

REDSHIFT

BY BLOOD OR BY STAR
BOOK 1

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Temple Dark Books

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PROLOGUE

It was five minutes before the end of the world, and no one knew. Before Milune became the galaxy's newest asteroid field, it was home to 2 billion people, mostly human. One of them was a nine-year-old boy named Abraham Zeeben...

The obsidian spire loomed ahead of their car as they glided down the boulevard. It lanced the sky like a black dagger, so high Abraham felt dizzy when he craned his neck to see the top. Large glass panes tinted maroon in the soft glow of sunset. His father's latest building stood proudly on the Viridian City skyline, the apex of his career as a locally renowned architect.

Cramped sidewalks between the tower and Terran Ford Spaceport were filled with crowds of stargazers and tourists from far-flung star systems all come together to see The Passing. The wet blacktop smell of recent rainfall was concealed by concession booths stocked with rows of confectionary treats, made fresh on the spot. Most potent were steaming layers of fresh bread doused in butter and crusted with brown sugar, a favorite local dessert called Earth Bread.

Abraham preferred his red bean ice cream.

"It's nice. I guess," his brother remarked. Ice cream drizzled down the tan skin of his hand. His dark hair was swooped to the side, covering one eye. The other eye was fixated on the carpet between his feet.

Abraham was only nine, but he knew David was different from other kids their age. He was a year older and remarkably good at school, but his photographic memory and tendency to correct everyone made it hard for him to make friends.

"That's a fine assessment, son," Father said, his dark, stubbled cheeks pinching with a smirk. "Kellina, you want to remind the boys why we're here? It isn't for a fancy new building."

Mom, holding slack in her seatbelt, turned to lean in between Abraham and his brother. Blonde hair ran in waves down her back, framing a gentle face with kind blue eyes. Her voice was mellifluous, like she was always just on the verge of singing.

"Seatbelt, sweetie." She buckled Abraham in, then pointed over her shoulder. "Any minute now, boys, we're going to see Dajun pass over the sky. The forest moon's passing is a sign of good fortune for the year to come."

David snorted. A spattle of melted red bean hit the ground. "Dajun orbits Sadaviridian faster than Milune, Mom. It's just science."

Father kept the wheel steady with one hand, watching the road attentively. He looked strange in casual attire, a simple long-sleeved shirt with no collar and no tie, tan cargo pants and gym shoes. He did something Abraham didn't see his father normally do; he smiled. "It's more than that, son. It's a beautiful sight."

As the words left his mouth a green light flared in Abraham's peripheral vision. The car's visor attempted to adjust to the strange color of Milune's solar eclipse. He glanced up at the sky with wide-eyed wonder.

Cheers broke out from the crowd in the street. Cameras flashed. Shutters clicked rapidly.

Dajun was there, glowing almost neon with the light reflected from the star, Sadaviridian. It was so close, he felt that if he jumped high enough, he could touch the tops of the trees. *I don't remember it being that close last year*, he thought.

David's cone plopped on his lap. "Mom," he said, "is it supposed to be that close?"

She looked to Father. "Obadiah?"

His face hardened. Eyes narrow, jaw set. He reached for the center console.

This doesn't feel right, Abraham thought, but couldn't say. His gut was in a knot. Squealing tires pulled his attention to his window. A red car barreled toward him like a speeding bullet.

Mom screamed.

Glass shattered.

Shrapnel radiated in a hailstorm.

The world spun in a roaring blur and went black.

Abraham came to on the street, covered in broken glass. Something was burning with an odor like oil or ethanol. His head thundered with pain. *Mom? Where's Mom?*

A few meters away, black smoke billowed from the two cars. A man lay on the concrete next to him, bloody face smashed in. It was not his father. *Was he wearing a seat belt?* Abraham thought. *I was. How did I get out of the car?*

Dajun, consumed in flame, barreled toward him like the eye of an angry god. The sky combusted as oxygen ignited in swirling lines of fire. Up and down the street, windows exploded, shards raining from the sky.

We need to get away! Mom! Father! David! Where are you?

Amid the screams and panic of the crowd, he saw something. A man wrapped in strange shadows with a hand outstretched toward the sky. His hand glowed bright red as if holding a flare, but his palm was open. Empty. Abraham didn't understand what he was seeing, not even when the man turned, exposing his face.

It was the face of a corpse. Dark, ashy skin, gray lips in a thin line, a black bar over his eyes like a censor line that covered inappropriate things on television. In the blink of an eye, the swirling shadows expanded, obscuring him from view.

Abraham scrambled to his feet, swaying with vertigo. Twisting metal shrieked behind him. The Interstellar Commerce tower – Father's building – was falling.

A shoulder in the gut knocked the wind out of him. The scent of tobacco and brown sugar washed over him. Father's strong arm held him. David hung limp under the other arm.

What about Mom?

He tried to look for her. The jostling from Father's running stride made it impossible to see anything. *Why are we leaving without her?*

Abraham closed his eyes. A sob wracked his throat. He tried to cry out, but the air was squeezed out of him by his father's iron grip. He heard the hiss of an airlock. Felt a seat cushion under him. Clicking from safety harnesses being secured. The last sound he heard before the shock pulled him into unconsciousness was the thrum of a fusion engine firing at full throttle.

PART 1: VERANDA

*Look back over the past,
with its changing empires that rose and fell,
and you can foresee the future, too.*

- **Meditations, Marcus Aurelius Antoninus**

CHAPTER 1

A hissing air vent like a constant whisper above his head. Steady vibrations under him. He was in a starship. He didn't want to be in a starship. He refused to open his eyes.

He wanted to be back on Milune with his mother. Her scream tore through his mind. Inhale sadness. Exhale grief.

Don't forget her face, he told himself. *She can't be gone. She can't be...*

He felt the ghost of her embrace and knew he would never again experience it in waking life.

Gravity was lighter on the ship, but he felt like a lead weight. Something poked him in the ribs. "Hey," the poker said, "wake up."

Abraham rubbed crusted tears from his eyes. Goosebumps sprouted from his skin and he shivered. Space was cold. He felt cold on the inside, too.

"Thanks for saving me. Back there."

She screamed.

The world spun around Abraham in a roaring blur. *I didn't save anybody*, he thought, his throat tightening.

The Interstellar Commerce building was falling.

Abraham blinked. The nightmare disappeared. He started breathing again. It was like sucking air through a straw and his sternum ached. He wasn't surprised when he lifted his shirt and saw a purple bruise.

I lost someone.

The poker was a kid about his age. Dirty blonde hair hung over the sides of his pale face. Weak lighting from the baseboards along the hallway lit his pale cheeks a shade of green where they weren't covered in soot. A miasma of smoke wafted off him.

"You were on Milune, too?" Abraham asked.

The kid nodded, his face scrunched. He sniffed sharply. "My parents..."

Abraham wrapped his arms around his knees and squeezed until they ached. Tears singed his eyes with a heat that felt like his face was melting. He didn't try to hold them back.

"My mother," he squeaked.

A series of beeps sounded from somewhere down the corridor.

"Hey kid," Father called, "you awake?"

Abraham used the wall to help himself stand up. His belly tickled with a tug of low G, but he settled easy enough. The muscles in his legs felt like they were submerged in quicksand. He inhaled a lungful of soot and mucus, coughing as he followed the tall, gangly boy into the crew station.

Father was strapped into the seat, harness splayed over him like a spider of belts and buckles. David sat next to him, straps dangling over the sides of the co-pilot's seat, reclined and sleeping with his mouth open.

Abraham's sobs softened enough for him to ask, "What's your name?"

"Larry," the boy said. "Larry Poplenko." He turned to Father and added, "I have...my grandparents...they're on Veranda."

Father laughed. A heavy, low sound that didn't sound like a laugh at all. "That'll do."

He typed on the control pad until a green and brown sphere materialized on the main screen. It made a slow orbit around a large red star. "Maximum velocity is...seven hundred lux, that puts us at...two days out. Strap in."

Abraham shivered. *Father knows how to fly a spaceship?*

His father's voice didn't sound like him at all. The vowels were pinched. The words seemed to crawl out of the back of his throat, like they didn't want to come out at all.

He's scared.

Abraham had never seen his father afraid before today. He strapped himself into the sensory operator terminal, watching Larry buckle into the navigator's chair opposite his own. Obadiah unbuckled himself to get David strapped up. He clicked one of the belts together and cinched it as tight as it would go, but it was still loose.

"Seats aren't designed for kids," he muttered under his breath.

