

The Wall

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The minute hand of the analog clock edges with agonizing slowness toward 3:45pm, release time. I hate the way the hands move around the clock-face as if stating: this boring class is almost over, but not quite. I prefer digital clocks, just like everyone else with a half functioning brain and a heart made out of anything other than stone. Mr. Brown, our genius teacher, decided in all his wisdom that to pass his class, all of us spoiled brats need to be able to read an analog clock. Stupid? Yes, but that's Mr. Brown, and he lectures, drones is more accurate, on the most fascinating topic imaginable: Founding Utopia, The Fall of the Two-Party System and The Rise of the American Prosperity Party. Fun? Not so much. Required for graduation? You bet.

"Miss Harris," Mr. Brown's voice rings in my ears. "Staring at the clock won't make time pass any faster. Now, answer the question."

My peers' twittering laughter echoes through the classroom. I blush. I'm in trouble. It's just like Mr. Brown to ask me a question while I'm not paying attention. I meet his gaze. His piercing blue eyes stare out at me from under a heavy brow. He looks dapper in his starched white shirt and neat blue and red tie with the conspicuous exception of an oil stain on the shirt's left breast.

"Well, Miss Harris?" he asks.

My face is flusher by the second. I feel my peers watching me, silently enjoying my embarrassment. High school kids are so empathetic.

"I didn't hear the question."

More laughter. Mr. Brown is about to speak, but the bell announcing the end of the school day interrupts him. My classmates and I, all wearing red, white, and blue uniforms, grab our tablets and make a beeline for the door. Before I can escape the purgatorial classroom, Mr. Brown intercepts me.

"You will answer my question, Miss Harris," he says, glowering at me.

"I'm in a rush. It's Thursday. My mom expects me at the Institute."

His expression changes to one resembling a scolded puppy. "Oh, of course. I don't want to make you late. Such an honor to help your mother with her research."

If he knew what happens to me at the Institute, he might not think I'm so lucky.

The hallway is jam-packed with students, their conversations creating a pleasant background white noise. I'm aware of a few of them glancing at me, but none dare throw shade or worse under the watchful electronic eyes of the numerous cameras placed strategically on the ceiling and walls. I search the hallway for Charlie, my bae, and, not seeing him, make a beeline for Mrs. Weatherby's class.

Before the war started, I might have texted Charlie, but nowadays it's common knowledge that the American Prosperity Force (APF) monitors all electronic communication. Anyone stupid enough to text risks having their conversations reported to their parents due to the Child Purity Act. Lame.

Arriving at Mrs. Weatherby's classroom, I glance through the window in the door and see Charlie in deep conversation with the calculus teacher. Above them on the wall is a clock, digital of course. 3:55. Great. I'm going to be late for my session at the Institute, but I have an urge, like a physical yearning, to gaze upon Charlie and touch him.

The minutes tick by. The clock changes to 4:00, and finally Charlie frees himself from Mrs. Weatherby's clutches. He emerges from the classroom, his square-jawed face alighting with pleasure when he sees me. He possesses the chiseled physique of a star athlete. His mesmerizing green eyes and luxurious blonde hair put me in the mood for Netflix 'n' Chill. Make out only, of course.

"Aren't you going to be late?" he asks with concern.

I love the timbre of his voice, so rich and resonant. "Yeah, but I just had to see you."

"Sorry," he says and takes my hand.

My heart thrums. His skin is warm and his fingers are slender yet strong. I'm so glad he didn't turn his back on me when the war broke out. As my other so-called friends started insulting me with racial slurs and threatening to call the APF to arrest me, Charlie and I became closer until we started dating. I just don't know what I would do without him.

We chat about school and his exploits on the soccer field as we stroll toward the exit that opens onto Burnside Street. Through the glass doors I see the dark sedan waiting for me to take me to the Institute.

"I really have to go," I say. "I'm already late for my appointment. Institute day. Sorry."

"How do you help your mom at the Institute?" Charlie asks.

My breath catches in my throat. It's the one question I can't answer, and I don't want to lie. Not to him.

"Why do you want to know?" I ask.

"We've been dating for like over a year, and we've been friends forever. You always have to go to the Institute. I'm curious. It's my inquisitive nature. Can I tag along on a night I don't have soccer practice?"

"It's a mother-daughter thing. You'd be bored. She wouldn't appreciate you being there. I have to go."

He leans down and kisses me on the lips. My entire body tingles. I wish I can kiss him for hours on end and never have to go to the Institute again. His arms wrap around me in an embrace. I'd return the embrace, but he crushes me against him. Still, it sets my body aflame, but then he ruins it by tangling his fingers in my hair. I pull away, breaking our kiss, and he loosens his grip on me."

What?" he asks.

"You know I'm particular about my hair."

We say our goodbyes and part. I head outside, goosebumps forming on my legs that are exposed to the cold air from knees to ankles. I silently curse the moronic school dress code that requires girls to wear blue skirts year-round. Who says sexism is dead? Not me.

