

CORANO I

“I don’t ever want to go home.”

“Yeah, me neither.”
Ryke sighed.

Something about being in the Green always relaxes me. It may be small and bland, probably 17 meters in diameter or something, but there is no outside world. Who knew an empty grass field and one tree could be so...blissful. It’s just me, Ryke, and our hex. Not to mention the technical



wonder the Green is just on its own! Tiny nanobots linking together to produce a life-like image, I mean c’mon! *I really need to remember to ask Sci-Doust about how he came up with it.*

“Hey, stop staring at the nanos and throw our innard back! You know we only have so much time in here.”

“Sorry, got lost in thought!” He is right though; we are only allowed in here for as long as the higher-ups or Head or whatever the hell they call themselves now allow. With the newfound urgency to restructure the Body’s new tower, our time here was contingent on how long our fathers’

meetings lasted. No matter how short our time is in here, it's nice to have Ryke around. *I'm lucky enough that dad was best friends with Ryke's before the war, otherwise—*

“Alright, what’s wrong, Corano?” I must have been deep in thought again, as I didn't realize Ryke had walked over to me.

“Huh, what makes you think something is wrong?”

“Well, dumbass, you have held our innard for a solid minute, keep staring at the Green, and are scratching at it, per usual. I mean you might actually be the first person EVER to scratch diamond with a fingernail! Might as well be holding a sign over your head saying ‘I am an anxious mess’. Look, you know you can just talk to my old man, right?”

“You know it’s not that simple, Ryke.”

“Well, it should be. I am sick and tired of people being treated unfairly due to something they have no control over. I mean, seriously, why aren’t you more angry about it than I am?”

“People like me do not have the luxury of being angry about the outcome of the Heritakge War. We are lucky enough to have our existence even be allowed to continue.”

“What in the cliché fuckery did you just say to me? There is—”

“Dude! Don’t cuss so much, especially at the Tower!”

“*Dude, don’t cuss so much around the tower.*” Ryke mockingly spat back. We both laughed so damn hard. “What are they gonna do, throw me in jail for using a word someone might find offensive? It’s a *word*. Words are just sounds; it’s the person who gives them life.

“You’ve been tutoring with Teach-Rochellye, haven’t you?” I jokingly jabbed.

“HA HA, yes, as a matter of fact, I have. It’s why I am smarter than you. But back to my point, there’s no ‘people like you’ Corano, don’t you get it? You are me, and I am you; we are *people*. You were born after everything was settled; we both were. Neither of us had any say in the actions of those who were a part of the war. You need to understand that because I feel like I’m OD-ing on Cloud when I explain this to you over and over and over again.”

“Were it so easy, Ryke”.

“It is so easy! I am the son of the famous ‘Sci-Doust’ and therefore second in command of the Shield! What I say will go one day!” We both let out a chuckle at that utopian reality and laid down under our favorite “generated” tree, a cherry, I think. I wish I knew the smells these beautiful monuments gave off, the sound they made as the leaves ruffled when the wind passed through them, and felt the relief of shade under the warm star’s light. Simulations can only produce so much; the rest is left to our imagination. I just don’t understand how something so beautiful could be so easily disregarded. *Why did they have to resort to the Incineration Protocol?*

With our heads next to each other while lying in opposite directions, Ryke placed his right fist on my chest; I did the same with my left. Our ridiculous salute to our forged brotherhood was exactly that, but it was ours. I understand where he’s coming from, I do, but I don’t feel the need to change the world when the world we have right now, at this moment, is everything I need. Any further conflict would just change everything, which is why I hope the Head has the same mindset.

“What do you think the Head is discussing this time, more taxes? The RP?” I asked Ryke.

“Your guess is as good as mine. My dad doesn’t tell me anything either, you know this. Even if they are talking about the Redemption Program, you know we have you guys taken care of. You don’t need to worry man.”

“Yeah, I know, but when I see my dad worry, my mom worries, then I worry. It’s contagious and lingers around just like—”

“BYRON’S LAUGH!” Ryke finished.

“Exactly!” Our laughs drifted our troubles away, alongside the generated pink leaves.

“But yeah man, I get you, it has been longer than usual. We aren’t usually in the Green for this long. It’s been what, almost two hours now?”