Two days was going to be a long time. Abraham kept making eye contact with Larry. They would both look away, scan the room for a moment, then invariably end up staring at each other again.

"What happened?" Larry asked.

Abraham looked to his father.

A few moments passed in silence. The air felt heavy. The low decibel thrum of the FTL drive and everyone's breathing filled the empty space where conversation would have existed under different circumstances. Only, how could they talk about it? Their home world was gone. Larry's parents and Abraham's mother...dead.

Everything they had to talk about was gone.

The tears returned.

He clamped his teeth shut until his jaw ached. A sob lurched out of his chest. He cried. Through blurry eyes, he could see Larry crying, too.

Father said, "It's...things like this defy all logic."

"I didn't know...accidents could be so...big," Larry said.

The moon was on fire, and it was falling. Abraham's stomach leapt to his throat. The Shadow Man raised his hand, a red glow piercing the air above him.

"You okay?" Larry asked.

Abraham blinked. The nightmare dissipated. "I saw something, Father."

Father's chair squeaked as he repositioned himself. If he heard Abraham, he gave no sign of it. "There's a video log on this ship. It was no accident."

"What do you mean?" Larry asked.

Abraham wiped his eyes and leaned toward his father, hoping he would play the video. Hoping he wouldn't play the video. How did his father know it wasn't an accident? He wanted to know, but he didn't want to see anything. He didn't want to relive it.

Obadiah tapped the panel. The brown and green planet dissolved, replaced by a large spacecraft.

Viridian Square sprawled out over the foreground. The rest of the city district stretched to the horizon. It was carnage and chaos like Abraham had only seen in movies. The city resembled the exposed rib cage of a massive animal; buildings lay on their sides, stripped of windows. People ran between them like flies flitting around with no clear destination in mind but moving fast. The view from the ground looking up made it hard to spot the ship against the background of stars. Small red glows were the only thing that gave it away. The image was a live capture. It moved on an endless loop.

A crimson plume appeared at the nose of the ship, but instead of moving away, the ship followed the plume, tracing its path like a guide through the Milune sky. Across the midsection, slats glowed, swelled, and contracted.

"What is that? Why does it move that way?" Abraham asked.

"That," Father said, "is a riskar ship. They do things differently than we do."

"So, they're the ones who did this?" Larry asked.

"Why?" Abraham screamed.

"Just calm down, son."

Abraham jumped to his feet, but the straps pulled him back down. "Why did they do this? They ruined our home! They killed Mother!"

Father turned to face Abraham. His eyes were bloodshot with tears, but his face was stone cold. The stubble made him look harsh. Angry. "Why does anybody resort to violence?" He covered his bared teeth with his lips in a thin line, staring hard at Abraham. "Because they want what we have."

Larry was staring at him, chin tilted down.

He's scared, Abraham thought. We're all scared.

The forest moon was on fire. The Shadow Man was there. Mother screamed as the car slammed into them. Father's building was collapsing and –

– *and it wasn't an accident, Abraham realized. The riskar did this. They killed her.*

"I'll kill them!" Abraham shouted through clenched teeth. His stomach churned acid into the bottom of his throat. He was nauseous. He balled a fist and slammed it into the wall.

Larry flinched, but didn't say anything.

Abraham's hand hurt, but he didn't care.

"I'll kill them *all*."

Father shook his head. "It's not that simple, son. Life never is."

Abraham could not tear his eyes from the riskar ship. The way it flexed, swelling and shrinking in the middle, it could have been breathing. Like the whole ship was a giant fish with a red line reeling it in. This wasn't Abraham's first time seeing an alien ship. It wasn't even his first time seeing a riskar.

But it was his first day hating them.



On approach, Abraham decided Veranda looked nothing like Milune. The buildings were squat, small, and spread apart. Most of the houses were surrounded by rolling green hills and flat brown fields. Father talked back and forth with the ground tower as their ship descended. Trees and rows of high-stalked vegetation sprouted from the ground, reminding Abraham of turning pages in a pop-up book.

The temperature inside the ship rose when they landed. Abraham woke David with the same courtesy Larry had shown him earlier – a stiff jab to the ribs. David unstrapped himself with a grumble. The moment his eyes were open, they never left the viewport until Father began corralling them toward the airlock. Abraham was pinned between his brother and Larry.

"Where are we?" David whispered.

"Veranda," Larry said. "My grandparents live here."

The tarmac was a concrete pad with a few dozen spacecraft parked in circular depressions. Trees danced in the distance, a mirage caused by heat emanating from the ground. The sun was red, and about twice the size of what Abraham was used to seeing on Milune. The air was different, here, too. Almost moist.

He hated it.

Abraham shouldered his way between the other two boys and kept close behind his father. They entered the two-story air terminal through a glass sliding door. A wave of cool air puffed down from the ceiling. He could hear the commotion of people moving luggage and making small talk. Abraham blinked several times to adjust eyes to the darker space in the building, and when the white haze finally cleared, they were walking through a corridor marked CUSTOMS/FIRST TIME ARRIVALS.

Coming in with refugee status posed some problems initially with Veranda Customs, but Father was able to prove the escape from Milune with the video loop and the Captain's Log from the ship. The Customs Agent, a bald man in a blue security jumpsuit, put a hand on Father's shoulder. "Obadiah Zeeben, you're a damn hero, far as I'm concerned. As for citizenship, shouldn't be a problem. Veranda's on a 26-hour-day rotation, gravity is point one above standard. Close enough to Milune, for all intents and purposes."

Abraham's ears itched. He hadn't heard an accent like that before. It made the words come out slower than he was used to hearing.

The agent added, "The Navy already got a declaration of war presented to the Senate. If it passes, the Nine Nations will vote on it. Could be war sooner rather than later."

Father stiffened. "War? Since when do the Nine Nations do anything fast?"

The agent shrugged, handed Father a small box and waved him on. When they were outside, Father turned to Larry and put a hand on his shoulder. "Now, kid," he said with a weak smile, "do you remember where your grandparents live?"



The three boys became close, their friendship galvanized by grief and trauma. Larry's grandparents were kind enough to take in Obadiah, David and Abraham for a few months.

Obadiah had been a successful architect on Milune, but the local bank and his life's savings were drifting through space in pieces. The demand for fancy skyscrapers and towering apartment buildings was non-existent on the sprawling farmlands of Veranda. Here, the coin of the land was what you could dig out of the soil at harvest.

There was an abandoned plot of land just down the road from Larry's grandparents' house. It had once been a bustling tobacco farm, but the former owner had been an ancient risker who had mysteriously abandoned the property two months before the Milune incident. The bank seized the property without investigating and promptly listed it on the market. Obadiah broke the news over a family meeting one hot summer day. The Poplenkos sold their spacecraft to front the down payment for Obadiah. The Zeebens moved in a week after the loan was approved. Abraham was relieved to see no sign of the former occupant.

The news headlines were now referring to the destruction of Milune as 'The Collision'.

On Veranda the summers were hot, the winters cold, and the passing seasons were filled with quiet tension and bittersweet memories. Many nights Abraham would lie in his twin bed across from David and cry himself to sleep. Remembering the last time he saw his mother and the terrible end she had faced. Had she known Abraham was nearby? So close to her, but just out of reach? Was she thinking of him when she died? Was she scared? Did she suffer or was it quick, being crushed by a building or burned to a pile of ash in the blink of an eye?

Terrible visions to torture himself with, he knew.

Yet Abraham tortured himself night after night, unable to stop the torrent of feelings and thoughts that welled up inside. As time wore on, he realized he was grateful for the change of scenery. He came to appreciate the shift from a life of comfort to one of endless work presented by the challenge found in a family business. Especially one as 'character-building' as farming. Obadiah constantly beat that drum into the boys. When he could be bothered to speak.

It was a strange, dark shift Abraham saw in his father. On the one hand, Father was remarkably satisfied with the farming life. It put food on the table, kept a modest but comfortable roof over their heads, and occupied their time. The days went by with bruised and calloused hands, cracked and bloody knuckles, weathered skin from sun exposure mixed with the salt-and-onion stench of body odor from long hours in the fields. It was a miserable existence for a child, an emotional vacuum. There wasn't a single bedtime story told. No television to lull the mind into relaxation. Few words of encouragement.

David was the first to crack.

One day when the leaves were falling in varying shades of red and brown, after the field had been tended and the sun was nearly cut in half by the horizon, the Zeeben clan was settling in for supper. The handmade table creaked as David leaned against it, his body quivering with excitement and consternation.

