

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

Beneath the City

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Introduction

My Senior Honors Thesis is a science fiction novel draft edited with the eventual goal of publication. The manuscript follows Keith Hayes, a seventeen year-old immigrant who moved with his father from Earth, to a new colonized planet whose primary focus is the pursuit of knowledge and venerating the ideals of intense study and education. The main premise of conflict for Keith is his inability to keep up with the rigorous structure of education outlined by this new planet, leaving Keith to be the fly in the ointment of their advanced education system. However, when a failed philosophical quest for Enlightenment goes terribly wrong, and seven of the universe's most prized scholars go missing, the oligarchy of the planet seeks to rid themselves of their "flies" under the premise of sending a rescue mission to recover those that they lost. Sent underground as part of a haphazard crew of misfits, Keith Hayes suddenly finds himself facing the same dangers that annihilated some of the universe's most capable, intellectual minds.

This science fiction novel is a social critique of the public schooling system. It works with themes of the real meaning of education and the toxic truth behind our own society's No Child Left Behind and state testing initiatives. My mother worked in the public schooling system for over thirty years, and in that time she encountered the negative effects it had on both the students and teachers. Kids were no longer being taught according to their skill level. They quickly fell behind, unable to keep up with the ridiculous standards for state testing. My mother saw that students were being tested in ways that did not correlate with their intellectual or developmental level. Some of these tests were not even academically sound. Curriculums are created to accommodate these tests that end up tying teachers' hands in the learning process of the classroom. This thwarts teachers' ability to work with the intellect of the students that walk

through their doors. This includes the No Child Left Behind initiative which in my opinion, while it sounds good on paper, has turned the public schooling education system into a destructive cycle. Teachers are pressured to pass students because if not, the students' inability—documented by state and federal testing—is blamed on the teachers. To me, their jobs are threatened not because of inability of the students or teachers, but because of the inaccurate and falsely reputable testing system. This results in students who go through the entirety of both a middle school and high school level education, but have nothing to show for it, intellectually. I wanted to convey that frustration and flaw in our public schooling system using Keith Hayes in the setting of an exaggerated environment of academic prowess, and the backfiring failure that kind of environment breeds.

This writing project was originally an Independent Study carried over from my senior year of high school. During my sophomore year at Alfred University, I brought what I had—a rough manuscript—to the psychology professor Dr. Gagne, asking if she would be willing to work on it with me. At this time, I was only working on this project in my free time, for fun, and without any academic credit in relation to my undergraduate degree at Alfred University. I had never planned to present it as my thesis. However, when I officially applied to get credit for Independent Study work with Dr. Gagne, and later showed it to the physicist professor Dr. DeGraff, I considered reworking it to become my Senior Honors Thesis, adding the guidance of two professors of English, Dr. Gray and Dr. Morehouse.

My original plan for my thesis was to work with each professor on certain aspects of the novel draft, pertaining to their specific field of expertise. Sophomore year, I started with psychology. Working with Dr. Gagne gave me insight on Keith's character, and an outside perspective from a science fiction reader's point of view. In my Junior year, when I decided to

make the piece my thesis, I worked on the science behind the plot of the novel with Dr. DeGraff, specifically fact checking and scientific detail tweaking. My plan was to save the English/Literature aspect for last, giving me as much time as possible to work on my undergraduate bachelor's degree as an English major, developing my skills as a writer and becoming better at both fictional and analytical writing. My senior year, I officially asked Dr. Morehouse, Dr. Gagne, and Dr. DeGraff to my Honors Thesis Committee, and I asked Dr. Gray to be my chair head. My chair head and the other members of my committee agreed to help and guide me through the undertaking of this massive novel draft—which, originally, was about two hundred and seventy pages long— and through the writing process of making the science fiction novel well written, fine-tuned, and engaging.

Looking back on this general order of my editing lenses (psychology, science, and then literature), it would have been more beneficial for me to have started with the English aspect of the novel draft, instead of leaving it for last. Once I started working with Dr. Gray, I realized that editing my thesis through the lens of English/ Literature would be the hardest part, and by far the most time consuming. It would have been easier, had I known I wanted to use this novel as my Senior Honors Thesis, to have been working on the English aspects of the novel throughout my four years at Alfred University, saving the scientific fact checking and psychological analysis of character for last.

Because I chose to edit this manuscript in the order that I did, when I officially began my weekly slotted thesis meetings, I found myself overwhelmed with the magnitude and length of the text I was trying to rework. It required me to go through individual scenes with a figurative fine-toothed comb, improving my writing sentence by sentence. While not impossible, it took me a lot longer to edit individual scenes than I had anticipated, and so I decided to modify the length

of my thesis in order to focus my energy on a smaller portion of the novel. I wanted to make *that* portion well written and thoroughly developed, instead of rushing and hastening the editing process to encompass the whole novel draft, ineffectively. With this understanding, I would have one section of intense edits, and one section left deliberately rough. I partitioned my thesis into two sections by dividing the novel into events that take place when Keith is *above* ground, and events that take place when Keith is *underground*. The events taking place above ground were the primary focus of my weekly editing and thesis meetings with Dr. Gray. The second part of my thesis, the remainder of the manuscript, is rough and unedited with minor plot edits, and still has character development and scientific flaws.

In my primary section of thesis work, which takes place above ground and averaging about seventy-five pages in length, my biggest challenges were problems with dialogue and pacing. Most of my scenes felt rushed when I did not mean them to be. I often paraphrased parts of conversation between characters, or the dialogue itself read like a screenplay: the spoken lines hanging emptily on the page without body language, facial expressions, descriptions of blocking, or physical character interactions. These literary edits were a lot harder for me to spot and fix as a writer than were the more objective and scientific corrections proposed by Dr. DeGraff and Dr. Gagne. In modifying the length of the piece I was working on, I had the opportunity to rework scenes multiple times, slowly building the dialogue and physical descriptions up to par. The modification of my thesis length enabled me to slow down in my own mental perspective of the piece, which helped me write slower, and work through my problems of plot pacing.

Beneath the City

1.

Keith made it to cobblestone of the capitol in less than twenty minutes by breaking a heavy sweat and accidentally flinging off his untied shoe. As soon as the decrepit, narrow streets fanned out into more luxurious roads devoid of potholes, Keith could hear the dribble of the City's fountain: one large dome of crisscrossing streams in the middle of the City Square. The buildings here were drastically prettier than his own neighborhood where the apartment buildings were scrunched up so close to each other that their corners had eroded. However in the City, the center of all civilization on Casimir, the buildings were chrome faced, had glowing marble, were adorned by shiny copper, or were deliberately rounded at the top to make them look like cranial domes.

Keith knew that the planet's crest lay at the bottom of the fountain without even glancing at the sparkling glimmer of water. The mosaic was submersed beneath the water— two garden hoes crossed over a bursting sunrise made with vibrant turquoises, yellows, and oranges. The fountain was enclosed by a low wall of marble, matching the capitol's Headquarters Building that towered behind it. Keith passed the fountain, fighting the urge to throw his backpack in it, as he raced towards his school. On his way, he crossed over three of the metal portal doors sunken into the cobblestone without stopping to crouch and listen to any of them. Seven of the manhole-like portals encircled the fountain, locked and engraved ornately with copper and brass, each one with a matching Casimir crest. He swallowed his excitement as he stomped over the metal portals. By this time tomorrow, these portals doors would be surrounded by the people of Casimir—electric whispering, gossip, camera crews, the High Council themselves... The reopening of the doors had been eagerly awaited for the last three sowing seasons. The Unveiling

was an event that the entire population had been waiting for—Keith included— and he intended to be there. But right now, he was remotely positive that he was already late. Keith blinked into the orange sunlight, putting an arm over his eyebrows to shield the glare so he could see the City's skyline.

Behind the fountain, the Headquarters Building was fashioned into so many sections and partitions, each marked by shiny copper-rimmed pillars, that it spanned the entire backdrop of the City Square. Flanking it were an assortment of capitol buildings deemed a necessity by the oligarchy of Casimir. Specialty hospitals lined with green and white stripes, brass-roofed academia libraries, laboratory research centers with ceramic domes, and tiny employment and immigration offices with glass fronts made up the entire left flank, while Keith's school, among others, made up the right. He could pick his school out of all the others without even looking. He hated it so much that Keith's sheer animosity for the place could lead him there blindfolded. However today he looked straight at the flat, stone rectangle as he huffed across the City Square, his book bag lolling off his shoulder as he went. He dragged it behind him like a martyr, hearing the metal zippers scrape across the cobblestone, mimicking the sound of scattering gravel. He reached the two crescent-shaped walls of slate that adorned either side of his school's entrance.

Gnawing on his bottom lip, Keith reminded himself that today was only a half-day because of the Unveiling tomorrow, and therefore he only had to stay in this building for five hours instead of the normal ten. He cleared the front steps of the building, taking them two at a time. At the top of the stairs he pressed his palm to the sensor in the middle of the door. Immediately, holographic letters appeared, projected in front of his chest to spell out his name, followed by his embarrassing grade point average. Even the little blue glowing letters looked disappointed. The holograph then disappeared and the door unlocked with an electronic click.

“*Late*,” the door tallied at him with its electronic voice.

“Yeah, well, why don’t you write home about it,” Keith muttered. He stepped inside letting the door shut loudly behind him. He crouched in the empty hallway, dark chrome-paneled walls on either side of him. As he dug his fist into the bottom of his backpack, he saw the glass screen of the floor between his feet change from an accurate ode to Casimir’s top soil—orange, and moist—to the ceremonious cobblestone of the capitol, and then fade back into shit-colored clay. “Where the fuck-” Keith rummaged through his bag, looking for the schedule he had scribbled down on a piece of cardstock at the beginning of the school year. Half days were always designated lab days, but which lab rotation were they on? He tried to remember the last half day they had had, but was suddenly drawing a blank. The floor bled from orange to a rich ocean blue. Was the last half day for the Founder’s Day Festival? The floor pixilated into a rich yellow, sky scene; a Casimir bird flew under his foot. No, Keith decided. The last half day was for University Aptitude Testing at the beginning of the Third Sowing Season. He laughed sourly. How could he forget that? He failed it this year, for the second time.

“Hayes, class, now,” the school’s Director meandered down the hall in his grey alma mater gown, refabricated and embroidered into a thick, green-embroidered dress robe. The middle-aged man—only sixty-eight years-old, Keith had remembered him bragging at a school assembly once—had blonde sideburns and had seen Keith’s disciplinary file so much that he no longer flattered Keith with the informality of his first name. He passed Keith, both bored and quickly, without making eye contact, as if he was trying to get away fast enough before Keith made him do more paperwork for some misdemeanor.

“Yup,” Keith said, “I’m going.” He finally grabbed hold of the corner of his schedule as the Director turned the corner down another hallway. Keith dropped his bag to the floor and counted his labs, squinting at his own writing:

Laser and Optical Engineering – Wing G
Interplanetary Biology – Wing L
Agronomy – Wing C
Artificial Intelligence Programming – Wing G

Bingo: Agronomy. Keith zipped his bag shut and turned down a hall on his left: Wing C. He followed the monotone gray paint of the walls: pictures and paintings were an unnecessary distraction in a building of study; the natural landscapes depicted in the floor however, had been scientifically proven to facilitate better brain function and concentration. Keith remembered that lesson on cognitive studies from last sowing season. It was hard to forget, really. The lecturer was visiting from **PLANET** and had literally fallen asleep during his own hologram slideshow. As Keith walked, the glass floor beneath his shoes changed to a different ocean scene—this one purple, characteristic of one of the Cello Lakes from the planet Nox. Keith looked up from the ground to see the break in the gray walls where a door labeled “MICKY T. CULTHORT LAB ROOM” was closed. He opened the door quietly. A classroom of twenty or so other seventeen year-olds stared up at him from black tabletops and electronic microscopes. Keith scanned the heads of oily-haired teenagers quickly, finding Rennie’s mop of brown curly hair and walked towards the empty seat next to him.

“Take your spot at your scope, Keith, we’ve already started” his professor with short red hair and matching lips pointed a webbed finger at the empty seat. She was from Metamorpho, was twenty-three, had already been teaching way too long, and was the only one in the room who cared to wear makeup whether artificial or genetically enhanced into her DNA like hers was.

Keith walked in between the rows of tables towards the back of the lab room, accidentally hitting a blonde girl with his book bag. “Watch it,” she hissed as she glared at him. She had the customary Casimir dark circles under her eyes, like every other student in the room, Keith included.

“You watch it,” Keith retorted. He pulled his bag towards his front and slid into the empty seat next to Rennie, whose ears were bright red.

“Where are we?” Keith asked Rennie.

Rennie has his eye pressed so far into the lens of their microscope that when he looked over at Keith he had a pink, indented circle around his eye. “Slide four,” he replied. Rennie scooted the electronic microscope over to Keith. The microscope changed the glass slide by itself, its tiny metal arms whirring at its base. Rennie, like Keith, was an outcast. Being the son of a High Council member, Rennie lived in the Headquarters Building with the rest of the families of the High Council. Rennie only went to school for half the time, returning home to his own private studies with his father. Because of this, their classmates thought Rennie felt was too good for school, and therefore too good for them. They called him the Golden Boy, but Keith knew the truth: Rennie had never felt pride a day in his life, but rather was encompassed by cowardice and shame on a daily basis. Keith too was shunned at school, but for different reasons. The shame Rennie felt at school was a joke to Keith; Keith didn’t understand the questions his professors asked half the time. The curriculum on Casimir was nine times as advanced as any class Keith ever took on the Origin, and when he asked for help even the tutors were exasperated with Keith’s inexperience. But instead of crying in the bathroom when his classmates shoved him—which is what Rennie did— Keith shoved back without question. Hard.

“Are we still hanging out by the old fountain after school?” Keith whispered as he turned the knob on the side of the scope, making the eyepiece expand to fit Keith’s slightly larger face.

“Yes, just be quiet,” Rennie kept his voice down. The professor had projected a holographic sample slide onto the table at the front of the room and was pointing to the individual molecules. Rennie handed Keith the electronic tablet, his big nose red and blotchy, matching his ears. “Annotate the properties, but we’re not doing absorption.”

“OK, OK, keep your pants on,” Keith whispered back and set the tablet down on the table, pressing his eye against the scope to see their designated sample. Keith guessed for slides six through twelve, but he assumed that’s what everyone else was doing as well since they all looked the same, anyway. Well, everyone else expect maybe Rennie. Whenever Keith passed the scope over to his friend, he grabbed it quickly, desperately eager to please someone. Rennie was the kind of kid that often looked up at the professor with the sole intention of catching their eye to prove they were paying attention. It annoyed Keith; sometimes Keith deliberately passed the microscope over to him ridiculously slowly, watching Rennie fidget impatiently until finally he would take it from Keith’s hand and move it himself. On slide fourteen, Rennie poked Keith in the shoulder when it wasn’t even Keith’s turn to examine the sample.

“Stop bouncing your foot, you’re distracting me.”

“Sorry,” Keith rubbed the side of his face, his eyelids drooping.

“Hey look, it’s John Deere,” a student behind Keith whispered loudly.

Keith straightened his back immediately. Rennie slunk lower in his chair, tightening his grip on the nob of the scope so his knuckles turned white. The boy who spoke snickered. John Deere was a name Keith got called a lot in school, referring to one of his father’s old t-shirts Keith often wore. Emerald green and wrinkled, it was one of the few articles of clothing that his

father had kept from their home planet. The phrase, faded and yellow across his chest, was one that no one on Casimir had ever heard of, and so naturally, Keith's classmates saw it fit to repeat.