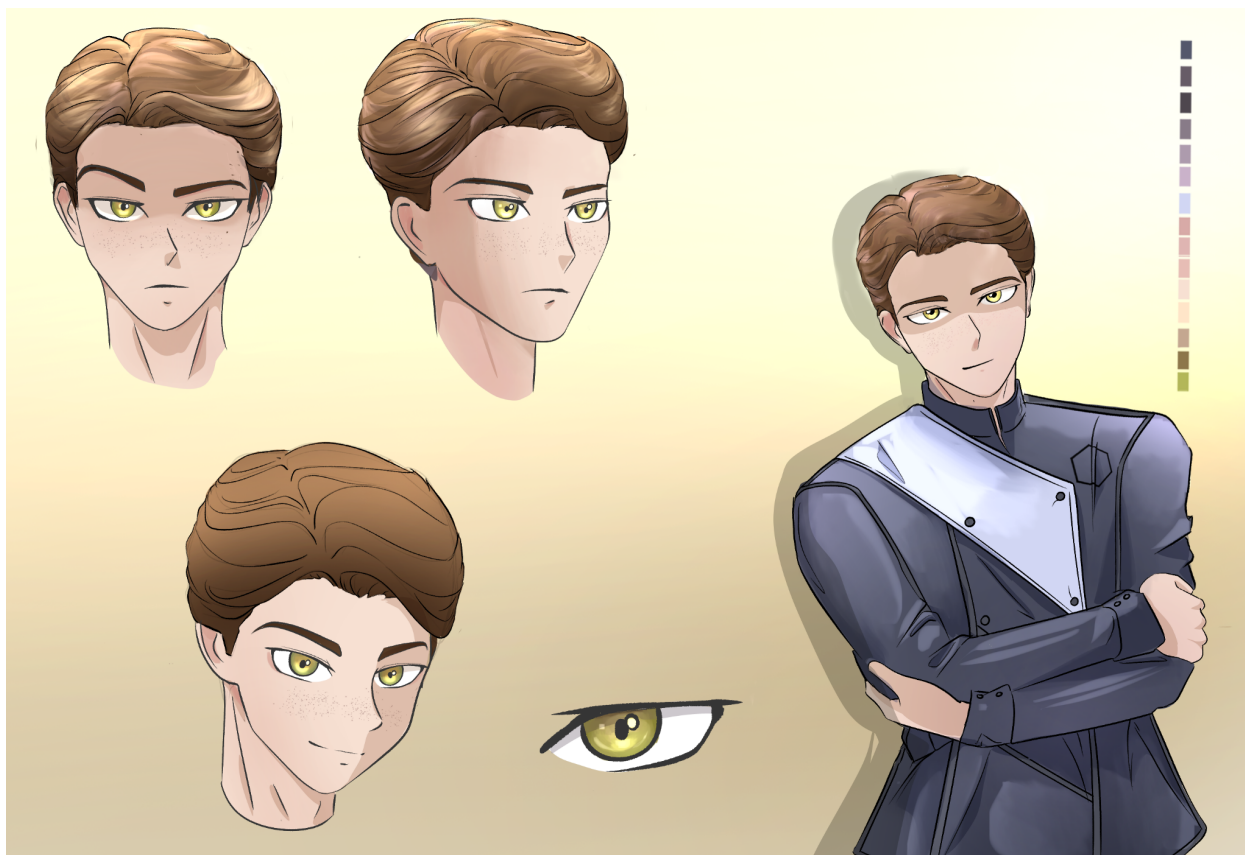
“I don’t know, I left my chrono at home...again.” I embarrassingly admitted.

“Ohhhhhh, your dad isn’t going to like that AT ALL.” Ryke began to laugh again as he continued. “Remember how he reacted last time you left it? He took away your studying privilege for a week! You’re STUDYING PRIVILEGES! Like, how much of a goodie-two-shoes do you have to

be, no seriously!? You're lucky you had Myneshe. You're even more lucky you have Claire and me because—ah, thanks, Claire! She said it's been an hour and seventeen minutes.”

Ryke stopped to listen to Claire, I assume because he was making the most hilarious “that’s ridiculous” face. “No, I am not telling him the seconds, Claire. No one gives a shit about that.”