He put forth a very convincing argument, stating the importance of a well-balanced education, for one. And two, that the boys could get their character-building on the farm *after* school, when their minds had already been challenged, and when the idleness of sitting at desks all day would leave them plenty of energy to tackle the near-endless workload that surrounded their home.

Father made a big show of pretending to refuse it, puckering his lips and puffing his cheeks. It was the widest range of emotions Abraham had seen from his father in almost six months. Father thought about it for a minute before allowing David to convince him it was for the best. "Education didn't bring me anything but trouble. Maybe it'd do you boys better. I'm not gonna hold you back based on my personal feelings. You can go."

"This year?" David's face lit up.

Obadiah nodded. "That's right. Starting next term."

David cheered and jumped and pounded his fist in the air repeatedly. It was the happiest Abraham had seen him since The Collision. Abraham hadn't made much of an effort to connect with his brother, preferring to lose himself in the farm work to avoid thinking about that day. Even though they now shared a room, David kept to himself for the most part. The very next week he and David found themselves assimilating into the folds of normal life on Veranda through the public school system.

Abraham's nightmares never went away.

As the years pressed on, he would be haunted by dreams of strange lands and faces, some haunting and macabre, others distortions of people he knew in real life. The dreams never made much sense. They were almost always centered around the death of his mother, but he was never able to gather much meaning from them. Mother would be crushed by the evil moon Dajun; or smashed into smithereens by a falling fireball; or crushed by the Interstellar Commerce building. Every time without fail, he would watch in disbelief. Fear kept him rooted firmly in place. On rare occasion, the dreams would focus on David or his father being killed, too.

Somehow, Abraham seemed invincible in his dreams. The dangers were real, the threat of imminent death so close he could feel it just as tangibly as he could on the day it happened, but there was something out of place about it. Something missing.

He was not afraid anymore.

CHAPTER 2

Abraham stuffed beef stew by the mouthful, grimacing. A delicious explosion of peppered broth was quickly tampered by the sting of salt. Three years of working the farm and his father still oversalted. The simple meals Father made were given the reception a five-star dinner might receive at a fancy restaurant on Parkway Drive downtown, if only because hard work created burgeoning appetites in Abraham and his brother. David chewed with his mouth open, peach fuzz just starting to sprout under his chin. His eyes stared off into space.

Father's chair creaked when he sat in it. Everything inside was wood, carved and assembled by the old man's capable hands. Abraham laughed inside to remember the state of the shed they called home when they first moved in. Water leaked in through the roof. No furniture save a crinkly, crusty mattress on the floor in the upstairs bedroom. No electricity, either. Over the last few years, Father had taken that hunk of shit and made it into a home. It was nothing short of a miracle.

The two-story 'shed' was now officially a homestead. Father's affinity for architecture formed a solid basis for his mastering woodcraft, but unlike the construction projects on Milune, the homestead was improved with a focus on function over art. A simple table for six surrounded by six sturdy chairs, a few flat-faced cabinets, Obadiah's rocking chair, and a rectangular mantle over a fireplace were the extent of the downstairs. The smells of fresh pine, sturdy oak and Father's vanilla pipe tobacco filled the house when it didn't have to compete with hearty meals on the stovetop. Abraham would always associate these scents with the memory of this dining room.

Most evenings under the Zeeben roof passed in relative silence. David was usually reading the encyclopedia collection Larry's grandparents had given them as a holiday gift the year prior, while Abraham was just grateful for the break from physical labor. On rare occasion, the chessboard would be dug out of the closet, and they would play until Abraham and his father gave up – David was the undisputed chess champion of the family. Father spent most of his off time smoking his pipe, seated in his rocking chair by the window with a weary expression on his face and a black box in his hands, always unopened. Abraham inspected it closely as his father's eyelids grew heavy one evening, and discovered the box was actually a book. The strange thing was, he never once saw his father read it.

One night everything changed. Freshly chopped veggies littered the counter. Scalloped potatoes boiled on the stove, wafting a butter-and-green-onion aroma into the dining room. The screen door creaked open as Father entered the homestead. Clutched in his arms was a rectangular screen, like a pane of glass that could be a window.

Father unveiled the latest addition to the homestead: a television.

We must be doing pretty good with the tobacco exports, Abraham surmised at the time.

After a few minutes of tinkering, the screen was installed above the mantle in the living room. Abraham could feel the excitement he shared with his brother at having a TV in the house. They hadn't seen a second of it since the morning of The Collision, instead relying on Father to bring news updates after a run into town for supplies. Father always made those trips alone.

Obadiah hefted the remote and clicked it. The screen crackled to life for the first time. It showed images of war. Spacecraft screamed across the frame, trailing streams of fire. Spacemen carried large rifles that whined with each trigger pull, spewing flashes of light. Jungle landscape erupted in flames.

The riskar most closely resembled bipedal insects with strange bulbs floating over their shoulders, connected where the neck and shoulders met. Presumably, their mouth was nestled beneath the crustacean-like mandibles under their chin. The news clips played, showing lines of light splintering their carapaces like confetti.

All this was backed by a victory fanfare of trumpets and drums.

The boys huddled closer to the set, potatoes on the stove burning as they were caught up in the excitement of the moment.

The images changed from jungle foliage to space. Stars swirled with increasing speed until the screen fixated on a planet labelled DURINGER. It was small. Text popped up beneath it, declaring it a planetoid. The poles were small white smudges bookending a red sphere covered in wavy gray lines. Black clusters were nestled in pockets and geometric patterns across the surface.

Abraham listened intently, his gut in a knot. Father served dinner as a voiceover narrated the progress of the Riskar War.

He recognized the cruel spires of the alien architecture as the image changed. It was the same behemoth ship he had seen flying over Milune. His chest ached. It reminded him of the night he could never forget, the night his mother had been taken from him. Everyone talked about it. Those who didn't talk in the open whispered in their homes.

The Collision. The day the riskar blackened the eye of humanity. The day an evil alien empire started a war they were never going to win. Humans never lose wars.

An old man's face appeared on the television, all hard lines and chiseled features. He had a mole on the side of his face, just behind his temple, and his silver hair was shaved and styled with military precision. A tag appeared at the bottom of the screen – *'Admiral Latreaux'*. His voice was gruff and imposing, his mannerisms reminiscent of a bulldog; chest thrust out, jaw clenched. He sounded exactly as Abraham thought he should:

"General Rictor is not fighting a fair war. The riskar have a violent history, rife with terroristic tendencies. The oversight that allowed this to happen was not a military one, but a political one. However, humanity has done a damn fine job of wielding its military might to smash the teeth of oppression and put an end to senseless violence over the last few thousand years. This is no exception. The attack on Milune was senseless violence. It was preventable. And it will be avenged. Milune was not a military target. My official statement this morning is to communicate that our forces have breached riskar-controlled space. The Navy will decimate their spacecraft; the Marines will land on their planets and crush their ground forces. We will locate the enemy home world. And when we do, we will bring a swift end to this war."

The camera zoomed in on Latreaux's hard stare, angling to show his grim resolve in the face of such unbridled evil. Abraham felt he could trust that face, that man in the uniform. He was solving the riskar problem when no one else would. The political bodies that ran the human branch of the Nine Nations had been caught sleeping on the job. They had let these aliens destroy a planet. They had allowed his mother to be murdered. *I'm stuck here, working this farm, when I could be out there, killing riskar.*

Abraham's spoon clinked onto his plate. His chair creaked against the floorboards as he stood up. The commotion pulled the attention of his father and brother from the screen. "I'm joining the Navy," he announced.

The cold calm of his words cracked through the tepid silence. David's long hair flipped with a jerk of his head so he was looking at Abraham with both eyes. Father leaned against the counter and crossed his arms, his brow furrowed.

David swallowed his bite of burnt potatoes with a loud gulp. "But war is abhorrent," he said, as if that should settle it.

"Don't you get it, David? These alien bastards killed Mother."

David flinched.

That cut him deep, Abraham smirked to himself.

David fell into a fit of blinking so intense his head twitched. He didn't move out of this for several moments. When he did, he did it with a groan and a renewed fixation on swirling his potatoes around with his spoon.

Probably pushed him a little too far.

Obadiah cleared his throat. "Don't get swept up in it, Abraham. It's not worth it."

Abraham pushed his chair in. He couldn't stand the way his father had become. He was nice, once. Happy. He had made Abraham happy, too. Sure, he had always been a bit more strict, a bit more expecting of certain standards to be upheld by his boys, but on Milune he had been a totally different person.

