

TIME GATE

Ascension at Aechyr

Book I

By Evan J Kuder

I

A False Start

It all happened in a single moment.

As the embers circled in the smokey night air. As they lived their little loops and then flickered out. As they were quenched by winds drifting in from the sea. The waves lapped at the bloody sands and stained rocks, whose patchy outcroppings grew thicker as one went inland. Or tried to.

The unmoving bodies wrapped at the bases or foisted on the peaks of these stones were unholy testimony to the difficulty of such a journey. The approach to the cliff face was precarious even in open sand because of *them*. The enemy skulking in the crags of the sheer rock, pelting bullets down into the beach. Some lay in waiting inside caves and tunnels. Some scuttled to better vantage points to ensnare incautious men below. And some manned cannons—great bloated beasts belching fire at the scrambling soldiers below.

But at that moment, they were silent. Their absence made the beach seem almost quiet, at least for a second. But soon the air would be alive with screams. Shouted orders, cries for help, or shrieks of pain.

I wasn't listening to them. That particular symphony was already too familiar to me. I was fixated on a point in the distance. At a crater just in front of the cave carved into the rise. A deep red light burned from below and spilled out ominously onto the scarred sand. But the cave, the gullet of a sleeping dragon, wasn't the thing I was staring at. I was staring at the nothing just in front of the mouth.

They had been there just a moment ago.

I caught a glimpse of another squad to my left. They were preparing another assault. *I should go to them*, I thought. I was all alone otherwise. But as soon as I considered this, I finally saw something stir in the space I was staring at.

A shadow picked itself off the ground slightly. The form had lost most of its gear, enough so that it was almost recognizable. It was a woman, lying under the lip of the cave, silhouetted against the flickering bloom beneath. She was wounded, but safely out of sight of the attackers above. At least for the moment.

I looked back towards the other squad. They were closer. They would need all the help they could get. In the relative quiet, as the world seemed to catch its breath, nothing was certain. Every direction promised danger. But I fixated.

In that one moment, I acted.

I leapt over the rise and my boots hit the sand. I charged forward, right towards my wounded comrade.

And after two steps, the sand exploded in front of me.

The ground was ripped from me, and for a moment I was weightless, and everything was truly silent. It was nearly bliss. But the stinging shock stabbed back into my brain as I slammed into the sand.

When the dust settled, when my vision faded back in, I saw the cold moon staring down on me. It was wreathed with a scattering of circling embers. I watched them flicker out with detached disinterest. I almost forgot where I was.

Then the pain set in. Like burning oil poured into a vessel shaped like my body. My bones blistered. My shoulder splintered in agony. It shattered. And somehow, as my senses returned, it kept getting worse. The pain burrowed into my brain. I let out a scream.

And then I shot up in my bed.

A cold sweat drenched me and a vice crushed my shoulder. Gasping for breath, I tried to see where *he* was, but I couldn't see anything. My vision was entirely bleached. I could only stare into a uniformly murky white. Gulping down a few lungfuls, I shivered. The heat of the battlefield had disappeared, replaced with a hollow cold. I realized the clamp on my shoulder was my own hand. For a moment, I couldn't remember how to ease my muscles. I pried my fingers in spasms from my body. I almost panicked as my hand, even free from my shoulder, kept its muscles locked tightly.

But slowly, they relaxed again. I could feel every tendon, primed from exertion, for minutes after that. But relief shuddered through me. Relief and a sick feeling. I wasn't on the beach. I was safe in my dorm. Everything was normal. Even my blindness was normal. But the dream's emotions had congealed at the bottom of my stomach. Like they did every night.

I felt the nausea from getting worked up, even as the details of the dream began to dissolve. The compulsion to save every detail jerked me into action. I reached over towards the nightstand, fingers fumbling for my glasses. My hand clumsily slammed into several shapes, one of which I recognized as the alarm clock. I was close. I moved my hand right, towards the glasses and—

They clattered to the floor. I cursed myself. Every second, the dream was becoming less vivid.

I leaned over the bed to feel around and misjudged the edge of the mattress. I tumbled and banged my wrist. Finally, I found my glasses and carefully placed them over my eyes. Everything finally swam into view. My academy dorm room, in the middle of the night. Exactly as it should have been.

My wrist throbbed as I looked around for my notebook. I saw it on the floor immediately. I had shoved it too off the nightstand in my fumbling. I started to reach for it, then stopped. My aching hand wasn't exactly in writing condition, and my sudden re-introduction to the real world had already obliterated some specifics of the landing from my mind. I could afford a moment to wake up a little before I did something else stupid.