I approach the sedan, and the back door automatically opens. I slide into the spacious back seat, and the door shuts behind me. The heated leather seat is pleasant against my goosebumps-covered legs. The air circulating in the cabin is cozy. I set my tablet down on the seat next to me and buckle up. The APF jerk in the driver's seat looks over his shoulder at me, his eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses.

"You're late," he barks.

"My stupid American history teacher kept me late," I say and roll my eyes.

"I saw you chatting up your boyfriend. Next time get your ass in the car, or I'll come inside and drag you out."

"Whatever," I say and turn my gaze to look through the window at my school.

The APF agent gives the command for the sedan's AI to drive to the Institute. The sedan speeds out of the city onto US-26 W toward Beaverton. The traffic is heavy, but the sedan pulls into the far left lane reserved for government vehicles that is practically empty.

About 15 minutes later, it's raining, and the sedan pulls into a nondescript office park inside the Beaverton-Hillsboro Science and Technology Park (BHSTP), an official government research zone.

Cameras are everywhere. Land-based cameras aren't the only things watching me when I get out of the car. Drones patrol overhead. I can't see them, but I know they can see me. Gotta keep an eye on the scientists and the looky-loos, know what I mean?

The rain drenches me as I walk between the single-story concrete buildings. The windows are reflective, so I can't see inside. I arrive at a heavy steel door with a camera above it. Shivering from being soaked through by the cold rain, I look up at the camera with an insincere smile and wave.

"Hello," I say just before there is a loud, annoying buzz.

Deadbolts clank and the door swings inward. I enter the sleek interior of the Institute and the door slams shut behind me. Abstract art hangs on the walls of the waiting room, not the usual stuff you see at a doctor's office, these are high-quality paintings by dead people. Worth millions, I guess. Behind the front desk is a young APF agent.

"Dr. Harris already called twice wondering where you're at," he says.

"Guess it's a good thing I'm her daughter."

I navigate the hallway to my mother's office. I enter without knocking. Mother sits on a rolling stool, typing away at a keyboard. Her monitor is like 100 inches wide and as thin as a sheet of paper. The office feels like a hospital emergency room but larger and with hardware, medical and otherwise, that is only found inside the BHSTP.

Mother swivels her stool to face me. She wears all white: lab coat, blouse, pants, even her shoes. Her lips are bright red as are her nails. On the right breast of the lab coat is a name badge reading Dr. Rachel Harris. I have to hand it to my mother, she's middle-aged and dresses in the drabest clothing imaginable and possesses the demeanor of a woman with a stick up her butt,

yet she looks good in a severe, geeky sort of way. She could be walking down the runway in New York or Paris or London at the lab coats and scrubs fashion show.

"Sit. You are late," she says and gestures to the exam chair that looks like it belongs in a dentist's office. "Remove your wig."

"Nice to see you too, Ma," I say.

She turns back to her computer. I can tell calling her ma annoys her due to her posture tensing. Shivering, I cross the room to the exam chair, pausing at a table against the wall to set down my wet tablet and remove my damp wig. My head is shaved down to stubble except and a rectangular titanium plate is attached by screws to my left temporal bone. I sit down on the exam chair and do my best to get comfortable, which is super hard since I know what's coming next. Believe me, you can never get used to having someone rummage around your dome.

The stool's casters clack across the floor. Mother looms over me, now with a mask covering her face, gloves over her hands, and a small drill clutched in her right hand. With her left hand, she turns on the bright light attached to an articulating arm that is situated above my head.

"You will feel some pressure," she says.

I roll my eyes and groan. She has said the same thing to me three days a week for as long as I can remember. The drill buzzes, and I feel pressure against my skull as she extracts the screws holding the plate in place. She deposits the screws and the plate on a small metallic tray next to her. Next, she sprays my cranium and quite literally my brain, the Wernicke area to be precise that is integral to language comprehension, with a powerful antiseptic. The spray will kill any harmful microbes, but, and I have to take this on faith, will not harm me.

"Everything looks good," she says.

She's talking about my Wernicke area and the semi-organic microchip embedded in it. Despite the many misgivings I have about this entire process, I'm relieved. The last thing I want is an infection in my brain. If that happens, I might lose the ability to understand language then experience a horrible, painful death. I imagine my family and Charlie will stand around my deathbed telling me how much they love me and I won't be able to understand a thing because my Wernicke area is toast.

"No headaches?" she asks.

"Nada."

She rolls across the room out of sight. I hear her typing away at her computer.

"Can you turn the heat up?" I say. "You may have noticed I'm like soaking wet."

"The temperature is optimal."

"Not for me."

Mother doesn't reply. I let the issue drop, knowing that she won't raise the temperature and that arguing with her is as futile as ranting at a brick wall.

"I established a link to the chip and ran a diagnostic. Everything checks out. Ready?" she says.

"Does it really matter if I'm ready or not?" I say and sigh. "Why even ask?"

"I will interpret your response as an affirmative. In the adjacent room is a Defender Series I Autonomous Mech operating under the control of its onboard AI. For this test, you will establish contact with the AI and instruct it to enter this room."

"No sight contact?" I ask, my voice tremulous and stomach queasy.

"No sight contact," Mother says.