"*Father,*" he used the word like a curse. "They killed Mother. Don't you want to hurt them? Kill them, like I do?"

Father scoffed as he packed his pipe. It was slender, plain ivory, as unremarkable as the man it belonged to. His bushy eyebrows drew together, nearly touching. "No, I don't. Everything seems real simple to you now, Abraham, but that's because you're twelve years old. When you get older, you'll see things more clear."

A riskar soldier, possibly General Rictor himself, appeared on the television. Thick carapace armor covered a tan and gray body. Chin mandibles clicked under three beady red eyes in the center of the face. Two large sacs floated over its shoulders, connected by thin tubes to the base of the neck. Abraham didn't know what those were, but he was repulsed by the alien's appearance. Just looking at the thing made Abraham sick. Knowing that it had killed his mother, killed millions of people, and destroyed a perfectly good planet...his blood boiled.

Abraham said, "More clear? You couldn't save Mom. They took her from us. Maybe if you had been in the Navy instead of designing buildings, you could have saved her."

Father glared at him with a ferocity only his pinched bushy eyebrows and gritted teeth could properly convey. Abraham was pissed. Obstinate. He had lost respect for his father on that day and harbored resentment for years, but that look whittled it all to ash and dust. Father's words were the wind that blew away any remaining dissent. "I understand you're upset, son. I am, too. Devastated. But we have to stick together. Your mother was the center of this family. She loved us all more than we deserved. I miss her just like you do. But what's done is done."

That's it? Mom's dead and that's all you can say?

There was no more discussion.

Father used the remote to cycle through several channels, but they were all similar in content. The television continued to blare shots of the war, of General Rictor firing what could have been a flamethrower into some trees, some shots of the human Navy vessels sailing through space. They looked like floating cities. There was no actual combat footage on most channels, but there were several mock-ups of riskar-looking targets being chewed up by laser blasts, catching fire and melting until they were unrecognizable, or piñata versions of them being beaten with sticks by kids at parties. "Kill the Sackbacks," they chanted. The piñata burst, spilling out mustard yellow slime, while the kids laughed and screamed good-naturedly about it.

Sackbacks? That's a good name for them.

A new clip played. Dajun, angry and wreathed in flame, smashed into the surface of Milune. Fire spread across the sky. Those bodies that weren't crushed or burned were lifted from the surface of the planet, floating through the air between. Obadiah switched the television off. "Whatever happened to cartoons?"

Abraham excused himself from dinner. He sequestered himself in the thin comfort of his twin bed in the room he shared with David. He pulled his blanket over his head and cried. It was cruel of the television to show his mother's last day so casually. He hated being reminded of it. Never wanted to forget it. Couldn't live with it. So many emotions and thoughts conflicting, constricting him, squeezing his chest and not relenting, and he didn't know how he could live through the next five seconds, let alone the rest of his life.

The Navy. Avenging his mother's death.

This was the only thing he wanted, the only thing that could bring some sense of purpose into his psyche. Abraham realized he only had to wait six more years until he could join. Enlist in the Navy, get trained to fly fighter ships. He would get into a massive dogfight and take on the entire riskar Royal Navy by himself. He'd outmaneuver them, outgun them, destroy them. After the battle, General Rictor would be so impressed with his new adversary he would offer a challenge, a duel, and Abraham would kill him. Rip his heart out and smash it on the ground, grind it into mush under his foot.

This is how twelve-year-old Abraham Zeeben comforted himself every night until he could fight back sleep no longer.

CHAPTER 3

Years go by. Seasons change and the cycle of life continues at its inexorable pace. This was Abraham's perspective, that every unit of time was meant to repeat itself in some fashion. Especially the units of time in which he lived, at least until his junior year of high school.

Every year was the same. The springs were gusty days consisting of hoeing and prepping the fields after school. The summers were transplanting the tobacco from the hot bed in the barn to the fields, irrigation checks and pest control until the harvest, which was a mad dash to finish before the soil tasted the first frost of winter. Obadiah would cart the tobacco into town by himself, leaving the boys to their own devices for the onset of winter. Abraham looked forward to the downtime of the winter season, even with the one-two punch of the holidays.

He had no escape from the reality of spending time with a family he didn't feel close to, and the constant reminder that his mother would never spend another holiday with them. The time off the farm was rare, which made it more precious to Abraham. Still, he was going to be eighteen at the end of next summer. He was so close to the Navy he could taste the stardust.

The brothers walked the two kilometers to a transit depot, where they caught a bus to Sun Lance spaceport. Sun Lance was smaller than Horizons Gateway where they'd landed all those years ago, but it was also one of the few runways where skiff races were authorized. David spouted facts about the skiffs the whole bus ride, while Abraham stared out the window, doing his best to ignore them.

Forty minutes later they stepped on the tarmac a short distance from the crowd of spectators. Abraham could see the skiffs, the racers, and the markings on the runway. A jolt of excitement ran through him. Today promised excitement, thrills, and things that didn't need digging out of the ground. He couldn't stop himself from grinning.

The mid-afternoon sun shone bright and elated over Sun Lance Spaceport. The light was a pure thing, a soft gold in the sky that transformed into a glittering silver as it descended upon the snow-covered surface of Veranda like a silk blanket. Abraham remembered seeing postcards like this in the shops on Milune. Lively green trees spattered with white powder. Unlike most planets, Milune never had seasons. Now, it was a hapless rock hurtling through space, a limp corpse forever falling in an endless black oblivion.

And so is my mother. He couldn't stop the thought from rising.

To distract himself, Abraham stopped to fix his brother's button-up shirt. David never paid attention to anything much beyond newsfeeds on his Portal or studying for his advanced classes in school. It was up to Abraham to fulfill the role of mother and ensure the boy didn't go out in public looking like a ragamuffin. Obadiah had given the boys permission to leave the homestead for a few hours. Abraham intended to take full advantage of it.

"Don't pinch me," David muttered, half distracted with fixing his hair.

Abraham said, "Remember what Dad always says – '*be a brother, not a bother.*' I'm trying to help you. We're going to have fun, trust me. The last thing we want is people picking on us or saying we don't belong there. Because we do."

Abraham fixed the last button and wiped some snow powder off David's shoulders. He looked his brother in the eye, the one eye that wasn't covered by a swoop of dark hair. "If you won't let me cut your hair, you at least need to wear your clothes right."

David shrugged. "Is it going to be fun? Like, for real? I want to see the jets up close." His eyes lit up. "Do you think they'll let us take one apart? I wanna see how they work, inside and out!"

Abraham steered his brother toward the throng of people gathered around the airport site. The last thing he wanted was to waste a beautiful winter's day getting greasy taking apart a jet engine. He loved to see them race but didn't care one iota about their internal workings.

"David, we're here to support Miles. I'm sure he'll let you look at whatever you want, as long as you don't try to take anything apart. Make sure you wait to ask him questions until after the race."

David nodded, and kept nodding. He often did this when his brain was working on overdrive. His physical presence sort of short-circuited. It was part of the reason the Zeeben

boys were picked on at school, but Abraham didn't mind defending his older brother over something he couldn't control. It was more the way David talked to people that got them both into trouble, and *that* was something Abraham couldn't stand.

Ever since The Collision, babying David had become the new norm.

As they approached, the crowd erupted in a series of catcalls and shouts and whistles. The cacophony surrounded them as they were immersed in a sea of people, more people than Abraham had seen in a long time. Lined up at the concession stands, a group of farmers in denim pants with worn circles in their back pockets – the shape of tobacco cans – and plaid button-ups shouted back and forth. Excitement lit up their eyes. One of them walked away with a large mug and a foam mustache from his first sip.

I wonder what beer tastes like.

A group of kids chased each other, weaving in and out of the crowd. A few boys chasing a little girl, pretending monsters were after her. She alternated between laughter and high-pitched shrieks when the boys got too close.

"Hey, Zeebens, how's it going?" Larry's greeting wafted out in a cloudy breath. He hugged them both, teeth chattering, his long blond hair parted over red cheeks and chapped lips. The years had seen him grow taller and thinner, his hair now down to his shoulders. He wasn't built for the cold. It looked as if a stiff breeze could carry him away. His normally soft face and hands were splotched with white skin flakes, a sign of wind burn.

Abraham felt bad for him. The Zeeben boys weathered the winters with skullcaps and long-sleeved shirts most of the time.

"Larry," Abraham said, "do you know where the pit's at this year? Miles said he'd let us back there. I'm sure you can come, too. Miles is pretty cool."