We both laughed again; damn it felt good to laugh this much. *I would remember my chrono more if I were paired with someone like Claire.*



“Thanks, Claire, you’re as reliable as ever. Ryke does appreciate you, even if he doesn’t say it! But, um, yeah, my dad doesn’t like a lot of things, me included.” Ryke moved his fist from my chest, let out one of those classic Ryke sighs, took our hex, and began tossing it in the air while still lying down next to me. One of these days, it is going to land on my face when he’s not paying attention. *Guess I should move my fist and protect my face.*

“You know damn well that’s not true and why he’s so strict. Think about what’s at stake for not just your family, but mine. He loves you bro, but I dunno, I just feel like he can’t show it if that makes sense. He has to keep a perfect image up, or else—ah, never mind you already know.”

“I know that just as well as you do, Ryke. I hate myself for feeling this way, but I just hate him sometimes. I do everything he asks: I study, I maintain proper hygiene, I follow all the rules, and I stay out of any kind of trouble, even when I feel it would be right not to at times. Do you know how frustrating that is, to go against your own moral compass?”

“Dude, we are fifteen, we know nothing of a moral compass. Your dad is up there trying to make one *and* be its true north. It’s all riding on our dads.”

“Hey, remember when you said not to worry? Well, good job, asshole, now I am worried again.”

“Well, technically, I said you don’t *need* to worry.”

“Okay, syntax police.” I paused. If Ryke is this dismissive, that just means...

“I know what you’re thinking man. I genuinely do not know if they are discussing the RP and it doesn’t matter either way.”x

“Says the asshole with the ‘Y’ in his name.” I chipped in.

“Hey, I didn’t choose my Shield, and neither did you, dumbassy. See, I added a ‘y’ to your name, now you’re one of us.”

“Hey asshole?”

“Yes, dumbassy?”

“Promise me, as far as you know, my family is safe.”

“I promise, Corano. I promise on us, the Green, and your Dad’s legendary Asteroid Soup.”

“That’s a hefty promise, Ryke, even for you, hell, even for Byron! God, I wish everyone were here.”

“You and me both man, but hey, Byron, Myneshe, and Alonz, they all understand. Alonz especially. How many of these conversations do we have to have? Better start paying me to be your therapist, and hey, I charge the “Y” rate!” Yet again, we laughed away all of our problems, our joy echoing into the brisk, autumn breeze.

“Oh come on, no discount for your sponsored RP brother?”

“Not a chance, unless you want to fill in for me in interviews.”

“I’ll take the “Y” rate.” I chuckled. *Imagine that me in an interview about the Moralo Archive. One day...*

“But yeah, I know they know. It's just hard for someone like me to be in a world like this.” I knew he knew this, but knowing and understanding are two sides of the same Vol that flips in the atmosphere of experience, or dad says. *Kinda wordy if you ask me.*

“Well if we are going by our parents’ cringe catchphrases, it's as my Mom always says: ‘Thinking about the possibility—’

“---Doesn’t change the reality.” I finished. If I had a Vol for every time I heard Surge-Maram say that, I probably could take my dad to Stromos like I always promised him I would.

“Huh, maybe you aren’t a dumbass, dumbassy!”

“Thanks, Ryke, maybe not.” I chuckled. “Still wouldn’t change the indisputable fact that you’re an asshole, asshole.”

“Now I did not raise my Son to use such vulgar language towards someone of higher standing, now did I, Corano?”

Ryke and I immediately sat up and looked back at each other. I guess that startled Ryke just as much as it did me because he didn't realize the hex innard was mid-toss on its way back down. Gravity took care of the rest, and it landed right on his head. I shot over a brief ‘I know that hurt, and you’re playing it off’ look. Wish I had the chance to laugh at him, but we both probably had the same thought: “How long has he been there, and why didn’t we hear any holographic interference, since someone entered the nano projection field of our hex?” The innard landed right next to my arm, so I picked it up before he could. *If I am getting in trouble, I’m at least taking the hex with me.*

“Long enough, boys. Ryke, your dad is waiting for you. He's in his office and has a few questions about, well, you probably know what about. You do not need another adult hounding you about it.” He approached Ryke and patted his head. “You are looking more and more like your Father each day, Ryke. I hope you have been paying attention in your studies. You are a bright young man.” I began to scratch the innard. *Why am I so irritated hearing that?*