I slowly crept into the bathroom. Splashing water on my face helped ground me in the moment. I looked at myself in the mirror, and some of the sickness settled. My face was still pale, paler than its usual sandy tone. And I had gotten some of the strands of my dark blonde hair wet. They hung to either side of my face, parted down the middle into two short curtains ending near the temples of the sunglasses.

The sunglasses. I pulled them off and wiped water droplets away with my T-shirt. Once more, I was plunged into a world of white until I put them back on my face. I felt like a tool wearing them at night, but what choice did I have? Polarized, photochromatic, UV protected, and most of all, just really dark, they were the only thing that let me see anymore. They wrapped around my face, giving me as large a field of view as possible, and always marked me apart from everyone else.

I certainly felt apart. And not just because I was probably the only one up at that hour. These dreams were telling me something. Something impossible, but there was truth in there, I was sure. If only I could figure it out.

Almost every night, I would wake up in the middle of the same dream. Over and over again, it played in my head. Every night, it felt

so real. But it couldn't be. I had never been a marine. I had never stormed any beaches. I had never even been in a real fight.

All things considered, I was a screwup. A screwup who had been swept up into something incredible, but nothing like my dreams. In reality, I had run away from home, only to be recruited into some interdimensional agency. Basically. They had the time gate—a portal to another world. Just what I had needed. Or so I thought, until I stepped through and lost my sight. They told me it was a freak accident and made me my sunglasses to compensate. After that, they shipped me here.

Nowhere in there did I become a marine. Nowhere in there had I nearly died on a dirty beach. So why was I remembering it?

If there were answers anywhere, they would be in the dreams themselves. I walked back into my room, towards the notebook where I charted every detail of those visions. Usually, I scrambled to get the fleeting glimpses of my dreams onto paper as soon as I woke up, hoping that one of these nights I would remember something new that would solve this riddle. It was my hopeless ritual. It was the only thing I could do.

I picked the notebook up from its spot next to the camouflage bedspread spilling onto the floor. In the morning, the bedding would be a claim to the identity I thought I lost. In the dim blue light, it looked like a joke. My jumbled thoughts were reaching back for unreal memories, like twisted *déjà vu*, and what I found made the pattern on the bed seem childish.

I took a deep breath. The real thing was waiting. If it was real at all. I sat behind my desk, opened the journal, and prepared to dive back in. I concentrated on finding the earliest thread of the last dream. It was always so hard to find the beginning. Eventually, I found the earliest part I could remember, and started writing.

Rolling. I remembered the rolling motion. A surging upwards, then a stomach-churning fall. We crashed into the next wave, a slow-motion collision. The cramped transport pushed its way through the roiling seas.

Inside, there was barely enough room to breathe, and the atmosphere was thick enough that I didn't want to. The marines were packed in tight lines, facing the firmly sealed door. The smell of oil and sweaty anticipation soaked the air. Red light bathed the faces of the troops in front of me. I was near the back, with only a sliver of a view of the rest of the compartment.

We hit another swell, and a trickle of water swung back towards me. As the boat pointed into the air, the stream splashed across my helmet, dribbling down on my face. We reached the top of the wave and plunged down again. The stream angled away from me, just as my stomach lurched into my throat. With a shudder, we reached the bottom, and we started the whole process again. I tried to adjust, to lean out of the way, but there was no space. We were shoulder-to-shoulder in there. Add in our gear and rifles and there was nowhere to go to avoid the next splash.

I gritted my teeth and wiped the salty droplets off my face.

"Doin' all right, son?" someone asked from my right side. I looked over to Thomas Madding. He was big, standing six feet to the dot, and with a hearty amount of muscle. His skin was rough, coffee-colored, and hairless. I kept imagining I would see a gray bristle, but nope. He didn't even have any stubble around his jaw. It made it extremely hard to tell his age. He was young enough to outperform all of us in all the drills, but he had an air of experience around him. Maybe it was the deep, commanding voice.

"A-OK," I said loudly over the roaring engine. It sounded too loud to me. Surely, the baying motor was betraying us by belting out our position. I started to anticipate that something might tear through the landing craft, splintering it to bits.

“I hope we get out soon,” I added to Tommy.

He leaned in closer. Only to me, he said quietly, “You’ll be eating those words pretty quick.”