Larry heaved a sigh, looking relieved at the invitation. "Okay, yeah, sure. The pit's this way, boys."

Abraham dragged David through the crowd, following Larry on a circuitous route around the spaceport. The main hangar was large enough for four cargo-hauling spacecraft to sit side by side, and it didn't see much traffic on a regular basis. For this small-town event, they had closed it down to off-world arrivals. It was no great loss for the community; space-farers weren't pounding on the gates to land on a backwater like Veranda.

The smell of the pits hit them as they crossed the taped barrier.

The chill of the air diminished in a cloudy miasma of oil, grease, and jet fuel that wafted over Abraham. The vapors were so intense it felt like they clung to his clothes. It was an electric sort of smell that crawled into his sinuses and rested on his tongue. Abraham hated it, but he had to admit the industrial odor was preferable to the smell of shoveling shit in the tobacco fields.

Several single-man craft were parked at intervals along a strip of thick concrete. They were hybrids of motorcycles and aircraft. Fuselages and fairings were covered in elaborate paint schemes like flames or colorful splashes of graffiti, more than a few with patches that had flaked off or been eaten away by rust. It was easy to tell who had money and who was building from scrap parts. The entire scene was a marvel to someone with no mechanical aptitude, like Abraham. He couldn't imagine knowing enough about these machines to build them or even just keep them running.

He also knew he'd never care enough to learn.

Larry pointed out Miles's craft. "Look at that thing!"

"It's a monster!" David beamed.

As far as skiffs go, this one was a status symbol. Chrome pipes gleamed with a perfect polish, blue-marbled fairings painstakingly waxed and wiped until even the smallest speck of dirt wouldn't dare stick to it.

It's a thing of beauty, Abraham thought. *I'd kill to pilot one of those.*

The rider was tall and broad-shouldered. Close-shaved on the sides, his wavy blond hair was swooped back to the nape of his neck in a bastardization of a gentleman's cut. His face was smooth and pale, with piercing blue eyes radiating an infectious passion for racing. He looked at his machine like it was as dear to him as his own family.

Miles Lannam had graduated last year as both head of his class and president of the school racing team. He was, by all accounts, the coolest kid on Veranda. The fact that Abraham even knew him was something to be proud of. It was one shining facet in his otherwise pointless existence on the most boring planet in space.

Miles slammed his foot down on the kick-starter.

A crack tore the air. Abraham could feel it in his knees. He had to steady himself on David's shoulder to keep from falling over.

Miles slammed the kick-starter again, and the engine roared like a savage beast. Chrome pipes belched thick black smoke. The air became saturated with sweet gasoline fumes.

He climbed up on the skiff, which was almost as tall as he was, and plopped down into the seat. The tires barely squeaked as his weight settled. He fumbled with the helmet in his lap, sliding it on and turning to look at the gathering crowd. "Zeebens! Poplenko! Glad you guys could make it out. Make sure you're cheering for me, yeah? I want all of Veranda to know me by name after the first go, all right?"

The group of boys shouted and cheered. Miles pulled away, tires crackling across the concrete from the vehicle's prodigious weight. It trundled toward the track, leaving Miles's skiff pit and crew in plain view.

A large toolbox and blue paint lines sectioned off a pocket of concrete covered in grease stains like bruises. A hasty stencil in yellow declared "LANNAM PIT CREW ONLY".

Behind the line, Abraham saw the mechanic who had unlatched the massive chain, what they called the 'bike-lock'. He was short but thickly muscled, blue coveralls tight across his chest. His shoulders were hunched all the way up to his ears. Ears that were large and awkward on such a small, smooth-shaven head.

This wasn't a real mechanic at all. It was Digger Tacheck, one of the guys who picked on David at school. The one kid Abraham ended up trading punches with semi-regularly in the hallways. Just two months ago, Digger had left him with a bloody nose, a black eye, and two weeks of jeers and sneers from his classmates.

Digger tapped a large wrench on the bottom of his boots, laughing. His words came out like poisoned daggers. "What the hell you ladies doing here, huh? I could hear you over the engine rev, pissing your pants and crying over *dreamy* Miles Lannam."

Abraham bristled. "We're just here to watch the race."

Digger swung the wrench, spinning the closed end on a finger, slinging small droplets of sticky black grease over David's shirt.

David flinched, gritting his teeth as if holding something back. He fell into a twitching session.

Abraham wiped him off with a glove, which only smeared the thick clumps into wide black streaks. He slapped the useless glove onto the concrete. It hit with a wet smack.

He turned to hurl an insult at Digger, but his archenemy had already walked off. No doubt chuckling and congratulating himself on being Veranda's biggest asshole. Larry offered to buy a mechanic towel from the pit crew to try to help, but Abraham waved him off. He traded shirts with David instead, not caring if his own shirt had a few grease smears on it. Even though David was a year older than Abraham, they were pretty much the same size. He left the top two buttons undone, feeling a slight tug in the back when he flexed his shoulders, but it wasn't enough to make him uncomfortable.

Fireworks sparkled across the twilight sky like shooting stars. Hundreds of voices cheered in response. Loudspeakers boomed, informing everyone they needed to take their seats or find standing room in short order.

The light display was the signal for the opening ceremony. Abraham hustled his brother and their best friend up to where the pit bordered the apron next to the runway. They watched and covered their ears for the better part of two hours as engines whined, ramped up and lit off. Smoke and heat billowed in wavy lines, causing the skiffs to look distorted. Pit side was the closest non-racers could get to the track. Abraham took in the whole scene with a knot of adrenaline gnawing at his gut.

The drag strip was four kilometers long with white lines placed one click from the ends. These lines marked the area where the race started and ended. If the tires were still touching

the concrete after those lines, it was a disqualification. Skiffs had a short distance to build up as much ground speed as possible, then just before the start line their tires would lift off. At that exact moment they would light their jet engines for a short burst; just long enough to burn a hole in the sky over the runway. At speeds pushing 1000kph, it was an ear-splitting, heart-dropping rush to behold.

Abraham considered himself something of an adrenaline junkie. At least he thought he would be if given the opportunity. It was a fantasy of his to have a rider approach him with an offer to try a race on one of their skiffs. That was about the only way he'd get the chance to ride one. He'd never in a million years be able to afford to build his own.

It would be good flying practice to add to his resume. Something he could use to get the attention of the Navy. This was his greatest dream, he reminded himself – to become a Navy Starfighter pilot. He would destroy hundreds of evil riskar ships. Bomb enemy planets and take *their* mothers away. Assuming those disgusting bug-faced creatures even had family. Assuming they even felt emotions and had connections with each other like civilized people. He doubted they cared much beyond their own interests. As a militarized society, did they even have a home world that wasn't a staging area for war?

Thinking of the riskar began to cloud his mind. It would have stolen him from the excitement of the race had David not tapped him on the shoulder. His brother sported wide eyes and a smile that showed teeth when he pointed at the sky.

Several blue lights appeared above the horizon. Abraham felt his chest tighten up. The sensation was akin to when he had seen the riskar ships above Milune all those years ago. Dread, fear, helplessness. The things he hated feeling more than anything. The things that instinctually morphed into pure, unadulterated anger. Rage.

His knuckles went white, and he ground his teeth.

The lights became larger. In the blink of an eye, they streaked across the sky. Roaring engines cut soundwaves into the emotional tension Abraham felt in his chest. The sound vibrated around him. Through him. He had his hands on his ears, but it was too late. The damage to his hearing had been done. He looked at David and Larry, frantic.

People fist-pumped. Hundreds of arms waved in the air. Some people jumped up and down. Everyone's mouth was open, distorted noises bellowing from their throats.

What the hell was that, and why is everyone cheering?

The announcer explained that those lines of light roaring through the sky were four Navy Starfighters, a combat sortie diverted to perform a simple flyover as a show of solidarity from the inner rim to the outer rim planets. The message was clear: every human life was considered valuable.

They want us to know we aren't forgotten. They're fighting for us, too.

He took his hands off his ears, saw Larry do the same. Soon the sounds around him returned to tones he could recognize. The damage to his hearing wasn't permanent after all. He relaxed his shoulders.

Larry shouted, "That was so damn cool, bro!"

David was fixated on the announcer's mini-history lesson, his head tilted to the side like a curious dog.