“Oh, h-hey, Mr. Allann! Yeah, sorry!” he nervously laughed. “We were just talking about...uh yeah, you know what, never mind, you heard most of it probably.” Ryke turned to look back at me, letting an uncomfortable smirk slip. “Yeah, you're on your own on this one, buddy. I tried. See ya!” He patted my shoulder as he walked towards the elevator lobby. He stopped as he neared the perimeter of the nano-field that made up the Green and looked back at me. His expression changed from a sarcastic goofball to an unsettling, serious one, and said “I know it's not fair, but one day I promise that you'll never have to worry about those with a dumb 'y' in their dumb name.” A small chuckle escaped me as I turned to look at the cherry tree one last time, seeking asylum from this situation, even if it was to be a mere moment. I approached the tree to try to touch it, knowing my desire for the softness of the leaves would only be met with a rough visual fracture of light.

“Ryke, wait!” dad shouted, “For the last time, drop the ‘Mr.’, it is not appropriate for someone of my status.” His booming voice startled me, shifting my attention back to them—trading visual disappointment for audible anxiety.

“With all due respect, Mr. Allann, as your so-called ‘superior’, I dub thee with the title of ‘Mr.’!” Ryke shouted back in his usual joking tone. “See, second in command!” *Did dad just try to hide a laugh?*

Ryke turned back around and resumed his reluctant walk towards the elevator. He peered over his shoulder, locking eyes with me, extended his right arm and made a fist, as if my chest was there too; I mirrored him.

His new look of determination faded as he continued on his way. “And I’ll be wanting that hex tomorrow, Corano!” he added as he left the Green. *Oh, now it wants to make a sound as someone walks through.*



I recalled all the nanos using our innard to make our hex whole again. The swirling cloud of colors glitching as they were magnetically sucked back and desaturated to their default dark gray was

something that never got old. How they intelligently conform around my hand as they situate themselves in the iconic Moralo hex pattern always makes me feel like a superhero or something.

The Green's illusion faded away as the gray industrial clouds of a reconstructing metropolitan emerged. They dampened the vivid purple and orange hues that usually paint the dusk sky, so I just ignore them, forcing an image of what I desire instead. Moralo, the capital of our planetary system, and what remained of her beauty, came into view. Five, no, maybe ten towering magno-cranes painted the orangish skyline as various businesses hurried to regain some sense of "normal". Their massive magnetic disks cast a hopeful shadow over various neighborhoods, also in the midst of reconstruction, following the destruction of the last war.

The Moralo Archive's reconstruction is nearly complete, and at the very top of its tree-like design lies a beacon. Its deep blue, meshy light blasting into the atmosphere and beyond to "let Heritake know we still shine". It aims to be a center of unbiased, factual information, but Byron always says that victors write history with their pen, and the paper the words lie upon is written in the blood of the defeated. Well, dad says not to entertain such a rebellious thought, since he fought in the war and knows what happens—the Archive will display both sides. At least one good thing came out of the war: a sense of community and opportunity...oh, and mesh light.

I turned away from Ryke and looked over the edge of the thirty-third floor of the Body's Tower's extended platform. The platform on this floor is to house a monorail station, which was almost complete, to nearly every Moralan's excitement. The 33rd will allow passengers on board to exit on the exterior of the platform, whereas people getting on board enter from the interior. This is done for added security, since floors 33 and up are reserved for Body members or related projects.

The rail passes through the building via a hexagonal opening and features an external radial platform akin to a building's skirt. It hosts an underbelly of sorts, meant for a private lounge or something of that nature. The rail then continues onward towards the other diverse districts of Moralo—shopping, housing, business parks, etcetera. Everything is bubbled into districts not simply for organizational sake, but to force community connection, which every Shield unanimously—

"Corano, you will look at me when I address you in an ongoing dialogue." *Just address me like your son for once and not some commanding officer.* I guess the Moralo skyline distracted me enough to get lost in thought.

“I’m sorry, sir, the sunset distracted me. I don’t see it from high up often. I wish I could see what this sunset looked like during Moralo’s prime.” I could hear dad making his way towards me, then he stopped behind me on my left side, with a pause that roared louder than the resurrected Moralo. Even though I was overlooking the entire skyline, I could only feel dad’s piercing “you’re a disappointment” gaze. *That’s how you always look at me.*

“I would argue that this is Moralo in its prime, and watch the contractions...but that is a discussion for home, and on that note, it is time to—”

“Can we just talk here, dad?” I interrupted. I do not want to go home; that is where my life is at.



