker. "Jasper... why did you... reject your pairing?"

The lights turn on, one by one the cryogenic gallery is illuminated, displaying the hundreds of vaults lining the walls. One on top of the other, reaching all the way to the ceiling.

"Wait, what did you say?" Jasper asks.

Andy's too embarrassed to say it again. She steps forward, absorbing the scene, "there's... so many..." she whispers. *Hundreds if not thousands...*

"Do you know their story?" Jasper muses, trotting along, excitement building in him with each step. Andy follows, still scanning from floor to ceiling.

"No, please. Enlighten me. What the hell is this place?"

"These are... the reserves. We were told that the forefathers awoke from their cryochambers and re-entered the world three generations ago. We were told that the reserves were just stuff stored from before The Last Day, boring stuff, mechanical parts, airplanes, building material. You know: junk. What they never shared was that... there are PEOPLE stored away. Those that never woke up. Those that are still waiting for a second chance at life."

He gestures to the vaults. “They kept these people a secret from us.”

Andy looks around at the high walls, “So why are they all still waiting? There’s no radiation anymore. It’s safe. Earth’s survivable again.”

“That’s what I thought too! But that’s the thing – earth isn’t survivable yet. We lost Peter today. We’ve lost so many people. It simply isn’t safe to wake up the masses down here. Not enough food, not enough space. We’re not ready for them yet.”

“How many?”

“Hundreds.”

They’re just... forgotten? She analyzes the underground reserves, *‘May they be remembered.’ Looks more like ‘may they be repressed... buried... abandoned.’* “That’s why...” Andy’s mind races to conclusions. “That’s why our job...”

“Yes, our lives are dedicated to making the world safer... for them.” Jasper gestures to the walls around them. “That’s the plan they aren’t telling us. But what if all these people, Andy... what if they could help us build that future, rather than you and me having to build it for them? What if we made them useful.” Jasper turns a corner. “C’mon, we’re almost their.”

Useful? Perched on her shoulder, Batcat hisses, upset about something. Andy tenses as she turns the corner. *It’s...* Andy’s paralyzed, unmoving, unspeaking. A cryochamber has been ejected from the wall and inside, a young woman glows in that same ethereal light.

It’s you.

“C’mon, c’mon.” Jasper waves Andy forward. She awkwardly stumbles over empty beer bottles and candy wrappers strewn about the floor as she approaches the young woman suspended inside her glass cage.

Jasper tosses an arm over the cylinder and peers inward as Andy slowly comes up behind him not believing her eyes. There she is, unchanged, preserved. Trapped inside this glass tube, for years, for centuries, for millennia. The age gap between them is gone. They’re now the same age.

Who are you? Andy steps forward letting herself be absorbed by the warm glow of the cryochamber. *Why are you here?* Andy studies the young woman’s face, the same face that occupies her dreams. Always asking that same daring question. Unable to erase her existence, nor the feelings she inspires.

This girl has haunted me since I was a kid...

“Isn’t she pretty?” Jasper gently runs his hand over the glass. “I never forgot her.”

Andy turns to look at him, a burning flash igniting in her chest, “what?”

“Ever since we found this place, I knew it was destiny.”

She squints hard at him, trying to pin down what it is, this terrible feeling... *Jasper... why is it that... I don’t recognize you?*

“I knew she was destined for me,” Jasper caresses the glass.

“Huh?” Andy gasps.

Batcat hisses.

“Yo, soldier boy, did you bring me more booze?”

Andy whips around as a squeaky swivel chair shuffles into view from behind the cryochamber. Sitting upon it, unkept and unclean, is Garrett, her late father’s assistant. The pitiful janitor, who’s being eternally punished for a murder he didn’t commit.

“Haven’t you had enough?” Jasper chuckles cheerfully, drumming the woman’s glass tube with his fingers. “Come on, I brought down seven cases. Did you check them all?”

Garrett groans, leans back in his chair, scratches his chin and chews noisily on one of the colonies coveted candies. Andy notices a half dozen empty bottles strewn about the floor. *This man is drunk.* She blinks. *I’m drunk and... Jasper has clearly lost his mind.*

Jasper points to more cases stacked against the far wall. Garret scoots the chair over to them. He pulls up a lid. “Aha, my knight in shining armor.” He pulls out three bottles. “Soldier boy!” Garret tosses a bottle to Jasper.

Jasper easily catches and uncaps it. “It’s counselor to you now.”

Garrett spins around on his swivel chair. “Ahh... Mommy helped you put on your big boy pants now, yeah?” He raises his glass to salute. “Here’s to making something of yourself.”

Jasper lifts his drink in agreement, “To making something of ourselves.” Both men take a swig.

Garrett drains his bottle, grabs a second one before shuffling across the floor to them. “What’s with Tanaka? Why is she here?”

Jasper tosses an arm around Andy. “She’s cool. She’s my pilot now. We work together.” *Is that all I am? Just your pilot? What? Do you want me to salute you now?* Her heart burns.

Garrett squints at her. “Your daddy was a real pain in my ass.” But then he offers her the extra bottle. “But I learned from the best.” Andy sees her hand reach out and take the bottle, sees herself uncap it and raise it to her lips, but she feels nothing. *Is nothing.* “So, did you get your wings?” Garrett quizzes her.

Andy nods and lets the alcohol cross her lips.

“Hah, so she is your wing woman then.” Garret laughs at his own poor joke. He stares at her. Slowly dropping his eyes to take in all of her body. Andy resists slapping him. Batcat rears, mouth open, displaying fangs he emits a deep, warning rumble.

Garret flinches at the winged beast and grumbling he scoots back to his cluttered desk. “Ready for the real party?” Garrett cracks his knuckles, and brushes papers off his keyboard. His space is crammed with monitors, stacks of paper, and a whiteboard. Uncategorized, disorganized, clutter. Rotting food and stolen equipment are strewn about what is evidently a secret underground lab.

So, this is what you’ve been up to.

“Time to test this baby once and for all!” He begins cranking lab machinery. Flipping switches. Powering up computers. “Test number one, here we go!” He glances over at the girl inside the glass. “You hear that sweetheart? You ready to be what you were always meant to be?”

Andy doesn’t take another sip. *What the hell is he talking about?*

Jade Parker

4 days, 22 hours, 45 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

“How does this feel?” Conrad places a hand on Jade’s waist and slides it down to her hip while he uses his other hand to caress her cheek.

I like it.

His fingers spread over her now shaven scalp. “Your hair?” he stutters, “will it grow back?”

You liked it better when it was long?

Maybe it's the raging period hormones or the overwhelming defeat. Jade has always wanted him, just not in this way. Not with this *outcome*. She wanted to be loved for her potential. Her power. Not as a petite pretty little thing. Jade hangs her head, disappointed in herself. "It'll grow back."

"Oh, good, I love how curly it was. I'm mean, I like it now," he fumbles awkwardly. "And I want you to know, Jade, we don't have to do anything... until you're comfortable. I don't want to hurt you." Conrad presses his thumb a little harder along her pelvis, feeling her curve.

Is this really what I want?

"That's very kind of you, Conrad... I... I appreciate it," Jade whispers. He smiles at her, taking her all in.

"I was... surprised tonight too, Jade. I didn't... I didn't think I would, at this point, I didn't think I'd EVER get assigned a spouse. Not with the gender imbalance. I was worried I might be too old at this point. I just want you to know that I'm honored to even get the CHANCE to be with you."

I may not have the position I want... but at least I have the person I wanted. She smiles softly, "Congratulations on becoming a counselor... and I'm not surprised."

"You're not?" Conrad gasps. "I certainly was... I can't believe what..."

"I've always had a crush on you." Jade cuts him off, not wanting to talk about his *father*.

"You DID?" Conrad's grin widens.

"Can... I kiss you?" Jade asks.

They lean their heads in. Jade, who used to practice kissing Andy as a preteen, is prepared. Her lips slightly ajar are ready to meet his. But his lips are puckered together and when they meet... It's just... awkward.

Conrad pulls away, his hand nervously rakes his hair, "Sorry! I'm new to this."