"You do remember what happened last time?"

"Yes."

"Yet you want me to do it again?"

"Yes."

"I was in a coma for a week."

Mother sighs. "That is true."

"I almost died."

"Do not be so dramatic. We have excellent medical facilities here. I personally oversaw every aspect of your care. You survived."

"Barely survived."

"That was over a year ago, Jade. You recovered eight months ago. You are performing flawlessly on all your tests. Now is the time to push yourself."

The fervor in her tone is unmistakable, and I know that the only way home to a hot shower and dry clothes is through obedience.

"Okay, I'll try," I say.

"You may begin."

I've had the implant inside my head for ten years or more, so it's like part of me. Most of the time, I'm not even aware of it. Well, if you discount the fact I have to wear a wig to hide the access hatch on the side of my skull. The only time I'm aware of the microchip is while I'm at the Institute performing my role as Mother's lab rat.

I activate the implant using the power of my mind. It gives me a sixth sense, the ability to detect and interact with AIs at the binary level. It's pretty crazy, and I don't understand 100% how it all works. What I do know without a doubt is that it all works better if I can see a physical manifestation, be it a tablet or a supersized machine of war, of what I'm trying to interact with.

My sixth sense expands my awareness, detecting wireless signals and the relatively simple LabQA Assist AI that uses machine learning to perform quality assurance on the tests Mother runs on me. There are other AIs, some simple and some capable of deep learning, but none are the one I'm looking for. I've interacted with a Defender before, and it has a very particular signature. At its core is a complex deep learning algorithm chock-full of safeguards that allow the mech to make kill decisions without the need for human intervention. If you're in a firefight, I guess you don't want your armored killing machine asking for permission to mow down the bad guys.

I start sweating like I've been doing hot yoga for six hours straight. I'm not cold anymore, I'm overheating and experiencing about the worst head bursting migraine imaginable. I point this out to my mother.

"You are within tolerances."

"My head is about to rupture like a carbuncle."

"You have to push yourself," there's an edgy intensity to her voice. "If you do not push yourself, you will never improve. You will be a failure."

"A failed experiment you mean?"

A knock at the door interrupts us.

"Yes?" Mother says.

"Rachel, I need to speak to you."

I recognize the voice of Lab Director Gillam and cringe.

"I am in the middle of running tests."

"It's about... you know what it's about," the usually suave Gillam sounds nervous, maybe even afraid.

"Jade, take a break," Mother says.

I stop trying to make contact with the Defender's AI and breathe a sigh of relief. My headache starts to dissipate, and my body cools. I'm curious why I'm being allowed a respite. That never happens.

Mother strides across the room to the door and opens it. Dr. Gillam bursts inside and closes the door.

"Is it... safe?" he asks.

"Yes, I turned on the audio interference," Mother says.

"Can we speak in front of her?"

"Do we have a choice?"

"I suppose not. The order will be given on Monday. You can't be here."

"So soon? I hoped we would have more time."

"It's the dirty bomb attack in DC. They claim it was a Chinese national."

"They will claim anything," Mother says with vehemence.

Like everyone else in the United States, I'm aware of the dirty bomb attack in DC that took out a dozen or so congress people. How could I not know about it? President Gloria Newman gave a presidential address on the topic that I had been force-fed at school. The fact a Chinese national is the perpetrator is news to me and is downright frightening. I'm half-Chinese. The United States is mired in an on-again-off-again war with China. Five years ago the APF started rounding up people like my family and throwing them into internment camps. Only my mother's status as a prominent APF scientist protects us.

"Leave now. Don't come in tomorrow. I'll cover for you. That will buy you time to get away," Director Gillam says and clasps my mother's right hand in his. "I'm going to miss you."

He leans forward and gives my mother a passionate kiss on the lips.

"Oh my god," I say in total disgust, if not surprise. I've long suspected something between them. My dislike for Mother dials up almost to hatred. "How can you look father in the face?"

They break their kiss. Director Gillam possesses the decency to stare at the floor in what I presume is shame. Mother's eyes narrow to tiny slits, a sure sign of annoyance. The director mumbles something and leaves, shutting the door behind him.

"We need to leave," Mother says.

"You and the director?"

"I do not want to talk about it," she says and rushes to the exam chair.

"No more tests?"

"No."

"What is going on?"

"We are leaving the country," Mother says, spraying down my scalp and brain with antiseptic.

"Leaving? I have school. Charlie and I are going to a movie tomorrow night."

"We are leaving and will not be returning anytime soon."

"No way. I have a life here," I say, glaring at her as she works. I see a tear rolling down her cheek. Mother never cries. "Does this have something to do with the attack on DC? Are we in danger?"

"Yes."

"We have to leave tonight?"

"Yes," Mother says and sets aside the spray bottle then picks up the titanium plate and a screw from the metallic tray.

"I have to tell Charlie. He'll worry otherwise. Mother, I can't leave him. I... I..."

She places the plate against my cranium. The metal is cold where it touches my scalp. She holds the plate in place and the screw with one hand. With her free hand, she retrieves the drill from the tray.