“Interrupt me again, and your next teacher is going to hear about it. You know to address me as sir in public spaces; this is not playtime, this is work. Survival. Do you understand me, Corano?” He gently placed his right hand on my left shoulder, a stark contrast to the tone he was using. *I already know my next teacher is an actual Teach-, but you never bothered to ask.*

“Yes, sir. I am sorry.”

“Sorry means you won’t do it again, and look at me when I am speaking to you.” I obliged and turned to face him. The hex shell now became victim to my excessive scratching. *No matter what I say, nothing makes you happy.*

“Yeah, I know, I know.” I looked to my right as the screech of the elevator charging to take Ryke up to his Dad’s office initiated. It is a grotesque, twisted metallic shriek that is thankfully followed by a far more satisfyingly quiet boom that launches the elevator cabin up. I watched as Ryke prepared to leave me behind in the elevator, taking him up to a life I knew he did not want.

Damn, no elevator boom. Why was there no elevator boom? It’s like the only good part of that. I recollected my thoughts and turned my attention back to dad as the elevator left our floor.

“I want an office up there one day. Why can’t we know what floor Sci-Doust is o—” His hand aggressively squeezed my shoulder excruciatingly hard before I could even finish my question.

“DAMMIT, CORANO, fix that damn lisp of yours! And what did I say about contractions? Have you not been practicing? Surge-Maram went out of her way to privately set you up with a vocal tutor. It is disrespectful not to show progress.”

“I’m sorry, sir—er—I am sorry, Ryke never corrects me—agh, you’re hurting me—I am sorry. It is hard for me to pronounce certain things—agh—I am sorry, I will fix it!” The pain caused me to drop the hex, reflecting the drop in my heart. *I thought today was going to be a good day.* I don’t know how to describe the emotional elixir of embarrassment, isolation, anger, and sadness that this conversation is brewing.

“If you apologize one more time or make another excuse, I swear to fucking God you’re drinking out of the hose tonight and losing your room privileges!” *He never uses profanity.* “Ryke Doust is your tutor, not friend! If someone other than Ryke or me had heard you, I would be fined, possibly worse. They would say you were intentionally making a joke out of a superior’s name. Then you and your Mother would both starve, or worse, is that what you want? Vols are tight as is. Why can’t you manage basic vocal articulation skills? Maybe you just do not understand...” He began to loosen his grip on me while his sentence trailed off, carried by the breeze.

The elixir began to boil, my eyes burning from the steam.

He let out a disappointed sigh as he took his hand off my shoulder and leaned forward on the glass safety railing; I mirrored him. A crisp breeze stung the right side of my body, complementing the sting of the left.

“Look, Corano, I know I am rough on you all the time. You just need to understand what’s at stake. Not just at a household level, but a systematic one.” *It’s always about the future, never the present with him.* He paused for a moment, and we both absorbed the last few photons produced by our nameless blue star as it sank into the horizon. “Change of plans, Son, I need to check something for Sci-Doust.”

“Okay, sir, I just want to make you proud.”

“I know you do, Son. Now stop stalling and get a move on. It is still red.” He ushered me forward, opting to walk behind me. Since only one elevator entrance was active on each side of the tower at a time until all safety audits passed, dad and I will have to take the Spiral. The Body’s Tower has an attached, external walkway that spirals around the building, with entrances to every floor, starting from the third, which is where the name “Spiral” comes from. Ryke had just taken the elevator on the other side, and dad doesn’t seem to be in a waiting mood.

We are lucky to even consider using the elevator since that is usually only reserved for Body and Head members, or those who work directly under them. There are red and green lights bordering the elevator entrances to distinguish whether your respective side is operational. Either Ryke is stalling or got stuck. *That would be hilarious, but seriously, he should have been up there by now.*

As we turned away from the elevator and made our way to the entrance of the descending ramp, dad suddenly grabbed both my shoulders and dragged me over to the right with him. We stopped, almost tucked away, in a small utility room with a humming electrical panel, bordered by blue lights, meant for the monorail station employees. We stood across from each other, a worried expression blanketed his usually emotionless face. Both of his hands rested on my shoulders as he pretended to remain calm. *I know you, dad.*

“Corano, there’s a cabinet with tools across the way. I need you to grab the OGI and tune it to CH4. Put this in the bag on the center shelf and press it four times until you see blue lights. Understood?” His tone shifted to that of desperation and hurry. “I need to inspect this panel for Sci-Doust, it’s very important.” *Oh, so he can use contractions now?* He handed me a small, round

medallion of sorts out of his inner blazer pocket and gestured over to a steel cabinet, rusted beyond belief, maybe three or four meters away. *Nothing should be in this state in the Tower; everything they use is new...*

The medallion, or coin, or whatever it is, was twice the size of a Vol, around the diameter of a pocketwatch; completely unmarked and smoothed over, as if someone had sanded the surfaces.