Jade falls flat on her feet, disappointed all over again. "It might take me some time... to get used to it." It comes out like a whimper, and she hates herself for it. They stand, clumsy and amateurish. Neither looking the other in the eye.

"I like... your necklace," Conrad points out.

Jade picks up the ruby around her neck, twirls it in her hands.

"Jade."

They turn. The commander strides straight toward them. *Ah, you. Of course, it's you. It's always you, isn't it?* Jade tightens her jaw.

“Commander!” Counselor Conrad Tanner ducks submissively to his superior. More nervous than normal for having been caught in an intimate moment with the commander’s own daughter. The commander doesn’t even acknowledge him, her attention is solely on Jade.

“Jade, I need you to locate your brother.”

You mean your precious golden child?

“I need a word with him about his behavior tonight... and now,” she scans the ballroom, “his apparent absence from the party.”

Ah... I see, we can't have a non-obliging son disrespecting the order of the colony now, can we, mother? Or the very rules YOU, mother, have set in place. How easy it would be for you if you'd just let me handle things, like I always do. But you would never let me lead - only follow. You prevented that from happening, didn't you? Prevented me from taking your place. Replacing you. “I’ll go look for him,” Jade says.

Her mother nods. “Good. Now I have some business to attend to.”

Jade watches her mother march away, back into the crowds. Once she is out of sight, Conrad takes Jade’s hands in his.

“I’ll see you later then? In our chambers?” He delicately kisses her hand, it's gentle, sweet. Jade forces a smile, curling her lips up into her cheeks, even showing a bit of teeth. But whatever tender moment this was, it's ruined.

“I guess so.”

“I’ll drink to that then,” he smiles before dipping back into the party.

CLAP. CLAP. CLAP.

London leans against a wall, slowly clapping from the shadows, as if the drama of this entire night has been her own personal play. With a disingenuous smile, she steps into the light. “Well done, well done. Landing yourself a smoking hot counselor?”

What do you want with me? I barely even know you.

“Oh... but that’s right... my man’s also a hot counselor. How about that?” London grins, swirling her sparkling champagne, “What a night, am I right?”

She's talking about Jasper. Jade shivers. *How is it possible your paired with my twin?* she turns to go. “I must find my brother.”

“Oh, tell Jasper that he can keep that side chick of his, just as long as he remembers who his real partner is.” London holds up her glass and winks.

What the hell? Jade grimaces at that and leaves. It’s smarter to not engage. But still, *what an unusual thing to say?* Jade checks to see if London is still watching her – she is, with that creepy knowing smile on her face.

What game are you playing?

Andrea Tanaka

4 days, 22 hours, 43 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

“Jasper, what the hell is going on?” Andy demands. Jasper’s blue eyes glow in the light. He only has eyes for the girl in the glass. “Who is she?”

Jasper blinks, like he is trying to remember his own train of thought.

“Jasper, who is she?” Andy asks again.

This time he cocks his head to look at her. Andy does not even *recognize* him, does not see the soul of her friend, unable to detect the heart in the person... *she loves*. That Jasper... *is gone*.

“This,” he taps the glass with an empty grin, “is my wife.”

“Your... wife?” Andy stammers, not believing it. Not wanting to believe it. That fire inside, it’s burns, blood boiling like molten magma. *His wife! What does he mean, his wife?*

Behind them tapping away at the controls, Garrett hums to himself, busy with his monitors. “So, what shall it be, Counselor?”

Jasper steps around the glass tube, Andy follows. The newly commissioned adults peer into the computer screens. “My question to you, Garrett, is what *could* it be?” Jasper rubs his hands together excitedly.

Andy notices the greedy glean in Garrett’s eyes, the smirk on his face, how he cockily combs his luxurious new hair. Andy’s hands twitch, a silent rage, an eruption manifesting.

“That’s just it. She could be *anything*. Anything you want her to be.”

“Red hair.” Jasper declares. “I always thought red hair was cool.”

TAP. TAP. TAP.

“Blue eyes; a classic with red.”

TAP. TAP. TAP.

Andy slowly pivots on her feet. There, inside the glass, the girl *changes*. The thick black hair coils up and turns a bright orange. Andy gasps, *how is that even possible?*

“Oh, you know what? Freckles are cute.”

Small speckles emerge on the woman’s face and spread slowly across her arms and legs. *She’s morphing into the portrait from the magazine cut out...* Andy propels herself toward the men. “Stop.”

Jasper turns to her with mild surprise, one eyebrow raised. Garrett doesn’t turn his head, glued to the development on his screens. Andy grits her teeth, “Jasper, what are you doing?”

“Progress.” He smiles.

That smile... who are you? Andy thinks back to all the times she’s seen him smile. Just never like that. Never that smile. *Jasper this isn’t you. I know you.*

Or do I?

“Don’t be so shallow. Consider more than just cosmetics.” Garret clacks away at the controls. “Dig deeper.”

Jasper leans into the glass, “You mean we can rewrite – “

Garret fills in for him, “Yes, we can rewrite... ANYTHING. I suggest.” TAP. TAP. TAP. “We start with a clean slate, a nice clean memory wipe.” CLACK. CLACK. Garret dramatically hits his keyboard once again, “There, this will only take a moment.”

Andy looks at the screen, a time bar labeled as: *MEMORY LOSS 3%*

Andy feels her stomach churn, nauseated as she looks at Jasper who leans over the glass staring... hungrily... at the contents inside. *This isn’t you. I know you.* She thinks back, running through memories of a lifetime together.

Andy’s Memory

Four-year-old Andy giggles with delight as Jasper and her race to the commissary until Andy trips over untied shoelaces. Jasper comes to an immediate halt, "Andy! Are you alright?"

Andy snuffles from where she's fallen. "No!"

"I just learned how to tie my shoes." Jasper's little hands begin to fold and tie the laces into one massive, tangled knot. "There, how is that? Is that better?"

"Thanks, Jasper." Andy whimpers as he helps her to her feet and the two race off, hand-in-hand down the hall.

"Jasper!"

Thirteen-year-old Andy squeals in horror, pointing to an open window as a plate-sized wasp flies inside Andy's dorm room. The venomous insect buzzes across the bed.

"Shit!" a wispy Jasper leaps to his feet.

The poisonous insect aims straight for Andy's face, stinger extended. She SCREAMS!

Jasper, with his thin arms, heaves her desk chair over his head and smashes the insect to the floor squashing the invertebrate into a gooey mass on the carpet.

"Thanks." Andy regains her breath as the wasp twitches at her feet in rigor mortis death.

Jasper pants that same a goofy grin on his face, "don't mention it."

"Here, I got you ladies a present." Eighteen-year-old Andy feels the weight of Jasper's arms on her shoulder. Watches him pull out *Andrea's Pride* from behind his back.

She inhales the sweet scent of the flower he named after her.

Andrea Tanaka

4 days, 22 hours, 29 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

Andy pulls out the Andrea's Pride. She spins the flower in her hand, its purple pistils glow in the blue light. Andy nervously glances at the screen; *MEMORY LOSS 15%*

Jasper... you're a monster. She crushes the flower in her hand.

"How much longer now?" Jasper asks, eyes still on the girl and her new brilliant red hair.

"Not much, 67% complete." Garrett answers. "Hey wing woman, you alright?" Andy lets the shredded flower crumble to the floor.

Jasper turns to check on Andy when CRACK! Andy punches him clean across the face. He drops to the floor, blood spurting from his nose, ruining his black and white suit.

"Ah BUGGUTS!" Garret hollers from his seat. "I knew you'd be a fucking problem!"

Jasper, stunned, kneels on the floor, holding his bloody nose. "Andy... what was that?" His face flashes with a second of recognition. He looks at her, his blue eyes full of sudden understanding. "Thank you." He blinks and the moment of clarity vanishes from his eyes just as quickly as it came.

Andy doesn't even notice, consumed by rage she kicks a monitor over, sending it crashing, cracking, and exploding against the concrete floor in a burst of angry sparks.

"You Cockroach! Do you know how long that took me to program?" Garret hollers, finally standing to his feet. He glares at her. "You can't just punch this project, you insect!"

"MAR-OW!" Batcat disagrees and lunges, claws out; he gouges Garret's eye.

