



BURN
THE SUN

HALO SCOT

There Are No Champions Here

Camroc

Bleeding sky, crying stars, sun on a noose, swollen and red.

She's dying. We're dying. Again, again, *again*. Flames slice open, and fire glows. Starving heat, greedy blaze, wants to eat worlds, waits for the end. She chews our songs and swallows our stories. We are nothing. *Nothing*. Bones and broth. No meat or memory. A smudge in space, a shadow in the dark.

Threadbare galaxy, she's a temptress. Eyes like diamonds, blind and bright. Lips like rubies, fangs wet with venom. She bit us twice: Earth, then our second sun. Death flirts with daggers. He chases us. We run. *Tag, you're it*.

"Duck," Coach says. I duck. "Dodge." I dodge. "Faster." I'm faster. "Stronger." I'm stronger. "Not enough." I know.

Iron scars, Coach is a hammer. Steel lips and titanium voice. Gray buzz cut and russet skin. Muscles like ropes, glare like ice. He makes us better. Builds us tougher. We are his puppets, and

he is our god.

“The Games are in a *week*,” Coach spits. “In one week, you fight for us all. Tomorrow, Trials begin. You are not ready.”

Win or die, the Games are knives. My life is a slave.

“Prime will destroy you. They’ve trained since birth. I coddled you too long. Again.”

I miss the punch. Coach cracks my nose. Again, again, *again*. Pain flowers. Blood rains. Tulips in the mud.

“Are you worthy?” Coach barks. “Is Quate worthy? Our world’s fate relies on you.”

Only a single planet can escape, a sole survivor to see our third home. This is law: five worlds, five teams, five Games, one winner. Another punch. Petals stained red. Coach shoves me, and I stumble. Life sharpens as death beckons. *Run faster, runt*. And so, I run.

“There isn’t enough room on the seedship for everyone,” Coach says. “Do you want a seat? Or do you want to burn to death in the heart of our sun? If you lose, you kill us all. Fight!”

So I fight.

“More, Camroc,” he says. I give more. “Push me.” I push. “Destroy me.” I destroy. “Take away my every hope.” I flip, twist, kick him away. “Not enough.” Again, I know.

“Let him rest,” Arada says.

“Rest?” Coach roars. “He can rest when he’s dead, which might be soon. Don’t interrupt, Arada.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Nyo, spar with Camroc. Combat measures strength, both physical and mental. Want it. *Need* it. Victory is a slippery bitch. Earn her golden claws. You’re afraid, Camroc, but fear is a demon. In new worlds, old ways must die. Save us or slay us.

It's your choice."

Not a choice, a chain.

Nyo throws a punch. I block. Ze kicks high. I crouch low. Ze twirls and flips backward. I catch zes ankle, yank zem to the ground. Nyo grins, and I help zem to zes feet.

"Weak, Camroc," Coach says. "You are so much better. So much *more*. You could have beaten Nyo from that first punch, but you let zem kick and flip. Don't wait. Time drains you, weakens you, wears you out so your opponent can obliterate you. Do you want to live? Or do you want to die? 'Cause right now, you're killing us all."

"*Riahbat sos od*," Evam says in Quatic. *Give him a break. "El od liht."* Please. Ronoc, Yelir, and Trebor nod while Arada and Nyo murmur in agreement. The team stands up for me when I cannot stand up for myself. Guilt. *Shame*. Regret. *Revenge*.

"In Common," Coach says. "Our language has no place in the future."

Evam switches tongues. "Please, Coach. Camroc fights harder than us all. He's tired today."

"He's not tired. He's gentle. And life is not gentle to gentle boys."

Lin na loas silim. Life is not gentle—*period*.

"Sorry, Coach," I say.

"Don't apologize to me," Coach says. "Apologize to *them*." He gestures at my teammates. "I'm an old, cranky bastard, and I've seen enough life. They haven't even started. Don't let them die before they can live."

Duty. *Pressure*. Burden. *Pain*. Quate stands on my shoulders. I buckle beneath her weight. Blood cries down my face, red as rage, hot as hunger. I am an athlete. My body is a machine—a *weapon*. Garnet curls. Golden-brown skin. Eyes jade and amber,

angular and shy. Broad, strong, yet still so weak. I was not made for this world, but this world made me, bred me, warped and ripped and molded me. I am clay.

“The other colonies expect us to lose,” Coach continues. “They *want* us to lose. We are nothing to them. An underdog, a failure. A loser and a laughingstock. I am the *only* one who believes in you, and I won’t stop pushing till you see gold. Because you are not a laughingstock. You are not a loser or failure. No, you are a dark horse. A stardamn powerhouse, if you let yourselves fall. Nyo, come here.”

The lean athlete approaches, blue-black skin dewy with sweat, cornrows tight against zes neck. “Yes, Coach?” Nyo’s voice is deep but soft, the rock to my storm. Ze glances at me, and zes large onyx eyes blink, slow, as if to say: *It’s okay, Cam. It’ll all be okay.* Ze knows me too well—ze and Arada, my family, my home.