He looked me in the eye seriously. I didn’t have an answer, but I didn’t really need to give him one. He probably knew exactly what I was thinking. He had an uncanny ability to befriend everyone in the squad, and I was no exception. Of the few friends I had, he automatically added himself to the list.

All at once, something changed in the air. I heard a radio squawking, but the words were gibberish. Someone replied intensely, and a ripple ran through the marines. You could hardly see it; everyone was still stoic, ready for the order to charge out. But you could feel it. Something was deeply wrong.

A man signaled for us to ready ourselves. Everyone did so with solemn dread. Any foolish eagerness had been quashed. Something had gone sideways for sure.

As I checked my things, I whispered to Tommy, “Who screwed up?”

“Don’t sweat it,” he said, but for once, his words weren’t much comfort. The atmosphere quenched the spirit in them. Tommy saw this, looked back to me, and added in a louder voice, “Must be the boys upstairs again. Once again, someone was too busy pushing papers to certify the obvious. Once again, something wasn’t filed in triplicate, and slipped through the cracks. Once again, someone was too busy calculating to think. Once again—as per standard procedure. So it’s just another day at the office, son. Just like always, it’s up to the boys on the ground to pick up the pieces, carry the load, and punch our way through. And just like every other day, we’ll do it, and we’ll do it in style. And when we get back, we’ll give the boys another complaint for them to lose. So no sense moanin’ now. Another day, another disaster.”

“And another drink,” another of our squad, Happy, chimed in.

“You’re buying,” Claire insisted from behind him.

“Sure thing, sweetheart,” Happy replied. “It’s a date.”

Claire rolled her eyes as we heard the man upfront call out again. Our lines stiffened. Tommy glanced over his shoulder one last time.

“Alright, kid. Ready to jam?”

Behind his grin, there was a warning. Not all of us would be coming back.

I nodded and gave him a joyless grin in return.

We heard thuds from outside. Something rattled. The booms became more and more regular, like a cacophony of fireworks.

The boat levelled out. I felt the deck suddenly rise. It was sudden, almost violent. Not like the waves had been. The boat never jumped towards the sky. It was a shallow rise, and I could feel the craft slide up the plane. It was solid ground. We were there.

The light flashed green, turning all our skin sickly. The giant hatch at the end of the room heaved open. With a thud that shook the deck, it dug itself into the sand. Immediately, the front lines drained out of the craft.

The columns advanced, slowly, as we disembarked. I could just make out the first glimpses of the landscape between the heads of those in front of me. I saw a mountainous rise beyond the beach. We had landed in a cove, a cave opening onto the sea at one point. Many more opened to the sand. One was directly in my line of sight. It glowed, like there was a deep fire inside it.

The line moved forward again. I could hear the gunfire now. It rattled off from different directions. Occasionally the rapid staccato was punctuated by a deep boom of a heavier shell being fired, or a thunderous tremor as it struck the ground. I saw a plume of sand shoot skyward outside and felt my stomach shrivel with dread. How much longer until our landing craft was targeted?

Another group of marines charged out. We were inching closer. Just inching. The ship rattled, but it hadn't been hit yet.

The line shortened. It was painfully slow. But there were only a few men left before it was my turn. My turn. Would that be worse than the waiting?

Finally, Happy dove out of the transport. He vanished from my sight as he zipped out. I lost track of him and tried to bury my worry.

Claire was next, right behind him. She ran down the ramp into the maw of chaos opening in front of us. Before I could mentally wish her well, the line moved again.

The man in front of me charged out. It was our turn.

Tommy rushed in, shouted something to me, but I froze. It was the most terrifying moment of my life. Just inside the familiar walls of the transport, I stood on the precipice of static fear and the utter insanity of the open world ahead.

Fire and salt assailed my nostrils as I watched the streaming lines of marines rushing towards the impenetrable rock. The rocky cliffside loomed at us threateningly. Marines searched for cover in the frantic hailstorm. Some laid motionless on the sand, near splintered shells and guns.

In that fraction of a second, I also saw Tommy. He was charging in undaunted. Something made a decision for me. I started running forward, my legs moving on my own. While my conscious mind reeled at the assault of sights, sounds, and smells, my training kicked in. The endless drills made it instinct. I didn't think, I acted.

I pounded down the deck, my heart slamming in beat after beat. It was like it was making up for every one it would never get. Adrenaline pushed itself through my veins. I forced myself into the fray, as fast as I could.