"NO!" Garret grabs his face. Hate shines from his one undamaged eye. "You can't stop this. You can't stop ME."

Andy answers by punching him squarely in his stupidly perfect-looking face, knocking him back he crumbles to the floor. Knocked fully unconscious.

"MeeeOOOWWW!" Batcat howls in warning.

Andy whips around, bloody fists clenched.

The hybrid cat lands on top of the glass of the cryochamber. Inside a violent thrashing has disturbed the young woman's peace as her body seizes out of control. Jasper and Andy watch as the girl opens her eyes. She screams in mouthfuls of the liquid that encases her, drowning inside the very device that's kept her alive for millennia.

Andy pushes Jasper back down with a furious kick and picks up one of the empty bottles strewn about the floor and with one deft swoop she uses all her force to bash the tube. A thin crack emerges. SMASH! She hits it again. The glass fractures. Water leaks. Pressure mounts, until BOOM! A thunderous gush floods across the concrete floor. The girl spills out along with all the wires that entangle her.

Andy makes short work of it. She rips the wires off her body. The girl gasps, choking, spurting water from her lips. Her head and body go limp... but she's breathing. Andy scoops her up. "Batcat!" She calls. The feline swoops over her head and the pair make a run for it.

Jasper pulls himself to his feet amid the puddles of broken glass. Anger and betrayal swelling in every cell of his being. "ANDREA!" He screams.

Oliver Patel

4 days, 22 hours, 26 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

"Andy..." Bucket struggles with his words. "Hey Andy." He tries again, drawing up his courage. "... I can see... I mean... I could tell... No."

He pauses, awkwardly standing in the middle of a dark empty hall, anxiously scratching his curly hair. Dog monitors his abnormally high stress levels.

"What do I even say?" He inhales, "Okay..." exhales, "Andrea, you mean the world to me. You've always been... well, you are my world. And... and it would mean the world to me if..." He closes his eyes, with a hopeful smile. "It would mean the world to me if..." He opens his ring box and looks down at the golden engagement ring... *it would mean the world to me if we got married.*

Bucket's only answer is his lone heartbeat.

“What if she says no Dog?” He shuts the box. “She wouldn’t, right? We’re partnered, meant to be.”

“I suggest that Andrea Tanaka might be waiting for you on the commissary rooftop.” The robot wags his tail.

“You're right.” Bucket keeps walking, heading to the one place he knows to go: their secret spot. Away from the crowds. Away from the commander. Away from the politics of the people. A place where they could talk openly and share... their true feelings. *She there... waiting for me. She’s ready to begin the rest of our lives, together.*

Footsteps. Dog turns, analyzing the sound. “Someone's coming.”

Andrea Tanaka

4 days, 22 hours, 26 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

The commander killed my father.

Andy runs.

I must marry Buck.

She runs faster.

And Jasper’s lost his mind.

Andy quickens her pace as the foundation of her whole life unravels beneath her feet. The beautiful red dress doesn't hold her back and the girl, heavy in her arms, doesn't slow her down.

She rounds a corner and- *Buck!*

Andy’s combat boots skid across the floor, until she comes to a full stop before her fiancé. Buckets brown eyes are wide with surprise. “Andy!” He’s happily shocked. “What are you- “ he spots the naked girl in her arms. His voice stammers, “Um...?”

Oliver Patel

4 days, 22 hours, 25 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

“...who’s that?” Bucket doesn't recognize the red-headed girl in Andy’s arms.

“Someone’s coming!” Dog barks in warning.

Sure enough, an angry voice bellows from down the corridor. “ANDY!”

“Jasper?” Bucket observes Jasper sprinting towards them, face twisted with rage, bleeding out of his nose, he creates a messy trail of red droplets behind him. “What's going on?” Bucket checks back in with Andy, trying to make sense of it all. “Andy, are you okay?” His fiancé response is to take off, sprinting straight past him.

“ANDY!” He shouts after his fiancé, “Where are you going?” Bucket watches, motionless, mouth agape as she flees. *Why are you so scared?*

“Out of my WAY!” Jasper body-slams Bucket, violently pushing him into the wall.

“Jasper!” Bucket bellows, truly shocked by the push.

“Slow down!” The robot spews from its speaker. “Slow down! You’re exceeding the pedestrian speed limit! Slow down!” But Jasper heads no warning as he chases after Andy.

Bucket peels off the wall rubbing his shoulder from where a bruise forms.

I hate him.

Bucket feels it, for the first time in his life: true unrestrained disdain. A surge of hidden power floods his large body as he too breaks into a sprint. *Jasper, if you hurt her!*

I'll kill you.

Andrea Tanaka

4 days, 22 hours, 21 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

Got to go! Got to go! The hallways blur together. I can't go to my dorm. I can't go back to Buck. I can't trust the commander...

A wild thought crosses her mind as she comes across an exit door that leads out to the flightline. She doesn't hesitate, kicking it wide open. A blast of wilderness scented air hits her. Andy stumbles outside still carrying the unconscious girl in her arms.

Batcat flies into the open, racing over the Air Force hangers that line up along the mile-long runway.

The nearest hangar. *Jet number 12.* Andy doesn't care how stupid of an idea it is. The dishonor it'll bring. Her world's betrayed her. Her leader's betrayed her. *He's* betrayed her.

It's time to betray them back.

She makes a break for the Jet.

Jasper Parker

4 days, 22 hours, 21 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

Which way? Jasper draws to a frustrated stop. Hands in tight fists he looks up and down the winding corridors. Unsure what path Andy has taken his designer bride.

Splat. Splat. Splat. His nosebleed drips noisily on the floor. For a second, Jasper stands clueless as to what he's doing. He blinks the vertigo away, remembering what's at stake.

"Andy..."

Jade Parker

4 days, 22 hours, 20 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

I could be cuddling with Conrad right now.

Jade rubs her shoulders as she walks the halls. This was not how she wanted to spend the first night of her engagement. *Where is that idiot?* "JASPER!" She yells down the long dark passageways. But then she notices something. Something that stands out.

Is that... blood?

Jade picks up her high heel, sure enough, she's stepped onto a dark red droplet of human blood. The blood trail leads deeper down the corridor. A nervous chuckle escapes her lips, *how much blood is too much blood for one day?*

Logic tells her to turn around. But she steps forward. “Jasper?”

Andrea Tanaka

4 days, 22 hours, 20 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

Andy climbs the maintenance ladder attached to jet number 12. Quickly she settles the unconscious girl inside the cockpit and kicks the ladder away. Batcat and Andy jump inside. The cockpit’s cramped, designed for one passenger, not three. It’s an uncomfortably tight squeeze as Andy wiggles into position in the pilot’s seat with the girl awkwardly slumped in her lap.

Andy finds the spare fighter helmet; she places it over her head and straps on the pressure mask making sure she has a tight seal. Carefully Andy brushes the unconscious girl’s red hair to the side and places earplugs into her ears. Andy pulls down the canopy.

They’re locked in.

Batcat mumbles from the dashboard, not enjoying the metallic claustrophobia. Andy scans the controls. Everything matches the flight simulators. Everything looks the same as last night. Her hand hovers over the power switch. “Meow.” Batcat encourages her.

She flips it.

A massive roar. The raptors’ double engines thunder to life. The fighter jet shakes under the rocket power of combustible fossil fuels.

Andy grins. *This is it.* The moment she’s been waiting her whole life for. Grabbing the throttle with both hands she taxi’s the jet out of the protective hangar. The mile long runway beckons her as the sun sets in the west, illuminating the path to heaven in ambient gold. Right on cue the Call to Arms Anthem spreads over Utoya Air Base.

Oliver Patel

4 days, 22 hours, 18 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

“Pause!” Dog barks in warning as the evening anthem begins. Bucket doesn’t want to stop running but he must - it’s the law. Placing his hand over his heart Bucket stands to attention as the song of his people plays across base.

Is that?

The haunting melody is interrupted by a familiar and unmistakable sound. The thundering cry that always hurts his ears. The sound he’s heard hundreds of times. The ferocious roar of a Raptor.