“Punch Camroc again,” Coach says.

Nyo starts a punch. Coach grabs zes arm, and ze freezes.

“This was your mistake,” Coach says to me. “Extension is a vulnerability. Nyo has reach, because ze’s tall, but you have force, because you’re not. Center yourself.” I center myself. “Ground yourself.” I ground myself. “Then grab zes arm, and flip zem over your shoulder. Claim zes momentum as your own. Throw zem off balance. Go.”

Uneasy, I grab Nyo’s arm, twist, and pull. Ze doesn’t budge.

Coach scrubs his face. Freckles dance beneath his frustration, and small hazel eyes pierce me with disappointment. “There are no champions here.”

“I don’t want to hurt zem,” I say, Nyo’s arm still in my grasp.

“If you don’t hurt zem, someone else will,” Coach snaps. “That’s why we’re here—to hurt, to heal, to make each other

better than we'd ever be alone. Tomorrow, you fight *against* each other for a spot on the Olympic team. In one week, you fight *with* each other for a spot on the seedship. Do you want to qualify? To survive? To lead this team—this planet—to safety? Or do you want to damn us all? This is on you, Camroc. You have the potential to be stronger than everyone, but you're afraid. There's no room for fear at the end of the worlds."

I'm angry, not afraid. Nyo is my sibling—chosen, not given. We're all orphans, so we became family. I don't want to hurt anyone here. I can't afford to lose anyone else.

"Do it, Cam," Nyo whispers. "Flip me. I'll be fine."

Ze relaxes in my grip and leans forward, aiding me. I grit my teeth and flip zem over my shoulder. Ze lands on the mat, winded. I wince.

"Ze helped you," Coach notices. He notices everything. A huff of disgust whips through my blood-red hair. "No one will help you tomorrow. This is your battle, Camroc. I can't teach you anymore. Practice is over. Sleep well tonight. Stars bless you all."

Coach leaves the gym without further farewell. Evam, Trebor, Ronoc, and Yelir smile, sympathetic, then head toward the bunks to shower.

"*Rat ra. A naegil ra lud*," Arada says in Quatic. *Come on. Let's go.* She tosses me and Nyo shawls, then wraps a chunky scarf around her wiry frame. Her narrow black eyes shine with mischief as she re-braids her sleek black hair with deft brown hands.

"*Ac tiah?*" I ask. *Where?* I tie my shawl around my shoulders, and Nyo does the same with zes.

"*Hcama*," Arada says. *Out.*

"We don't have time," I say in Common. *In new worlds, old*

ways must die. “You heard Coach.”

“We’ll be back early, promise,” Arada says.

“Ri-ri—”

“Shut up, Cam. We need this. Tomorrow, we leave. I want to say goodbye to Quate. We might never return home; if we do, we will die here. Tonight is our last night to be normal, to be free.”

“We were never normal or free,” I say. Followed since childhood, scanned and scrutinized, the worlds tore us apart before we could piece ourselves together. Guards have always sheltered us, isolated us—symbols on a pedestal, flesh treated like metal. Coach is our father, but he is also our master, forger of blades and blacksmith of souls. I am a dagger, a sword, a scythe. Death melted me from an early age.

“Get out of your head,” Arada says. Her sunshine is blinding today, brighter than our actual sun, rusty as gore and dying on knots.

Nyo uses a medscanner to heal my nose and wipes blood from my face. “You’re too kind, Cam,” ze says. “You’ve always been too stardamn kind.”

“And too mopey,” Arada says, slapping my cheek. She’s small but spunky and takes nobody’s shit. “C’mon, Grump Supreme, race you to the top.”

She sprints away before I can answer. Nyo follows, serene. I wish I had zes calm, but I don’t. Nor do I have Arada’s flames. I often wonder why Coach recruited me all those years ago. Quate has many orphans from many famines. Why me? Why not the others? I was timid then, I’m timid now, and I’ve never outgrown that worry, that angst. Maybe the Games will change me—or break me.

“Hurry up,” Arada calls from the gym’s exit.

She opens the door. Sunset invades: fat, pink, and watery. With Nyo on her heels, she darts outside. Reluctant, I follow, and Quate engulfs me. Hills and valleys, lakes and streams, green limned red, land rolling thunder. The sun squats on the horizon, tired and dying. She waits while we dash up a slope—feet sliding, hearts pounding—and reach the crest of the nearest hill.

Rodents scurry through heather at our feet. Thatched roofs sprawl beneath us. Stone houses glow with lanterns while greenhouses and factories close for the night. Citizens drive aircars home through fields of wheat and potatoes. Cigarette smoke feathers through open windows. Laughter bubbles with wine and whiskey, then something splits inside me.