"You are only 16. You will meet other boys."

"Other boys!"

The drill whirs and I feel pressure against my head.

"I love Charlie."

"I am sure you believe you do. I understand. I was 16 once."

"I'm not leaving without talking to Charlie," I say. "I don't think I want to leave at all. It's not like I'm Chinese. Not really. You leave. I'll stay here with Dad and Rob."

"When the APF comes, it will be for all of us. If you speak to Charlie, you will put him in danger. The APF will question him. It is better that he knows nothing."

My anger and bravado drain. Mother is right. I hate her, but she is right. The APF makes people disappear all the time.

She finishes attaching the plate, and I head to the table against the wall to retrieve my wig. She surprises me by helping me put the wig on, she hasn't done that since I was like ten.

"Are you sure we're in danger?" I ask and retrieve my tablet.

"Yes."

"You seem to just take Director Kissy-Kissy's word for it. How do you know he isn't making it all up?"

"I trust him," Mother says and walks over to her desk.

She starts turning off equipment, I suppose to make it look like she's gone on a long weekend.

"What? You get frisky with him, and that makes him trustworthy? You're married to Father. He's an adulterer, and so are you."

"I slept with him in exchange for his protection. Today, my sacrifice is paying off. He fulfilled his side of the bargain."

"Sacrifice? Does Father know?"

Without answering, Mother finishes turning off the equipment and marches for the door. I block her path. I take after Father, so I'm a good half a foot taller than her and outweigh her by at least ten pounds.

"Does Father know?"

"That, young lady, is none of your business."

"Does he know?"

Mother slaps me. My cheek stings, and I feel unbidden tears in the corner of my eyes. My hand goes to my smarting cheek. I glare at her and step aside.

"Follow me. Do not lag behind."

"Yes, Ma," I say and follow her into the hallway.

Despite the sedan's AI doing all the driving, we ride home in icy silence. By the time the sedan pulls into the driveway of our two-story house in a middle-class enclave just outside of the BHSTP, it's dark out and still raining. Dad's HydroCar is already in the driveway, and the outdoor lights are on. I feel sick to my stomach. Do I tell Father about Mother and Director Kissy-Kissy? Won't he have enough on his plate when Mother tells him that we have to leave the country, like right now?

I go inside and breeze through the living room, heading straight for the stairs to the second floor. Father and Rob, my little brother, sit at the dining room table doing homework.

Rob looks up and says. "You're soaking wet."

"Captain Obvious," I say and mount the stairs.

Father greets me, but I don't respond. I'm afraid if I say anything to him, it will be about Mother's extracurricular activity. I'm halfway up the stairs before Mother enters the house. I hear her tell Father that they need to talk. I don't bother listening. After dropping off my tablet and wig in my bedroom and grabbing fresh clothes, I head to the bathroom for a hot shower.

In the shower, I cry. I don't want to leave Charlie, especially without telling him. He deserves to know. He stood by me while others turned their backs on me or worse. Without him, I have no one. I accept remaining incommunicado is for the best. It will protect him from the APF.

I turn up the heat until the water is almost scalding. Steam fills the bathroom despite the running fan. I wish the water will wash away my grief, but it doesn't, so I wallow in my heartache.

I hear the doorknob turn. Luckily, I locked the door. Banging on the door follows.

"What?" I say with exasperation.

"Mom and Dad say you need to get downstairs," Rob says.

There is a whininess in his tone that I find aggravating.

"Jade, something is wrong," he says, voice tremulous. "I'm scared."

My annoyance at my little brother evaporates. He is at least as frightened as I am and at eleven even less equipped to handle the sudden upheaval. I turn off the water.

"Tell them I'm coming. I just need a minute."

After drying off and dressing in dark jeans and a grey hoodie, I go to my room to retrieve a dry wig that is a replica of the soaking wet one. Then I head downstairs to find everyone sitting around the dining room table. Mother looks as severe as always. Father has a hand on Rob's shoulder and softly speaks to him. My little brother looks like he's fighting back tears. His distress almost reduces me to tears. Mother's judgmental stare keeps me from crying. I'm determined to be as hard ass as her. On the floor next to the table are three bulging duffel bags and a cooler. I gaze at these in puzzlement.

"I wasn't in the shower long enough for you to pack. You've been prepared for this, haven't you?"

"Yes," Mother says.

"I'll go pack my things," I say.

"Jade," Father says, his kind voice stern. "Clothes for you are packed. We're leaving, now."

He stands up to his full intimidating height.

"But—"

"Jade, this is not the time to argue," Father says and turns to Rob. "Come on, champ, help me pack the car."

My father grabs two duffel bags and my brother one. They head across the living room toward the front door. I glare at my mother. She returns my stare.

When I hear the front door shut, I snarl. "This is all your fault. If it wasn't for you, none of this would be happening. I hate you."

Mother stands and smooths her white pants and blouse.

"Help me with the cooler," she says.

I don't budge. She raises an eyebrow.

"You can blame me for this. I accept that. It is my burden."

My mouth drops open. I can't believe she is playing the victim card. I'm the one with the hole in my head. I'm the lab rat. I'm the one being ripped from my life.