“Andy.” Bucket gasps, *don’t do it...*

But the sound of the engine only grows louder. Ignoring law and reason, he breaks position. As the eerie music grows around him, he runs to the flightline, towards the growl of the engine that never should have been ignited.

Jade Parker

4 days, 22 hours, 18 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

“Where the HELL is he?” Jade groans searching for her brother. *He could be anywhere!* “JASPER!” She calls for her twin, but is interpreted as The Call to Arms anthem, spilling out from various speakers. The familiar melody settles into the shadows of approaching night.

“Shit.” Jade, conditioned over eighteen years, dutifully raises her hand to her heart. She stands still, unmoving. Loyal, law-abiding. “Fuck it.” She keeps going, ignoring the anthem only for a second sound to emerge - a deep distant rumble.

Wait... Jade tilts her head... *is that? That can’t be...* yet the forbidden sound grows louder. Jade thinks the unthinkable and runs to the nearest window that looks over the flightline. There, a single F-22 Raptor drives itself to the runway, preparing for takeoff.

“Are you kidding me?” Jade gasps. *Is Jasper taking a nighttime joyride... in a fighter jet?* Jade breaks into a sprint for the air control tower. *Jasper you better not ruin everything! I swear!*

London Graham

4 days, 22 hours, 18 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

London finishes her champagne, she has no one to talk to. No friends. No family. Nor a doting fiancé. She lingers in the corner, as she always has, and watches the rest of the party goers in quite spite. *These pitiful people...*

The song begins, the one London has heard twice a day for her entire life. London watches the trained puppets before her silence themselves, standing still. The colonists line up, one-by-one, shoulder-to-shoulder, dutiful hands placed over hearts. They hold their respectful positions. With servitude. With honor. Paying due diligence to their fabricated lives. London does not join them, slouched in the shadows, she doesn't place her hand on her heart.

I hate this place.

Instead, she peers into her empty glass.

I wonder what my wonderful, loving fiancé is doing right now...

Then she hears it, distant, mumbled. Almost drowned out by the Call to Arms Anthem. But it's there... the indisputable sound of a fighter jet's engine. Her head perks up with intrigue. Like studied clockwork, London knows every flying schedule. She knows which pilots are in which jets. She's studied the ins and outs of everything. Because knowing is her specialty.

But this? This is off the clock and flying without orders, *is illegal.*

London grins, *how interesting...*

Andrea Tanaka

4 days, 22 hours, 17 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

“It's time.” Andy squares the stolen jet with the runway and scans through the controls. *Fuel. Check. Wings. Check.* “Gear clear.” Andy hovers her hands over the throttle. “Were out of here Batcat.”

She punches forward. The afterburner is unlike anything she's ever experienced, it shakes her bones. The pushback is nothing like the centrifuge as the raptor rockets down the runway. Andy's slammed into her seat as they gain unprecedented speed in mere milliseconds. Barreling halfway down the tarmac Andy crosses the point of no return, she either takes off now or crashes into the wall.

Let's do this.

She rips the stick, tipping her nose up, they lift. The ground peels away as the Raptor shoots for the moon in a near vertical ascent. Andy activates full afterburner as the jet collides with the clouds cutting through the fading layers of sunset and bursts into a darkening sky. The unconscious girl presses tightly against Andy's chest as they break the sound barrier.

Andy grins under her pressure mask. With nothing but expansive sky she twirls the jet in a triumphant spin. Andy pilots the stolen aircraft with nothing but the fading sunset to paint the heavens before her.

Freedom.

It's everything she's ever wanted. Andy breathes against the pressure, tears at her eyes, living the very moment she's dreamed of for as long as she can remember.

So why am I crying?

Jasper Parker

4 days, 22 hours, 14 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

"What is she DOING!" Jasper bursts onto the gangway of the air control tower that overlooks the runway below. Throwing himself against the railing he catches the last glimpse of jet number 12 as it disappears into the darkening clouds above. Leaving behind a thunderous scream that shakes the tower.

The roar fades alongside the final lyrics of the anthem leaving only silence as the sun sets over the wall.

Drip... drip... drip... blood from his nose hits the metal railing. Jasper wipes his chin, glaring into the dark skies where the Raptor disappeared. "Andy..." *why did you leave me?*

A second pair of footsteps hit the top steps as Bucket stumbles onto the gangway. “Where’d she go?” He rushes to the railing. The free air plays with his head of messy curls and little blue bowtie. Dog dutifully plods alongside his creator. Jasper eyes the robot and its creepy, camera-eyed face.

Bucket leans over the edge hunting the sky for any sign of the jet. But it's gone.

The two newly-made-men stand shoulder-to-shoulder overlooking the flightline harboring the colony’s prized aircraft, eleven remaining F-22 Raptors, stored properly in their individual hangers. Where they’re supposed to be... Except for one missing Raptor that should have never of left the maintenance hangar.

“What are you doing here?” Jasper growls under his breath. Bucket doesn't have the clearance to be in the tower.

“Well... what are you doing?” Bucket asks right back, “and what happened to your nose?”

They size each other up. Evenly matched in strength and stature. Both big, both unstoppable.

You followed me. Jasper pushes Bucket to the side.

Bucket steadies himself, acutely aware of the 300-foot drop to the tarmac below. “What’s going on?” Bucket tries to calm his breathing, without success. “Where’d Andy go?”

Jasper yanks open a door, letting it slam shut behind him as he steps inside the air traffic control tower's command room. “Andy just STOLE a jet! Why?” Bucket yanks the door open again, following just a step behind, “Why would she do that? She’ll be served the death penalty for this!”

Jasper's mind buzzes with the fury of an enraged wasp’s nest. *What is she thinking? After everything we’ve been through...* Jasper's muscles convulse with anger. *She... TOOK HER!*

“Why would she steal a jet?” Bucket yells as Dog plods loyally behind him. The two young men pace inside the dimly lit interior as the shadows grow among them as night takes hold.

“Loose Screw!” Jasper snaps, “Let me think!”

Bucket staggers, Jasper’s never called him that - not once. “What is wrong with you?”

“Jasper?” A soft voice speaks from the shadows, the boys to turn their heads to the whispering darkness.

“Who's there?” Bucket asks. But Jasper knows exactly who it is.

Jade. He scans the darkness for his sister, “What?”

Jade materializes out of the blackness, arms crossed, moonlight outlining her petite silhouette and shaven head. The dim light glistens off the ruby necklace around her neck. The three eighteen-year-olds eye one another, all of them still in their formal commissioning attire. Each wondering why the others are here – unauthorized - in the air control tower.

“What are you doing here, Jade?” Jasper asks his twin.

“What do you think?” She steps forward, hands on her hips. “Mom sent me to check on you and as usual you're up to no good.”

“So? You going to snitch to mom?” Jasper barks back.

“Hell no.” Jade shakes her shaven head.

“Andy!” Bucket mumbles with dismay. “She... She...” He chokes, on the verge of tears. He wonders over to the flight controls, his engineering eyes searching the mechanical components, fingers reach across buttons and navigational devices. “How do we get her back?” Bucket turns to the twins with gleaning wet eyes. “What went wrong? Why did she do this?”

Jade pushes her brother out of the way, side-eyeing him as he signs. Jasper gives his sister a curt nod. A silent agreement. Jade rests a delicate hand on Bucket’s shoulder. “It’ll be okay.”

“HOW? She just flew over the wall!” He points a finger at Jasper. “You! You had something to do with this! What did you do? Why are you bleeding?”

Jasper pinches his nostrils, stopping the bloody nose.

Jade steps between the now commissioned adults, grown men in the eyes of Utoya Air Base, but all she sees are bickering boys. “Calm down. We need to be levelheaded about this.”

“Andy was fleeing for her life!” Bucket pushes his curly hair out of his eyes, “Why ELSE would she take off like that? This doesn’t make any sense. Is she running from YOU?” He jabs a finger into Jasper’s chest.

Jasper smacks Bucket’s hand, “I was trying to STOP HER.”

“Oh really?” Bucket squares his shoulders, “Who is that girl she was carrying? Huh? What do you make of that!”