Quate is a friendly world—fiery when necessary. We're poor but warm, and there's no chance in hell that we'll win. This is over. This is the end. In too few days, we'll all be dead. *If you lose, you kill us all.* Coach was right. I will lose, and I will kill them all. *Fight!* I fought. Failed. There's no more to give. I am no dark horse, nor powerhouse. I'll let my team down, my friends down, my world and people and our Houses down. We are ants. Prime will squash us. If not Prime, then Dion, or even Tertia. We are the worst of the worlds—tied with Quin for bottom rung. At least Quin is rich. They'll die in style while we die in screams.

"Cam, darling, breathe," Nyo says, zes hand on my arm. I breathe. "Count." I count. "Relax." I can't.

"We'll die," I say. "We'll all die because of me."

Arada snorts. "Overachiever. Only some of us will die because of you."

"Not helping, Ri-ri," Nyo says. Ze turns to me. "This is on us all. We're a team. We fight together, die together, and if we die,

we die in peace.”

“And if not peace, then flair,” Arada says. “Lighten up. It’s only death. You didn’t kill the sun, Cam. No matter how self-centered, big-headed, and broody you are, this is not your fault.”

“If I could only—” I start.

“Stop,” Nyo says. “No more ifs or doubts. Tomorrow, we fight for team placement. I *will* make the Quatic team, and I want you by my side.” From anyone else’s mouth, it would sound like arrogance, but from zes, it sounds like hope. “Okay?”

“Okay,” I say.

“And me?” Arada asks, dark brows raised.

“You’ll be number one,” Nyo says.

“Damn right.”

“Always so modest.”

“Modesty is overrated,” Arada says. “Life is, too. Cheer up, Cam. Live or die, it was a hell of a ride.”

Wind whistles between us, over hills, through valleys of this ghost-ridden world. “*Si aerb moil ut,*” I whisper. *I love you.* “I love you both more than the stars. Never forget that.”

“And we love you,” Nyo says.

“Are you two drunk?” Arada asks.

“I’m serious, Ri-ri,” I say.

“I know, and I love you, too,” she says, “but if you get more maudlin, I’m gonna vomit on that fern.”

“Spare the fern,” Nyo says.

“Then I’ll vomit on you.”

“I didn’t start it.”

“But you encouraged it. You know Cam’s a sucker for soaps. In another life, he’d be an actor.”

“No, his face is too...”

“Bitchy?” I offer.

“You do have resting prick face,” Nyo says. “It’s a good thing.”

“It’ll scare the competition,” Arada adds.

“Or make them wonder why I’m constipated.”

We laugh together as broken bells, as untuned fiddles. Hearts a drum roll, we pray to the moons.

* * *

Night rains stars on wounded souls.

Pain. *Echoes*. Fear. *Ghosts*. Cry me a river, *then drown in your tears*. Weak as weapons. Strong as words. Swords saw through rotten dreams. *You are not ready. You will never fly free.*

I gasp awake. Blood sears my veins. Air chafes my lungs. It wasn’t real. I’m not real. No monster can kill a shadow.

“Cam, you okay?” Nyo hisses from zes bunk.

I whisper, “Yes.” *Never again.*

“Liar. Come here.”

“No.”

“Camroc.” Nyo spins my name like a spell, and I listen. “I’m here. Ri-ri is here.”

“Unfortunately,” Arada says, voice thick with sleep.

“We all are here,” Nyo says, though the others snore, oblivious.

“I’m broken,” I breathe.

My fists tighten into wrecking balls, and I chain the rage inside me. *I cannot fall apart*. Our people rely on me. If I lose, they die. I am a killer. *Killer*. A murderer. *Murderer*. Fire flames within me. Static crawls up my limbs. Thoughts roar—*let me out, let me in*—as I palm my temples in silent terror. Mouth agape. Eyes clenched tight. Veins a net to cage me.

“Yes, you are,” Arada says. “So take your broken shards and fight.” She turns over and falls back asleep.

Nyo stays awake. “Cam.” I don’t answer. “Camroc.” I flail on a sinking raft in a boiling sea. “Brother.” I pause in the dread-ridden dark. “We’re all broken.”

“Then we’ll all lose.” *We’ll all die.*

“Scars are the toughest skin,” Nyo says. “They’re numb and strong.”

“I don’t feel numb or strong.”

“Because you’re picking at scabs. Let yourself heal.”

“No time.” Panic shivers through me. Cold sweat. Hot blood. Scorching breaths. Heart a hammer. Mind an ocean. Life a memory.

“There’s always time,” Nyo says. “Too much time. Breathe. Count. Relax. You are in control.”

“I’m chaos’s bitch.”

Nyo chuckles. Arada pointedly snores—awake again, asleep again. Empty. *Empty*. I’ve always been empty. A robot. A tool. They raised me to save them. A brittle shell. A hollow statue. I am nothing. *Nothing*. Breath on the wind. Sobs in the storm. *Erased*.