“Okay, sir.” As I made my way to the rusted cabinet, the sound of dad rummaging around an electric panel pierced my every thought. My mind began to race—*he is a very intelligent man, but he knows nothing about energy or electricity.*

I opened the cabinet, its screeching piercing my ears, detracting from the panel dad was inspecting, only adding to my anxious state. Sure enough, a small black toolbag lay inside, isolated on the middle shelf. Inside the unzipped bag lay...*nothing?*

“What is going on? There is no button, and there’s nothing in the bag.”

“There’s not a button, Son, and just press it four times as I instructed. Just do as I direct and take what I say to heart. Don’t think too much about it right now—and don’t think I didn’t catch

that grammar slip.”

The elixir was now overboiling, the steam of anxiety suffocating all forms of rationale.

“Corano, you lack selfishness



and passion. You choose to bear the weight of having too much selflessness and compassion. At some point, you need to stop being what you think others want you to be, and come into your own,

much like Ryke has.” *There he goes, comparing me to Ryke and putting him up on a pedestal.* “I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but it needs to be said because, heh, I doubt I’ll have another chance to do so.”

“What does that mean? You’re kinda freaking me out. I thought you wanted to go home?” I inquired as I pressed the circular disk between my left thumb and index finger four times. Blue lights began to slowly brighten around the circumference of the object, their vibrance radiating a welcoming hue. As they became brighter, a web of interconnected lights in the center branched out, starting from the top of the object, creating...*scribbly lines*? Well, if a circular shape had a “top” anyway. I placed it into the bag, as dad instructed, and zipped it back up.

“Look, Son, if I am being candid, I just needed us to get out of someone’s eye-sight, and this is one of the only spots on all of Moralo where no one can listen or see. Those damn cocky fools—have you done it yet?” I made my way back to dad, with an anxiety-fueled stride.

“I don’t follow...what’s going on? Whose eyesight? And—err—yes, th—there was some strange pattern, like scribbly lines or something, I-I am not sure, sir. But it was blue, and is now inside the bag!”

“Good, and you’ll find out soon, Corano, I just can’t tell you right now. I just need you to start maturing in the right direction and use a bit more of those critical thinking skills I know you have.” I could not focus or understand what was going on, nor at the very least decipher what those scribbly lines were, but some part of me felt it was...familiar? Recognizable?

“I WILL make you and Mom proud. I even made that my pledge for this year’s MA pledge! My new teacher is an actual Teach—, can you believe it? His name is Rochey...Rochel...”

“Rochellye?” he asked with a sense of familiarity.

“Yeah! They said I made the top thirty in Year 13, so I was assigned to him for Year 14! I will finally be with all my friends’ dads! Ryke, Byron, Myneshe, and Alonz all made the top 30, too!”

“Alonz?”

“Yeah dad, Alonz too!”

“Who—oh I see. It doesn’t matter. That makes me happy, Son. Now hand me the OGI, please.” *He never talks to me like this, let alone with a “please”.* As I handed him the tuned OGI, he paused for a moment after doing whatever he wanted to do with it; I am very ignorant of how they work, outside of basic functions. “Oh...now then? Thought so...that’s a damn shame,” dad said. He dropped the OGI and slowly turned to face me, placing his hands on my shoulders, but with a much more caring touch than the last time—and smiled.