The boys watched the races with renewed zeal after sundown, cheering and shouting when the engines roared over the runways, red or blue flames ripping across the star-studded sky. Abraham hadn't seen David laugh this much in a long time. He felt it in his chest, warm and fuzzy. He had done a good thing setting this up. He and Larry fist-bumped each time the blue flames crossed the finish line first, showing home team pride. David ritually clapped his hands once or twice, but never more. The evening passed in the blink of an eye. The pulse-pounding races came to an end with another display of fireworks, this one the rapid-fire of a grand finale.

Miles earned first place. He had the best skiff money could buy, and he had been racing since he was eleven. He was the biggest kid celebrity on Veranda, but he had earned the title, something most kids with privilege and money didn't have to. It was a great shock to the entire planet that when Miles got up on the podium to give his victory speech, he instead announced his retirement.

He gave the crowd a winning smile and a wink, finishing with a salute. "My racing career is over now, Veranda. I'm taking to the skies in a whole new way, shipping out to flight school with the Navy in a week. I'm proud to announce I have received a commission as Veranda's newest Navy Starfighter pilot!"

The crowd erupted with voracious applause and cheers.

"Lucky bastard," Larry said, "I want to be in the Navy, too."

Abraham said, "Yeah, me too. I want to fly ships and kill those dirty Sackbacks. They deserve the worst we can give 'em."

David was reading something on his Portal, a tablet he got for Christmas a few years before. Abraham tapped him on the shoulder. "What're you doing on that thing now, David? We're outside. You should put that thing away."

David looked pale as a ghost. "Abraham, I just got an e-mail from school. The holiday dance is in two weeks."

Larry chuckled. "Who're you going with, David? Got your eye on any special lady?"

David shrugged. "I might. If I could find any special ones."

Abraham tousled David's hair, causing a few seconds of nervous twitching. It was more a sign of affection than to piss his brother off. A way of being a brother rather than a mother. David was annoyed by it, but it wasn't enough to set him off.

"We'll help you out. For now, though, it's dark and Father's going to be wanting us home. Let's get out of here. Thanks for coming out with us, Larry. We'll see you at school."

Larry bumped fists with the Zeeben boys and they parted ways, leaving Abraham feeling he had just lived through the first good day since The Collision.

CHAPTER 4

The school was one of the nicer buildings in the slice of Veranda called Stony Ridge. In a town where wood was revered and aluminum siding the undisputed norm, Stony High's marble pillars and floor-to-ceiling windows stood out as a sort of diamond in the rough. Fame and fortune weren't the way for most citizens, but this rural community's devotion to education was something to be admired. Teachers received good paychecks, and a handful of students every year graduated with full-ride scholarships to prestigious universities off world.

Abraham knew it was the desperation to leave Veranda that made those scholarships so competitive. Who would want to go to a third-rate institution on a backwater planet when you could travel across the stars and party in a completely new and exciting place? A place that didn't smell like fertilizer-ridden fields and the sweat that was worked into them. The only decent places to visit were the strawberry fields a few towns over, or Leona Lake to the south. Veranda was a place to seek out simplicity or retirement, the exact opposite of the college experience.

Inside, the school auditorium had been repurposed for the dance. The basketball court was thoroughly scrubbed of both sweat and sneaker stains. A lingering odor of rubbing alcohol or some other cleaning agent clung stubbornly to the makeshift dance floor. Weights, balls, and bats were replaced by tall speakers. Fold-out tables around the perimeter were covered in rows of refreshments in white disposable cups. Several streamers of Stony High red and green were draped over the white walls like floating brushstrokes.

The lights were a little too dim, the music a little too loud.

David and Larry were already pointing out to each other which girls they thought looked particularly attractive. Abraham was checking the collar of his button-up, and he quickly flattened one side that kept popping up. He ran a hand over his spiked hair, smoothed out the front of his shirt and, with a deep breath, finally entered the dance.

Paranoia immediately set in like a drop of acid hitting the pit of his stomach. His eyes couldn't stop flitting to and fro, capturing a dozen images in a single moment.

Teachers stood against the wall, primly dressed with flat expressions. Several girls in a cluster whispered to each other and laughed. A few jocks were bumping and grinding with cheerleaders. Some of the freshmen and sophomores sampled the punch and grape juice from the beverage tables. One kid spilled red juice down the front of his shirt, causing a fracas from his jeering buddies.

In all this chaos, Abraham couldn't shake the building pressure inside him, this nagging, tugging feeling that every single person in the room was looking at him. Judging him. Weighing his every movement, dissecting his facial expression. Even counting every breath he took.

It was unnerving, made more so because he knew it was irrational. He wasn't of any particular interest to anyone here, but he couldn't reconcile that fact with these emotions. He swam outside the common social circle, and he knew it.

Along the sides of the auditorium were lines of kids. The girls seemed to be congregating on the left side where the locker rooms normally were, with the boys on the right at the entrance to the cafeteria. A decent number of kids were dancing and jiving on the floor, but the majority hovered on the borders. Larry steered Abraham and David toward the boys' side of the room.

"So, this is it? We stand here all night?" David asked.

Larry shook his head and flashed a toothy smile. "No, we're going to find some *ladies*," he said the word like it was the name of a dessert he really liked, "to dance with. What did you think, we came here for the punch or something?"

David reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out his Portal. "I'm here because Abraham told me I had to come."

Larry laughed, his long hair bouncing ridiculously.

"Come on, bro, don't give me that! You like girls, right? This is your first real opportunity to get up close and personal with one. If they like you, they might even let you touch 'em, ya know?"

Abraham pulled his eyes away from scanning the crowd to glare at Larry. "You're trying to corrupt my brother, Larry."

"No, I'm trying to *instruct* your brother. You Zeeben boys would be a lot more relaxed if you didn't have to work so hard all the time. But knowing your dad, that's not an option. So, what's the next best thing? A little attention from a female, yeah? Besides, I meant touching like dancing, anyway. If you're gonna slow dance, they let you put your hands on their hips." He raised his eyebrows twice.

Abraham was about to lay into Larry about setting a good example when he saw her.

She was tall and blonde and wore a lavender dress with black sequins at the hem, emphasizing her long, pale legs. Her shoulders were a bit too broad, her long legs carried a bit too much weight, but her face was soft and her smile radiant. She sat close to Abraham in History class. He spent more time studying her than the lectures on Earth civilization prior to the space age. It was an ancient, boring place that all humans came from, but had become a ghost planet long ago.

Larry asked, "Lucinda? You making your move on Lucinda tonight, Abraham?"

He shrugged, not taking his eyes off her. "Maybe."

"You should, bro. I was going to dance with Mylee Draper. They're friends. Look," his voice cracked, "they're taking notice."

Larry slapped Abraham's back, took a deep breath to puff his chest out, and started running his hands through his hair.

Lucinda whispered to Mylee, a shorter, mouse-faced, dark haired girl who was apparently the object of Larry's affection. At least for today. They looked at the boys and snickered, covering their mouths and whispering back and forth.

Abraham didn't know what else to do, so he just smiled.

"C'mon, bro, let's go." Larry slapped him on the back again and started his approach.

Abraham steeled himself with a breath and a tug on his button-up. He was trying to think of how to introduce himself when he realized David was no longer with them. He scanned the room, trying to ignore the sound of his own panic-laced breathing.

David wasn't by the beverage table. He wasn't by the speakers or milling about on the dance floor. He had just up and left, or Digger and his bully squad were up to no good.

Abraham tore through the crowd, moving like a madman. He walked right past Lucinda, who stared at him with something between confusion and disappointment – he hoped it was the latter – and tripped.

His shoes squeaked as he lost his balance and collapsed. His knees burned as they dragged across the floor.

The dancers parted to give him some room, but for the most part the dance continued without more than a few people staring at him. It wasn't enough to stop the heat from rising in his cheeks. Abraham looked up at the crowd wondering, *What the hell?*

Digger was laughing, his arms around the waist of a cheerleader. "Watch your step, Abe. We're trying to dance here!"

His harsh face beamed with hilarity.

Abraham wanted nothing more than to wipe that smirk off on the gym floor, but he had to find his brother. Some things were more important than anything else, and David's well-being was unfortunately more pressing than some petty revenge. He rubbed his knees and stood up.

Abraham flung the door open to the boys' locker room, choking on the humid sweat trapped within. The lights were much brighter in here. The door shut, muting the bass beats of the dance. He had to squint until he saw a dark figure slumped against the maroon-colored aluminum lockers in the back of the room. "David? That you?"

"Yep."

Abraham shuffled over to his brother. His eyes were starting to adjust, but he still had to pinch them nearly shut.

"What the hell's going on? I got nervous when I couldn't find you!"

David shrugged. "I hate this stuff."