"Close your mouth. That look is unbecoming. Help me with the cooler. We must leave, or we will be imprisoned and most likely executed."

"I still hate you," I say and help her with the cooler.

The rain is pouring as we carry the cooler from the front door to the car. After placing the cooler in the trunk next to the duffel bags, I climb into the back of the red sedan. The heat is on so I warm up despite being wet. Mother slides into the front seat, and Father instructs the AI to travel south on a preprogrammed route.

"Why south?" I ask.

"Isn't Mexico to the south?" Rob pipes up.

"It is," Father says.

"Why not north to Canada?" I ask.

The sedan drives through the development toward the arterial. Nobody is out on the roads. Streetlights highlight the rain streaking down from overhead.

"The APF will expect me to flee to Canada," Mother says. "I have cousins there. They will not expect us to head for Mexico."

"The Resistance is active along the US-Canada border," Father adds. "Security is tight up there. Mexico is a safer bet."

The sedan pulls onto the arterial, and I hear snuffling next to me. Rob, tears streaking his face, stares at our neighborhood.

Leaning toward Rob, I place a hand on his shoulder and smile. "Everything will be okay. This is an adventure. Remember how you used to ask Mother to take us to China all the time?"

"Mexico isn't China," Rob says.

"Yeah, but it's not everyone who gets to travel internationally anymore," I say, making my tone more upbeat than I feel.

"I guess," Rob says and stops crying.

"We're nearing the freeway," Father says. "That means the car will be connecting to the AutoNet and that the APF might be listening in. Keep the talking to the minimum. Don't mention anything about where we're going."

"Yes, Dad," Rob and I say in unison.

I drop my hand from my little brother's shoulder and settle back in my seat for the long and silent drive through the night. Rob falls asleep right away. I wish I could, but I don't because I'm too busy feeling like my heart is being cut from my chest with a dull knife. I miss Charlie. I brood over how horrible my life is until sleep overtakes me.

I wake up groggy, blinking because bright spotlights shine in my eyes. The car is stopped. Rob still sleeps next to me.

"Where are we?" I croak.

"The Oregon-California border," Mother says.

My eyes adjust to the light. I make out the giant checkpoint obstructing the roadway. Two cars are ahead of us in line. An APF agent in tactical gear with a semiautomatic rifle over his shoulder approaches the vehicle. He shines his flashlight inside and knocks on the window.

Father rolls down the window. "Yes, officer?"

"Kinda late to be out for a drive," the APF agent says. "Let me see your ID."

Father pulls out his wallet and hands his national ID card to the agent. The agent looks it over.

"You're a long way from home, Mr. Harris. Where you headed?"

"Long weekend in the Redwoods," Father replies without hesitation.

The agent shines his flashlight over Mother and us in the backseat. My shoulders tense. I remember how being Chinese puts us in danger. Rob doesn't look half Chinese, but I do, and there is no mistaking Mother as anything but an Asian woman.

"Ma'am," the agent says to Mother. "I need your ID."

After Mother gives the agent her ID, he steps away from the car and lowers his flashlight. He takes out a handheld from a pocket. I remember the conversation at the Institute. That the APF will come for us on Monday. The agent is going to run Mother's ID and likely learn that she is not allowed to leave Oregon. I'm sure the AI running the checkpoint will screen the IDs. Without a second thought, I activate the chip.

I stare at the handheld. My awareness brushes against the AI running the checkpoint. I don't try to hack the AI. That might set off security safeguards. Instead, I just suggest that it flips a few zeroes and ones so that the handheld display tells the APF agent to allow us to pass in all haste. It's ephemeral, like a dream, except I have a pounding migraine, my skin is damp with sweat, and I'm shaking. My vision becomes a tunnel focused on the handheld. I feel the convulsions coming and the blackout that follows.

"Sir, ma'am, your IDs. Dr. Harris, I apologize for delaying you. You may proceed to the government access lane."

I'm fighting to keep from blacking out. My vision is all wishy-washy. I'm vaguely aware of the car moving. Animalistic panic howls at the edge of my consciousness. I sense the AI as we pass through the checkpoint.

"Mom, something is wrong with Jade."

"What?"

The last thing I remember is Mother leaning over me with something in her hand.

I wake up in the most complete darkness I've ever experienced. I sense movement and hear rumbling, like a large vehicle rolling down a highway. Frightened and discombobulated, I squirm.

"Where am I?" I say with the edge of panic in my voice.

"Quiet," someone whispers.

"Jade, it's okay. Calm down. You're safe. We're all safe."

It's my dad. I can tell he is by my side. I take a long shuddering breath, a modicum of calm returning to me. I feel his reassuring hand on my shoulder. The familiar human connection anchors me to this new and unexpected reality.

"What's going on? Where are we? Where's Rob and Ma?"

"Keep your voice down, Jade," Mother commands. She must be sitting next to Dad. "Or you will wake your brother."

It's just like her to chastise me and not offer a shred of explanation about what's happening.

"We're in the shipping container of a self-driving cargo truck," Dad says.