"He doesn't look so dear to me," another boy commented from behind, leaning forward as he did so to make sure Keith heard him.

"On the contrary, I think he depicts the dumbfounded immigrant look quite well," the first boy continued, "Do tell: are you getting *the help* you need at home? Has your father found work yet, Johnny? Too bad he doesn't teach here anymore. You could do with another tutor. All the other professors are getting quite tired; you're working them awful ragged."

Keith laced his fingers together in his lap so he was not tempted to use them. Rennie sank lower in his chair, his ears blood-red, his eye pressed so firmly into the microscope he looked like he was trying to push his head inside it.

"Do you think his father *could* tutor him?" The boy's voice was a hollow laugh.

"Ah, good point. Probably not. He seemed a little behind as well. A little... what's the word? Flabbergasted?"

"Over challenged?"

Keith unlaced his hands and pulled on his jeans, making sure they were loose on his thighs. His legs bounced on the balls of his feet under the table as he rolled his head in a circle, cracking a particularly tense spot in his neck. Keith listened to the satisfying crunch of the crack, feeling the back of his neck flood with heat. He felt his pulse in his thumbs, heard his heartbeat pound in his eardrums.

"Underqualified?"

"Retarded?"

"Mm! Yes. Maybe it was *best* that he got let go."

“Tommy!” the classmate fake-chastised his friend, “You mean you don’t think *Charlotte’s Web* was beneficial to your edju-muh-cation?”

Keith spun around so fast that Rennie flinched and almost fell out of his chair. Keith threw a punch at the boy closest to him; his body was already leaning over the table behind them, bending towards Keith like a worm. Keith’s knuckles collided with the boy’s face, sending him flying backwards and rolling over the table’s corner and onto the floor, *thwump*. The crunch of Keith’s fingers cracking against the kid’s jaw was just as satisfying as Keith rolling his neck. Keith stood up without realizing it; he stood in front of the table, his fist still poised in the air, his mouth an angry line. The classmate’s friend who had joined in the mockery started yelling for the professor, who screamed as she spun around—“Keith, get away from him!” She pulled the large lever of the Disruption alarm by the lab room door while Keith cracked his knuckles, staring at the boy writhing on the ground. The boy howled, holding his face, blood oozing from his nose. Keith turned back to the front of the classroom, pulled his chair to face front again, and sat down. The professor rushed past Keith, slapping his shoulder as she went and then knelt on the floor next to her student. Keith put his elbows on the table and dropped his chin in his palms. Rennie shrunk lower in his chair, pretending not to know Keith. A girl a couple rows in front of them gaped at Keith with her mouth open; she dropped the glass slide she was holding to the floor where it shattered.

“KEITH, GET OUT, RIGHT NOW. GO HOME,” his Agronomy professor shrieked from the ground.

As Keith stood up to leave, the friend of the boy Keith had punched lunged at Keith over the table, “What the fuck—!”

Keith jerked out of reach and slipped around the crouched professor into the isle, grabbing his backpack as he moved towards the door. He closed it to the sound of his classmate's continued wails, the rest of the students now crowding around him in a circle. He was halfway down Wing C when his professor loudly slammed the lab room door, her red glossy hair askew and sticking out on the sides in messy points. Keith turned around and she huffed over to him, brandishing a piece of paper. "Three day suspension. File it with the Director before you leave."

He wouldn't, but she shoved it into his hand anyway and whipped back around before Keith could even glance at her hurried writing. He crumpled it in his hands and stuck it in his pocket. He felt it crunch against his jeans with every step. When he reached the school's entrance, the floor melted into a swirl of cosmic starry whirlwinds. The glass screen fluttered through the galaxy as Keith let the metal door slam behind him.

2.

It was almost noon when Keith stepped back out into the City Square and the Redrum bugs' hum had joined the throng of people bustling in and out of buildings on their lunch break. The half day would be over soon and Rennie would meet him as planned, but until then, Keith hulked down the school's steps, watching the buzz of the capitol. Scholars in robes walked up and down the marble steps of the Headquarters Building while nurses, healers, and families filtered out of different hospital buildings each one color coded for their specialty: blue checkered paneling for *Rabidious Asylum*, where all the crazy people lived, green and white stripes for *Casimir Memorial*, the largest hospital of the three, and a soft rose-colored wood lining for the front of *Serendipity*, the children's infirmary. Keith wanted to puke whenever he saw the last one. When he was eight, Keith got some virus that the healers said was very

common for first-time immigrants. He was holed up in *Serendipity* for almost three weeks, drugged out on fever medication, half the time mistaking the nurses for hallucinated monsters with wild hair and needle-looking teeth. When he was finally stable enough to go home, he was too scared to leave his bedroom, afraid that the same monsters would be waiting for him in the hallway. His father had to buy him a handheld mirror for his delirium, and for a few days Keith even used it to check around corners. At age twelve, that was pretty embarrassing for a new comer of Casimir, but the healers assured him the paranoia was a common side effect to the medications if he had never encountered them before. Regardless, Keith was glad he grew out of that side effect.

Keith turned away from the hospitals and walked past his school and the next, designated for ages seven through fourteen, until he came to the corner of the block and turned right into one of the residential districts. He would meet Rennie at the old fountain that Casimir doesn't use anymore, which was about the same distance from the City Square as it was from Keith's apartment to school, but in the opposite direction. He walked with both hands in his pockets through two neighborhoods much richer than his, laden with fancy grass patterns illustrating various parts of the brain and personal green houses with chrome skeletons and copper doors. The old fountain used to be the center of the original City Square of Casimir when the planet's original pioneers first moved from living underground to living above ground. However, the water supply they had found by the old fountain soon failed. The oligarchy then moved the City Square to where it was today, so they could continue streaming water from the underground water main they had used before. The result of the relocation was an abandoned stone fountain, cracked and eroded, on the opposite side of the City.

Keith and Rennie used to come here when they were younger to build boats out of empty soda bottles and lunch trays and see whose ship sank the slowest. The left-over water was nasty and green, and if Keith had to guess, probably more sludge than liquid. Its putrid smell and overall grossness always made the victor feel that much more accomplished, when their boat remained afloat the longest. But now, as the residential neighborhood thinned behind him, Keith was alone with the sight of the crooked stone wall encircling a pit of green. Grass had even grown in between the cobblestone here, making the fountain look like some displaced tree in an oasis, pointing uselessly towards the sky. The stone base formed a curved seat, riddled with fractures ranging in width from hairline to trenches. Despite the age and blunt cracks of the fountain's rim, the water—if you really could still call it that— stayed in the center pool, broken only by the large crescent-shaped slab of stone from which a spout once came. Now, ivy crept up the structure's side like some swamp vine creeping out of a lagoon.

Keith dropped his bag and sat on the edge of the fountain. He pulled his suspension notice out of his pocket and threw it in the center of the fountain where it sank a few centimeters then sat stagnant on top of the sludge. He stuck out his legs and compared the long scar on his right shin to the rocky fissures in the stone beneath his palms. When he had first sliced up his leg on the rusty, broken bottom stair of his apartment building, it took forever to heal. It was gnarled and puffy, and healed unevenly when the scab finally fell off, replaced by a fleshy mound of scar tissue. One time, a seventh grader asked Keith if he had been stabbed. “No,” Keith had told him, widening his eyes, “I bit myself.” The look on the kid's face made Keith forget that he had limped painfully for a week when it first happened.

A few minutes later, Keith spotted Rennie shuffling towards him from the City, both hands grappling the straps of his backpack. Keith smiled and stood up, scrunching his own bag

into a ball. He waited until Rennie was close enough and threw it to him. Rennie caught it. “Nice right hook, there,” Rennie said, “try to let me finish my slide before you start next time.”

Rennie’s voice was a lot deeper than Keith had expected it to be when they had first met five years ago when Keith and his father immigrated here. By now, Keith was used to Rennie’s awkwardly deep tone.

“I’ll try to work on that,” Keith changed the topic quickly, the thought of his classmate’s insults making his stomach bile boil, “So? Can you go to the Unveiling?”

“Yeah,” Rennie threw Keith’s bag back at him and dropped his own onto the ground, “My dad’s officiating it, so I get to be there. No lessons that day.”

“Excellent,” Keith said. The two of them sat down on the edge of the old fountain, staring at the pieces of grass sticking up around the old cobblestone. They usually couldn’t stand next to each other at City gatherings, since Rennie’s father was on the High Council and he had to stand with him, but afterwards, the two of them always talked about the events: who they saw there, laughing at mistakes in the teleprompters, passing judgement on and making predictions about the gatherings. Last year at the Descent, Keith and Rennie had made bets with each other on which scholar was the smartest, or would become Enlightened first.

“I can’t believe it’s been a whole year,” Rennie said. Rennie stood up and turned around, putting his palms against the fountain’s rim. He stared into the sludge, his butt pointed out towards the yellow sky. His brown curls poured out from the center of his head hanging over the water, sweat making his hair stick together in uneven clumps. Rennie let go of the stone and straightened up as he swiped the curls out of his eyes, then sat back down on the fountain wall next to Keith, clasping his hands lazily between his knees.

Keith stared out at the blocks of houses in the distance. He pictured the City Square just a year ago at the Descent, every citizen of Casimir scrunched tight against each other like the buildings in his rundown neighborhood. The excitement in the City that day was freakin' tangible. Keith remembered walking into the City Square with his father, both of them grinning ear to ear, eager to witness the event that would advance the psychological development of the human race itself. Reporters from different planets flocked to Casimir that day, desperate to notate—to capture, to partake in the sending off of the chosen seven. Packed around the tiny portal doors in the City Square, people nudged each other, pointing—*do you see that scholar? And that one? Do you see them?* Keith and his father took turns climbing on each other's backs to get a better view of the scene, the horde of people pressed back behind sections of rope encircling the fountain and its surrounding portal doors. Keith's father laughed as Keith slid off his back prematurely, pulling them both into the large man standing next to them who yelled at them both. Keith's father apologized to the man but then turned to his son, grinning, "my goodness, Keith, how dare you want to be involved in society! I didn't raise you like that!"

Keith replied, stifling laughter, shoving pieces of hot pretzel into his mouth, "gosh, I'm such a disgrace to the Hayes family name, you should send me back to the Origin where I belong."

His father ruffled Keith's hair, grabbing a piece of pretzel from the bag Keith had bought. Keith remembered looking back towards the fountain, this time, both of them standing on their own two feet. The High Council had been there too, at the front of the crowd introducing each scholar one last time before the seven of them climbed down into the massive tunnels hidden beneath the City street. Now, sitting on the old fountain, miles outside of the City Square, one

year later, Keith thought about the Unveiling tomorrow asked Rennie “do you think they’ll be Enlightened when they come up?”

“Honestly? I think they’ll come up dumber than when they went in,” Rennie said. He said it exasperatedly as if the upcoming failure of the chosen seven somehow put him more behind in his homework. Keith almost laughed when Rennie’s shoulders slumped beside him, but shoved one of them playfully, instead.

“Ahhh, boooo, pessimistic,” Keith crooned.

“You?” Rennie smiled, turning his head towards Keith.

“I think they’d better be Enlightened,” Keith yelled, “They had one job!” Keith put both hands through his hair—straight and dirty blonde, the exact opposite of Rennie’s. Keith smiled at his own joke and swung his feet as he hung over the side of the fountain wall.

“Dude, a year isn’t enough time to reach Enlightenment,” Rennie’s low voice cracked a bit, as it often did when Rennie spoke quietly, “I don’t think. I mean, Casimir’s whole society is built towards higher education, and we, its students, are the direct product. If we’re not Enlightened, I don’t see how they will be.”

“Jealous much?” Keith put his hands behind him on the stone wall and sighed.

Rennie followed suit, leaning back with him, “No, I don’t mean I want to go down there—it’s not like I’m even qualified...”

“I think you’re pretty damn close, freak show.”

Rennie slapped Keith in the back of his head— “Shut up.”

Keith snickered and scrunched up his shoulders, “but seriously, you haven’t been meditating underground, isolated from society for a whole year. So you don’t know. Maybe society is getting in the way of our own lay-person enlightenment,” Keith continued.

“Yeah, but...” Rennie tilted his head, chewing on one side of his mouth, “I don’t know. Maybe isolation just made them stupider. I could be wrong. Maybe some of them will actually be Enlightened when they come out of the portals tomorrow. That Marsyr guy looked pretty smart, already.”

Keith remembered the sallow face of the theologist from the TV interviews *City News 5* aired the week before the Descent. Hard wrinkles sat on the theologist’s forehead like a stack of books, creasing his eyelids into deep, sunken grooves. He remembered watching each one of the scholar’s interviews with his father on their couch. There was the chemist Leora Purchase who had silver eyes, an angular face, and an unfailing stern expression; the theologist Marsyr Galloway and his curtain of white hair; the archeologist Honor Tessings, mother of two, whose short blonde hair had shone through the television screen; the psychologist Toby Echin with a doughy face and prematurely bald head; Adam Knott the engineer and youngest scholar; the philosopher Steven Quail, who couldn’t stop talking; and the descendant of the founder of their planet, Randal Casimir.

“I liked Toby,” Keith said, “he was hilarious.”

“Yeah, I can assure you he will not come out Enlightened,” Rennie agreed with a guttural snort. Rennie picked at his fingernail. “I would hate to go down there,” he said, “I bet it’s all dark and cold.”

“Nah they said they’d turn the lights on,” Keith argued, rubbing the back of his neck. The sun was starting to set. The blaring cloudless yellow of the sky was melting into a reed red. The shadow from the fountain’s spout grew taller on the chipping cobblestone as they talked. “Plus,” Keith said, “I bet there’s a lot of old things down there for the scholars to use from when the pioneers lived underground. Like beds and showers and stuff.”

“Yeah, but still: no sun for three whole sowing seasons?” Rennie’s voice trailed off.

Keith thought about it. He could part with the sun if it meant he didn’t have to go to school for a year straight. He bet there were millions of tunnels which would be perfect for running, and he would have plenty of time to himself to read or even write if he wanted. Keith smiled at the thought of being away from all of his professors, grades, his dingy apartment, everything. Then he thought of his father, and his smile slipped from his face. His father: shadow of a man that he is now, growing older each day in his bath robe, his face oily and covered in stubble, meandering around the apartment. Keith tried to rationalize that his father would still feed himself if Keith didn’t come home every night, maybe even read the paper every once and a while, or take a shower without Keith’s prodding him to do so instead of him just sitting in his own filth day after day.

“I bet they went crazy,” Rennie interrupted Keith’s thoughts.

“We’ll find out tomorrow when they open the doors, I guess,” Keith said.

“Yeah.”

They stayed there for another hour throwing sticks into the fountain and reciting funny lines from the last episode of *Me and My Eleven Rubik Cubes*. Then they pulled on their backpacks and headed back towards the City. When they reached the new fountain in the center of the City Square where Rennie and splits off to go home to the Headquarters Building and Keith to his remote, piss-poor neighborhood, Keith pulled his friend aside. “Hey, can you help me study next week?”

Rennie fell silent.

“Just, like, one hour. Please?”

Rennie pulled at the straps of his bag, letting his gaze drift off towards some spot above Keith's head. The red glow of the already set sun cupped one side of his face like large bruise.

"I just have to learn the difference between Dr. Jaedaire and Jaelayre for Interplanetary Biology," Keith went on, "Actually it'll probably take less than an hour."