“Sleep,” Nyo says. “You’re ready. Have faith in the training and rest. If you don’t, you’ll sabotage yourself.”

Fists and drums, hand-twisted iron, I sink, swim, wait in between. Night shimmers around us.

“I’m not ready to die,” I whisper.

“I am,” ze whispers back, “but I don’t want to, so *sleep*, Cam. You’ll feel better tomorrow.”

“For stars’ sake, shut the fuck up,” Arada snaps. She rustles her covers, turning over. The others remain asleep. Fear doesn’t kidnap them as it kidnaps me. I am horror’s hostage. *Run*.

“Sorry, Ri-ri,” I say.

“Go to sleep, Camroc, or I swear on all the fucking stars in

this stupid bloody galaxy that I'll kill you myself. Then you won't need to worry about letting anyone down."

A smile twitches my lips.

Nyo smiles, too. "You heard the queen."

"Go to hell, Nyo," Arada spits. "Keep spewing that wise shit, and I'll kill you, too. It is bed-fucking-time, time to fucking sleep. If I hear so much as a stardamn burp from either of you, I will slit both your throats in the night."

"You take tough love to a whole new level, Ri-ri," ze says.

"My knife is in my hand."

Nyo falls silent, amused, but pads across the room to squeeze my shoulder. That squeeze says, *We'll be okay. And if we're not okay, we'll be together.* Ze tiptoes back to zes bunk and falls asleep. Ri-ri does, too, but panic plagues me. *I'll crash and burn. Pressure. Sleep. Failure. Go to sleep. Disaster. Go to fucking sleep, Camroc.*

I don't. Can't. Must.

Breathe. Count. Relax.

Slow. Steady. Stable.

Rest. *Rest.*

Heart calms. Lungs cool.

Home. *Home.*

Done.

A whispered prayer: "*Life, you've made me strong. Now, have mercy.*"

Yes, We'll Die, but First, There's Cake

Ketra

“Eat,” Mother says.
EI do not eat. I can eat, but I will not eat, because this is no time for cake.

“No one wants a skinny princess. You reflect Quin’s welfare. If you are thin, the world is thin, and if the world is thin, the world is weak. *Eat.*” Mother uses her royal voice. She grates each syllable against her teeth, shredding words into weapons.

“I am not thin, and Quin is not weak,” I say.

“No thanks to you.” Mother is Queen Ora now. She is no longer the woman who made me, but the woman who carved me from Quin’s frozen tundra. I am her prize centerpiece. *Shine.* I shine. *Glow.* I glow. *Give them hope where there is pain.* I slice open a smile and bleed over the snow. Her iron-gray eyes cut me with disdain. She tucks a silver-blond strand behind her ashen ear and braids her scrawny fingers. We’re both short, but I’m soft where she’s sharp, curvy where she’s cruel. *Save me.*

"Tomorrow is important, Ketra," Mother says.

Ketra. *Ketra*. I have only my name, not hers, not my late father's. Family is found. Deserve loyalty, and earn every drop of success.

"Trials set the tone for the Games," she continues. "Tell me who will make our team."

This is a test. Servants retreat to the ice palace's walls and wait, heads bowed, while Queen Ora judges across the table. I gaze out the frosty windows to the staff's igloos. My reflection tickles the glass: pale with freckles, storm-gray eyes, wild starlight hair. I resemble Mother. Mother does not resemble me.

"Tell me," Ora presses.

I feign thought, but I know her games. Mother does not want my answer. She wants *her* answer. She wants praise. I learned long ago to be timid. Submission hurts less than subjugation. *Yes, Your Majesty. Always, Your Majesty. I am but your humble tool.*

Quiet and shy, I say, "Isrik."

"Good," Ora says. "Give me two more."

"Kire and Ekris."

"Valo and Urat are competent." Another test.

"No ambition," I say.

"Akina and Iram show promise."

"No power."

Mother hums in approval. Unlike the other planets, she chose our Olympic team. Tomorrow, our alternates will let the others win—will let *Mother* win. She's always right. She *must* be right. Quin is strict, standoffish. No local plants, no local animals. Greenhouses provide a fake life. We're rich but worthless with inflation and high prices. Ghosts are devalued here, while on Prime, cybercurrency soars. I spent my whole life shunning

that desert, but fire always melts ice.

“Eat,” Mother says again.

I eat. My willpower is tissue compared to her titanium. “*Em emmelouk*,” I say in Quinish. *We’ll die.*

Mother hates our language. She hates our people more. In Common, she says, “Yes, we’ll die, but first, there’s cake.”

She has little faith in victory and less faith in me. But she’ll cheat her way up, no matter the cost. There are no consequences for her. She killed my father, a poor ruler, to claim the throne as a worse ruler. I never met him, and I never understood her. Mother craves power. She starves for control. I doubt she’ll cede to me, and I hope we die before a civil war.

Mother faces a servant. “Add extra security to Isrik, Kire, and Ekris.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the servant says and leaves the room.