"What?" I say. "How—"

"Hush, Jade," Mother says, her tone condescending even for her. "We left the car in Montague. California, of course. You do not remember, because I sedated you. You were..." Mother's voice drops to a whisper. "Convulsing. You took a terrible risk."

"Why are we in this container?" I ask.

"It belongs to the smugglers," Mother says.

"Smugglers?"

"The Wolfpack," Father says and takes his hand from my shoulder. "Just try to take it easy, Jade. Rest."

I've heard of the Wolfpack, a criminal organization, comprised of former APF agents, that among other things smuggles people south of the border. The Wolfpack is infamous for its brutality that makes the Mexican drug cartels look like playground bullies.

Hours roll by. I hear cars pass and people murmuring inside the container. It's dark out when the truck pulls off the highway. My sense of time is pretty screwed up, so I have no idea how long we've been off the pavement when the truck slows to a halt. I sit up, and Father unwraps his arm from around me. I hear people moving and talking inside the container. The doors to the container open and blinding light floods inside. Squinting, I throw my hands over my eyes.

"Single file, now!" a man barks. "Out of the container."

We follow the instructions. Like what choice do we have? Once on the ground, my eyes adjust to the light from three generator-powered floodlights, the kind used for nighttime construction. The men, a half dozen or so, wear desert camouflage with snarling wolf masks covering their faces. They are armed with military-grade automatic rifles and equipped with an assortment of tactical gear. Black SUVs are parked at the edge of the illumination provided by the floodlights.

The wolves allow us to relieve ourselves in the dry bushes at the edge of the light. Usually, I'd be too embarrassed to pee in front of anyone even in the dark, but my bladder is bloated and there is no way I'm going to pee my pants. The wolves keep a close eye on everyone and order us back into the illumination from the floodlights once we're done with our business.

"Stay with your group. Have payment ready," a wolf, I decide to call him Alpha, yells.

We scramble to obey. Father takes off his backpack and digs through a side pocket, retrieving a USB thumb drive.

Alpha and a second wolf holding a tablet start collecting money. Alpha demands payment from a young couple. The wolf with the tablet takes a thumb drive from trembling hands and plugs it into his device. After a few seconds, he nods once, pockets the thumb drive, and the two men move to the next cowering group. The scene repeats itself. The wolves move on to an elderly couple.

"Money?" Alpha demands.

The elderly gentleman looks at the ground and shakes his head. "We lost the USB drive."

"Lost? That's too bad," Alpha says and in one fluid motion draws his handgun and fires.

The old man collapses to the ground. His wife screams and a second shot resounds. I don't see what happens next because I've buried my head against Father's chest. He wraps his arms around me, and I glance at my brother. Rob is clinging to my mother and sobbing. She holds him close and rubs his shoulders with a hand.

"Eyes on me," Alpha commands. "I need to make something clear. No payment is not an option. Do we have an understanding?"

In response, most of us whimper or remain silent. Alpha seems satisfied with the response and the wolves continue to collect payment. When they demand payment from my father, Alpha stares at me from behind his mask. His gaze runs over my body, like a scurrying cockroach. My palms are clammy, and my head swims.

"Funds confirmed," the wolf with the tablet says.

Alpha continues to eye me and says. "Make sure these fine people get the special treatment."

The wolves finish collecting payment and hustle everyone into the waiting SUVs. There is a wolf in the driver seat and another riding shotgun. We share the back seat of the SUV with a young family of three. The young family's preschooler kicks me in the shin and Rob elbows me in the cheek as we try to get comfortable.

The SUV's internal combustion engine roars to life and sets off at high speed. It's a bumpy ride. Everyone is quiet, and we ride along with only the roar of the engine and the creaking of the suspension staving off silence. The wolves start talking in Spanish, assuming none of us "Chinese" will understand them. Their mistake.

"You heard there's a new guy at the border," the driver says.

"I heard."

"He's supposedly a straight arrow. Right out of the Academy."

"Great. You think he'll be trouble."

"Everyone likes a payday."

"When it's get paid or get shot I know which one I'd choose."

Border duty. Crap pay. They must be planning to bribe the border agents.

I keep listening to the wolves talk and hear something that makes my insides turn cold. They plan to do more than bribe the APF border agents, they intend to hand us over to them. What will the agents do? Kill us? All they'd have to do is claim we tried to cross the border illegally to justify putting bullets in our heads. The little girl next to me is too young to die. Rob is too, and so am I.

My pulse rockets. I consider hacking the SUV's AI, but the gas-guzzler is so old it probably doesn't even have an AI let alone one capable of driving the vehicle. Before I can decide what to do, the SUV slows to a halt. Up ahead of us on a rise lights flare. My breath catches in my throat. I recognize the fifteen-foot-tall silhouette of a Goliath V autonomous mech.

"Should I make a call?" the shotgun wolf says, his voice shaky.

"No. Stay calm," the driver says. "Let me do the talking."

"Stay inside," the shotgun wolf growls at us in English.

The wolves get out and walk toward the rise.

"They plan to hand us over to the APF," I say.