And then it all exploded in front of me.

I dropped the pencil. My hand was seizing up in pain. I leaned back, looking at my furious scribbles. I had been writing in a frenzy, and my hand couldn't take any more. I set it aside and tried to relax.

But another headache was on me. I wasn't sure anymore if a shell really had exploded in front of me as I ran out of the landing craft. That hadn't been the moment when I had to choose between running towards the marine at the cave and joining another squad. But it was suspiciously similar.

Both times, everything seemed to be in slow-motion. Both times, I was getting ready to run out onto the beach. And both times, I was cut short by an explosion in front of me. Though, charging out of the craft, I was sure I hadn't actually been hit. It had looked closer than it had been. But still, I wondered if I was getting it right.

That was a problem. Even though the dreams seemed the same each night, when I jotted them down, discrepancies started to emerge. One night, I remembered Claire jumping out before Happy. Another time, Tommy was in front of me, not beside me. Sometimes, we were closer to the door. Other times, farther away. A hundred little changes, enough to eat away at my certainty.

Panic rose up in me again. In those moments where I wasn't sure of anything, of what was real or what wasn't, it got worse. My mental defenses collapsed, and a roiling wave of confusion washed over me. Hideous howling winds ripped away my sense of self, until I was dissociated fragments of awareness, tumbling in a lose pattern through an unforgiving world.

Stop. Stop it, I told myself.

Breathe. Focus on what you do know. Anchor yourself.

I am Kennedy Frost. Serial number... No, I didn't have a serial number.

Yes, I absolutely did, another part of my mind resisted. It was struggling to find the numbers. It was sure that I could do this on instinct, and yet, nothing was coming to me. As if something had been cut out of me—a phantom limb of a past life.

Forget the number. What do you know for sure?

I am Kennedy Frost. I am eighteen years old. Is that old enough to enlist?

Focus.

I am currently in my dorm room. I am enrolled in Aechyrr Academy. My dorm is in Aechyrr Academy West. I had to resist telling myself, “Duh” after that. I know it’s obvious, that’s the point of the exercise. Now keep going.

Aechyrr Academy is in the nation of Aechyrr. Aechyrr like “acre.” And Aechyrr shouldn’t exist.

I sighed and went to my window. Opening it, the smell of the ocean wafted into my room. For a split-second I thought about diving to cover. As the smell hit my nostrils, I was back at the cove, assaulting the beach. But after a few seconds, the difference became obvious. This time, the scent was somehow cool, calming. Pure salty spray. No hint of burning, or gunpowder, or death. Just the waves.

No, as I looked down, a much friendlier beach met my eyes. In the distance, pure white sands glistened in the silver moonlight. Dark blue waves gently lapped at it. The rhythmic shushing sound soothed me, even as I thought about how this place shouldn’t exist.

Aechyrr was an island nation, roughly the same size as the UK. But back home, in my world, you couldn’t find it on any map. In this world, you could spot it easily enough—just look for that little pocket between the Carolinas and Florida, and you’d find Aechyrr nestling up to the lower United States. I was pretty sure we didn’t just miss this landmass back home. No, Aechyrr only existed in this one alternate universe.

I looked at it. Towards the capitol, Thysiopolis, and the mountains rising behind it. Towards the rest of campus below. And in the opposite direction, towards the flat forests beyond the city. I drank in all the sights, just thankful to see again.

I stood there for a while, my mind clearing. Everything was quiet. I could believe everything would just stay like that forever, nothing ever changing. As if I was alone in the world.

I realized I had been zoning out when a sleek black car crawled through the still landscape. As it pulled out of the campus and towards the capitol, I wondered how much time I had lost.

Looking back inside, I saw my alarm clock dimly display 4:42 a.m. I shook my head. No one in their right mind would be up at this hour. I would have thought about going to bed, but I would never be able to fall back asleep. For as long as I could remember, whenever I woke up, even if it was the middle of the night, I would stay up. The dreams hadn't changed that.

I felt at my wrist. It didn't hurt quite as much. Just a little sore. I had to get down the rest of my story, what little I could remember of it. Even if what I had just dreamed didn't match the other dozens of versions I had jotted down, I had to save what I had relived. Anything could wind up being the clue I needed.

I walked back to my desk but left the window open. I might need a calming influence.

Picking up the pencil, I continued where I had left off.