Rennie met Keith's eyes and inhaled deeply before responding— "First of all, its Jaedaire and Jaemore. And Jaedaire only studied organisms that don't stop growing after they die. Jaemore only studied organisms that don't grow post mortem. And second of all, it's not going to take less than an hour and you know that. I have my own studies to work on, dude." Rennie pushed past him towards the marble steps of the Headquarters Building where he lived with his father. Keith turned to follow him, a second proposal ready on his lips, but Rennie spun back around and stopped him. "You need tutoring in every subject, Keith. All the kids know it. All the professors know it. And they don't like it. And neither does the Director of the school. Or the High Council, for that matter. I've heard things..."

Keith swallowed. The red shadows on Rennie's face made his cheeks look gaunt and mean. "Yeah, well. ...I'm not stupid if that's what you think," Keith said.

Rennie let out a strained breath, "That's not what I meant, it's just... You're falling behind. ...like, like your father."

Rennie tried to turn away but Keith put a hand on Rennie's chest, forcefully, "Don't bring him into this." Now Keith's voice was low. He would never hit him, Keith hoped Rennie knew that, but in that moment, he didn't care if he knew it or not."

"I'm sorry," Rennie sputtered, " just... forget I said anything. Look, I'll see you tomorrow, OK?" Without waiting for a reply, Rennie shuffled away. Keith stood in front of the Headquarters Building, a vein in his temple drumming softly in his ears. When Keith got back to

his apartment, he stood outside the door scraping the dried blood off his knuckles thinking of how he was going to tell his Dad that he was suspended again. “Dad?” Keith called through the apartment when he opened the door. The living room, which also served as a kitchen, was empty. The full apartment consisted of two tiny bedrooms, a cramped washroom, and their makeshift living room which was so bare it looked as though both Keith and his father were in a permanent state of moving out. Cardboard boxes filled with paperback books spotted the living room like freckles. One lonely couch sat in the middle of the room, an awkward hole in the middle cushion, and an overturned wooden crate served as their coffee table.

By the one and only window, sat a horizontally long bookcase filled with his father’s finest hardcovers. They were the only objects worth a damn in the whole apartment, but Keith knew that his father would sooner sell his internal organs than try to find a buyer for the fiction classics. Keith couldn’t honestly complain, as he too adored the books. The shelves were lined with stories his mother had read to him as a child like *Nature Me Nature You* and his favorite, *Lord of Space*. However, there were also books there that had served Keith’s older self, some of his current favorites like *Never Tell a Soul*, *Death with No Whip Cream*, *The Giver*, *Two Cups of Coffee*, and *I Am the Difference*. Keith didn’t have time to read those kinds of books anymore, but he liked having them there, because Keith read them anyway: long after the sun goes down when he has given up on his homework. He slung his backpack onto the sofa and ventured down the hallway until he came to his father’s door. Keith knocked and it fell open. His father looked up at him from his mattress clad with two sheets for blankets, on the floor. Blake Hayes had a thin, long face much like Keith’s own. They shared the same hair color, although his father’s hair was so long that he kept it in a ponytail, grazing the middle of his back. Keith made sure his own

hair was short enough to keep off his neck on all sides. His father's room looked smaller than Keith's, but that was just because of the queen-sized mattress, built for two but only serving one.

"Hey bud," Blake said. His voice was scratchy since he didn't use it much anymore. In his hands was an old syllabus and gradebook, random papers spilling out of the open folder. His father's bedroom didn't have a dresser but he did have a filing cabinet which was tan, old and starting to rust. To make up for it, his father's closet was full of hangers which held old suits, dress robes, button-down shirts, folded trousers, and even jeans. However Keith hardly ever saw him change out of his dirty nightshirt, boxers, and bathrobe. There were no holes in Blake's walls, unlike Keith's, but there were no posters or pictures, either. Keith remembered how his father used to keep his mother's picture by his bedside, but that was almost five years ago. That was before she stopped calling. On Origin, Keith's mother used to be protective of him, or at least that's what he thought. It was hard to tell on that planet. By the third millennium, children and adults alike were being knifed on street corners and pulled into dark alleys where their organs were scavenged to sell on the black market to illegal genetic research facilities. Walking anywhere by foot on the Origin was never even a consideration, let alone a normalcy like it was on Casimir. The crime-rate for Keith's home planet as a whole was 34.2% on a good year, and soon buying body parts under the table from criminals and murderers became a not only profitable, but a legitimate strategy against the global economic depression.

"He'll never get a chance in this world if he grows up around all this, *if* he gets to grow up *at all*," Keith had heard his mother tell his father one night, back when he was eleven. She used to pull at her hair a lot, something Keith found himself doing unconsciously sometimes. When his family decided interplanetary immigration was the way to go, Keith's mother opted to take the second shuttle, giving Keith and his father a chance to settled in to Casimir; shuttle

tickets were expensive and they couldn't afford to all go at once. For weeks after they moved, Keith remembered the fuzzy satellite phone calls, his mother's quiet voice multiple solar systems away. Keith also remembered the last call she ever made to them: his father threw down the receiver, jamming it into the electronic holder.

"She's never coming, Keith," he had said. And that was that. Keith and Blake Hayes, *two discarded men in a foreign world* as his father referred to them as, stayed up into the early hours of the morning that night. Keith was twelve; they camped out in the living room reading the old leather-bound stories from their bookshelf. *Classics* his father would call them: *Eragon*, *Moby Dick*, *Harry Potter*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. That night, it was just Keith and his father, as it had been for the last ten years. Yet in all those years, Keith never asked his father why his mother decided not to come. For many reasons, Keith did not desire to know.

"What's wrong with your hand?" his father's voice brought him back to the present; he was in his father's bedroom; his father was frowning.

"Nothing," Keith said. He wiped his knuckles again on his jeans. One of the scabs ripped open and a tiny stream of blood started to trickle down his finger. "I, uh, got suspended again."

His father dropped his old lesson plans and stood up, grabbing his son's hand— "Did you get in another fight?"

Keith ignored his father for a moment and let him examine his knuckles. For all the times over the last year through his father's unemployment, Keith wished his father would speak to him; this wasn't one of those times.

Blake Hayes examined his son's hand, feeling the split skin gingerly, "Keith..."

"I know," Keith replied on autopilot. He looked at his father's eyes and they hardened.

"I don't think you do," his father's voice went from concerned to angry.

Keith pulled his hand away, livid. Keith rolled neck away from his father, boring into the corner of the ceiling. This was the first time his father had spoken to him in over a month and he's mad at *Keith*? That's bullshit. Keith felt the pulse in his temple start to quicken.

"This is serious, Keith, this is your second offense. Who knows what they will do to you after a third. They could kick you out of school entirely." Blake's arms were down by his sides, but he was gesturing with them as he spoke. He tried to get Keith to look at him by waving a hand in front of him, but Keith turned his head to the other corner of the ceiling instead.

"I'm already failing," Keith groaned.

"Don't say that..." His father's voice was a whine. Keith watched his mouth hang open stupidly out of the corner of his eye. His father's eyebrows pinching his face into a sad, disappointing frown, "Keith, listen to me!"

"I shouldn't have to tell you that, Dad," Keith snapped, making eye contact with him, "you've seen my grades, you've seen me struggling. It's too much for me to keep up with." Keith folded his arms, the tiny line of blood from his hand smooshed against his arm hair as he knotted his arms.

"I'll talk to your teachers," Blake argued, "I used to know the principal—"

"No," Keith's voice dropped an octave, "you've done enough," he almost shouted. The awkward silence that followed made Keith sweat. He wiped a stream of it off of his temple as he turned down the narrow hallway and walked towards the kitchen.

"Keith," His father followed him, his tone level and authoritative. Keith found this funny since he had been wearing that bathrobe for at least four months straight now without washing it. Who was he to demand anything of Keith? "Keith, come back," he called.

Keith spun around. “Enough, Dad, OK? You’ve done enough. You brought me to this planet, you put me in this school. I’m failing everything and you just sit there and watch. I mean do you even notice that I’m flunking out? Do you even care? My classmates think I’m a freak, my professors think I’m retarded, everyone thinks we’re both just—” Keith shoved a stack of his textbooks off the kitchen counter and grunted.

His father stared at the fallen books then said quietly, “Keith, I know the academics here are challenging, but—”

Keith didn’t want to hear it. “Oh, do you? Fuck you! Last time I checked, you failed just like I’m failing. You couldn’t even hold on to your own stupid subject.”

Blake’s face contorted as if Keith struck him. His father’s furrowed eyebrows slackened, his jaw hung open, empty of a reply. Keith watched his father’s arms go from outstretched to falling to his sides in slow motion. “It’s not my fault they extracted Literature from the planet’s curriculum,” Blake defended himself. His voice sounded small, feeble, as if he were ordering water at a restaurant.

“I mean, what the fuck do you even do all day?” Keith storming around the living room, kicking over the wooden crate that served as their coffee table, “stare out the fucking window? Have you even tried to find another job?” Keith exhaled with a growl and raked both hands through his hair, “and it’s not even the academics, Dad, it’s this *fucking* apartment. It’s these old hand-me-down *clothes*, it’s these *stupid*, ancient *books*.” Keith picked up a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* from the sofa and skipped it across the room. “Nobody knows what these fucking stories are! *This*,” he grabbed a glossy textbook from his backpack on the floor titled *Seven Ways to Weigh the Human Soul*, “*this* is what I need to know, and I don’t understand it. Nobody will explain it to me. Nobody will even *help me*, I’m so far behind. And you? In your fucking

underwear staring at the wall all day, you're not helping either. Living in this— this— *hell hole* of an apartment full of useless information? *Isn't. Helping.* Everyone at school thinks I'm fucking *incapable* or something. Just like—just like..."

Blake blinked at his son, his mouth open the faintest crack, flecks of dead skin caught in his stubble.

"Just like *you*," Keith seethed. His sweat turned to chills on his body; the hairs on the back of his neck and his forearms spiked. His throat became dry, devoid of an apology despite the instantaneous knot forming in his stomach like an anchor. Keith stormed past his father who got out of his way like a puff of exhaled air.

In the bathroom, Keith wrenched the sink faucet on, hot. The mirror fogged up almost instantly, the room the size of a pantry closet. Through the steam, Keith saw his skinny torso and high cheekbones. His face mirrored the thinness of the rest of his body, although his arms showed significant muscle from doing various house repairs around the apartment. His dirty blonde hair stuck together in pieces on his forehead and Keith swiped it away, angrily. He splashed hot water over his face.

"The occasional sweat is good for a man," his father had told him once when he was fifteen. They were rebuilding the inner wall of this very bathroom when it was crumbling, having fallen to termites— before Blake lost his job and still had remnants of a functioning life. "Elbow grease and will power can make you invincible," his father had said.

Now, Keith heard the quiet click of his father's bedroom door closing. Keith took off his baggy jeans: the only pair he owned and from a second-hand shop. They were slightly short for him, revealing his shoes laced up to his ankles, a trend that had long gone out of style on Casimir. Keith took those off too, and leaned against the sink in his boxers. While the water sent

puffs of steam unfurling from the sink, he stared at his scabbing knuckles. The dried blood on them was his.

3.

The next morning was the Unveiling. Keith woke to the silence that was normal of their apartment, but today the empty air felt much guiltier. His biological clock had woken him up early out of pure anticipation of the day's events, but Keith didn't really feel that excited to go. The Descent was an event and he and his father had gone to together a year ago; it would be weird to go to the Unveiling without him. Keith sat up, shame twirling in his stomach like a hunger. He was embarrassed at his disrespect, his ungratefulness, his rudeness. His father didn't raise him to be like that, so why did he act that way? It's not who Keith was. Keith sighed, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. However Keith couldn't honestly say he knew who he was anymore—and that goes for both him and his father. How could Keith have said that to the man who raised him? Keith threw off his sheet and got out of bed, naked except for his dad's old raggedy sweat pants. Their apartment was already lit by the yellow morning glow although the lights were still off. He tiptoed down the hall towards his father's bedroom. The door was closed, but he knocked softly.

"Dad?" No answer. Whenever he had knocked before and didn't get an answer, Keith imagined what the silence looked like from the other side of the door. He pictured his father, staring up at the ceiling, eyes blank, practically a vegetable. But now, the silence was different; now, the silence was Keith's fault. He wanted to pound louder, apologize through the door, beg for some scrap of forgiveness or pardon. His father was the only ally he had. Rennie didn't live here; Rennie didn't skimp on every meal to pay rent for the apartment; Rennie wasn't an immigrant who still had trouble pronouncing Casimir birth names; Rennie actually knew his

mother, he hadn't been left behind by her. "I'm sorry," Keith whispered through the door. He stood for a second leaning against it, his knuckles hovering to knock again. Keith chose against knocking twice; he didn't deserve to. Instead he tiptoed back into the living room feeling awkward, eager for some kind of self-punishment. He knew his father would never ground him. Sometimes, Keith wished he would. Keith stared at the holographic clock perched on the kitchen counter. Dawn had just broken over Casimir. He still had hours before the Unveiling ceremony that afternoon. Keith went back to his father's door.

"Dad? I'm going for a run, I'll be back really soon." Keith turned and walked down their narrow hallway, kicking his own bedroom door back open with his foot. The door creaked on the loose bottom hinge. Keith looked around. His running shoes—well, they were his only pair of shoes—were under a pile of dirty laundry sitting at the foot of his dresser. The piece of furniture was a curbside steal Keith and his father had found one day walking back from the City Square. The bottom drawer always stuck out a little bit, and the whole piece was slightly slanted, but in the ten years Keith had been on this planet, it held up pretty well. He saw the shoelaces sticking out from under the pile of clothes and pulled at them. Up came his two faded yellow, high-tops. They were white once, but now they matched the peeling cream of Keith's bedroom walls. Each shoe had the outline of stars on their sides, indicative of an old Origin brand, but they were nearly rubbed off, now. He found a pair of socks in the pile and sat down on his bed to pull them on. Without a box spring, Keith's lanky knees almost hit him in the chin when he sat down on his mattress. He laced up the shoes, customarily wiggling his toes through a hole in the top of one of them, and stood up. He scanned the room for his jogging hoodie. The dresser, his twin mattress, a cardboard box full of toys and books from when he was little, and an empty closet, except for a couple of grotesque metal hangers, was all that Keith had to his name at seventeen

years-old. He didn't have a M-ey—couldn't afford one. His dad had given him his old Tempters when they first moved here—two sticky circles that stuck onto his temples and pulsed alternative rock from the 3000's— but the flight must've corrupted it because once they landed, Keith couldn't get it to work anymore. So he ran without music.

Still scanning the room for his hoodie, Keith turned around and saw his *None for the Living* poster, along with the hole he had punched in the wall when he was fourteen and one of his professors told the entire class that he had the lowest test grade. He used to think he was able to punch through the wall that day because he was really strong. Now he knows that the walls were just really that thin. Spying a black sleeve tucked between the wall and the mattress, Keith bent over to grab it. He pulled the sleeve from the crevice, glancing at the series of tally marks he kept by his bed. Keith reached under his pillow for the pencil he kept there, held it up to a particular section of tallies and waited, silently. He heard his father's faint snore again and, guiltily, drew a tiny vertical tally mark under the section labeled *days Dad stays in bed*. Keith made sure to draw this section farther down on the wall on the off-chance of his father walking into his room, which, admittedly, hasn't happened in over a year. Keith stared at his various groups of tallies and moved over to the one labeled *exercise* and drew a diagonal line across the last four tallies. He bent over further and marked the final tally under the section labeled *days until Unveiling*. Then Keith dropped the pencil onto his bed, zipped up his hoodie, and closed his bedroom door behind him.