I didn’t get a hand to the face for not saying “sir”, but rather a blinding white light that made my eyes feel as if I stared at a chrono’s holographic projection at night for far too long. *What the hell?* Something very small fell on my left shoulder, like a raindrop almost, as dad removed his hands from them; I reached back out to him and felt nothing. *Did he leave me?* My fear continued to rise as this unknown light penetrated every one of my thoughts. *I can’t see a thing. What is this light coming from? Where’s dad? Did the hex malfunction? I shouldn’t have left it unattended.*

Out of the blinding light, a massive force threw me in a direction I could not tell. A deep, thundering boom roared, making my ears feel as if they had exploded. I desperately reached out, clinging to anything I could grab onto, fearing for my life. The platform has yet to be completed, so I have no sense of direction. It didn’t help that even after being up here so many times with Ryke, we always used our hex to make the Green, so we never really paid any attention to the monorail platform.

“FUCKEN HELL!” shouted a distant, unfamiliar voice as I tumbled across the platform. As my footing finally became stable, another forceful push threw me again. *That felt like someone pushed me...?* I must have thrown out every curse word I knew while my tumble resumed. Something was finally sturdy enough to be grabbed onto, which felt like a steel rod. I was met with a different, intense pressure that put a massive strain on my arms. *Wait, this feels like...oh god.*

“Holy shit! Holy shit, holy shit! DAD, DAD HELP ME PLEASE!” I couldn’t see where I was yet, but that force in my arms was gravity. I was hanging over the thirty-third floor with no sight of where I was or what I was clinging to.

Before I could even shout for help again, another thundering boom roared across the platform. However, there wasn’t a reverb out this time, rather a very sharp end to the “boom”, which ironically

created quite the satisfying audible conclusion that the elevator failed to provide.

Wait...elevator...RYKE!

“DAD! DAD, I’M HERE!” The blinding whitish-yellow light began to dissipate. *What the hell was that?*

“I’m coming, Son, hang on!” he shouted back. I was finally able to begin to make out where I was more clearly. I looked down and immediately laughed unintentionally. Yep, definitely dangling over the city. *Holy shit, I could actually die right now.* What have I done with my life? Study? Follow all the rules? Damn, I should have tried Cloud when Ryke offered it. I guess moral compasses don’t mean anything when you’re about to fall to your death. I guess Byron was right, humor does help cloud the seriousness.

After what seemed like an eternity, dad reached over the ledge and pulled me up. Thankfully, that metal rod was a part of the glass trim, which would make up the railing of the platform, to prevent onlookers from falling over. *Today is just full of irony.* I almost let out another laugh.

Safety became the number one priority over all else after the war, so anything being constructed had to instate all safety features first. *Guess that's three good things to come after the war.*

“Actually, only one thing did, Corano.”

“Only one thing, what, dad?”

“Only one good thing came out—ugh—fuck—of the war.”

“What do you mean, how did you know—?” My ears were still ringing from the blast, so I couldn’t tell whether I heard him right or misheard him. Wait, that doesn’t make sense. Did I hit my head? Why do I feel so dazed? A numbing feeling was creeping up on me, as if I had slept on my arm all night, except it was my entire body. My head feels...fuzzy.

“I don’t have much time, Corano. Just stop talking and ask questions later. Please, just listen. You’ve always been good at that, Cor, so please, for your dad, just listen. All will be explained in time.”

You'd think a million thoughts and questions would run through your head at a time like this. It is only natural to keep asking since we are a curious species, as Teach-Rochellye puts it. But why am I so calm? Why am I not freaking out? I feel so...so...emotionally suppressed.

"I understand, dad."

"I know you do, Son. Or at least you will." He grabbed my head and placed it into his stomach. *Is he bugging me? Wait, I'm forgetting something, something important...*

"Corano, the life you know isn't real. It's a fallacy concocted by those who seek peace in a world incapable of achieving it. I did my best, I need you to know that. Everything I did, I did for you and did so without choice." He moved my head from him and began to cough up blood.

"Are you okay? It seems you need medical assistance." *YEAH NO SHIT CORANO! What's wrong with me? I feel so...wrong. On autopilot.*

"I will be if you keep listening," he winced in pain. "Oh, Corano, you'll look back on me with such disdain and anger. I am so sorry that I couldn't give you the life I wanted for you. From here on, you need to step up, pay attention to Rochellye's instruction, and take care of your Mothe—shit." He continued to cough up blood, and I just stared, unable to think, process, or react. "You will accomplish stellar things and make everything come to Fruition. None of that matters unless you have those you cherish next to you, understand?"