Then Mother turns to me. “Tell me why I did that, Ketra.”

“Protection,” I say. Another bite of cake. Sugar gags me. *Eat.*

“Tell me what they would need protection from.”

“Assassinations. Sabotage. The athletes are important.”

“The athletes are *vulnerable*. They know how to play, not how to fight. We must protect them from the other worlds. The Games are toxic. Their players are under a massive amount of pressure. Imagine the weight of the world, the survival of your people, on your shoulders.”

“I cannot.” *I can.*

“Do not lie, Ketra.” A test. I fail. “You are not so different from the athletes. I was proud after your first assassination attempt. I had worried about your soft demeanor, but when that servant drew his knife, I saw you in a new light. He was the first to view you as dangerous. Fear is a shield. Use it. Hone it.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I say.

Fear is no shield. Fear is a sword. After that assassination attempt, I crumbled beneath its bite. Mother shelters me even more now. She isolates me in an icy bubble, and loneliness knocks at its skin. I am her heir, thirty and still weak, while she's sixty and too strong. We have much to survive before the throne switches riders. I wish I weren't royal, but I am. I wish the crown weren't a claw, but it is. Nerves branch in my gut at the chains.

I face a servant and ask, "Could you please refill my water?"

"Yes, Your Royal Highness." The servant obeys. She must.

"Stop," Mother says. The servant stops. "Again, Ketra. A princess who pleads has little power. A woman who asks has little control. Tell her what you want. Demand it. You are Princess of Quin, heir to the throne. Make her bow."

The servant bows, but Mother says, "Stand." The servant stands. "She did not earn your bow, not yet. Ketra, again."

"Never mind," I mumble, chewing my lip, picking skin off my fingers. I am not this woman, this princess, this pawn. Mother always reprimands me: *Too kind, too sweet, too tame, too nice*. I care about people. She cares about power.

"Ketra, *again*," Mother—Queen Ora—orders.

So again, I cave. "Refill my water," I whisper.

The servant starts, then stops when Ora lifts a skeletal finger. "Questions do not need question marks. That was a plea, not a command. *Command her*."

I do not command her. Instead, I sit and wait for fate to claim me.

"If you don't make her, I will," Mother says.

The servant twitches, eyes me with desperation. *You, not her. Never her*. They know me for mercy, but they know Mother for murder.

I mock-cough and mouth, "*Iskeetna.*" Sorry.

The servant flashes a smile, then smooths her expression into compliance. *I understand.*

My face hardens as I straighten my cloak. "More water." My voice is not my own. Neither are my words. But Mother beams, and the servant sighs. Yet Ora needs more. Always more.

As water flows, I slap the glass from the servant's hand. Crystal shatters on the floor. The servant looks shocked, but her shoulders relax. We both pretend and perform.

"Clean it," I snap.

"Yes, Princess Ketra." The servant cleans. Mother claps.

"Wonderful," Ora says. "A lovely touch. *And then, in the end, in the cold fist of fate, the light of a thousand suns will spark across time.*" She quotes Scripture. A success.

"*May the stars bless you,*" the servants murmur in reply.

"Finish your cake, and get your parka," Mother says. "The Council of Five starts in ten minutes."

I finish my cake. Retrieve my parka. Listen, follow, obey, and break. *I am not the monster you made.* I am.

* * *

Delegates from all five worlds attend the virtual call, planets behind tablets, power behind screens. We speak Common, the original tongue that spawned dialects then new languages from lack of cross-colony interaction. To preserve fuel and limit disease, worlds do not visit each other, apart from the Games.

This is our second sun. We lost much in Earth's Exodus, but we found more here, in our strange new home. There are five worlds. All share size, rotation, and atmosphere. Gravity is the same. Days are the same. The colonies sit in the same time

zones on every planet. The system is in sync. It's impossible, yet so are we. Like attracts like. But we stayed too long, waited too long, and death comes to those who wait. All good things must come to an end, though this was never a good thing.

"How would Quin respond to disqualification?" Priman Dictator Ribaj asks.

"That is a rather severe implication or insult," Mother says. I sit beside her in royal furs, satin threaded with silver, and frown. She expects me to frown, to sit, to purse my lips, to jut out my chin as she taught, she taught, *she taught*.

Dictator Ribaj dips his head on the screen. "I meant neither, Your Majesty."

There's not much technology left: screens, cells, tablets, panels. It's basic. Embarrassing. We should be gods by now, but tech is the autonomous, omnipotent one. We no longer understand or control its updates or advancements. It tends and improves itself. We surrendered too much control and yielded too much power. Mother thinks us dependent and reliant, but weak worst of all.

Ribaj adds, "I simply wish for the honest execution of the Games."

Queen Ora plays along. "In that case, if you're concerned about execution, disqualification carries the utmost consequences on Quin."