Keith walked over to the refrigerator. He opened it, inviting a wounded, gurgling hum—it was a very old fridge—and scanned the top shelf. There was about a quarter of the milk jug left. Keith took one swig and left the rest for his father. He closed the fridge, which emanated a quick sucking noise when he did so, and crossed the measly two steps of linoleum to the front door.

Putting his hood up, Keith kicked the bottom of the door twice to loosen it, shimmied the handle to get it to open, and then locked it using the broken finger scanner which only worked half the time. He walked down the hallway past the doors of the older man who drops acid twice a week—he tried to sell Keith some once— the newlywed couple that yells more than they make up—Keith’s bedroom shares a wall with theirs— and the woman who leaves her TV on all night—still not sure if she’s dead or deaf. At the end of the hall was a rusted metal spiral staircase. The hum of the laundromat one building over quite audible, Keith’s hand was just about to touch the stairs’ railing when a voice from the other end of the hall creaked at him.

“Keith! Keith, come here I want to show you something.” It was Mrs. Fosdick, an old woman whose family moved her here, then forgot about her and went back to their home planet. “I’ve got new pictures of David,” she squealed.

Keith’s hand gripped the railing, “I really can’t right now, Mrs. Fosdick, I’m going for a really quick run.”

David was the name of one of her sons. She had four, but only remembered the name of one and was convinced they were all the same person. At least once a week, she would try to pull Keith inside her apartment— which smelled of old soup and shag carpet—to show him pictures of their military service in various interplanetary wars. Half the time the stove was on, or the refrigerator door was left open, or the toilet hadn’t been flushed in days, so Keith often stayed and walked around to make sure she didn’t burn the whole building down. But today he couldn’t; today was the Unveiling. “I can’t today,” Keith said, “but I promise I’ll see them another time, OK?”

“OK, David, have a nice time,” she waved; her wrinkled face always looked like it was smiling, even when she wasn’t trying to although really, her face was so perfectly round that it was hard to tell the difference.

Keith waved back as he flew down the stairs. When he reached the last step, the broken one, he jumped over it as he was accustomed to ever since he fell through it; he still had the V-shaped scar to prove it. The bottom floor of the apartment building was dusty and grime encrusted from one broken-tiled wall to the other. A rickety set of old wooden furniture sat in the corner, discarded by some family who found the pieces would not make it up the stairs. Instead they sat, half molding from a leak in the ceiling. The ghostly shape of cat slunk out from behind an old desk and stared, at Keith with glassy eyes. “I got nothing today,” he told her brandishing empty hands, and pushed the front door open with his back. He put up his arm up to block the customary orange glow of the day. It was especially sharp and bright at this hour, but it would lessen as the day wore on. The sky was never blue, here, but always between gold and red. Most of the planet was dry and windy. The majority of Casimir’s surface was caked and cracked. The City was the one and only cultivated plot of land on the planet for that reason, and it was built in its specific location because that soil alone, in and around the capitol, was rich and moist.

On the outskirts of the City where Keith and his father lived, where rent was cheap and the apartments cheaper, the clay streets were always empty. There were no scholars bustling to work here, no City employees, professors, healers, no children playing around. If you wanted to see that, you’d have to leave the boarded-up store fronts of Keith’s neighborhood, venture past the ranch-dominated suburbs, and head into the heart of the capitol where the clay streets became cobblestone and the buildings were wider than they were tall. Here, the apartments on either side of the road cast long rustic shadows on each other, as if trying to cancel each other out. Not even

the smells of Casimir's Founder's Day Festival reached Keith's neighborhood, despite being able to hear the distant flutes and bells. To experience anything, Keith and his father had to walk blocks away from their apartment where the sludge of the clay wouldn't scuff people's dress shoes.

Keith broke into an easy pace in the middle of the street, solely for pedestrians. He could never run in the middle of the road on his home planet. He'd get run over. However on Casimir the only vehicles were crop plows, and they only came out during the Second Sowing Seasons to re-carve the dirt roads after the snow and rain had finished morphing them into slopes of mush. Veering away from overturned trash cans, Keith took a narrow side-street as the blood started to rush through his legs, balling up in his toes like little bursts of energy. He inhaled the damp rot of clay still saturated from last night's storm. His sneakers slopped against the dense ground until their rhythm matched the pulse in his eardrums. Keith knew these streets with his eyes closed. The one he was on would eventually fan out into an upscale centenarian community behind the Headquarters Building.

He headed there to see if Rennie was awake yet. Plus, there weren't any portal doors in Keith's neighborhood and those were his favorite things to pass when he went running. Only the richer towns with cobblestone streets had them encrypted in the ground like they were part of the design. They were all over the City, each one ringed by large copper rivets that shined a soft rose-red at sunset. Keith liked hearing the hollow thud when he ran over them, the knolling echo left in his wake. His pace quickened at the thought as he made the snap decision to go through the gulley between the old bakery that had gone out of business and a poor-man's cemetery that had tin boxes for tombstones and rotting wooden planks for fence posts. The gulley was a shortcut but was often slippery after a storm, so Keith slowed his jog as the dirt started sloping

downwards. At the bottom of the decline, he took a running leap over the tiny creek lining the middle of the ravine, the water dark and murky like an old, bloated jump-rope. His yellow sneakers, scraped now with splotches of fresh mud, got stuck in the slop on the other side of the ravine and he had to pause for a second, panting as he pulled at his feet until they were free.

On the other side of the gulley, Keith sprinted through brick alleyways lined with stray cats and bright turquoise Casimir weeds that looked like balls of fur atop their pale green stems. When the rubber soles of Keith's shoes finally met stone, each step sent a pounding jolt through his knees. He slowed his jog at the opening of the alley where a street lamp overlooked a row of identical dual housing complexes with circular windows and doors. Keith spied one of the metal portals in the center of the street: an elaborately carved and perfectly circular Casimir crest disrupting the cobblestone. He walked towards it, grabbing hold of the streetlamp and swinging himself the rest of the way. He crouched in front of the portal which was locked—as they all were. He rapped his knuckles against the metal, half expecting one of the chosen seven scholars to hear him and knock back. Keith pressed an ear to the ground and listened, waiting. No one ever had knocked back of course, but Keith had tried more in these last few weeks than he had in the past three Sowing Seasons all together. He, like the rest of Casimir, was eagerly anticipating the Unveiling. Keith heard something. Was that—was that a knock?

“Hey,” a man's voice snarled, clearly from above ground.

Keith whipped his head up from portal and saw a homeless man in heavy black boots clomping towards him in the middle of the street. The grime on his face stretched from above his heavy eyebrows down to—and throughout—his gray, tangled beard. Two messy mats of hair curtained his face on either side, hiding both his ears.

“What the hell are you doing, this is my portal, come on, up, get.”

Keith started to stand slowly, “This isn’t your—”

“I SAID GET,” the man roared, flailing one of his arms at Keith, shooing him.

Keith stayed put, still half crouched, and pointed at the metal circle in the ground. “I thought I heard—”

“Thought you heard what?” the man mocked, “Huh? No. That’s what I thought. Now get the fuck off my street.” The man ran at Keith, who jumped away from the metal door, catching a whiff of vomit and alcohol off of the homeless man’s jacket.

“OK, OK, geeze,” Keith backed away, his hands out in front of him in case he needed to use them.

“Get,” the man repeated, waving his arms.

Keith started jogging away from him. He found his rhythm again and slid back into his normal sprint, looking back over his shoulder one last time before he entered the City. The man was still glaring at him, straddling the small circular portal like he was keeping guard. Keith ran at the same pace until he could see the pointy corners of the centenarians’ rooftops, glistening orange and gold in the fading sunlight. The neighborhood was wide. The flat, rectangular houses flanked the back of the Headquarters Building closely like a wall. Quiet neighbors, as expected for centenarians, the squat homes spanned the entirety of the white capitol building, covering the length of one whole side of the City Square. Even from the back, Keith could tell that the Headquarters Building was sectioned into different parts by connecting, ornate marble pillars, each one taller than all of the centenarian houses stacked together. Keith slowed to a walk in front of one of the identical homes and bent over to catch his breath. He held his knees as he stared at a miniature Zen garden dug into the lawn in front of him. Keith squinted at it; someone had left a handprint in it. It had seven fingers— like his Agronomy professor, the person must

have been from Metamorpho, the planted known for its genetic engineering and body modification. Keith stood up and walked on a path between the houses, to the back wall of the Headquarters Building.

He looked up, searching for Rennie's bedroom window. He found it counting the pentagon-shaped windows, but only to see that the dark blue curtains were drawn, which meant Rennie was either at dinner or studying. Keith let out a sigh and turned around, fingers laced together over his head. He closed his eyes and listened to the stillness of the morning.

Somewhere down the row of houses, an old woman sneezed out her open window. Keith opened his eyes and shook his feet out, readying his muscles to return home. He bent over and retied one of his shoes, wondering if his father was still shut up in his room. Keith took a couple deep breaths, replaying his apology again in his mind, then ran all the way back to his neighborhood without stopping.

When he opened the door to their apartment, the faint drone of the television met his ears. He found his father asleep on the couch, his head lolling to the side on the back cushion. His mouth hung open in a silent snore as their old video-microchip of *The Dying Generation* played on the TV screen for the third time this week. Keith still remembered the day he brought his father depression medication from Rabidious. After a month of being laid off, his father had decided he no longer needed to leave the apartment. Keith had set the on the counter in front of his father, who merely wrinkled his nose. That night Keith heard his father flush the whole bottle of iridescent pills and down the toilet. Keith never tried a second time.

Nearly a year later, Keith went over to their sphere-shaped video machine and popped the chip out the front just as the documentary got to the part of grainy footage of old Origin riots. The video player itself was so ancient, the microchips often got stuck in it, forcing certain scenes

to replay in an endless, arduous loop. The apartment light fell to a gray haze as static appeared on the screen. Keith put the chip on top of the TV and hit the mute button on the cracked remote control, silencing the white noise but leaving the pixilated war between white and black on the screen. He turned around and pulled an old afghan from under their crate-coffee table and tucked it over his father, who didn't even flinch, both eyelids crusty with sleep. "I'm sorry," Keith murmured. He went into the kitchen and opened the green cupboard door over the stove and pulled out a box of cereal. A mouse poked its head from behind the box when he lifted it and Keith watched it clean its whiskers. The bottom corner of the box had been completely chewed open; brown flakes started to trickle onto the floor as he pulled the box out further. "Here, keep it," Keith told the mouse. He set the box back on the shelf, spooking the mouse back into the dark. His father snored from the couch in response.

Behind the closed door of his bedroom, Keith sat down on the floor and pulled his cardboard box of possessions into his lap. A lamp with no shade stood in the corner of the room by his bed, the bulb burning a limited circle of light onto the adjacent walls. Under its glow, Keith looked through the shadows cast by the items in the box, pushing past books and old photographs, a slingshot, and one awkward roller blade missing a wheel. He dug to the bottom of the box until he felt the edges of the small laminated rectangle. Through the rubble of miscellaneous objects, Keith pulled out his Origin boarding pass. The circular seal on the card below his name and birth date matched the Immigration Tag branded onto his skin, just below his right palm. The light from the lamp illuminated the matching tattoos: a black laurel wreath encircling a space shuttle. Keith found it funny that of all the colonized planets, each with their own individual crest, his home planet was the only one that defined itself by the concept of leaving. Keith wondered if anyone ever immigrated *to* the Origin planet, but Keith doubted it.

What was left to immigrate to? Depleting resources? Daily violence? Fear? Keith thought of the Second Salem Witch Trials in DATE, finding it hard to believe anyone wished to be from the Origin at all.

Keith held the boarding pass in his hand. When he closed his eyes he could still hear the disgruntled lady checking them through the Tagging-Lane the day he and his father moved. They had just the passed through the last of the Entry-Lanes where they had been prodded, poked, and cultured for any medical illnesses that would deem them unsuitable for immigration.

“Name?” a square-jawed woman had said from behind her podium. A twelve year-old Keith stood shyly behind his father.

“Blake and Keith Hayes,” his father had said, putting a gentle hand on Keith’s back as he did so.

Keith watched as the long line of families in front of him picked at their newly branded tags. A bawling toddler wailed as he held his wrist, but his mother was too preoccupied with his four other siblings to care. “Qui-yit!” she screamed at him, her Origin accent flying from her mouth like a boomerang. The single mother corralled the rest of her children, short, plump, and round, with her two arms, shooing them towards the Boarding Zone.

“Is this the first inter-planetary trip you are making?” the tagging woman stamped their passes with the Origin seal, wet black ink sliding on the laminated cards, then handed them back to Keith and his father.

“Yes,” Blake said.

Keith looked over his shoulder, his eyes scanning the crowd for his own mother. She was standing just beyond the glass, like a white wave above the sea of people. She was watching them. His mother was pretty, Keith had remembered. She had sandy blonde hair that hung silky

and soft, grazing her collarbones. She had a small face and pointed jaw line, like Keith. She scrunched her index finger playfully at Keith, meeting his eyes and smiled wryly, tipping her chin down. Keith remembered that his teeth were still sore that day, finally straight from his last regulated pubescent dental surgery. He had grown accustomed to their uneven predisposition, and they felt weird now in his mouth. Keith smiled back a fake smile, sliding his lip up too far, showcasing his new, symmetrical enamel.

“Please hold out your right arm,” the lady droned. She had no hair on her face, except for one long, gross, curly hair below her chin; even her eyebrows were waxed.

His father held out his arm and winced as the woman pressed a cylindrical silver rod to his skin.

“Now, you,” she gestured at Keith.

Keith felt his legs lock up.

“Come on, I don’t have all day,” the lady barked, beckoning him with the rod.

His father gently took hold of Keith’s shoulders and walked him closer to her. Keith held out his arm, shaking. He looked back at his mother who stared at him with a calm face, nodding to let him know it was OK. The silver rod felt like a dog had bitten Keith’s wrist and yanked out all of his veins at once. Keith cried out as it burned his flesh and immediately tried to rub it off with his other hand. He stared at the brand, the detailed black leaves on the laurel wreath outlined in pink, the skin on his wrist puffed up and inflamed.

“OK,” his father examined their large, rectangular shuttle tickets, “Boarding zone B... let’s go, Keith.”

When Keith had looked up to wave goodbye to his mother one last time, she had been distracted and was looking the other way. Keith remembered staring at her until the glass wall

was completely out of view as waited in line for the Boarding Lanes, but she never looked back at him. Finally, Keith lost sight of her all together. Then it was just Keith and his father, the two of them standing in front of the large tainted window of the Launching Station. As Keith stood beside his father, he looked out the window at the shuttle where the sunlight on the pavement was nothing less than aggressive. The space shuttle was a large, jagged shape in front of the dark gray sky. It took up most of the window's view, and looked like a ginormous bullet—a gradually tapered nose at the end of a long, white cylinder. The smooth space shuttle looked wildly out of place next to the field of charcoaled black grass, where the exhaust fumes from various launches had had destroyed the soil.

“We’re going on that rocket,” his father had put a finger against the glass, like his mother. When Keith and his father finally boarded the shuttle that day, they snapped red buckles over their chests while Keith’s stomach turned over in knots. As the shuttle left the ground, his father waved goodbye to the planet, playfully. Keith didn’t watch as they launched, rocketing away from his home planet, rippling through the atmosphere towards Casimir like a sound wave. Keith had shut his eyes.

4.