Before anyone responds, I see muzzle flare come from the mech followed by the distinctive pops of a 20 mm cannon firing. The wolves are marching toward the rise one moment and in the next disintegrate in an explosion of blood and dust.

"Out of the vehicle," booms a commanding male voice. "Face down on the ground."

We all pile out of the SUV and throw ourselves onto the ground.

"Guess they weren't expecting that," a man says from the direction of the rise.

"They sure weren't," a second man says. "Not much left of them now."

"Those new shells are something else. There's nothing left of them. Wait. I see a boot."

I look up and see two silhouettes standing near where the wolves met their fate. The Goliath remains motionless on the rise beaming its high-powered lights down on us. To my left the young family whispers amongst themselves, the parents trying to keep the preschooler calm. Mother is doing the same for Rob.

Next to me Father whispers. "Jade, you need to take control of the mech."

"It's too far away," I say, then I turn to stare at him. The harsh light makes all the imperfections of his face stand out. "You know about the chip?"

"You have to try," Father says. "If they take us in, your mother is dead. We're probably all dead. You have to do something."

I have to do something. He sounds just like Mother, but that's not what makes me angry. It's that all this time he's been complicit. I feel like such an idiot.

"You let her experiment on me!" I scream. The woman next to me whispers that I need to keep my voice down, but I don't care. I'm dealing with a lifetime of wrongs perpetrated against me by my parents. "Do you know she cut a hole in my head?"

"Keep your voice down," Father hisses.

"No talking," an APF agent commands.

"I thought you loved me," I say. "You know, she had an affair with that prick Gillam."

I see the agony in his expression and know my words struck a nerve. I'm glad.

"Girl, shut up," an agent says.

I turn my gaze toward the voice. The two border patrol agents march toward us. They look prepared and nonchalant at the same time. Why should they be concerned? They have a 15-

foot-tall armored killing machine backing them up. It made short work of the wolves and can make quicker work of us.

One agent stands guard as his compatriot checks the young family for weapons. I stare at the Goliath in the distance. As much as I dislike Father, he is right. I need to do something. If I can just talk to the Goliath. The AI can't be that different from a Defender's. I've interacted with those tons of times at the Institute. Only it's so far away. Wait. So far away... how do the agents stay in contact with it?

I stare at the agent watching over us, looking for any kind of communication device on him. It's hard to make out details due to the backlighting, but I see something that looks like a handheld strapped to the left breast of his uniform. Maybe the handheld connects to the mech. It's worth a try. I activate the chip.

My awareness expands into the handheld. I find the uplink to the Goliath and then I'm in. The handheld starts beeping.

"Huh?" the agent says and takes his handheld from his uniform and stares at the screen.

"What?" the other agent marches to his companion's side.

"Something is going on with the Goliath."

"Order it to run a system diagnostic."

I intercept the system diagnostic command, flipping a one to a zero here and a zero to a one there. The resulting command is gibberish. My awareness brushes against the Goliath's AI. The AI is similar to a Defender's, but the safeguards against using deadly force are even stricter, because some units are armed with tactical nukes.

My head is throbbing, and sweat is cascading down my face like a waterfall. I must involuntarily groan because the agent without the handheld looks at me.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" he demands.

I'm shaking, and I feel the convulsions coming. I might die, but I will not allow them to hurt my brother or, as much as I hate them, my parents.

The agent strides toward me, his pistol halfway drawn. Without warning, my father surges to his feet and confronts the agent. I turn off the Goliath's communication array. I see Father and the agent go down. The agent with the handheld draws his gun. Men scream. The crack of a gunshot tears through the night.

Then machine-gun fire roars from the Goliath. Blood sprays from the agent with his gun drawn and he goes down in a heap. More machine gun fire follows then eerie silence.

"No one touch the guns or any other weapon," I shout, my voice unsteady. "The mech is treating anyone with a weapon as a threat."

I turn off the microchip too weak to move. Mother and Rob kneel over me.

"Can you sit up?" Mother says. "I need to examine you, and then we should leave."

"Leave me alone," I say. "It's your fault. You've made me a killer."

"You have kept us alive," Mother says. "That is all that matters."

"Where's Dad?" Rob asks.

"He was by the border patrol agents," Mother says.

"I'll find him," Rob says. "Dad!"

"You don't want to come over here," it's the mother of the young family.

I force myself up to sitting. My head still throbs, and I feel unbalanced. I remember the gunshot. I didn't think much of it at the time, having my mind divided between my physical reality and the ephemeral zeroes and ones of the Goliath's AI. Now, with terrible hindsight, I'm certain what that gunshot means. My stomach rolls like I'm in aboard a ship about capsize in a stormy sea.

"No!" Rob wails a heart-wrenching cry of disbelief and loss. "Daddy! Daddy!"

Mother leaps to her feet and runs to Rob, who is on his hands and knees sobbing. Dizzy, I struggle to my feet. Mother is beside Rob and hugs him to her. Every step I take is a struggle to remain upright. Only ten feet separates us, but it might as well be ten miles. I know my world will be broken by what I see at the end of the trek. I know, and yet I stumble on because Rob needs me.