Abraham put a hand on his brother's shoulder.

"I know you do. But this is kids' stuff. It's what we're supposed to be doing. Having fun, dancing with girls, making friends. You're graduating this year, David. Even Father has to be proud of that."

David moved the hair out of his one eye. "I know, but that doesn't change the way I feel, Abraham. Mom's gone. She's...just dead. Her body is floating out in space. Forever. And —"

Abraham squeezed David's shoulder. "Stop that. I know Mom's gone. I think about her every day. I know you do, too. But she would want us to be here, to live our lives. That's what she was raising us to do. I know she would have been proud to see you dressed like such a gentleman." Abraham paused for a moment, staring at David's hair. "She would probably have cut that mop off your head by now, but she'd be proud of you."

David slapped Abraham's hand away. "Don't joke like that," he said with a soft voice. He slid his back up the lockers until he was standing. His nervous, thick body twitched rhythmically, fighting total breakdown.

Abraham resisted the impulse to ruffle David's hair. Even a small gesture like that could set him off at this point. Instead, he opted for encouraging words. "Look, David, you're my brother. We both know what we went through. What we survived on Milune. We can't let that stop us. We can't keep living our lives like it just happened yesterday. It's been eight years, bro. It's time to move on."

David laughed. "You haven't moved on. You want to join the Navy. You want to leave me alone and you want to kill people because you can't stop thinking about what they did."

Abraham clenched his teeth. "Sackbacks aren't people."

David spluttered. "Just because their lungs dangle outside their body doesn't mean they aren't people. You calling them Sackbacks is just bigoted. Intelligent life is intelligent life. Alien or not, they're people. And some of them deserve to die for Milune, for...killing Mom. But not all of them. There shouldn't be a genocide."

Abraham shoved David against the locker. It creaked.

He wasn't going to stand for this, not even from his weak older brother, who acted more like his little brother anyway. Forget setting him off, David needed to get this straight.

"There *will* be a genocide, David. If I have any say in it, I'll be the one pulling the trigger and dropping the bombs. The Sac — *riskar* — are monsters and they deserve to be shot and blown up. Every last one of them. Fuck those bastards. Fuck. Them."

David sighed. "I miss Mother. I wish we could go back to that day, just the beginning of it. I just want to see her one more time. Give her a hug. Tell her I love her...and know that she hears me. I hate feeling like I'm talking to myself in an empty room, hoping my words somehow find her...thousands of light years away in a forgotten corner of space."

Tears flowed.

David's shoulders shuddered. Sobs wracked his body until he collapsed against the lockers in a grief-stricken heap.

Abraham locked his knees. His gut developed a chill. He bit his lip, taking a full minute to process his brother's words. They were deep, dark things, those words. They were sharper than they should have been because they were true and when he really thought about it...he felt the same way.

David feels alone. He doesn't know who he is without Mom. I feel it, too. We were too young to lose her. But we did. Nothing we can do will change that, even though we'll spend the rest of our lives trying. Trying to remember, to hold on, to love.

Abraham felt his eyes sting. These thoughts were private, personal things that came from the deep dark of his being, the very core of who he was. He would never share these things with anyone. Not even his brother. David was too close to him. He knew too much about him and the way they both felt was too painful.

Abraham grunted. He punched one of the lockers, denting it.

He didn't know what to do with himself.

He hated the riskar, wanted them all dead. To suffer the way he was suffering. He wanted to comfort his brother. Help him feel safe and know he wasn't alone. He wanted his father to be here for moments like this. They had plenty of paternal guidance in the fields after school.

Where was some of that now, when he and David needed help navigating the emotional disaster of losing their mother?

He's at home staring at a book he never opens. The thought skirted his mind like a buzzing fly.

That feeling came back. The one he had when he watched the Navy invading riskar space on TV. The urge to leave Veranda. The realization that unless he joined the military, he'd be trapped here forever. At the age of twelve he had come to realize fighting in a war was the easiest answer to all of his problems. Now he was seventeen, just one year of high school away from realizing that dream.

Abraham slammed his fist into the locker again. Pain bit into his knuckles. He went numb up to his wrist. His split knuckles left two half-circles of blood in the dent.

Grabbing David by the underarm, he stormed out of the foul-smelling locker room.

"Are we going home?" David asked numbly.

"Yes," Abraham said through gritted teeth, "we are. This dance is over for us. We never should have come. You were right, David. We don't belong here."

CHAPTER 5

Like a surprise avalanche hits a quiet mountain, the holidays were upon them. There were no real mountains in Stony Ridge, but the snow blanket had been pulled tightly over the surrounding farmlands and valleys. The Zeeben fields were covered an average of five inches. The boys had to team up one afternoon to plow the half-acre walkway between the house and the street.

Abraham did his best to pay attention in most of his classes, but there were a few – especially Pre-Calculus and Earth Literature – in which he struggled to stay awake. These were also the classes he shared with Lucinda Blaylock, but he couldn't bear to look at her after the way the dance had turned out. The two weeks after the dance to mark the holiday break passed with his embarrassment warring against his desire to approach her.

Ultimately, embarrassment won out.

David seemed to be carrying on as if nothing had happened, still his absent-minded, halfway jovial self. Abraham liked that about his brother. Maybe even wished he could deal with his own life in a similar way. The darkness of their childhood would forever shadow them, but David had a way of stepping out from under the dark cloud on occasion. Then again, maybe his mop of hair, finally down past his shoulders, functioned as an umbrella of sorts.

The quiet of the homestead was hypnotic at times. Abraham was enjoying the peaceful stillness until a knock at the door tore him from his reverie.

He got up from his father's creaky rocking chair and opened the door. Sunlight spilled in weak and thin, unable to compete with the winter chill rolling in on icy gusts. The loamy smell of empty farmland was like a fork in the sinuses.

Larry and his grandparents greeted him dressed in puffy jackets, black jeans, and beaming smiles. They had arms full of food platters, heat rising from them in clouds of mist that smelled like turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, and some kind of casserole.

"Ready to eat, Abraham?" Johnford Poplenko, Larry's grandfather, smiled wider, stretching his thick salt and pepper mustache. He had a full head of hair, but it was withered and gray, like a tumbleweed just waiting on a stiff breeze to uproot it and help it take flight.

Abraham took the casserole tray from Amelia, Larry's grandmother. Her wrinkled nose was red at the creases on either side. She sniffled with dignified effort, followed by a high-pitched *brrr* from her thin lips.

"Yes sir, I surely am," Abraham said to Johnford. "You know Father can cook, but he's the 'eat to live' type. It's been a while since we've had something like this. Thank you!"

David piped up from the couch, "Yeah. Since last holiday."

Everyone laughed politely. David didn't take his eyes from his Portal.

Abraham's stomach grumbled as he walked the tray into the kitchen and placed it on the counter. He removed the tinfoil with excitement. The green beans looked delicious, the onion flakes crisped to a golden brown across the top...it smelled heavenly. Abraham double-checked the fridge still had water bottles while the Poplenkos were sliding their coats over the back of their seats.

"Where's Obadiah?" Amelia asked.

"Out back," David muttered.

Abraham walked into the living room and gave his brother a gentle slap on the back of the head. "Put that thing away, David, it's holiday dinner. Don't be rude."

Larry chuckled. "Don't start like this, you guys. We're supposed to eat, drink, and be merry. How can we do that if you're slapping and bickering? Life's too short to be bitter."

Abraham nodded. Larry always knew how to balance out the relationship between David and himself. It was tough business having an older brother, but even worse when he was like David. Special rules, special treatment, and never really held accountable for anything. It was hard for Abraham to accept, but then he also felt a certain pull to protect him.

Johnford clapped his hands and rubbed them together.

"I'll grab Obadiah and we can get started. Wouldn't want the food to get cold now, would we?"

He chuckled and made his exit.

After a few minutes of awkward conversation between the boys and Larry's grandmother, Obadiah and Johnford came in to carve the meat and set the table. Obadiah gave a brief speech before everyone dug into their food, thanking the Poplenkos for being so helpful to the Zeebens over the years, and for being great, dependable friends.

Johnford took his seat and said, "Obadiah, we owe you everything. You're the best example of what it means to be human. You saved our Larry. I just...we can't thank you enough."

Abraham flinched at the allusion to *The Collision*. He gripped the edge of the table until his knuckles were white and his wrist ached. *Way to kill the mood, Grandpa*, he thought.

"Truly," Amelia said, "you've given us the greatest gift we could ever receive."