Keith tried to knock off some of History of Governmental Sciences homework as he waited for the Unveiling, but gave up and decided to indulge in a paperback instead. He had fallen asleep with *The No Way Watch* he had stolen from Casimir’s library before they got rid of the fiction section. The book was flat across his face when the wristwatch that clamped around the base of his bedroom lamp started beeping. Keith shot up in his bed and sent the book flying across the room. Keith rubbed his eyes and reached for the metal pole of the lamp, dragging it

towards his mattress. He squinted at the old digital wristwatch and then pulled his duvet off his legs and got up. It was two P.M.; he still had two hours until the Unveiling started. He threw off his sweaty hoodie and dug a hand into his pile of dirty clothes. He grabbed his *The Missing* t-shirt, an Origin metal band that Keith listened to, that was only moderately wrinkled and pulled it over his head. He then pulled off his running shorts. In the middle drawer of his dresser, Keith grabbed the only pair of jeans he owned which were about three inches too short for him, and pulled those on too.

He left his room and tiptoed to the bathroom, his jeans shushing between his legs. In the bathroom mirror, Keith's dirty blond hair stood up straight in the back where his pillow had held it. He turned on the sink with its characteristic screeching noise and tried to pat the clump of hair down with water. The tuft stayed down after the third try and he wet both his hands to wash his face. He looked up at himself in the mirror as the water dribbled off his face. His brown eyes scanned every inch of his face, checking for dry spots to scratch or dandruff to wipe. His mouth hung open as he looked. His low-set cheekbones did help hide the hereditary gauntness of his cheeks, but did nothing to detract attention from his nose, which was too small for the length of his face. Before drying his hands, Keith pinched the tips of his hair in the front, directing it up and out of his eyes. Then he stood up and went into the kitchen which shared a hand-towel with the bathroom, swiping his face on the rag tied to the refrigerator door.

He grabbed the TV remote from the coffee table and turned it on; his father had moved back to his bedroom. The television blared with a feeble volume: an ad for a new restaurant located behind the hospitals in the City Square gave its sing-song jingle—*if you wanna little color, eve'ning drinks, I'll have another, come on down to Twist's and Tuthur's, finery bar and grill! Now with laser ovens!* Keith stood up and walked over to the fridge. In one of the drawers,

he found a stalk of celery that had yet to grow mold. He grabbed a jar of peanut butter from one of the cupboards and sat back down on the couch. Keith changed the channel to a news station.

“And now... the day we have all been waiting for,” an overdressed female news anchor reported from behind a desk, her orange dress wrapping all the way up her neck— “Exactly one year ago today, we watched the seven most revered intellectuals of the age accept the mission of a lifetime: a search in solidarity for the next level of human intelligence, the quest for Enlightenment.” Her voice was crisp and expertly annunciated: the textbook perfect accent, or lack thereof, for a native Casimir citizen.

Keith dipped the celery into the peanut butter and gnawed on it like an animal; he was hungry. He hadn’t eaten since yesterday but even now he felt slightly guilty for eating the peanut butter knowing there was barely any food in the house. Keith would have to rifle through his Dad’s food stubs later tonight and go grocery shopping after the Unveiling. As the anchor talked on screen, the channel played footage of the Descent: the chosen seven standing in front of the crowd of people by the central fountain of the City Square. They stood next to the High Council, all adorned in long white robes, and waved before each took their turn being lowered into one of the open portal doors. The camera zoomed in on the metal manholes, watching the workers lock and seal them with large electronic machines, one rivet at a time. Keith ripped off another stalk of celery and dipped it in the jar.

“It feels like only yesterday that we, as a community, said ‘farewell and good luck!’ to these heroic scholars, but now, we are about to get the reconnection of a lifetime. Have they fulfilled their mission and noble duty to the people of Casimir? Will they have learned the secret to the mental advancement of us as a species? Will they, like the myth and legend Daniel Rischefin, be Enlightened? All that and more, when we return.”

Keith turned off the TV and stuck two long fingers into the peanut butter and swiped across the bottom. His hand wobbled as he pulled it out, a huge dollop balanced on his fingers. He stuffed the whole thing into his mouth, finishing the jar. He screwed the jar shut and left it on the coffee table. Keith walked down the hallway to the bathroom, took a piss, and turned on the shower. He waited until it went from ice cold to room temperature and then stepped in. He ran a bar of soap through his hair and cleaned under his arms. He turned around and rested his forehead against the tiled wall of the shower, letting the weak water pressure graze his back. Keith again pictured the seven faces of the scholar. He wondered if their physical appearance had changed at all. Keith remembered watching the television shows—medical screenings and high-tech supplies the chosen seven were given to survive a year underground. They High Council and their delegates arranged for tons of nonperishable food, hygiene gadgets, even personal trackers, not that the High Council would use them. The trackers were mainly for the scholars themselves, in case they decided to separate from each other once underground. That was the whole point of their mission, separation. Isolation from society was key to becoming Enlightened, or at least that's how Rischeffin did it.

When the water temperature started to drop, Keith spun the knob off and stepped out. He rustled his hair with a towel and then wrapped it around his waist. In the hallway, Keith stared at his father's closed door. "Dad?" he called, "Wanna go to the Unveiling with me?" No response. Keith's neck flushed and he felt guilty again. Keith put on some clothes and left the apartment by himself. The City Square was so packed that by the time Keith got there, he had given up any hope of finding Rennie before he had to go stand with the other families of the High Council. Instead, Keith pushed his way through the sea of people palms first, without apologizing. He could see the top of the fountain, bright blue spurts of water, protruding from the center of the

crowd. He imagined the red, velvet rope sectioning off a space by the portal doors surrounding the fountain, the ones they used for the Descent and also designated for the Unveiling. Television crews from both Casimir and other planets poked through the crowd, interviewing various City-goers. The crew from Casimir had cameras wired to monster screens. The electronic billboards were large enough to direct planes, if Casimir had any planes, and hung off of the front of the Headquarters Building like large flags. Keith slid through the crowd until he was packed so close to the people next to him that he could no longer move and further. He felt like a single thread in a woven fabric. He resigned himself to the inevitable smell of sweat and heat, excited whispers and gossip.

Keith craned his neck towards one of the gigantic screens made up by hundreds of massive squares welded together to make one picture. On it, he saw Rennie with his father and the other High Council members standing in front of the shiny, copper-encrusted marble fountain. Rennie's head was down in sheepish manner, wearing his best dress robes, white with elaborately thin onyx-colored curls embroidered down the front. The five graying old men that made up the High Council were dressed in their customary white, but had on multiple gold rings indicating their time spent in Succession and then their resulting initiation into the planet's oligarchy. Keith remembered these rings being one of the first things he learned about in school when he and his father moved here.

In front of the High Council, a little square of pavement encompassing one portal door was roped off: a single metal circle, the copper freshly polished, between the cobblestones. The High Councilmen waved at the cameras, mere feet away from the portal. A man and a woman stood on either side of it in turquoise construction jumpers and orange work gloves. They both carried big, electronic screwdriver-looking devices—the tools used to open and close the metal

doors. In the bottom right corner of the large screen was a countdown for the Unveiling in wide, angular, yellow numbers. It read *four minutes, thirty-two seconds*. Keith bounced on the balls of his feet staring forward, where he could see both the screen and the top of the fountain between a man's bald head and a woman's massive black curls. Keith breathed through his mouth to avoid the all-consuming body odor—the collaborated stench of the entirety of Casimir huddled up against each other. Keith waited impatiently as the countdown went from four minutes to two. The crowd grew feverish with anticipation as a little girl sitting on her mother's shoulders a few people away from Keith squealed and clapped her hands. The countdown went down to one minute and the two construction workers took precedence on the electronic screen, starting to unscrew the metal bolts in the ground.

Forty-two seconds, the yellow numbers announced. The screen above the horde of people switched from a camera man's tripod view to a hand-held camera. The crewman holding it inched forward and knelt on the cobblestone in front of the portal door, getting an extremely close shot of the machine whirring and grinding against the metal bolts. Keith shook his hands at his sides, flexing his fingers; he could feel drops of sweat bead down his forearms and into his palms.

Twenty seconds.

One of the High Council members who had no hair on his head, but two white tufts of ear hair peeking out of his lobes started to speak, a sticker-chip microphone clinging one of his temples. "And now..." he spoke slowly, leaving room for his echoing voice to face after each word, "In the year 3404, today... I present to you... the much awaited event... the return of our beloved scholars... the chosen seven, I give to you, the people of Casimir... the Unveiling."

Nine seconds.

The construction workers dropped their machines and pulled the long metal pins out of the door by hand.

Five.

The pins were out. The two construction workers now squatted on opposite sides of the portal door, their fingers plunged into its holes for a firm grip.

Two.

The two construction workers slowly stood up, bringing the circular door with them. They shimmied sideways, walking out of the camera's view. Keith stood on his tiptoes, his legs wincing unsteadily. His eyes were glued to the screen, but his shoulders strived to see the open portal door without it. The crowd hushed into silence like a vacuum, or a candle being blown out. The darkness of the hole obliterated the televised screen on the Headquarters Building. The people around Keith exchanged glances, panting with anxiety, wringing their hands and biting their fingernails. No one dared to break the silence, yet all of them wobbled, teetering their weight from one foot to the other, craning their necks to try to get a view of anything—anything at all. The cameraman hooked up to the electronic billboard moved closer to the hole, shoving their microphone rods down farther into the gaping black circle.

All of a sudden a blur of yellow flooded the screen; Keith and everyone else in the crowd flinched at the jolt of color. The camera man fell back onto his side, dropping his equipment. The screen now showed a sideways view of a distorted body climbing out from the depth. The microphones picked up a gurgling noise, an odd mixture of phlegm sounds and gargling. The cameraman picked up his lens again and pointed it directly at the body: it was the distorted yellow-skinned form of a human, its veins bulging out of the skin, its mouth dripping with saliva,

its hair fallen off leaving awkward pieces of gray strands, and its eyes two watery pools of white—the remnants of pupils puddled in two dark blobs at the bottom of each eye.

The entire City Square burst into a panic. People screamed and clawed over each other towards open space, away from the portal. The crowd began to fall in on itself, disintegrating, pushing and shoving from every direction, citizens desperate to put space between themselves and *that thing*. Keith alone, stayed stationary gawking at the screen, getting knocked this way and that. Keith just stared, using his arms to steady himself as everyone rushed past him. The cameraman pointed his lens at the hulking yellow mass, wheezing and crawling over one of the fallen microphone sticks. The High Council ran for the doors of the Headquarter Building, shoos their families to follow. Keith staggered backwards as someone's elbow hit him square in the face. He cried out, clasping his hands over his nose which started to bleed.

Meanwhile, the electronic screen continued to broadcast. The handheld camera scrambled for focus, showing the rancid neon yellow body of the creature—one of the scholars? Keith thought—*thought*—it was a man but its blubbing swallow of a voice was unrecognizable. The mutilated figure shined covered in its own saliva, jaundiced like a radioactive corpse. The veins on its arms and legs were so thick, swollen, and raised that they were practically popping out of the skin like tree roots. The thing let out an unearthly yowl which exploded from the two vertical speakers flanking the pixilated billboard. As the scream peaked, one of the speakers malfunctioned, cutting off the creature's yowl and abruptly replacing it with warped bursts of crinkled, popping noises. The people of Casimir screeched trying to find friends and family members. They ran into any building and any opening, to get away from the scene. In the fray, Keith was knocked sideways and fell onto the ground, knocking his jaw against the scratchy cobblestone. Someone stepped on his hand, and Keith recoiled his arm, the pain blurring his

vision. He pulled his arms and legs in towards his body as people fleeing in heavy boots, sneakers, and high heels smacked around him. The sound reverberated in his eardrums, competing with the still broadcasting crackling of the speakers.

Finally Keith rolled over. The people around him fanned out as the crowd evacuated the City Square. *What was that thing?* Keith shoved himself up from the ground, blood from his nose speckling his t-shirt like a bib. On the screen, the construction workers in turquoise jumpsuits tried to corral the creature with their drills away from the dispersing crowd, but the thing only lunged at the workers, bloody scars speckling its yellow body. Keith ran for his school, the only building in the City he knew for a fact he could open. He reached the front door in twenty seconds flat, drops of blood still flying from his nose. At the top of the school's stairs, Keith pushed aside a small group of middle-aged men banging uselessly on the metal paneling. Keith shoved them aside and jammed his palm against the scanner; he barely heard the door say his name before it opened and they all flooded inside. Most of the men bolted aimlessly down the hallway, but Keith and one other man sprinted to the first classroom, an already open door on the right side of the hall. Keith skirted around the desks, nearly tripping over his own feet, until he came to the window and pressed both hands up against it.

The City Square was in a pandemonium, but it was almost empty. Keith could see the tiny moving dots of remaining people fleeing away from the fountain and into the residential blocks surrounding the capitol. A bulge of people waited outside Rabidious, the mental asylum, filing into the locked gate one at a time. There was another throng of people outside Casimir Memorial, and a few stragglers were filtering in to one of the scientific research libraries with a pointed, gold ceiling. Keith's eyes scanned the cobblestone around the fountain for the disfigured

scholar, but instead found his eyes drawn to the large screen, still broadcasting the cameraman's view.

On the screen, a High Council member reappeared on the steps of the Headquarter Building, armed with what looked like a large tranquilizer gun. Keith had only ever seen something like it once when he was seven, on the Origin, when a Bengal tiger got loose at the zoo and was walking down the highway. Men in SWAT gear came down and shot it. Here, the cameraman pointed his handheld lens towards the old man, struggling with the weight of the weapon. Suddenly, the view on screen changed as the cameraman spun around and screamed, finding a blur of yellow charging towards him. Keith watched High Councilman fire the gun with a loud *crack*, and the creature collapsed onto the ground in front of the cameraman's feet. The terror in the street froze as the remaining civilians crouched down at the sound of the gun: arms over their heads, mouths open in stifled wails. The gun bore smoke from the end of its barrel, the High Councilman's chest visibly rising and falling. Keith watched the two construction workers in turquoise slowly approach the lifeless form of the fallen body. Through the billboard, Keith saw the thing's veins convulse exaggeratedly under the putrid skin, the tranquilizer dart poking out of its abdomen. Foaming saliva fizzed and seeped from its mouth like a condensing, white vapor—a man's mouth, Keith reminded himself. The man was one of them, one of their *own*, someone who was *chosen*, a scholar.

The High Council member who shot it down walked over to the seizing body. Keith's brow dripped with sweat and he swiped it away with his palm, mixing it with the blood from his nose. His breath fogged up the glass as air ripped in and out of his lungs. On the screen, the yellow chest of the scholar rose and fell spastically, releasing disgusting choughs and spurting phlegm from its mouth. It shuddered for one more moment before the visible pulse in its throat

stopped throbbing. The body went limp, and the female construction worker walked over to High Councilman, shaking her head.

The cameraman swiveled to face the two of them on the steps of the Headquarters Building. The discarded microphones picked up the old man's voice as he spoke, holding the gun out in front of him like incarcerating evidence— "It was not fatal; it was just a tranquilizer..." He dropped the gun on the marble steps and walked over to one of the microphone sticks, the metal pole snapped in half. "Everyone..." he boomed, "Go to your homes and stay there. Until further notice, the planet of Casimir is on mandatory lockdown."

Keith watched as people in stark white hazmat suits came flooding out of the Headquarters Building, pushing the two construction workers aside. They surrounded the fallen body of the scholar, throwing what looked like powder over its form. What was that thing?" the man in the school beside Keith whispered.

"I..." Keith wrinkled his forehead watching the powder gather in little clouds over the yellow body, "Have no idea."

5.

It had been three days since the Unveiling.