I'm aware of the young family entering the SUV. It's not until the engine roars to life and the vehicle speeds away that I realize they're abandoning us. I want to be outraged by this, but I'm too exhausted.

I drop to my knees beside Mother and Rob. She holds my little brother against her chest. He cries, and she whispers comforting words to him. Supine on the ground before us is Father. There is a wet stain on his sweatshirt. All the emotion and vitality drain from me. I know I should be crying, but I can't. Maybe because I'm in shock. Maybe because...

Rage boils up inside me from the recesses of my body. I'm angry at my father for allowing Mother to experiment on me and then dying out here in this inhospitable desert. Tears of fury gush from my eyes. I'm angrier at Mother because this is all her fault. She should be the one lying dead in the dirt. Father showed me affection. She treats me like a mosquito, except when she needs readouts from the microchip in my head. Then she treats me like a lab rat.

My gaze shifts to the Goliath. I could kill her. I'm already a killer. What's one more death? All I need to do is flip a few zeroes and ones, and the mech will squash her. I'd never need to suffer through another experiment again. Rob and I will be better off without her. How couldn't we be? Look at where we are now.

"Just cry, dearest, cry," Mother says, holding Rob to her.

"Don't die, Mommy, don't you die too."

Rob spills out words between sobs, and Mother's replies are calm and empathetic. I feel a pang of jealousy. Most of all I'm ashamed. I see with crystal clarity that Rob needs her, now more than ever. If we survive this night, he will still need her and will keep on needing her for a long time. What she provides him, I know I cannot give. My floodgates open and I fling myself onto my father's body.

"Save them, Jade. You know what to do. Save them."

The voice is my father's and as soft and as fleeting as a dying breath. I push myself up and stare at his face. His eyes are closed, and he is not breathing. My brother and mother show no sign of having heard his words. Perhaps the words were all in my head. It doesn't matter. I know what to do. I have to force aside my grief and act.

"Goodbye, Father," I say and allow myself one last sob. "I love you."

I stand on wobbly legs and stare at the Goliath.

"We need to leave," I say. Mother looks up at me and follows my gaze. "Are you serious? If you go into convulsions or overheat, there is nothing I can do. I do not have tranquilizers or water."

"It's risky, but what choice do we have?"

"We can walk."

"I turned off the mech's main communication array, but for all I know it had already contacted the APF. Plus, all the weapons fire is bound to draw to attention. There could be an armed drone in the air right now. We need to get over the border fast."

"You might die," Mother says.

"I think the border agents have water on them," Rob says.

While they say their final goodbyes to Father, I have the grim task of searching the dead agents. One has a half-full water bottle. I take it.

Mother and Rob hold my hands as we trudge up the rise toward the Goliath. The mech is constructed to look like a supersized soldier. Its body is studded with weaponry and antennas. We stop before the mech.

"I'm going to talk to it," I say.

"Wait," Mother says and places a hand over my forehead. "You are burning up."

She drops her hand from my head.

"Should I pour water on her?" Rob asks and hefts the water bottle.

"I'll be fine," I insist.

They pour half the water on my head. It's cool, and in combination with the cold air makes me shiver. I tell them what I plan to do. They accept my plan without comment.

I activate the chip, and my sixth sense expands my awareness. I'm familiar with the Goliath's AI now, so it's simple to flip the right zeroes and ones to have the mech pick us up in its oversized hands, cradle us like puppies before its chest, and head toward Mexico. The Goliath moves with surprising grace and speed for such a gargantuan machine of war. I'm not saying that it's a comfortable ride. My bones vibrate, and my teeth chatter every time a foot thumps to the earth. The noise of the hydraulics and actuators is deafening. Next to me Rob whoops.

My head feels like it will explode. I'm monitoring the mech's scanners just in case a drone or something else is sent after us.

"Turn off the chip," Mother says.

I shake my head in the negative. She pours the remaining water over me. The Goliath detects the border wall up ahead, but all I see is the dark vastness of the desert.

"We're almost there," I say.

"You are slurring your words," Mother says.

"Are you worried about me or the chip in my head?"

"Both."

"At least you're honest."

"You are my daughter. I am more worried about you."

I doubt that, but I keep my opinion to myself.

"Turn it off."

"I need to monitor—"

"No. You need to survive. That means turning off the chip."

I give in and turn off the chip. I soon feel better. That is until we reach the twenty-foot-tall border wall of solid metal.

"What now?" Rob asks.

Before Mother or I can reply, the Goliath kicks the wall. Boom. The metal creaks and buckles. The mech keeps kicking the wall until a section collapses. Then the mech bends over and sets us down on Mexican soil. My knees give out, and Rob's quick reflexes save me from doing a face plant.

"We need to go," Mother says.

In the distance, the bright lights of a town illuminate the darkness. Still mourning the loss of Father and suffering the turmoil of our sudden upheaval, we set out toward the town. I look to the heavens and see the thousands upon thousands of stars scattered across the black expanse like glittering jewels. I've never seen a night sky such as this. It's new. It's wonderful. It gives me hope for our future.