David sat with his hands flat on the table, staring at his fingers. Father took a sip of water with a shaky hand and offered a gracious smile.

Abraham noticed the strange reaction but decided it must be his old man shaking off the cold he'd brought in. His attention was soon divided between small bites of turkey, large bites of heavily salted mashed potatoes and gravy, and flaky, buttery bites of biscuits. It was far and away the best meal of the year, every year. Perhaps the crown jewel of the season Abraham liked the best.

Even David seemed to be enjoying himself. He broke eye contact with his own hands to butter a biscuit with a half-inch thick smear of apple butter. His hair had to be out of his face for him to eat, which made him seem more expressive than usual.

Conversation came in fits, focusing on how great and grateful both families were for each other, until David brought up school. Larry immediately cut him off with his typical braggadocio about the three girlfriends he was currently juggling. Abraham breathed a sigh of relief as the pall of loss seemed to lift from the table the moment Larry started speaking. Amelia made sharp objection to his philandering, but Larry insisted it was innocent. "I'm not taking anything from these girls they aren't perfectly willing to give me, Gramma."

Abraham interjected, "Larry, if you're going to be talking about this kind of stuff, shouldn't it be around the bonfire out back?"

David's eyes lit up. He swallowed a chunk of biscuit and said, "Bonfire! Marshmallows! C'mon Larry, I'll listen to whatever bimbo stories you have if it's outside."

Everyone shared a laugh at Larry's expense. He took it good-naturedly.

Abraham stood to leave the table when Obadiah grabbed his arm. Something thudded under the table.

Obadiah's black book, the one with the two arrows on it, rested facedown under the table. Obadiah picked it up and placed it back on his lap. "Marshmallows are in the cupboard."

Abraham stared at his father, not understanding. He nodded anyway, trying to keep the confusion from his face. The old man nodded and let go of his arm.

Abraham went to retrieve the marshmallows from the cupboard. As he did so, he wondered for a moment why Obadiah was eating dinner with his book in his lap. He was increasingly attached to it, to the point where if he was in the house, he had a hand on that book.

Abraham grabbed the marshmallows from the cabinet. When he did, he realized what the arm-grab had been about.

In the back of the cabinet was a foil-wrapped block with a brown and white wrapper. The smells of holiday dinner had permeated the home, but the sweet aroma of this item had filled the cabinet. It was a pleasant tingling in Abraham's nose, and it started a small shiver down his back. He hurriedly grabbed the block and rushed back to the table to show David and Larry, who responded as one. "Chocolate!"

Obadiah chuckled. "Came all the way from Sila. The Poplenkos were good enough to make us this fine meal, and I'm not much of a cook, as my boys are more than happy to confess for me. I figured this was a small way I could say thanks to everyone for being here."

Abraham and David crushed their father in a hug. Chocolate was only available off world, and the price to import it was exorbitant. This block, notched with portions for ten people, had probably cost Obadiah a month's earnings from tobacco exports.

Abraham separated the chocolate into portions. He got a platter together with the marshmallows and some crackers. In moments, everyone rushed outside to the fire pit.

It was a cluster of wooden chairs encircling a half-sagging tepee of wood, freshly chopped and laid out by the boys that morning. Obadiah joined them and lit the pit. It blazed tall and bright, lighting up the space with a comfortable warmth that was an oasis in the otherwise bleak weather. Both families gathered around, conversation buzzing.

The marshmallows were roasted, the chocolate melted, the s'mores combined and devoured. Even Obadiah, king of bland and simple living, enjoyed one. It was a marvelous time they all enjoyed together, a time of full bellies and warmth from the fire in an otherwise cold and tough world.

Larry pulled out his guitar, fingers slapping against the wood rhythmically. He spent a few moments tuning it with discordant plucks, then launched into song.

Abraham basked in the heat and the music. For the first time this year, he finally felt some sense of peace. David hadn't been too far off the mark with his comment about the food, but the meal was only a part of it. It was the combination of everything; food, music, uplifted spirits...these things made the winter and the holiday season his favorite.

Notes danced by the fire, floated upward from Larry's fingers and his voice, swirled around the air, and settled onto Abraham's psyche. The lyrics of the song were unimportant, but Abraham couldn't help but let their simplicity carry him inside his mind, taking him to an island where it was warm and sunny, a place where there was no future and no past, just an eternal present of contentment. A marshmallow smacked him in the cheek.

He jerked his eyes open to see another one slam into his chest. On the other side of the fire, David was snickering.

That little bastard, he thought, reaching for his own set of fresh marshmallows. Abraham cocked his arm back and let one fly. It twisted through the air for a moment before impacting squarely on David's forehead.

Plop.

David flinched, a second too late, and burst into laughter.

Abraham congratulated himself on a clean hit and reached for more marshmallows. David grabbed a handful. They chased each other around the bonfire. The flames had dwindled to about the size of a campfire, hardly putting off the heat they once had. Larry strummed and sang, the rhythm slowing down, his fingers growing pink and stiff in the cold.

Abraham took a pelt to the side of the head. Ducked another. The marshmallow pattered into the snow behind him. He paused to catch his breath when an idea occurred to him. The marshmallows were soft, but as funny as a direct hit was, they were weak. He scooped up a fistful of snow and packed it into a tight ball. He and David squared off on opposite sides of the fire, two brothers at the height of merriment on a cold winter's night. It was an old-fashioned standoff.

Abraham launched his snowball missile with a crack of his elbow.

David juke'd left, as predicted. The snowball slammed into his neck with a loud smack and a puff of powder.

Got him! Abraham congratulated himself.

David lost his balance. He tripped over his own feet, arms flung wide –
– right into the fire.

Abraham felt his body stifle. He became a statue, frozen with fear.

Flames wrapped around David's hands and forearms, coiled around his biceps, and chewed at his shoulders. Skin distorted. White blisters popped up where the fire flashed. The cloth of his long-sleeved shirt wilted and rippled. He threw his head back and screamed.

The sound hit Abraham like a hammer to his kneecaps. He buckled.

Before he knew what was happening, he had his hands at the side of his head, and *he* was screaming. He couldn't look at his brother burning alive, but he couldn't look away. He couldn't breathe but he cried, and somehow his hands on his head were the only thing keeping himself from exploding, and the fire was glowing brighter, redder, deep, deep red, and –

David rolled out of the fire, sizzling as he spun over the powdery snow. He rolled five or six times. Each time progressively more snow clung to his body. When he came to a stop, he looked like a snowman from the neck down.

A small stream of white smoke, about the size you'd expect from a cigarette, wafted up from the fire pit. The flames had been extinguished. The pile of wood in the center appeared as if it hadn't yet been burned and stood in its half-disturbed tepee.

Abraham blinked, unable to comprehend.

Larry and his grandparents rushed to David's side, their chairs kicked over into the snow. David rolled onto his back, sobbing. Abraham took a step toward his brother, his legs finally feeling like they were unlocked from the adrenaline dump.

Father's hand clapped onto his shoulder. He stopped in his tracks.

The old man looked at him, his face...sad.

Abraham wilted. He knew he was to blame for this. He just hoped David was all right.

"He's okay!" Johnford shouted from the other side of the firepit.

Larry said, "What the hell? He didn't even get burned! Look at this shit, guys!"

"Language, young man!" Gramma chastised him.

Abraham rushed to David's side. "Hey bro, you okay?"

David nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. I can't believe I didn't get burned. I thought I was going to die!"

David held his forearms out. His shirt was scorched up to the biceps. Burnt threads dangled from what was left of it. Abraham ran his fingers over David's winter-pale skin, amazed. The fire had consumed his long-sleeved shirt, but...not his flesh?

Did I see what I thought I saw?

"Didn't you scream, though?" Abraham asked.

"Let me up." David shoved him back. "Of course I screamed. I fell in the fire and thought I was gonna die!"

Abraham backed up, gave his brother some air. Larry shot Abraham a glance with a raised eyebrow, like, *what are you doing?*

"I thought you were...ugh, I thought I killed you, David."

David laughed. "What? You didn't do anything. I tripped." He brushed some snow off. Larry helped him pat the powder clean. Everyone shared a good laugh at the de-escalation.

Abraham played along with the laughter, but he had a strange feeling gnawing at his gut.

The screen door slammed shut on the porch. Father had gone back inside. That was the signal to everyone that the holiday evening had come to an early end.

Thank you for reading this sample. Now that you have freely enjoyed the fruits of this author's labour, we strongly advise that you purchase the full title wherever you may find it. Failure to do so will be...unpleasant.



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