Any residual awkwardness and guilt evaporated between Keith and his father once the Unveiling went to shit. Keith even tried to apologize again, but since the news reports brandished footage of the catastrophe 24/7, his father barely heard him. Blake Hayes merely put up his hand the minute Keith started talking to shush him, and stared wide-eyed at the television screen. They ate every single meal in front of the TV, which since Keith never got to go shopping, consisted of multiple bowls of cereal, an old frozen pizza, and a box of stale graham crackers. The two of

them were glued to the screen, watching the nervous talk shows, news anchors speculating on the fate of the City, the doom of the lost scholars. Keith and his father sat there day and night, sleeping on opposite ends of the couch. The entire City was on mandatory house arrest—a planet wide quarantine until further notice, but how long would that last? What was the High Council going to *do*? The footage of the Unveiling played on an infinite loop on almost every channel, from dawn until dusk. When Keith closed his eyes at night, he saw yellow skin, bulging veins, even heard that gurgling yowl. When Keith sneezed, he thought of the frothing saliva pouring out of the mouth of that creature. When the speaker-phone rang, he and his father both jumped two feet.

“Accept!” Keith yelled at the receiver, his voice shaking. He stared at his father who sat frozen on the couch, listening.

“Hey, er, just calling to make sure you guys were safe, and, er, you know, home safe.” It was Rennie.

Keith and his father relaxed their shoulders. Keith stood up and walked over to the window, “Yeah we’re fine, where are you?”

“I’m at home,” it took Rennie a minute to escalate his timid voice to a normal speaking volume.

“What do you think is down there?” Keith asked. His voice rang clearly throughout the tiny apartment. Steven Quail, the philosopher: that’s who that yellow thing in the City Square was, or used to be. The news reporter who had stayed behind with his cameraman after the panic by the fountain had found the scholar’s horn-rimmed glasses on the cobblestone. However, to Keith it felt more like no one from the first group had even been found at all. Keith pulled back a flimsy bed sheet from the window. The sheet clung to his hand like vapor.

“Dunno,” Rennie replied, “Something must be down there to have made him go all... funny.”

“Yeah...” Keith said, staring out at the rainy street corner through the grime of the glass.

“Keith, get away from the window,” his father said— “We don’t know what’s out there.”

Keith let go of the bed sheet and watched it conceal the muddy downpour, sending their apartment into shadows. He sat back down on the couch next to his father.

A muffled voice came on the line: quiet muttering from Rennie’s side that Keith couldn’t fully hear. “I have to go,” Rennie said, his deep voice growing timid again.

“OK,” Keith replied. He waited for the click from Rennie’s end that meant he had disconnected, then murmured, “end call,” to the hollow apartment. The receiver on the wall emitted its own closing click. On the television, a still photograph of one of the portal doors was being zoomed in on; the voice-over, accusatory.

“There have been no new updates from the Headquarters Building on the whereabouts of the remaining six missing scholars,” said a mournful woman’s voice, “with every day that passes, friends and family are wondering: are they still alive? And if so, what is the High Council planning to do about their rescue, if anything? We have a caller, Julieann Fritter from the centenarian district, now. Julieann, what do you think is the obligation of our oligarchy in this trying time? Do they have a commitment of responsibility to the planet of Casimir in this whole fiasco? And more specifically, a duty to the concerned relatives of the remaining scholars?”

A much older, but still crisp woman’s voice answered— “I want someone to go down there and tell me, first hand, what is going on. I have portal doors right by my house and I am scared for my safety as well as my dog’s. Should I be worried? What if something comes out of

there in the middle of the night? I personally do not understand how the High Council can sit there and do nothing for three days.”

“Thank you, Ms. Fritter, for your input,” the voiceover woman said. The picture of the portal door froze on the screen, perfectly capturing the copper crest beveled into its front. “We would like to remind everyone that the portal doors are still, as they have always been, locked and that as long as everyone stays quarantined in their homes as instructed, they will be safe until further notice. We have another caller”

“Hi, yeah, I’m a nurse at Casimir Memorial,” the voice was male and rather young judging by the pitch, “I’m wondering why we do not have a statement from the High Council or further instructions or anything. All we have are tabloid news reports. I mean, no offense, but how long are we supposed to speculate about the safety of our City without any governmental guidance at all?”

There was a knock at the door of their apartment. Blake and Keith’s gazes snapped to it. The two of them sat frozen on the couch. Who would be visiting them during a mandatory house arrest? Keith’s father hit the remote and the television switched off. Someone knocked again; Keith moved to get up but his father shot out a hand in front of him, motioning for him to stay put. His father stood up and walked over to the door. Keeping one hand on the back of the door and the other on the doorknob, he opened it a crack.

“Who’s there?” his father asked, his voice unusually loud and unwavering. His head was tilted towards the door, his feet spread apart in a fighter’s stance.

“Keith Hayes?” someone on the opposite side of the door asked. The voice was male, quick, and slick sounding. The vowels in Keith’s name seemed to roll over each other in the guy’s mouth.

Keith's father straightened his back, growing several inches. He turned his head to look at Keith, one eyebrow raised, his lips pressed tightly shut. Keith watched the belt of his father's bathrobe slither through their fabric loopholes, stretching with his tensing shoulders.

"No," Blake Hayes argued through the door, "I'm his father. Can I help you?"

Keith saw the pale skin and mouth of a man press itself up against the crack in the door--
"Can you step aside, sir? Our main concern is with your son, Keith."

"No, I think I withhold the right to not let you in without a reason. We are under an authorized quarantine." His father's voice was level and articulate; it didn't shake or fade like Rennie's did. The Keith heard his father's jaw pop: a whip-like sound that usually only happened when his father was angry or annoyed—like Keith was in trouble or when someone was being an unwarranted asshole. Blake's lower lip jutted out, his eyes dark brown like Keith's, boring through the crack in the door while shifting his jaw back into place. Whoever was on the other side of the door shoved it open, anyway. Keith's father stumbled backwards at the force, his body tall but very thin. A paunchy man in a black blazer entered their apartment, knocking the door into the old leather armchair with a *thuchunk* as the chair's legs scratched across the floor. The man stared at the chair which was now scrunched in between their makeshift coffee table and the television stand.

The man slicked a hovering hand over his hair: straight, black, and greased into rigid lines towards the back of his skull. On his wrist, Keith saw an antique copper watch gleam from under his jacket-sleeve, complete with diamond pegs along the edge for turning cogs. A second man crossed their apartment's threshold behind him. This man was at least three times the first man's width, but also had matching slicked-back hair. He wore a tight black t-shirt devoid of any words or insignias and was tucked into dark trousers. No watch, but he did have uneven-looking

knuckles as if the man had hit one too many things in his lifetime and his fingers healed incorrectly as a result. Keith thought of the hole in his bedroom wall, the brown scabs on his own knuckles, and stood up from the couch. The first man in the blazer surveyed their apartment with a quick sweeping gaze and then wrinkled his nose. He cleared his throat loudly and looked down at a manila folder between his fingers, everything from his waist down obscured by the cheap burgundy leather of their armchair.

“Keith Samuel Hayes, born in the year 3387 to Cassandra Poxx and Blake Hayes on the planet Origin?” the man asked, staring at Keith, gripping the edge of a piece of paper between his index finger and his thumb. His eyebrows were raised and straight which made him look bored. As he waited for Keith’s response, he pursed his lips half-hoping the seventeen year-old in front of him was not the one he was looking for.

Keith didn’t move, but matched the man’s questioning stare. Keith’s heartbeat began to race. Was this because of what happened in school? Surely they’d had students punch each other before; nobody ever got a disciplinary home visit. At least, Keith sure never did. Until... now? Keith’s thoughts scattered like a swarm of interrupted gnats: did this have something to do with the quarantine? Was Keith possibly contaminated by merely sharing air with the mutated Steven Quail at the Unveiling? His father couldn’t have gotten it—he had stayed home... where Keith also lived... could he be infected, now, too? Keith’s eyes flickered from the man in the blazer to the man in the tight t-shirt. Neither wore gloves or hazmat gear.

“Who’s asking?” Keith said, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Blake walked around the armchair to stand in front of his son. Keith’s eyes narrowed as the man in the blazer looked from Keith’s father, to Keith, then back to his folder.

“What is this about?” Keith’s father actually raised his voice threateningly, which was something Keith hadn’t heard him do since Literature was scrapped from the planet’s curriculum. His father looked taller in that instant. His head was turned slightly so the unkempt knot of his ponytail was hidden behind one of his shoulders and all Keith could see was the side of his strong jawline. His father’s open palms stuck out of the sleeves of his robe like they were ready for a fight.

Keith felt his own fists clench in response as he looked from his father to the black-clad pair in their living room. The man with the folder tucked it under his arm and buttoned his blazer. He turned around and nodded at his much larger companion who stepped towards Keith. His father immediately took a large step forward, one hand out in front of him shoving the bodyguard back. “Step away,” Blake barked.

The burly man who looked very much like a boulder raised an eyebrow at Blake’s outstretched arm, his father’s fingers brushing the man’s chest. Blake’s fingers looked like feathers compared to the knotted muscles that shown through the man’s t-shirt.

Keith gripped his father’s shoulders—“It’s OK, Dad, I’ll talk to them.”

Neither Blake nor the body guard waited. A second or two later, the barrel-chested man whipped his fist across Blake’s jaw to get him out of his way, followed by a swift sucker punch him in the stomach. His father buckled and Keith lunged over him at the body guard’s throat—“You son of a bitch,” Keith’s voice cracked.

The boulder’s large, scratchy hands found Keith’s neck and yanked him towards the door, pulling Keith the rest of the way over his father’s crouched back, crashing Keith’s knees into their wooden coffee table.

“Keith,” Blake wheezed from the floor, holding his stomach, his face already swelling, “no!”

Keith clawed at the thick ham of the man’s forearms with his fingernails, the grip on his windpipe squeezing. Casimir profanities Keith had seen scrawled onto the bathroom stalls of his school rattled through his head, useless knowledge without the ability to speak: *sethwrecker*, *harb*, *aleetch*! The body guard pinned Keith under his sweaty armpit with one arm and swung his whole body around until they were both facing the door. Keith’s back crashed into the TV as they pivoted, knocking it off its stand, one corner barreling through the wall. Keith’s eyes began to water; he stared at a spot on the floor, his face parallel to it, unable to move. He felt his eyes squirm in their sockets, like the blood vessels would start popping at any moment.

His father crawled into view in on the floor front of him, clutching his abdomen with one hand and the other stuck in a swirl of afghan that had fallen from the couch to the floor. The man holding Keith wrenched him upwards so he was now staring at the ceiling. Keith choked for breath with a sound half between barfing and a sharp, desperate inhale. Keith watched as the peeling ceiling tiles started to blur in front of him. He blinked shifting his gaze downward to the man in the blazer, who pulled a glass tube from his pocket and unscrewed a cap off the end. The man shook it gently and a clear medical syringe fell into his palm. He walked over to Keith and pressed two fingers against the base of his neck, the needle poised in his other hand.

Keith’s father yelled with what sounded like a broken jaw, “Let’m goh!”

When Keith felt the dizzying pinprick of the needle, his eyelids began to fall in slow motion. Keith heard another thump as his father, who had gotten up, fell a second time to his knees. Keith saw the black bag come over his head but could do nothing to thwart it. He felt the

man's arm fall away from his neck and with it went the air from his lungs. Keith's mind swirled like a toilet flush, as if someone had sucked everything out of him all at once.

Wait— Keith could have sworn he had said it aloud— *I didn't get to say I'm sorry.*

6.

When he woke up, his head felt muddled, his thoughts scrambled and coded in nonsense like the notes from his Artificial Intelligence Programing class. He saw the faded blue of his jeans swimming in front of him, checkered white floor tiles beyond them, strands of dirty blonde hair hanging down from the top of his head, and no walls—or were they just white walls? His feet tingled as the foggy form of a thick marble table came into view in front of him. He flexed his fingers, fighting their weary, fragmented movement. Keith reached out to touch the marble with great, shaking difficulty, but felt his arms stop abruptly mid-swing. He squinted, focusing on the light trail of hair tracing the backs of his hands until he saw the thin straps of white, Velcro handcuffs strapping his wrists to the chair he was slumped in. He let his arms fall back onto his knees and held his eyes closed for a minute until the table in front of him stopped moving. Keith willed his head to rise, but his neck burned like he had been hung from a rope for the last four hours. Impatient, he jerked his chin up, lolling his head half-sideways but off of his chest.

Across the marble sat the man in a black blazer with slicked-back hair. Keith remembered a swirl of afghan on their apartment floor, his father's wrist tangled in it as he crawled towards Keith on all fours. Keith jerked his head violently to the other side. Keith thrust his hips forward, screeching his chair three inches closer to the table and the man with an ugly pointed nose, staring down at his open manila folder. The man flinched at the movement and

stared at Keith. Keith lunged at him, straining against the Velcro straps, the chair teetering on two legs as he did so. “Where’s my Dad?” Keith growled; it was a guttural noise full of spit and drool, “What did you do to him?”

“We left him,” the man said folding his hands over each other on the table, “where we found him.”

The muscles in Keith’s arms flared with pain from reaching. They fell back down limply onto his legs. “Whuh-dih you do to him?” Keith repeated, nausea bubbling up his throat. His head lolled backwards as he gasped from the burning exhaustion in every one of his muscles, “What did you do to *me*?”

“Nothing that isn’t temporary,” the answered, snarky and defensive.

“Who’s that other man?” Keith breathed to the ceiling, a vein in his throat pulsing. He closed his eyes again, willing the puke back down into his stomach, “The one who hit my Dad?”

“That was Aggrago, and he is standing just outside. He is my assistant.” The man sounded bored again.

“I’m going to kill him,” Keith choked, bringing his head back down slowly to look at the man in the eyes.

The man across from him raised his eyebrows, “You really are troublesome, aren’t you?”

Keith huffed through his nostrils, clenching his hands into knotted fists over the armrests. He glowered at the man and his greased back hair, his tight blazer, his fucking folder. Keith tried to shake the image of his father on his hands and knees in his bathrobe.

“I am Clare Knoews,” the man went on, “I am a delegate for the High Council.”

“Where am I?”

“You are in the Headquarters Building, the home of the oligarchy.”

“I know where that is,” Keith snapped. He carefully turned to look at the open door of the room which led to the sweeping, high-ceilinged atrium of the High Council’s house. He had been in here loads of times with Rennie who had shown him his bedroom made entirely of marble, and his study lavishly filled with leather couches, copper desks, and ridiculously ornate fireplaces. From his chair, Keith could even see white pillars climbing to the domed ceiling and matching swirled marbled floor. Keith listened, but heard no clicking footsteps from the atrium. Usually it was filled with people: busy and bustling with workers, scholars, confidants and delegates of the High Council, their personal chefs and healers, budget advisors, and interplanetary ambassadors. However, all Keith could hear now was his own pulse—the magnitude of it pounding in his head was exhausting—and the dull scratching of papers being moved over each other in Clare’s manila folder which he had opened on the table in front of them.

“It says here that you’ve been suspended two times from school.” Clare’s face was parallel to Keith’s, but instead of looking at him, Clare kept his gaze on his papers.

“Is that why I’m here?” Keith let his bottom lip jut out and hang open, opening his fists, palms up, brandishing his restraints.

“No, that is not why you are here.”

“Then why am I here?” Keith challenged. He closed his fingers around the arms of the chair and squeezed, turning his knuckles white.

Clare sucked his teeth making a small squeaking sound—“It says you were suspended for your second aggressive physical encounter with another student last Wednesday.”