To his credit, Ribaj does not flinch. I do. Mother spits darts at his heart, and he sneers through pain. Prime is rigid, militant. They pride themselves on structure. However, during their latest drought, there was a scandal among their defense contractors. Someone stole food for their family, and Ribaj pardoned the offense. Mother pardons no one, not even me.

"Understood," Ribaj says. "And you swear on Scripture that

your athletes don't use moxies?"

"I swear on all the stars in the sky," Ora says. "Our athletes' performances need no enhancements."

"What about Makers?" asks Senator Farsa from the Dionese Socialist Democracy.

"Yes, do you filter them out?" Representative Aseret adds. Tertia is anarchy. They rule themselves, and Mother hates them for their courage.

"This sudden suspicion concerns me," Mother says.

"We're thorough," says Speaker of the Houses Esrioas, though she's behind it. Quate doesn't trust Quin, so they sow rage with fear. We two underdogs spawn twin wolves. They hate us, and we hate them. They also hate Prime, but Prime is a fortress. Quin is flesh between armor. We hurt and bleed.

"Quin removes Makers at birth. There is no plague here, though I cannot speak for the other worlds."

Esrioas fidgets. Quate has a surplus of Makers, evolved humans who use thought energy to Make matter. They literally think things into existence, but there aren't many left. Quin marginalizes magic and crucifies creators. Mother is the thorough one.

"Moving on," Dictator Ribaj says. Prime rejects drama. "Tomorrow, skippers will chauffeur athletes to Starstop. The location is neutral, so I expect cooperation. Since the space station orbits the sun, make suitable preparations for the heat."

Another advantage. Prime is hot. So is Starstop. The colder planets are unused to warmth. But this is "fair"—as fair as a red-hot supergiant ready to supernova. She was already giant when our ancestors settled, so the expansion has not affected us—a pity. I'd prefer Mother melted. If we win, if we reach our third home with binary suns, perhaps she'll fade to steam.

“Because of population growth since Earth’s Exodus, only one colony can fit in the seedship,” Ribaj says. “We would have ferried in groups earlier, but the seedship needed extensive repairs, ones its internal systems just completed. As such, given the supernova’s aggressive timeline, we cannot take multiple trips. The Games’ victor will win the seedship’s seats for their planet. Deceit or deception will face grave punishment.”

He reminds us of rules we breathe, we dream, even though it has been three thousand years since the last Olympics. As an ancient Earth tradition, it seems appropriate. We link the apocalypses with this tribute.

“After Trials tomorrow,” Ribaj continues, “in a week, the Opening Ceremony will occur. Next will come qualifiers then a final in all five events: combat, racing, obstacles, airball, and trust. Gold medals earn one hundred points, silver medals earn fifty, and bronze medals earn twenty-five. The planet with the most points wins.”

Simple. *Savage*. Law binds him to reiterate these terms at every Council of Five. It’s hammered into our heads, so we cannot claim ignorance or innocence. Win or die. Conquer or crumble. The universe is barbaric, full of cruel surprises—like Mother.

“The Council has delivered uniforms to all worlds’ training facilities,” Ribaj drones on. “We printed athletes’ names across the front and planets’ names across the back. All are gray, one piece, and formfitting; loose uniforms are not permitted. Indicative stripes outside the arms and legs designate planetary ownership: orange for Prime, green for Dion, yellow for Tertia, blue for Quate, and violet for Quin. Teams may not remove or modify these stripes. If uniform alteration occurs, the penalty is disqualification...”

Ribaj rambles guidelines and disciplinary measures. I tune out. Mother does not. She's cold as ice. Harsh as death. Bitter as a blade.

"Listen, Ketra," she hisses.

"I am," I say.

She mutes the call. "No, you hear them, but you do not listen. Every word from Ribaj's mouth is a threat. Read between the lines: disqualification, execution, deception, punishment. These Games will be brutal. Trust no one."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Mother scoffs. "You do not understand. If you did, you would say 'thank you' instead of 'yes.' You're too much like your father. Smart as a whip, but thick as a brick."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Too late, Princess. Too late, indeed."

Shame heats my ears. Mother unmutes the call. Ribaj rattles off more rules and regulations. I frown, sit, listen, wait. *You will never be enough.* I am too little. Mother is too much. Imbalance breaks our world.

But the Games will break us all.

Even Without Paper, There's Paperwork

Allebazi

“**N**o, don't auto-translate,” I say. “Last time you did that, I asked their queen if I could eat her nipples.”

A pause. Muttered frustration.

“Then find someone who speaks Quinish, and run it by them before I ask another royal to braid their pubes.”

Another pause. Grumbled swears.

“I know it's easy, but it's also wrong. Language is complicated. You can't program translation. ‘It's a pleasure to meet you’ can become ‘I'd like to pleasure you’ if you're not careful. No, I don't want to fuck their queen. Okay, I do, but that's beside the point.”

A third pause. Reluctant surrender.