“SHUT UP!” Jade erupts. Bucket and Jasper freeze. In their entire lives, never – had they ever – heard Jade raise her voice. Jade capitalizes on their stunned silence to glare at them both. “Would you focus? Andy NEEDS us.”

“I can fly.” Jasper suggests, “I’ll get her.”

“No.” Jade holds up a hand, “We need to be smart about this. Quiet. Or else you’ll lose your position as counselor and Andy will lose her life! The colony might not notice one missing broken plane, but two jets? No - no one can know. For our sake, or for Andy’s.”

The sibling’s stare. Jasper grits his teeth, *why does Jade always have to be right?*

“I agree.” Bucket nods, “We must do what’s best for Andy.”

Jasper groans, lifts his huge arms into the air, “Well then, what do we do?”

Jade sighs, composing herself, calculating, she glancing out the window, to the airfield and the colony’s great outer wall and beyond that – The Wildlands. “Send drones.”

Andrea Tanaka

4 days, 22 hours, 9 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

What the fuck am I doing?

Andy checks her perimeters. The stolen F-22 raptor races above the treetops. *Nowhere to land. Nowhere to go.*

“MEOW!” Batcat uses his clawed wings to clamber across the dashboard, his skeletal, hairless tail lashes in disapproval.

“We are not turning around.”

“MEE-OOWWRRROW!” He protests, ears folding behind his wrinkled, fanged face as Andy throws the plane into a sharp turn. The alcohol fades. That warm, intoxicating power gives way to cold clarity. Everything sharpens - along with a panic-inducing flood of memories that Andy tries to shove down.

“MEOW!”

“You’re not helping!” She shouts over the roar of the engine.

“MEEEEOW!”

This time she looks back. *Oh, great.* Three drones scream toward them. *They're coming for us.* Andy banks left. The drones mirror her move. *Who sent them?*

For the first time since takeoff, she truly feels the girl's weight - buckled into the same single seat. She glances down. Limp, pale. Slumped against Andy's red dress. *Why her?* Resentment creeps in. The girl's body looks sculpted, untouched. Still-wet, flame-red hair spills across Andy's arm. Too perfect. Too innocent. Andy can't decide whether it's intrigue - or hatred - she feels.

"MEOW!" Batcat paws Andy's hand that grips the throttle forcing her eyes to snap back to the sky. They're in the mountains now. Large limestone cliffs jut out like knives. Andy curls the plane into a narrow valley. *How long was I staring at her? A second? Two?* That's all it takes to make mistakes in the air. Through her fighter helmets visor Andy focuses ahead. *What will they do to us if we go back?*

A red warning light ignites. BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

Shit.

She needs to land. *Soon.* She glances at the unbroken rainforest hugging the sides of storm carved cliffs. *Nowhere to land. Nowhere to go. Alien territory.*

"MEEOW!"

The drones have surrounded her. A static buzz - the intercom comes to life.

"Andrea Tanaka!"

Jade.

The voice of her best friend - usually calm and steady, now shaking in fear. Three drones. One on each side, one on her tail. Andy activates her aux. "Did you send them?"

"Turn the plane around, Andy!" Jade pleads with her.

She answers with motion, not words. She rips the stick, rolling the plane onto its side, slamming into afterburner. The Raptor whips around a cliff edge. BOOM! The left drone smashes into the canyon wall and bursts into flames behind her. Despite herself, Andy smiles. Simulator hours well spent.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" Jade yells in her helmet's headset. "You're destroying colony property!"

Oliver Patel

4 days, 22 hours, 8 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

“Did she just destroy a drone?” Bucket breathes, astounded.

“WHAT IS SHE THINKING!” Jasper angrily smacks a pile of paperwork to the ground. “Jade, step aside.” Jasper snatches the speaker from his sister, “ANDY – Listen to me. I am your counselor and I ORDER you to stand down!”

Bucket paces the control towers command room, hands on his head. *Why is she doing this? Why did she leave?* Stress-sweat forms at his brow. His anxiety is trained on the darkening clouds out the window. *Why would you leave me?*

“Don’t do this Andy.” Jasper growls into the microphone. “Don’t do this to me.”

Bucket pushes himself between the twins and reaches for the microphone. “Let me talk to her!”

Jasper holds out his arm, stopping him, the newly-made-men glare at one another, mistrust festering. “I am her counselor.” Jasper growls. “She’ll listen to me.”

“And I am her husband!”

“Future-husband.” Jasper mutters.

The two stand, nose-to-nose.

“Oh, for the love of the colony!” Jade snatches the microphone out of her brother’s hands “Andy! Stop this!” Jade shouts into the speaker.

The three listen but Andy doesn’t respond.

“Let me talk to her” Bucket begs.

“Hold on.” Jade lifts an impatient finger. Holding her ear to the device waiting for Andy to say something – anything.

“What’s happening now?” Jasper asks.

Bucket offers a hand to Jade. “Give it me.”

“FINE.” Jade slaps the microphone into Bucket’s chest. “Talk to her and leave the testosterone outside!”

Bucket nods, a pitiful *‘thank you’* and slides into a chair, gently he sets the microphone down. He inhales, then presses the ON button. “Andy...”

I know you can hear me. I know you're scared. His whole body yearns for her, wishing to reach out, take hold, wrap her in his arms and never let go. But he can't. He gently leans into the microphone, cupping it in his hands. *Answer me, Andy.*

He presses the button again, closes his eyes, and whispers into the speaker. "Andy.... I love you." Static answers. *I know you're there, just say something. Anything. Answer me. Please. Come back to me.*

Please.

Andrea Tanaka

4 days, 22 hours, 6 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

I love you? No, you can't. Tears leak from Andy's eyes. *What even is love?* She fogs up her helmet. *Stop crying!* Andy blinks, frustrated with herself for letting emotions control her and refocuses her eyes just in time to see a cliff appear through the treetops. A wall of hard rock.

"SHIT!" It's too late, *we're going to crash.* Andy lets go of the throttle as the cliff races to meet her. A gaping hole, a cave, the rockface screams with a stalactite fang-toothed mouth. The very earth howling for her to: STOP!

Quickly Andy tightens her straps and grabs the eject handle below her seat. She holds tight to the girl and yanks hard. The canopy explodes open, her seat rips into the air, she punches out of the aircraft just as the raptor collides into the cliff erupting into a toxic plume of fire and gas.

The seat spins the girls through burning air, flaming debris rains down in all directions, Andy pulls on her straps, feels the single but powerful jolt as the parachute deploys. Andy cranes her neck up as the parachute unfurls properly, "Fuck yeah!" Batcat, glides by their side as they descend. Through the fire and billowing smoke, a fearsome scream reverberates through the carnage on the cliffside. *That's organic.*

But Andy can't dwell over the eerie sound as the fiery blast rains hot sparks on her parachute. Molten bits burn holes in the fabric. "Oh fuck!" Andy can't hide her dismay as the

parachute's integrity goes up in smoke. Andy and the girl loose altitude as a second ear-splitting shriek calls out through the roar of fire. The long-drawn-out howl of some ungodly beast.

Dropping!

They fall. Fast. The burning holes in the parachute widen as the forest races up to greet them. Andy closes her tear-stricken eyes and holds tight to the girl, bracing herself as the canopy swallows them whole.

Jade Parker

4 days, 22 hours, 6 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

The microphone shrieks with metallic rage before silencing completely.

“What happened?” Jade asks.

Bucket sets the microphone down, connection severed.

“FUCKING HELL ANDREA!” Jasper punches the table, blood from his nose flings everywhere as Jade calculates contemplating conclusions.

Bucket spins around to the twins, who annoyingly appear to know more than him. “Did she CRASH?”

Jade stares with empty eyes, “We don't know that for sure. We just lost connection.”

Jasper fumes, his entire body coils up, ready to hit something again.

“So, what does that mean?” Bucket stands, not ready to give up, “What does that MEAN!” He shouts at Jade. Who's motionless, except for her darting eyes that stare at the floor. She raises a hand to her mouth, thinking.

Jade finds her inner calm, “It means, the drones are down, and she got away.”

“So, we find her.” Bucket demands. “We find her, and we bring her back.”

“We bring them BOTH back.” Jasper huffs under his enraged breath.