Keith snorted, practically yelling as he spoke. “What does that have to do with anything?” He asked incredulously. This was ridiculous; he felt like he was on trial, “you want to talk to my lawyer?!”

Clare stared at him and smiled disinterestedly at the joke; Casimir had no lawyers. Citizens were educated well enough to defend themselves in any legal situation they were to find themselves in. Keith had missed that boat. “Just confirm your involvement in the assault of these students, please. Mr. Hayes—” Clare again broke eye contact with Keith, flipping through his papers.

“I want to know where my father is, first.” Keith’s voice was flat and stubborn. He glowered across the table, strands of his dirty blonde hair falling into his eyes.

“Your father, as you and I are both very aware, Mr. Hayes, is most likely right where we left him: confined to his own home due to lack of motivation and will power.”

Keith scooted forward in the chair until he was sitting on the edge of his seat. “I want you to send someone to go check on him,” Keith demanded.

Clare looked at him, both eyebrows flat and apathetic—“We checked his pulse before we left, Mr. Hayes. We assure you, he’s fine.”

“I don’t believe you.” Keith had swallowed his nausea but not fear ate at his sides like some rapid, flesh-eating disease. What if his father was internally hurt, hemorrhaging and unconscious on their apartment floor? Alone. It was Keith’s fault he was alone. He turned away from Clare and stared at the wall, but not really seeing it. Keith should be with his father right now, Keith should have tried harder to tell him he’s sorry.

Clare sighed and looked back down at his folder— “It also says here that you had a private tutor appointed by your school’s Director in the past? About two sowing seasons ago?”

“Yeah, for Metallurgy,” Keith clenched and unclenched his fists, listening to the Velcro strain and relax accompanied by faint ripping noises.

“And did that go well?” Clared pressed.

“No.” Keith shut his mouth, gnawing on his tongue between his teeth.

“Yes, it does say here that that ended quite quickly,” Clare pointed with a bony, long finger to a line on his paper, tilting his head down to read revealing his blanched scalp between strands of his hair. “Tell me, Mr. Hayes, would you say that you are behind on your schoolwork?” He looked at Keith, who could now see every pore on the man’s nose without difficulty. Keith imagined stabbing needles, much like the one Clare had used on him, into each one of the pores individually.

“No,” Keith said.

“Please be honest, Mr. Hayes.”

“I’m doing fine on my school work,” Keith snapped.

“Ah. I see.” Clare looked disappointed. He laced his fingers together and pressed them against his chin, his elbows resting on the table which took up so much of the tiny white room that Keith guessed it was probably meant to be a supply closet. Clare looked at him and tried again, speaking quietly. “What comes to mind when you hear the word ‘disadvantaged’?”

Keith laughed as if it were funny, not insulting. “Well, I’m not stupid, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Just then, a woman in a green smock shuffled into the room. She came over to Keith with a square, chrome bag in her hand and crouched beside his chair. She took out a metal wand and waved it over his wrist to get his pulse, placed a clear plastic circle on his temple to get his

temperature, and held a square electronic tablet up to his chest to record his blood pressure. Keith glared rudely at her and in response she kept her eyes averted from him the whole time.

“Thanks, Gia, that will be all,” Clare said, rubbing his temples with his middle fingers. He waited until she left the room before he continued. “Tell me, Mr. Hayes, what is your current grade point average?” The man exhaled and sat back in his chair when Keith did not respond. “Here is the deal, Mr. Hayes,” Clare said. “You have been chosen to be part of an elite task force assigned to relocate and recover those missing from the first group of seven chosen scholars, last seen a year ago at the Descent.”

Keith furrowed his eyebrows, thrown off by the drastic turn of the conversation. “But I’m not a—”

Clare held up a hand to silence him, “the group has been hand selected by me and other delegates of the High Council, as well as the High Council themselves.”

Keith thought of Rennie and his father sitting at the dinner table together, discussing it: *Keith, how about Keith? He looks like a good choice, don’t you think?* Rennie, as always, would have stayed silent. However in this situation, Keith would have probably stayed silent, too. Keith knew he was a horrible choice. He knew nothing about being a scholar and knew nothing about locating missing ones, either. “Why doesn’t the High Council just go down there themselves?” Keith retorted.

“It is a very trying time for Casimir, Mr. Hayes. Please try to understand,” Clare’s voice slowed down just then. It sounded slippery, hospitable, *nice*. “The High Council has a lot on their shoulders right now and we, as a community, must do our part so that they can do theirs. They are extremely concerned about the wellbeing of their people, Mr. Hayes. Aren’t you?”

“Yeah, sure,” Keith lied without missing a beat, “but that doesn’t mean I’m gonna agree to go down there—”

Clare closed the manila folder, “I think we’re just about done here, Mr. Hayes, thank you.”

Keith just gaped at him, angrily. “Uh, no?” His voice was rising, now. More of his hair flopped down onto his forehead, segmenting his sight of Clare into thin lines. Without free hands to swipe them away, Keith exhaled loudly with his lower lip, blowing them out of his eyes. He squeezed his fingers back into fists on top of the plastic arms of the chair, digging his nails into his palms. Keith felt them tear through his own skin, the warm ooze of blood stationary like a pocket of water cupped in his hands. He dug deeper into his palms, pulling at the Velcro—its ripping noise culminating like the slow hum of a bee hive.

Clare stood up and buttoned his blazer.

“I don’t want to be part of your second group,” Keith snarled, following Clare’s movement with his eyes.

“Unfortunately Mr. Hayes,” Clare said sounding quite relieved and glad to be done with the conversation, “you do not have a choice.” He picked up the folder and tucked it under one arm. Clare pushed in his chair and walked around the edge of the table towards the door. When he was close, Keith lunged at him from his seat, knocking himself over. The white plastic chair crashed against the floor with a *clack-eh-tuh-clack*. A sharp pain shot through Keith’s left arm as it got pinned under the side of the arm rest. His forearm felt hot against the cold marble floor. Keith twisted his ankles around the chair legs trying to right himself, ineffectively. Clare scooted sideways to avoid touching him altogether.

As Clare walked out the open door, Keith yelled after him, “Hey! Dipshit! Come back here! I said, no!” Keith’s voice scratched the back of his throat, invisible anger trickling like venom down from his head to his stomach, his fingers and toes. Keith itched with it, seizing on the floor in frustration, but neither Clare nor anyone else answered him. Keith was alone, much like his father probably was. Keith’s eyes suddenly moistened; he tried to blink away the headache from the night before, the Velcro cutting into his wrists—angry, he was so angry... What now? What if he’s just left here for days? “Rennie...” Keith called out half-heartedly, “Hello?” Keith stared out the open door waiting for someone to pass by. He could feel the circulation in his left arm slowly fading, his pulse painfully throbbing through his pinned forearm.

Finally, someone walked past. *White robes*. Keith saw the swoop of a High Councilman’s heavy, snow-colored robes tickle the floor as he passed. Keith knew that fabric anywhere. He also recognized the small saggy ears and faint blonde hair: Rennie’s flesh and blood. A whopping fifty-eight years-old, the man was the youngest member of the High Council Casimir has seen in decades. However, he did not even glance into the room as he walked by. Instead, the large boulder-looking man named Aggrago came into the room, still wearing his trousers and tight black shirt. Aggrago bent down and unzipped the Velcro handcuffs, taking Keith’s entire upper left arm into his calloused palm. “Don’t try anything funny,” he said.

“You broke my father’s jaw,” Keith spat, resisting his grip, “I didn’t find that very funny.”

“He threatened me,” Aggrago said. His voice was deep and slow.

Keith snorted, “What planet are you from, Gorn?”

Aggrago stared at Keith and held out his arm, revealing his own immigration tag: dark green ink encircling an extravagant shield of armor. “Yes,” he said, “I am.”

Keith said nothing back, letting the man jerk him out the doorway and through the atrium— empty except for a young man cleaning the floor with laser rods. Keith thought about bolting for the large wooden doors at the entrance of the building; they were never locked. This place was always open to the public. If Keith could, he would run home, the morning air tearing through his lungs until he got to his apartment building. He would burst through their apartment door and belt: I’M SORRY. He pictured his father sitting on the couch aimlessly or staring out the window, like he always did. It was funny now how Keith would easily accept that stagnancy over nothing at all. Now Keith imagined his father scraping the back of the freezer for leftover ice, his bruised face swollen to twice its normal size. Had Keith even filled the ice tray for his father this week? Had Keith even remembered to check?

Aggrago led him down a narrow hallway adorned with large holographic pictures of Casimir’s history: portraits of Archibald Casimir and his family, the builders and architects of the underground tunnels pouring over holographic 3D blueprints, satellite pictures of the planet from a distance, an orange and brown swirl, and former generations of the High Council, some men and some women, but all with white or gray hair. At the end of the hall, Aggrago opened a door with his one free hand that led down a very steep staircase made entirely of cement—oddly mismatched against the atrium’s marble floors. The stairs were poorly lit and wound down in a circle like a mythical tower Keith had read about in fiction books. At the bottom, Aggrago showed him to an ugly green copper door, but did not enter it himself. Instead, he gestured for Keith to go in, alone. Keith look at its gnarled pattern which looked like a five year-old had welded it together, then pushed it open, letting it creak shut behind him.

The room was a tiny television studio. The walls were cement like the floor: soundproof. At the opposite end of the room stood a tall, lanky man taking slow drags from a cigarette. The word *DIRECTOR* was emblazoned on the back of his denim jacket. The man stared out a wide, tinted window overlooking the recording room. Next to the man stood two other tech operators from channel 5. Keith could tell by their pale purple t-shirts bearing the tagline *CITY NEWS 5, THE NEWS STATION YOU CAN TRUST*. On the wall closest to Keith were three plastic chairs, one of them cracked down the back. Two of them were empty but the third was filled by someone Keith recognized: the homeless man who had defended his stupid portal door in the street a couple days ago. He wore a ragged, green army jacket and had dirty gray hair that was just long enough to touch the back of his neck, tucked behind the ears. A matching unkempt beard covered most of his jaw with stubble sprawling down his throat like a tribal tattoo. A frown was carved into his mouth like a river. When he turned towards Keith, angry brown eyes glared out at him from under the man's heavy brow. His eyebrows seemed permanently furrowed and extremely thick as though the artist creating such a character had tossed his paintbrush away in frustration and merely swathed them on with a thumb. Even the man's skin was filthy; grime entrenched every one of his wrinkles, leaving his face ash-colored. But most noticeably to Keith, the homeless man's body was shaking.

"You all right?" Keith asked.

The man glowered straight ahead as he spoke, his arms rigidly folded over his chest—"Ask me again, and I'll bite your face off."

"Alrighty then," Keith sat down beside the man as the director turned around, his cigarette smoking between two fingers, and pointed to the vagabond.

"You, we're doing you next," the director said.

The homeless man said nothing but re-folded his arms, fingers twitching. He smelled like a reluctant fire: a green plant thrown into flames and refusing to burn. “I need a drink,” he grumbled to Keith.

“Why are we down here?” Keith asked him quietly, so the director couldn’t hear.

The homeless man jerked his chin towards the window of the recording room. “They’re fucking interviewing us before we go down there.”

“What?” –Keith leaned forward to catch the man’s eye—“You’re going down too?” Keith’s sweaty palms found his knees. The plastic chair creaked under Keith’s weight.

The man spun his head towards Keith. With his malicious eyes, the man looked like the head of a demented jack-in-the-box, his wild gray hair perched on his jacket collar, hiding his neck— “What the fuck did I just say?”

“Geez,” Keith groaned, feeling his right ankle start to bob under his knew, “sorry.” He slumped in his chair. Keith regretted starting the conversation at all. The man seemed to sense this though, because when he opened his mouth again, his voice was softer, nicer.

“My name’s Gair Loman,” the homeless man grumbled, “Loman will do fine.”

“Keith Hayes,” Keith responded.

Loman gestured again towards the recording room on the other side of the glass, “She’s in there right now. They’re taking us in turns.”

“Who’s in there?” Keith clarified, wrinkling his nose, half because of Loman’s smell and half to make sure he had heard Loman correctly.

Loman jerked his head towards the glass window again, “The last able-bodied member of our crew,” he drawled.

Keith stared at the picture window on the other side of the room which showcased the adjoining studio. Both the director and his crew members talked quietly between themselves, facing it. Keith couldn't see much of the room: chairs, a standing cameraman beside a large rectangular audio machine. "Did you sign up for this?" Keith asked, curious if the man had about just as much reason for being there that Keith did.

Loman laughed, which sounded more like a dog barking. "No," he said inclining his head, "but she did."

Keith sat up in his chair and for the first time saw the tiny red head of a woman sitting behind a table in the recording studio.

"Her mother's a delegate, apparently," Loman said shaking his head slowly, "Talked her into volunteering. Old bag."

A minute later, the door to the recording studio opened and a young woman of about twenty-five toddled in in a faded blue hospital gown. Her hair was a violent putrid shade of orange, a curtain on either side of big, green doe-like eyes. It hung in a messy bob around her small, symmetrical face. Her hair had smears of white and blue finger-paint splattered throughout it. The woman had a lost look in her eyes that made her seem overly girlish. She tilted her head at them. "I'm a pocket watch and we're all supposed to be watching, now, my mother said so. I'm gonna be a cello when I grow up, how about you!" she crooned.

It wasn't a question. Keith's mouth hung open; she just smiled. Even her voice sounded off. It was high-pitched and wispy like it was more empty air than actual sound. When she spoke, Keith had to pay attention to her mouth, as if he didn't watch it for clues, her words would slip away unheard like little clouds of vapor. Keith gawked at her blue gown. He knew that all patient hospital gowns in the City were white. Doctors wore green; temporary patients wore white. Only

permanent patients wore light blue. Those people were the mental patients, the crazy patients. Keith could tell she was from Rabidious, the insane asylum, even without seeing the plastic ID bracelet on her right arm. She hopped onto the broken chair next to Keith, scrunching her knees up to her chin. She smelled like Keith's neighbor, Mrs. Fosdick, who reeked of old magazines and forgotten dirty dishes. The girl—woman—rocked back and forth on her chair, making it squeak, and then started screaming a long, off-pitch note.

The director spun around and yelled at Aggrago through the green copper door, "Aggrago! Take her out of here!" he snapped.

She stopped and turned her head towards Keith as Aggrago came through the door behind her. "You're a fish, you're a fish, what a dirty little fish!" she sang at Keith in a glorified tone, first screechy high, then bumpy low. "A fishhhhhhhhh—!" She whispered like she was bestowing a secret. Aggrago tried to grab her arm to escort her out but she flitted away from him and started hopping around the room. Aggrago chased after her, making the floor shake, until finally he seized her by the shoulders and steered her, giggling, out the door.

Loman hacked a wad of spit onto the floor. Keith rubbed his temples. *What the hell was he doing here?* "That woman's mother," Keith said through gritted teeth, "talked *her* into volunteering?"

"Yep," Loman said, "I met her, once. *Lovely* woman," Loman mocked, "let me tell you." Loman refolded his arms a third time, his tremors only just now starting to lessen.

Keith instinctively pulled at his hair. He watched Loman's eyes go wide, fixed on the immigration tag on Keith's wrist. Keith put his arm back down, hiding it between his legs. What the hell were they all doing here? Did the High Council seriously think any of them had a chance of finding their scholars—or of even surviving a night underground? That woman looked like

she would more likely eat toothpaste than organize a search party, Loman already looked like he had been living underground, and Keith... Keith... what was he good at? Fucking things up, sure, failing out of class, spot on, but discovering Enlightenment? Sheer post-catastrophic-Unveiling survival? Keith could barely start a fire, let alone use one to ward off whatever than jaundiced mutation of a creature was in the City Square. Where all of the scholars messed up like that? Whatever was wrong with Steven Quail, he couldn't possibly have lasted for more than a few days like that—could there seriously be more? Were the rest of the scholars already dead or was he, Keith, about to meet a whole group of them: neon yellow and eagerly waiting to tear out his eyes and drool all over his face? The tiny wisps of smoke from the director's cigarette suddenly made him nauseous; a knot of bile churned in his stomach.