"I understand." I robotically said as I processed what I just heard. *Why am I talking like this? Why am I thinking like this?* He coughed up even more blood. What the hell is wrong with me? Why can't I feel anything emotionally? Every cell in my body wanted to scream and cry and question and find...find...RYKE! Holy shit, Ryke, how could I forget?

"Heh, looks like it's fading based on your eyes, that was fast. Well, at least I tried. Wouldn't expect anything less from a Hallow."

Fading? Hallow? Irrelevant, I must listen. Wait, no. Listen. No. Yes. FIND. LISTEN. NO, FIND RYKE! *Fucken hell, what is this feeling? I was just lying down under a fake tree. How did it get to this?*

“What’s going on dad? I am scared. I can’t feel, can barely think...dad we have to go, we have to find Ryke!” An intense surge of heat washed over us as what looked like the 45th-ish floor erupted into flames.

“Look at me Cor.” He grabbed my face and turned it towards him. I have never seen my dad’s eyes look at me like that—like he loved me. Like he was proud of me. Like I was his son.

“Ryke’s okay, son, trust me. Focus on me, please...just please.” He collapsed to the ground, but I caught him before he smacked his head on the very steel rod that saved me. There was blood coming out of his mout—oh god. Why is there a big piece of metal in my dad...that’s...that’s not supposed to be in his abdomen.

“Seems it didn’t do much to you, guess I should have listened—heh.” He chuckled. “Look, Corano, I am sorry I have to be so vague, but I was told to be. Go find Ryke, then seek out Rochellye. He is the best of us. Tell him...tell him that I entrust the rest to him. Tell him I loved him as a brother and make damn sure you tell him—kof—he still owes me 20 Vols.”

“Please stop talking like you’re dying, you’re not, you can’t be. Mom and I need you! I-I feel a bit clearer now, I can-.”

“NO, you can’t, and you won’t. Please, Corano.” His voice began to tremble and weaken to the point I barely recognized it. This can’t be happening. I was just under a tree, I was throwing a ball, so why is my dad bleeding?

“Son, I’ll see you again. Son—kof—, don’t worry, continue—kof kof—studying, and you’ll find the brightest sun. I’ll be the shadow watching over you—kof kof kof—where no shadow can reside.”

“I DON’T CARE ABOUT SOME STUPID SUN! Why did you hate me? Why are you saying this now, like you’re dying or something? You said you were making Asteroid Soup for my birthday next week...you promised. You even said Ryke, Byron, and Myneshe could come! Yyou said you were going to take me to the opening of the Moralo Archive! Hey, hey dad, I forgot my chrono at home! You always scold me, I will clean everything four, no, five times over when we get home!”

“I—I—I loved the tea.” His eyes went emotionless, and a blank expression covered...well...dad. I waited.

His blank expression remained unchanged. He's probably just in pain. Yeah, he just needs to get something for the pain. I know I shouldn't remove the metal...

"Why don't you ever say you love me? Why don't you love me? Am I not good enough? I promise I'll fix my lis—I mean, I will fix my lisp. You can say it right now, you can say you love me right now dad an—and that you're proud of me. I got an A on my history final, did I tell you? Are you listening? I got nervous again about telling Myneshe about my feelings; I know Ryke has feelings for her too. I need you to show me how, dad. Mom is very pretty, and you married her, you are supposed to show me how to be strong in this world. I don't have a 'y' dad, I-I-I love you dad. Please say something. We can go to Stromos next orbit if you say something. I have some Vols saved up! I just want to make you and Mom proud. I love you dad, why don't you love me?"

I didn't realize I had closed my eyes and was yelling. I can't see straight, but I am not sure if it's from that bright light, all the dust from the explosion, or my own personal rain. My throat hurts. My head hurts. Why does my chest hurt? I opened my eyes and looked at dad, his expression unchanged. One of my tears fell in his eye, but he didn't blink. He's probably in shock.

"Dad?" Shaking him isn't doing anything. "You need to activate your chrono." No response. "It's okay, I know you're having trouble speaking, I'll use mi—"Wait, no please no. FUCK WHY DID I LEAVE IT? It was on my desk, directly in front of me. "Let me get a Body member, I'm sure they can get Nurse-Maram or something—"

"Corano, I—I don't know what to say. I am...I am so sorry. He's gone. Claire and I can't hear a heartbeat." I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned. What I saw was what was left of Ryke.

Then everything went black.