Jade glares at her brother, then at Bucket. *Why am I always babysitting fools? If everyone just followed directions like they're supposed to, I wouldn't be dealing with any of this nonsense.* She can't help but sneer at the other two in the room. *You're supposed to be men now - why are you acting like boys?*

Bucket runs his hand through his messy hair, “We need the commander. We need help. Andy is out there all alone. I don’t care about the consequences; we can’t lose her.”

Jade walks to the air control towers exit. “I don’t know the full story and quite frankly I don’t care to,” she begins, “but if Andy was so quick to risk everything to leave. We might not be safe here.”

“What do you mean?” Bucket squints. “Andy slayed that perverted serial killer.”

“You know about that?” Jasper asks.

“Andy told me.” Bucket shoots him a look.

“That’s true,” Jade sighs, “but clearly Andy’s in trouble. We’re her closest friends. She trusts us and I trust her. But you know who I don’t trust? The commander.” Jade raises a hand, “I vote we don’t say anything.”

Frustrated, Bucket nostrils enlarge as he inhales. “Not telling the commander is crazy.”

“Jade is always right so... yeah.” Jasper raises his hand, “I agree. Let’s not say anything.”

Bucket side-eyes Jasper who’s currently topping his list of most unliked individuals.

“Bucket?” Jade asks, “What do you say? This only works if we all agree on the next step - together.”

The twins wait for his response. Bucket sucks in air between gritted teeth. He’s outnumbered and he knows it, “Fine. Yes, I agree. If that what's best for Andy.”

“We will find her.” Jade softens. “First thing in the morning, okay? Because right now, my mother is wondering where we are.” She offers a small pat on Bucket’s shoulder. “Let’s go back to the party, pretend everything’s normal – for Andy’s sake.”

Bucket nods, giving into the logic, the plan. “I know a spot where we can meet in the morning. Take the third hallway from the commissary. You will find a utility closet on your right, it's unlocked. Go in, there's a rusted ladder. Take it to the top.”

“So...” Jasper squares off with Bucket, “that’s your little secret spot?” Bucket shoots him a look, as if daring him to come any closer.

“I’m going back to the party to show face,” Jade glares at them both, “I expect both of you fools to be there.” She steps out the control tower door and SLAMS the door behind her. Jade looks up into the storm clouds of the night sky, her heart breaks.

Why Andy? Why did you leave us?

Oliver Patel

4 days, 21 hours, 59 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

Rain picks up outside. It batters the windows as Bucket and Jasper sulk in the dark, cold control room. “You know,” Jasper heads to the door after his sister, “you can’t marry Andy...” He grips the door handle. “...until she accepts you.”

Andy will accept me. Bucket folds his arms, confident, “I have five days.”

Bucket catches Jasper’s glistening smile, pearly white teeth shine in the dark, it’s eerie, soulless. “Then we have five days to get our girl back.” Jasper shuts the door leaving Bucket alone with his thoughts.

Our girl?

For one quick and unsettling second, Bucket wonders: *what if Andy likes someone else?* But he shakes the idea off and pulls out his ring box to peer inside at his engagement ring. *We’re destined for each other.*

Jade Parker

4 days, 21 hours, 30 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

I wanted this.

Jade lies still, eyes wide, she doesn’t dare move. The twenty-one-year-old man beside her kept his promise. Conrad made no unwanted advances. Jade’s aware of his body, so close to hers. His snore fills their matrimonial chamber as he breathes peacefully on her shoulder. *I wanted this.* Her cheeks flush. *I picked you.*

Lying in bed beside her fiancé, Jade can’t separate her crush from the face of the serial killer who hurt her. Ken Tanner’s features are prominent in his son. It’s unnerving. Jade plays back

the murder in her mind: the deranged counselor's attempted assault and Andy stabbing him to death.

You're nothing like your father. Jade tells herself as she examines her fiancé's face, with those dramatic eyebrows and prominent cheekbones. A face she dreamed of getting this close to.

Our first kiss was awful...

Jade sighs. She's not good at this: being someone's somebody. She's always been Andy's. *So why? Why did Andy run?* Jade replays the sound of Andy taking off, committing an impossible crime by stealing a F-22 raptor.

She shifts in the bed.

Are you even alive out there?

She stares long and hard at the ceiling above her.

Why did you run?

Conrad twitches beside her, suddenly tossing an arm over her chest. Jade catches her breath, holds it. Every nerve in her body taught. She dares not move for fear of waking him.

I chose this. She reminds herself.

Oliver Patel

4 days, 21 hours, 28 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

Andy would have told me if she liked someone...

Bucket's confidence is slipping as he paces his marital chambers. The new housing is twice the size of a dorm, with an extra-large bed meant for two at its center. A locked side door leading to the child's chamber will remain closed off until a pregnancy is confirmed. Bucket strides through this space meant for Andy and him, for their future kids. For their future. He walks alone, with only Dog analyzing him from the floor.

Andy likes me. Bucket sits down on the bed and drops his head into his hands. His left leg nervously taps the concrete. *I'm sure of it.* Bucket pulls out his ring box and peers inside at the golden ring. Dog stays silent, studying him with unblinking camera lenses. *I know Andy better*

than anybody. I was there the day her father died. It was me who visited her in the hospital. I'm the one she has dinner with. I've always been there. I will always be there.

Why did you run, Andy? Bucket closes his fists around the bedsheets. A new and terrible thought occurs. *Jasper...* Bucket feels a wave of nausea. *Did Jasper reject London because... he likes Andy?*

Bucket gets up, tipping dangerously close to fury. He opens and closes his ring box. Dog stares at him, wordlessly processing Bucket's racing heartbeat. "It can't be." He begins to pace again, the spacious room feels constricting, claustrophobic. *Could there be something more than cadet camaraderie between them? More than just two friends having each other's backs? Does Jasper know her better than I?*

He inhales, eyes landing on the bed. *Our bed.* For a split-second, Bucket imagines himself laying in it, *beside her.* Using his arm to fold around the small of her waist, to press his ear into her chest, to listen to her heartbeat, her breathing. *To be that... close...*

He slowly shuts his eyes and shakes his head. He grabs his keycard and lab coat and heads out the door. "Come Dog. We're leaving."

Jasper Parker

4 days, 21 hours, 27 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

"Oh yeah... you."

"Yeah... me." London sits on their matrimonial bed, arms crossed. Jasper carelessly slams the door behind him and enters the room he's supposed to occupy for the rest of his existence. Their room is dark, damp, and filled with spite. *It's a prison cell...*

"I tried to go to my old dorm room," Jasper shrugs, "but I was locked out."

London glares at him, unamused.

"Okay look..." Jasper tries again, though he's frustrated and very, very tired, "... no hard feelings alright? We're just..." he struggles for non-offensive vocabulary, "... not compatible."

Jasper slogs into the room. He points to the large bed, “You don’t mind if I crash here then? It’s been a long day.”

“Sure, take the bed. What do I care?” London mutters.

Jasper isn’t listening, he’s collapsed onto the mattress. Eyes closed, the alcohol wins. Exhausted by an aching body, beat from its first day in the field and the strain of the alterations. He falls asleep instantly.

London gets up from the corner of the bed, but hovers. Her shadow cuts across Jasper's body. Her dark silhouette glides over his well-defined back, in the dips and edges of powerful, lean muscle mass. An impossible psyche. With a gleeful smile, she whispers over him. “I know about her.”

London stomps her heels and slams the door on her way out.

Jasper doesn’t budge.

London Graham

4 days, 21 hours, 15 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

Is my existence a joke?

London glides down the halls keeping to the shadows. It feels good to be wrapped up in the comforting familiarity of the night. In darkness she becomes a ghost in an underworld of her own making.

Jasper is such an insect.

London can’t help but scowl at how Jasper publicly humiliated her in front of everyone. *So what if I’m not conventionally attractive?* London hadn’t expected the commander's son to be so vain. It’s out of character. *Jasper, the golden boy. With his cute little paintings and his secret flower garden. Something’s gone wrong with him.* “Asshole.” London concludes with a nod to herself. *He doesn’t deserve me.*

What is this? Blood? London takes out her messenger, activating its flashlight. She beams the light across the blood trail on the floor.