“I think I’m gonna be sick,” Keith winced. He leaned over the edge of his chair, his head spinning.

Loman leaned over with him and put a hand on the top of his back. “Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth,” Loman murmured.

“You,” the director pointed at Loman without turning to look at him, “next. Get in there.”

Loman got to his feet, the chair creaking as he did so. Keith held his forehead with both hands as he watched Loman's black combat boots clunk out of the section of floor he was staring at. Keith heard the rustling of Loman's patched-up jacket, Loman smirk “I can walk myself, thanks,” and then the close of the studio door. *Click*. Keith wished there was a pattern on the cement floor so he could tell if the room was actually spinning, or if it was just in his head. A second later, the mere idea of lines or colors sent another wave of possible up-chuck through his mind. He squeezed his eyes shut. It felt like his stomach was actually rippling under his skin, but when Keith put a hand to his abdomen, he just felt smooth and sweaty fabric of his t-shirt. He

closed his eyes and concentrated on the streams of air he that he sucked through his nostrils, like little snakes rushing down into his lungs, coiling and then out again through his open jaw.

Loman was barely in the recording room for two minutes before the studio door swung back open. Keith snapped his eyes open, his ears suddenly assaulted by the angry hollering. Keith looked up at the sound. One of the cameramen poked his head in from the recording studio as Loman's roars of "ASK ME AGAIN, WHY DON'T YOU?" rang out from behind him.

"What do you want us to do?" the cameraman asked the director, who flicked his finished cigarette onto the cement floor.

"Just cut it," the director said, "We can't show this—" He turned to the two tech operators next to him— "Scratch all of the interviews for the second group. We'll just send them down cold."

The cameraman nodded and closed the studio door again. Loman's yells were cut off the second it clicked shut. The director glanced sideways at Keith out of the corner of his eye. Keith met his gaze; what did that mean exactly, to be sent down cold? Would anyone even know they were being sent down there at all? Did Keith's father know? The director just stared at him lazily, as if trying to decide if Keith were actually sitting there or just a figment of his imagination. The sleepy look in the man's eyes told Keith that he honestly couldn't care less. The director turned his head away as if to prove that point and languidly groped in his jacket pocket for another cigarette.

What now? The knotted feeling in Keith's stomach returned. When he opened his mouth to exhale Keith thought he might barf, but he didn't. Despite the rolling sea nausea, he felt hollow inside—like he would have nothing to throw up even if he wanted to. His stomach growled, thinking of the cheap frozen pizza he and his father had had the night before. Keith

wanted to sleep. Rennie had told him once about the extravagant penthouse sleeping quarters at the very top of the Headquarters Building. The chosen seven scholars had stayed there the week before their Descent ceremony. Rooms all in white, Rennie had described them, huge rooms and everything marble white. Did Keith have a week? Maybe a little more? If they weren't doing interviews, could he possibly have less time before the High Council shipped them underground? Keith knew that if they just left him alone to sleep he could find his way out. He had been learning how to navigate these halls for years because of his friendship with Rennie. Escape would be easy for him, if he was just left alone.

Keith thought about slipping out of the door right next to him, but Aggrago would most likely be standing on the other side with the crazy woman. Keith pictured the boulder-looking man waiting like an immortal robot. Aggrago would probably never leave Keith's side. If nothing else, Keith could bolt sometime during his Descent ceremony which, he remembered from the last time the High Council sent people underground, was a loud, chaotic event that was easy to get lost in or slip away from. Either way, there was no way in hell Keith was going down any one of those portals. He liked the scholars and everything but as far as he was concerned, Keith wasn't even as intellectually capable as the dumbest one of the chosen seven, and none of them had made it out of the doors alive at the Unveiling. *None of them.* No thank you. Keith was out.

Just then, the door through which Aggrago had disappeared with the woman reopened. Clare Knoews stepped in, this time in a powder blue blazer with a black button down dress shirt underneath. His hair hadn't moved an inch. Keith's nausea turned to solid rocks in his stomach. The mere sight of Clare made Keith angry. He opened his mouth to tell him again that— no, he's not going down there— but all that came out was a hot exhale of breath, as if his stomach had

emitted a shimmer of heat. The director, a new cigarette squeezed between his fingers, turned around and nodded to Clare.

“Come on, Mr. Hayes,” Clare murmured, turning to Keith, “let’s go. We’re done here.”

“No,” The word came out warbled, like Keith had already thrown up and the word was a shaky afterthought. He stayed seated in his chair.

The director, watching this, pressed all of his fingers into his eyes and groaned, “God, I can’t work with these people!”

“They’ll be out of your hair soon enough,” Clare tried to smile then gestured at the two crew members in purple shirts, “Get Mr. Loman, please.”

The two techs disappeared into the recording studio. The director turned his back on Keith, still rubbing his eyes, the smoke from his cigarette swirling into the air. Clare grabbed the front of Keith’s t-shirt, his other hand gripping the open door. He yanked Keith up off the chair with surprising force, sending the bile in Keith’s stomach sloshing. Keith’s vision ricocheted around the room at the sudden jolt from being dragged to his feet. The walls of the room shifted inconsistently in Keith’s eyes as he groped at Clare’s grip on his shirt trying to pry his hand off, but the man was already six inches taller than him.

“Move it,” Clare seethed, his face inches from Keith’s, “now.”

Keith blinked, merging Clare’s two fuzzy heads into one. Clare’s hand guided him through the doorway, but then Keith felt two scratchy hands wrench him backwards out of Clare’s grip.

“I got this one, slick,” Loman growled at Clare, who threw both hands angrily into the air and turned around to lead them up the stairs. Once he had turned around, Loman let go of Keith’s

shoulders slowly, making sure he was steady on his feet. Keith's vision swam back into normalcy.

"Thanks," Keith murmured, holding his forehead. The two of them began climbing the stairs, single file, Loman behind him. "Where are we going now?" Keith whispered over his shoulder.

"Down, kid, probably." Loman's voice was gruff and pessimistic.

"What about the Descent ceremony?" Keith felt like someone had just thrown a bucket of ice water over his head. He thought of the black hole of the portal door, broadcasted across the billboard in the City Square at the Unveiling: the gaping darkness, infinite and unknown.

"Does it look like any of us are worth a Descent ceremony?" Loman asked him.

Keith faltered on the stairs, smacking his palms out against the walls to catch himself; he felt one single bead of sweat run down the rivulets of his back. "I thought they wanted us to find the first group? Shouldn't they tell us what they know or give us supplies or something?"

Loman was quiet for a moment and then whispered in a voice that sounded nothing like the harsh bite Keith expected. His voice sounded weird: contaminated, almost, but with what? Then, Keith knew: it was pity. "They don't expect us to find anything, kiddo. The High Council has to be seen doing *something*, and we're that pathetic something. Sure, they'll send us down as a second exploratory group hoping to save the other scholars, but do they really expect us to succeed? Nah. They're just trying to get rid of loose change while they can. Kill two birds with one stone: you, me, and that woman."

Keith swallowed then bit down on his own tongue, holding it in place until the pain was encompassing and calming. He wondered if Loman was thinking the same thing he was: that they wouldn't last a night beneath the City. Images of jaundiced skin and bulging veins pervaded

Keith's head like a pile of rotten vines. Keith let go of his tongue with his teeth. It pulsed painfully, and Keith counted the throbs, imagining tally marks. Spit wadded up in Keith's throat. Is that what killed Steven Quail? Did he choke to death on his own spit? Keith swallowed, remembering the sound of the scholar's saliva frothing over his lips like misshapen and chunky white waves.

At the top of the narrow stairs, Clare and Keith met up with Aggrago, still holding onto the crazy woman, pinching her upper arm with one, lazy hand. The woman smiled when she saw Keith and bounced back and forth on the balls of her feet, practically squatting. Keith cringed as he saw her Velcro handcuffs, no doubt a direct response to the new shiner starting to swell under Aggrago's right eye.

"Aggrago, Miss Hoffman," Clare addressed them hurriedly, "please follow me." Clare pushed the two of them into the wall with an outstretched arm as he squeezed past, out of the narrow stairwell and into the open hallway. He didn't wait for them to follow, but took off in an impatient stride down the hall.

Aggrago gestured with his free hand for Keith and Loman to follow Clare. "Go," Aggrago grunted.

Keith stared at the open space between the body guard, the hopping psycho, and the wall. What else could he do? Fight? Run? That's all Keith seemed to do anymore, fight. He fought at school, fought with his dad, it only made sense for him to fight now. Keith looked Aggrago up and down, the dips of his muscles under his shirt clearly visible. Keith began to sweat and was suddenly aware of his own t-shirt, wet and stuck to his back. *Did* he always fight? His mind raced, trying to think of school on the Origin, his home, where he grew up, did he fight then? Old classrooms popped into his mind like a black and white news reel: Keith falling asleep on his

desk with a book during recess, Keith bringing home A's on his school reports, Keith's mother framing those essays, booming: "*this one's gonna be a writer!*" The memory was jarring. It was as if Keith had buried his old self when he and his father moved. He used to want to write books—not the academic bullshit that Casimir is always trying to push down his throat, but real living stories of adventure and passion, mystery and betrayal. Keith stared down at the hole in his worn out shoes and the jagged scar on his shin. He watched his fingers straighten out of the fists he had curled them into. He looked up at Aggrago, speaking barely above a whisper: "what if I don't?" Keith heard Loman's army jacket swish as his shoulders grow rigid behind him. Keith could feel Loman's breath on the back of his head, hot and rugged.

Aggrago narrowed his eyes at Keith, slowly releasing his grip on the Miss Hoffman's arm.

"I'm a frog!" she yelled and leapt into the air the second he let her go.

Aggrago took a cautious step towards Keith who bent his knees as a reflex, ready to run.

"Go for his legs," Loman breathed into Keith's ear.

Keith did. He bolted at the guard's knees, shoving one of his ankles under center weight of Aggrago's body. Loman lunged in tandem to Keith, sending his own elbow into the crux between the Aggrago's neck and right shoulder. Aggrago grunted and buckled forward, tripping over his own feet as he tried to regain his balance. He failed and sprawled onto the floor, face-first. Keith slipped through Aggrago's legs and pulled himself up while Loman grabbed Miss Hoffman around the waist and slung her over one shoulder.

"Come on," Loman huffed as he and Keith turned left and started running down a hallway the opposite direction from where Clare had gone.

Aggrago yowled from the floor, rubbing his clavicle.

“HEY,” Clare yelled, turning back around from the other end of the hallway.

Keith and Loman ignored Clare’s bellowing as they bolted down the winding hallway, the portraits on the walls flying past them like Origin highway signs. Dark blue wallpaper lined the way, a swirled marble that matched the atrium returning under their feet. Keith’s shoes flopped against it violently with every footfall. He could feel the breath in his lungs stretch his ribcage with every inhale. His feet flew underneath him on autopilot, smack after satisfying smack of his rubber soles against the floor.

“Code 11-30-30,” Keith heard Clare call out. The sound echoed off the walls, “11-30-30!”

The lights in the hallway fluttered through the color spectrum until they stopped on a low, dark blue. An alarm began to whirl around them, a high-pitched rising and falling crescendo. Loman and Keith skidded on their heels as they came to the end of the hallway, turned right, and saw the large open cavern of the atrium looming ahead of them. Miss Hoffman clapped her hands from Loman’s back. Loman and Keith two bolted for the atrium, Clare’s light but hasted foot steps behind them: *rick-tick-tick!*

The narrow walls of the hallway finally opened up into the chandeliered ceiling, the blue warning lights tainting the marble making it look cyan and gray, endless curls of cyan and gray. Jewels from the chandelier vibrated in correspondence to the whine of the alarm, catching specks of color, transforming the clear diamonds into pale ominous sapphires.

“The doors,” Keith breathed as he ran—he could see the doors. Spanning two stories at least, the large wooden doors looked like the gates of heaven to Keith at that moment. They were seconds away from crossing the atrium, shoving the doors wide open, and falling into the

sanctuary of the public City Square. Keith had never before longed for his bare, disheveled apartment, but he did just then.

He and Loman ran towards the exit flanking the left wall of the open cavern. Closed doors blinked past them in even intervals as they ran. Then suddenly, one of the doors flew open. A stooped man in white robes stepped out in front of them. Loman, closer to the wall, barreled into him. The woman on his shoulder rolled off and tumbled onto the floor, screeching. Loman flattened the man on the floor; Keith tripped over both of them and went flying. He raised his arms in front of his face and felt the bone-on-stone sting of both elbows smacking against the floor. Keith heard Loman grunt as he turned and saw the he and the man in white fumbling over each other. Loman sat on top of the older man—a High Councilman, Keith realized, and not just any High Councilman. Keith remembered the generous folds of white hair adorning his round, pudgy face. The man’s awkward maw of a mouth, squashed above his bumpy chin. He was the Councilman who announced the expulsion of Literature in the schools. Keith would have recognized him anywhere because he still remembered the moment as it happened. Keith and his father were sitting on the couch having cereal for dinner, the High Councilman’s face covering the screen as he made the speech broadcasted live to all of Casimir.

“The facet of fictional literature is a dying art in today’s high-strung academic society. Unfortunately, there comes a time in the history of any great society when vestigial topics of study must be abandoned for the further development of mankind.”

Keith’s father had dropped his spoon into his cereal bowl as he stared at the television. Keith remembered thinking his father’s eyes could burn a hole right through the screen.

Loman recognized the man, too. “Beenie!” Loman glowered sarcastically, “so nice to see you again.” The High Councilman yelped and shielded his face with his arms as Loman started throwing punches.

Keith was still flat on the ground when they swarmed him. Five or six men who looked exactly like Aggrago—and he meant *exactly* like Aggrago—started pinning him down. Keith yelled, his jaw pressed into the chill of the floor. Keith heard Loman swear, “*Get off me, you motherfucking pricks,*” and Miss Hoffman laughing hysterically as she, too, was being held down by the clones. Keith scraped his fingers against the floor, pushing against the muscles of the men clambering on top of his limbs. He cried out again in a warbled groan, one of the clone’s open palms holding his head firmly against the ground. The man’s hand squished Keith’s face harder, scrunching his lips against marble. Keith tried to move a limb—any limb at all, but was met with their dead weight and stubborn resistance. He blinked at his limited view of the floor, watching a pair of shiny black shoes amble towards him. They stopped in front of his face and their owner squatted in front of him. Keith peered up at Clare Knoews, who was holding another syringe between his pointer finger and thumb. Keith spat at him, his saliva barely making it two inches away from his mouth, messily coating the with a clear, wet sheen.

Clare shook his head at him, clucking. His eyes were full of apathy and twisted enjoyment. They even twinkled. “You’re really making this harder than it has to be,” he whispered. He poked the needle into the back of Keith’s neck; Keith jerked his body away, but still felt the prick of the metal all the same. Keith’s vision instantaneously blurred. He watched as Clare turned his head away from him and started moving his lips as if he were talking to someone else. Keith couldn’t hear him, though. The only noise he could hear was the whirl of the alarm, muted and fading like melodic, rhythmic bleats.