“Good. Send it to me before I finish my coffee.” I cut the call and slam the cell on my desk. Fucking politics. Even without paper, there's paperwork.

“Need any help?” Efia squeaks. My new assistant is young and shiny. Bright blue eyes and curly orange hair. Bronze and short. Big and beautiful. She knits hats for charity. I give away nothing for free.

“No,” I say.

“Great, I’m here if you need me!”

The perfect helper. So happy. So peppy. It’s annoying. And arousing. *No*. Love is a turd. It gets everything dirty and is a bitch to clean up. *I want to lick her*. Stop it. Behave.

I clap my hands and turn to my dozen staff. “Trials are today, people. I want constant updates on athletes, coaches, and colonies. Get me stories. Dig for lies. Scroll PicTic. Find viral posts, and piggyback off their keywords. We are the voice of the Space Olympics. Sing a good song. Go.”

They go. Within minutes, a hundred pitches cross my desk: filtered photos, doctored muscles, a nipple here, a groin shadow there. Familiar, not scandalous. They’ll do. For now. I trim the brain dump into five lightning bolts: “Ten Reasons Why Prime Is on Top,” “Shocking Confessions from Dionese Athletes,” “Tertian Coach Reveals Team’s Secret Diet,” “Five Things You Don’t Know About Quate,” and “You Won’t Believe How Quin Trains.” They’re cheap, but cheap makes money. People are lazy. Spoon-feed them ease.

“Boost Prime and Quate,” I say. “Play off their feud.”

“On it, Bazi,” Efia says.

All five articles blow up www.orlds. In seconds, traffic storms our site. M2O buckles beneath the assault, but my brain baby sails on. We’re the best for a reason, the most trusted media company in all the worlds. Yes, we bought that trust. Nothing is free. Except Efia’s hats.

“Use proxy accounts to post extra comments,” I say. “Trick

the algorithm.”

“Already done,” Efia says.

Goody two shoes. I want to untie those laces. *Enough.*

“The athletes will arrive soon,” I say. “I want half of you in the field and half of you here.”

M2O is on Starstop, our space station that orbits our dying sun. The station came from Earth with the seedship, then it broke: no wings, no escape. It's dead, but we like dead things. The Olympics will gnaw this phantom's corpse. Tensions are high. Fuckery is higher. Sooner or later, everything will crack.

That's why M2O's here, to capture that crack. We left our worlds and live in an adjacent barracks with artificial gravity and synthetic lives. Our office is a small cube with desks, tablets, and wall screens. Blue-orange seams shine along dark metal walls. Everything has that fake candy glow. One windowed wall overlooks the bloody supergiant. That's real. Too real. A constant, gory, fear-swamped reminder. *You're all gonna die.* It's about time.

“Take a break if you need it,” I tell Efia. “Once Trials start, we'll be busy nonstop.”

“Thanks, Bazi,” Efia says. I hate when she uses my name. She acknowledges I'm a person, not a thing, but I like being a thing. People have feelings, and feelings are messy. “I'm going for a walk. Want to join?”

“No,” I say.

“Another time!” Always so sunny. Fuck the sun. That's why we're in this mess. Efia pauses, then turns and adds, “Do you have people? Friends, I mean?” Blush blisters her cheeks. “Sorry, I didn't—”

“No,” I repeat. “I don't do friendships. Or relationships. People will always leave or let you down.”

Efia beams. The happy, annoying shit. “Yep, that’s the healthy outlook. Well, if you want...people...you know you can—”

“Go.”

“Going.”

Gone.

She’s bold today. Then again, today is the beginning of the end, so this is our one last chance to be bold, to be brave. I don’t want to be bold or brave. I want to die a boring, painless death. No friends. No lovers. *Everyone will die.* Shit, I need to chill. *Calm the fuck down.*

I leave the office and head into the hallway kitchen. Cupcakes, that’s what I need. Fancy ones with frosting and shit. Sprinkles, too. And gumdrops. No, fuck gumdrops. *Relax.* I am. *Flour, sugar, salt, baking powder, vanilla, milk, butter, eggs.* All fake. Our greenhouses grow food and nurture livestock, but it’s fragile. We’re fragile. We’re fake, fragile, *fucked.*

Breathe. *Breathe.* We’ll all die, yes, but that was always a given. No one lives forever. This just squishes our timeline. *Measure, pour, whisk, blend.* Faster. *Rougher.* Beat the living shit out of death. *Ironic.* I know.

My cell beeps. A call. I answer. “Hello?”

“Are you stress-baking again?” It’s Camroc.

“Are you panic-calling again?” I slop batter into a tin and toss the cupcakes in the oven.

“Yes,” he says, honest and pure. Camroc is a gentle boy. Life is not gentle to gentle boys. “Sorry, I wanted to...never mind.”

“Cam, vent,” I say. Our whatever-ship started with his childhood interview on Quate, and he latched tight.

“No, you’re busy,” Camroc says.