London carefully takes a blood sample. If she's learned anything it's science never lies the way people do. She holds up the blood sample, *I wonder? Who do you belong to?*

She follows the blood droplets to a door which leads to the runway. She pauses at the exit. A sign reads: *authorized personnel only.*

Hah, like that's stopped me before. London opens the door and steps out into the night. She uses her flashlight to light the way. Sure, enough the suspicious blood trail leads out onto the flightline. *I'll be dammed.* Her eyes widen at an unbelievable sight. *An F-22 is gone.*

London grins as she holds her blood sample. "Andrea Fucking Tanaka." *What have you done now?*

Garret Widget

4 days, 20 hours, 55 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

"Ugh, my face..." Garrett wakes, rolling himself onto his stomach. "AGH!" He yelps. Shattered glass shreds his skin. "Good god." He winces, rising to his knees, the ground is littered in glass shards that cut deep. Sourced from the shattered cryotube which lays hatched open like a broken egg in the center of his now destroyed underground lab.

Stumbling on his feet, Garret presses a hand to his swollen eye. Viciously scratched by Batcat's claws. "Doc's little mutant." With one eye closed shut he tries to reboot his computer as the monitor flickers on and off, casting wicked light over his ruined research.

Andrea Tanaka, what have you done?

He catches a glimpse of himself in a shard of glass on the floor, bruised, beaten. *My perfect face...*

He runs a hand through his thick hair, a reminder that the research works. He just needs to fix the lab and then he can fix his face.

"You're a janitor you're supposed to clean messes, not make them." A pair of angry heels crunch broken glass underfoot as her silhouette enters the scene of the crime.

It's you. Garret turns away not wanting his boss to see his cat-scratched eye. “I heard your lab rat got killed tonight.”

“Ken Tanner had his uses.”

“I thought you wanted Ken to kill her.”

She doesn't respond to that, “his body is still in Andrea's dorm. You'll be expected to clean it up.”

Garret grimaces. *Andrea Tanaka and the messes she makes...*

“And clean this up.” His boss makes her way to the broken cryochamber. She inspects the empty husk. Hatched, like a cicada breaking free from the ground after eternal dormancy. She selects a folder discarded amongst the glass. Doctor Tanaka's forbidden research. Her fingers glaze over the logo of the winged insect taking flight. *Project Cicada Rising.* She killed the doctor for it. She will continue to kill until the research is complete. “How long until you get this up and running once again?” She asks.

The monitor flickers on and off. The latest test results flash on the screen: *85% complete.* Garret chooses to not mention the glitches, the incongruencies. But the truth is: he's close.

Their dream will be executed. They will make people better. *Change them.* “It'll be ready for the weddings.” Garret concludes.

She nods, “Good.” She surveys the vaulted walls full of trapped souls, “It's good to keep you're promises.”

“What promise?” Garret clears his desk, ready to work.

She laughs, “that I'm coming for them all.”

Oliver Patel

4 days, 19 hours, 12 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

“You're not a night owl,” London declares, entering the engineering department she flicks on the bright florescent lights. Illuminating Bucket hunched over his workstation. He looks

at her with tired, bloodshot eyes. “If you don’t say anything then I won’t either.” London gives a thumbs up.

Go away London. Bucket doesn’t have the energy for this.

“Don’t worry, I will not report you to the authorities.” London draws near, dragging a chair with her. She sits down beside him, and nods to Dog who robotically wags his tail at her arrival. “Let me guess... rough night?”

Bucket doesn’t move from his seat, doesn’t blink. His hurting heart doesn’t care to entertain small talk.

“Want divorce papers?”

Just leave me be.

“I’m sorry; that was rude of me.” London crisscrosses her legs bundles her neon green hair into a bun. “Want to talk about it?”

He grumbles tiredly, “I don’t know you.”

“Ouch. You know... there’s always room for getting to know someone.”

“I’m sorry...” Bucket sighs, ashamed of himself. *That’s no way to treat someone.* “I am having a rough night.”

“Fate cursed you?” She whistles. “Same. Jasper can’t even look at me.”

She’s paired to Jasper... fate has indeed cursed us.

“How’s Andy?” London asks, “what is little Miss Popular Pilot doing?”

I should lie. Bucket shifts nervously at his workstation. “Truth? I don’t know how Andy is. That’s the problem.” He sighs.

London nods. “Relationships are hard. You must wake up every day and fight to stay together, otherwise you will wake up every day and fight to be apart.”

“Harsh.”

London shrugs, “love isn’t easy.”

“What do you want, London?”

“Oh!” London’s sits up, at a loss for words. “No one’s ever asked me that before.”

“Well, I asked.” Bucket smiles faintly, too tired to think straight.

“I want this war to end. I want to marry the love of my life. I just want everyone to be okay. So, Oliver, what is it that you want?”

Bucket is unable to inhale enough oxygen. “I thought I knew what I wanted, but... now? I’m not sure.” It’s a lie – there’s only one thing he wants... and it’s disappeared beyond the wall.

London nods, leaning in her seat. She reaches for the ring box laying on the desk and opens it. This time she doesn’t pull the ring out. Bucket doesn’t even try to stop her, the mere sight of the gold threatens tears at his eyes. “I can help you. I’m good at keeping secrets.” She gently closes the ring box and sets it to the side.

“Why do you want to help me?”

“Because... why not?”

“I don’t really know you,” Bucket muses, again.

London grins, “well, you could.”

Andrea Tanaka

4 days, 12 hours, 43 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

Andy’s head throbs, threatening to split open like a gardener’s gourd cracked by a shovel. The concussion, she can’t escape it. The headache is only eclipsed by a fierce stabbing between her ribs. She groans.

“Meee-rowww,” Batcat grumbles.

“I know!” Andy mutters. *I will feed you in just a moment!* She tries to wave him off as pain ricochets across her abdomen. Andy manages to sit up, and is greeted by the disapproving, red glare of her winged feline. “What are you so mad about, huh?”

The cat grumbles. Red eyes squinting.

“Why are you so mad? Huh?” Andy’s vision sharpens revealing a formidable jungle surrounding them. She sobers up. “Oh shit.”

I’m in the Wildlands.

Andy pries off her helmet and tosses it to the side. It rolls, instantly absorbed into the underbrush. Her hand reaches to her head to the patch of dried blood crusted into her black hair. “I’m alive.”

“Mew.” Batcat agrees, tail swishing.

The hangover is real. *Adults were not joking about alcohol.* Andy rubs her pounding head and senses this weight... pressing against her. She can't ignore it. Andy lets out a quivering breath and slowly raises a hand. Carefully, Andy pulls away the burned parachute fabric blanketing her. There, lying on top of her, face down, is the girl.

It's you.

Andy scrambles from underneath the girl's body. Quickly she covers her up with the parachute. Hiding the breasts, the arms, the torso. *I don't need to keep seeing that...* Andy's face flushes red. She gets to her feet, only to keel over “Ahh!” Pain implodes at her side. She spots the problem, there, stabbing her ribs, shards of red glass.

Buck's red rose...

The glass ornament is embedded into her abdomen. Andy rips it out. Her purple tinted blood oozes from the open wound. She holds up the glass flower, bent, broken, demented. She angrily chucks it into the bushes, grimacing at the bloody gash. *Ignore the pain.*

There's a bigger problem. Andy checks back on her unmoving passenger. *Is she dead?* Andy freezes, cheeks burning. Not wanting to get any closer. *Dammit, I need to check.* Andy looks away as her fingers contact the girl's neck. *A pulse.* Andy retracts her hand. “I respect you for not dying.”

Andy rises, her red ballgown is shredded and so are the trees. Broken branches and tangled paracord display the violent path where Andy and the girl ripped through the canopy. Andy scans the forest floor where they crashed. *Where's the seat?* Emergency supplies are always under the seat. *There.* Lodged between some massive tree roots Andy makes her way to the remains of jet 12's seat.

Andy pulls out the supply bag. But when she opens it - it's empty. No beacon. No bandages. No compass. Nothing.

Ground crew must have removed all the emergency equipment. The only thing Andy uncovers is a small pocketknife. She holds it up. Her only weapon against whatever might be lurking. *I guess this is better than nothing.*

Exposed in just spandex and sports bra Andy peels off the red dress. Using the knife Andy cuts paracord and parachute fabric, wrapping it tightly around her waist, she bandages her injury. *Hopefully that will stop the bleeding.*

Andy takes in this alien world. Towering trees. Earthy ground. Diversified leaves. Pivoting, knife drawn, Andy surveys the complexity of the rainforest around her. She searches the shadows and listens to countless chirps, rustles, and snaps. The jungle hums with a million lifeforms. A new mission takes hold. A familiar narrative: survival

Water. Andy ignores the pounding in her skull and ache at her side. *Water is the first thing you need.* Andy motions with her new knife. “Stay with the girl Batcat.”

Batcat doesn't need to be told twice, swooping onto the parachute fabric, he parks himself on the girl's warm stomach. Tucking his wings, he settles in. Ready for a much-needed nap. Andy leaves them, slowly she creeps into the jungle, disappearing into shadows with a slight limp in her step. Andy keeps the small knife out, ready for who knows what. *God, I wish I had a gun right now. Even a jamming cadet rifle...*

She walks, all alone with nothing but pain and thoughts.

Jasper... how could you?

Despite everything, her heart beats for him.

Andy's Memory

With a gun in her lap Andy angles her neck to look out the back window of the Humvee, as the large, reinforced steel gates close behind them as they leave the protection of the colony. She feels a temperature difference, a sudden darkness as the sky disappears above, hidden behind 300-foot-tall trees.

Jasper leans close, “I'm glad I have you, Andy.”

His voice fills her soul with fire. She smiles, a real smile, “I couldn't imagine doing this without you, Jasper.”

His blue eyes shine, “it's me and you. Always.”

Andrea Tanaka

4 days, 12 hours, 22 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

It's all a lie.

Andy pushes through the dense understory as a hurt radiates inside her. Not a wound or a headache, something deeper, something worse. *You were my friend.* She keeps her feet moving swinging the knife forward slicing through foliage. *I trusted you...* the ground thickens with muck. Andy drags her military boots through the mud.

I loved you, Jasper.

Andy comes to a stop; the muddy soil gives way to a shallow pool. *Water.* With overwhelming thirst and an intense dryness on her tongue she hovers over the murky puddle. *I mean... it IS water.* The tannin-brown liquid is infested. *Ick, mosquito larvae and water fleas....*

Andy is so thirsty though. Her tongue feels like it's cracking. Despite the larvae, the puddle tempts her. *Is a virus a better death than dehydration?*

Andy bends over the puddle and notices her mismatched eyes staring back at her. One gold, one black. *I guess one of my contact lenses fell out when I crashed.* She doesn't care. It's irrelevant. Cupping her hands, she scoops up a handful of puddle water. She slowly brings it to her lips.

DRIP.

Another droplet hits the water in her hand, Andy looks up. An enormous, partially unfurled leaf hangs above her head.

Droplets dribble from the tip of the giant leaf. Andy inspects the plant, to her surprise clean rainwater pools inside the leaf's concave center, creating a natural bowl. Andy does not hesitate. She gently tips the giant leaf to her lips and drinks. Fresh water washes over her cracked tongue, filling her with instant, unmistakable, relief.

Something's on my neck... Andy looks up. There, dangling overhead are the large beady eyes of a giant wolf spider. An arachnid bigger than a dinner plate. The spider leaps onto Andy as she slips into the puddle. Its enormous hairy eight-legged body wraps around Andy's torso. It CLICKS its fanged mandibles angling for a death bite to her neck arteries. Andy swings the pocketknife around and bludgeons its abdomen. She stabs again and again as the spider lunges for her face.

"GET OFF!" Andy stabs the head and twists the knife. The spider's mandibles reach for her, once, twice. Andy twists the knife and kicks the giant spider off. The creature twitches in death. Disgusted, covered in goo, Andy yanks the knife out.

"Great." Andy plucks each of needle-sized poisonous spider hairs from her arm. Red itchy welts form in their place. She scans the canopy, making sure there aren't any more spiders. The wind whistles through the treetops, like it's laughing at her.

I'm going to die in here.

Andy takes a breath. *I'll either live or die by my sins.* The jungle only offers disease, death, and despair. She thinks of what awaits her inside the wall, her friends, her engagement, the death penalty. *This was a mistake. I've been able to redeem myself before...* Keeping the knife out and ready she heads back to the crash site. *I need to go home.*

"RONJJAAAAA!"

A young woman's earth-shattering scream slices through the dense rainforest, gripped in terror. Andy's never heard such heartbreak; she breaks into a sprint.

Mia Mendoza

4 days, 11 hours, 57 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

Tucked into a tight ball Batcat rests his head on the girl's chest. Badump. Badump. Badump. Batcat's ears flicker. Her heartbeat is off. The girl twitches, eyes darting beneath closed lids. Dreaming.

"Ronja..." the girl mumbles in agony.

This is curious for him; Andy doesn't talk in her sleep. His large bat ears swivel forward.

“Ronja!” The girl tosses her head back and forth. Batcat stretches and shakes loose his wings. Another naptime interrupted. Tears spill from the corners of her eyes, “RONJAAAAAA!” The girl screams, scaring Batcat up into the sky.

Mia sits up violently, wide-awake, sucking in air and snot as tears cloud her vision. She GASPS. “I... I...?” Mia stops. Her face fills with confusion. *Why am I crying?* She lifts an arm to wipe away the tears blinding her vision as Batcat flutters back down and lands in her lap.

Keeping as still as possible, Mia freezes, hand mid-wipe. Mind racing, she stares face-to-face with a hideous, red-eyed demon. “Mew.” Batcat introduces himself. Knobby tail swishing side to side across the girl’s bare legs.

“EeeeeeeAAAHHHHHHHH!!!!!!” Mia LEAPS to her feet, flinging Batcat off her.

Andrea Tanaka

4 days, 11 hours, 48 minutes
Until Wedding Ceremony

Another ear-splitting scream fills the forest. Knife in hand Andy picks up the pace, she tears through dense greenery.

WHAT’S HAPPENING?

A flock of squawking birds take flight as new-world capuchins holler and whoop, the forest is unsettled by the commotion. Andy bursts through the vegetation and onto the crash site landmarked with the shredded parachute and broken jungle. With her back pinned to a tree, Mia clutches parachute fabric and madly swings a measly stick in self-defense.

The girls lock eyes; equally taken aback by the other.

It's the girl who’s haunted her dreams. The girl whose story has been erased. The girl Jasper wants to marry.

“WHAT.” Mia hysterically waves her pathetic stick. “THE HELL.” She points it at Batcat. “IS THAT?”

“Mar-ow” The feline folds his ears back, offended.

Still gripping the knife. Andy steps forward, “that’s Batcat.”

“That’s not a cat!” Mia swings the stick. “Cats can’t fly!”

She's freaking out.

“Where are we?” Mia asks, scanning the surrounding rainforest.

“I don't know.” Andy admits, stepping forward, she raises her hands submissively.

Eliciting calm, like she was trained after losing a fight against an opponent.

Mia points her stick to Andy, warning her to not come any closer. “Who are you?”

Who are you?

Andy hates that question. In one angry burst Andy lurches forward and snatches the pitiful stick from Mia's hands and chucks it into the jungle. *You have no idea what I've given up for you! I just saved your life!*

Terrified and pinned against the tree, Mia cowers, eyes pleading. She clutches the parachute.

Andy stands so close to her she can smell the scent of pine needles in Mia's red hair. But it's the fear in the girl's eyes that brings the deep shame. Andy backs off, humiliated by her outburst.

“I'm Andy.”

“I'm” Mia holds the tree for support, eyes widening. She tries again, gripping the bark.

“I'm...” She chokes, terrified, eyes begging Andy for help. “...I don't know who I am.”

I don't think I know who I am either...

Pain and hurt circle the air between them. Andy's tired of it. Tired of labels, the ranks, the rules, she exhales, “I guess it's time to see what we are really made of.”

--To be continued--