“I’m always busy, but I’m a multitasking monster, so spit.” I worry about him. He’s kind and sweet. The Games will eat him

alive.

"Trials are today."

"Yup."

"I can't do it, Bazi."

"Then don't."

"I must," he says.

"No one's forcing you, kid," I say. "Well, they are, but you can bow out, fuck up."

"You're supposed to give me a pep talk about courage and strength."

"Give yourself a pep talk. I'm here for truth."

He sighs. Stress seeps through that sigh, so I soften. "Listen, Cam, I know it's hard. Impossible, even. They put the weight of your world on your shoulders and expect you not to fall. But every world needs a sun, a star to anchor it, a reason to keep spinning. Find a sun. There. Pep-talky enough?"

"I don't understand," Camroc says through the cell.

"Find a reason to fight," I say. "It doesn't need to be Quate's reason, but you need a reason. Got it?"

The athlete hesitates, considers. "My team is my reason."

"Then fight for them."

"But what if I fail?"

"I'm too old for ifs, kid. Fake it till you make it. Fuck it till you break it. Be a pompous asshole. You got this."

"I don't."

"Then channel my pompous assholiness."

He chuckles. *Good.* "Thanks, Bazi."

"Anytime, Cam. Go be epic and shit."

The call ends, and Efia rounds the corner. *Dammit.* Saved by the oven. I remove the cupcakes and frost them hot. Icing weeps down the sides. I dump sprinkles on top and stuff them

in the freezer with the rest of my stress spawn. I sell some at bake sales, with stupid signs like “Bumcakes” and “Enoughins,” but bake sales can’t keep up with me. Neither could my ex. *Move on.* I know, but hate burns, and I love fire. *Learn to live again. Love again.* Therapy can kiss my half-century ass. As I said, love is a turd, and my self-worth is a clogged toilet. People suck. Some suck better than others. I mean more.

“Was that Camroc?” Efia asks. Her mouth opens in awe. “He’s from my world, you know.”

“I know,” I say, cleaning the kitchen.

“Could I get an exclusive with him? He is *so cool.*”

Youth is wasted on the...well, young. “No, let him be.”

“He’s nervous, isn’t he? I’d be shitting myself. It is *awesome* that you know him, Bazi! Like so, so, so wicked awesome! How did you meet him? You’re from Tertia, right? What’s it like there? I heard it’s gorgeous. You all are so creative! No wonder you made M2O!”

“Can you take your joy somewhere else? You’re fucking with my vibe. Can’t mope with you around, and I do love to mope.”

“Of course, Bazi,” Efia chirps. “Sorry, so sorry. Mope away. See you later!”

Damn her. *Deserve her.* I don’t. *Let her go.* Wait. “Hold up,” I say.

My assistant turns around.

“Fight back.”

“Sorry?” Efia asks.

“Don’t let people treat you like shit. I was a twat. Sorry, rough day. But call me out on my twattery next time. Okay?”

She shifts, uncomfortable. “It’s fine, don’t worry.”

“It’s not fine, and I do worry.” *For fuck’s sake, now is not the time to care. Live as a grumpy fool, and die as a grumpy fool.* But

my lips mutiny. “You’re good, Efi. Talented. Smart. Don’t let a jaded fuck like me ruin you.”

“You’re not jaded. I understand your concern. And you’ve helped me *so* much. I’m *so* grateful for you.”

“Then you need to raise your standards, darling.”

Efi reddens. “Thank you, Bazi. I will, Bazi.”

Silence hangs between us. I want to say more. Do more. Have more. No. *No*. I can’t. *I won’t*. Fold into death, and leave in peace. But Efi reaches toward me. On tiptoe, she brushes my golden cheek, and her fingers slip through my graying mahogany hair. I’m tall, broad, but in this moment, I’m weak. Rose petals. Butterfly wings. Snapped twigs. Autumn leaves. *Tangent much?* Shut up, subconscious. Deal with my weird shit.

“Sorry,” Efi whispers. “You had...frosting.”

“Frosting,” I repeat. *Dumbass*. I clench my jaw, narrow my thin brown eyes, don the armor that builds me, breaks me. “Check PicTic. Find more stories.”

She clears her throat. “Right, yes. Stories. On it.”

A message buzzes my cell. “For fuck’s sake.” This is the third time this month. People are stardamn animals.

“What is it?” Efi asks.

I don’t answer. Instead, I link my cell to the office intercom, and the speaker coughs on. “A reminder,” I announce, “to please refrain from drawing pictures of the ancient Earth celebrity Nicolas Cage under toilet seats in the company bathroom. These images—which are well done, by the way—have caused several urinary accidents, and the janitorial staff would like us to practice caution when relieving ourselves. Thank you.”

Efi stifles amusement and returns to the office. I follow her inside, and we fall back into routine. We both pretend it’s not awkward as the morning grinds on, the athletes arrive, and the

Games begin.