The sand shot up in a fiery pillar. The shockwave ran up my legs. A split-second later, it thudded against my chest.

When I realized I was still standing, I dived for cover. Only once I had ducked behind a piece of debris did I let myself look for the rest of my team. To my shuddering relief, I saw Tommy and the

others had also taken shelter. They were huddled far ahead of me, and Tommy barked something to Claire and Happy.

I edged closer, ready to run up to them as soon as it was clear. But as I peeked around the corner, Tommy spotted me. He held up a hand and shouted back to me. But he was too far away and something roared overhead. A huge explosion rocked the beach from behind us. I tried to ignore it, focusing on Tommy. I cupped my hand to my ear to signal to him I hadn't heard.

He glanced towards the cliffs. As if shushed by his glare, there was a lull in the pounding gunfire.

Tommy quickly turned back and shouted, "Our comms are down. Get the backup and—"

Another explosion cut his words short. I saw sand plume behind Tommy, but it wasn't close enough to throw shrapnel into him. Still, he reflexively ducked. Someone else shouted in the distance. Tommy glanced back at me one last time.

"Get to the comms, that's an order!" he barked.

Then he turned back to the others, and they leapt back into the fray. I felt it as they ripped themselves away from me. I had to root myself to the ground to not follow after. I tore my gaze away from the beach as it was chewed up around them and looked back towards the landing craft.

It was burning, half in the water, half in the sand. It looked like the waves were on fire. And spillage littered the sand. Strips of metal. Equipment. And somewhere in that mechanical gore was the backup comms.

Suddenly I had control over myself again. I rushed into the minefield, eyes darting across the wreckage. My mind was racing, processing the information I was seeing too quickly to put into words. It didn't take me long to find what I was looking for.

I slid down next to the half-buried metal box. It flashed to life as my hands scrambled over the controls. Soon, I was shouting into it over the noise behind me. I turned back and saw my squad rushing from cover to cover.

The fight wasn't going well. If we couldn't push into their stronghold, we would be wiped out. I shouted this into the mic. Someone on the other side issued a placid reply. It was lost on me in a muddle of emotion, but I heard something about backup.

Finally. Before I could get details, though, another shell exploded to my side. I buried myself in the sand, and when I sat back up, saw I was unharmed. The spare comms was another story.

Shrapnel had lodged itself into the back of the transmitter, gutting its usefulness. No sense staying here. I darted forward, careful to cling to any concealment I could find. I was heading straight for my team when it happened.

A shell landed right in the middle of the group, and they were swallowed by fire and sand. Ducking behind a rise, I waited, nerves electrified. But as the dust settled, no one moved.

I stared. My muscles coiled and uncoiled again. I didn't believe what I was seeing.

I saw the other fireteam making their way up the beach. I remembered the overall situation. Our odds of winning this were already near zero.

And then, with one motion in the distance, it was all real.

Claire stirred at the mouth of the cavern. The red glow surrounded her, as if she was on fire. Feeling kicked back in, right down to my toes. Claire was moving gingerly, haltingly.

I pushed aside the other fireteam. I had to help her.

My guts roiling, I leapt into action. I wasn't calm. I wasn't controlled. But I had a goal. Clarity. Peace of Mind.

Almost.

I was knocked off my feet almost as soon as they had gone over the ridge. I landed on my back and shock numbed me. I saw the pale moon, and the slowly circling embers. And finally, the pain set in. It burned through me and took my mind.

And yet, I was sure that somewhere in there, I heard footsteps. Crunching sand and broken metal underneath.

I set down the pencil. If there was anything concrete to these visions, I had lost it by now. The early morning haze had rolled in over the memory of the dreams. I could have just been making this up now.

My headache, my unease, started to creep back in. Even though I finished putting down what I had relived, I was still wallowing in uncertainty. Or was it dread? Did that last part of the dream dredge up the fear that came with the end of the memory?

I had been spared that final scene that night, but every other time I revisited the beach, it ended the same way. With *him*. I shuddered. He seemed the most unreal part. But if the rest of the dream was real, he had to be too. Given the choice, I wasn't sure which I'd take.

As the doubt built up in my chest, I looked for some sort of anchor. I turned on the TV, hoping for some mild white noise.

"...missile program may even rival America's. Testing is scheduled for the end of November," the newsmen said, ending a story. "In more somber news, the Queen's condition continues to deteriorate. Despite the best care being made available, doctors tell us it is only a matter of time. Joining us is Dr. Hardwick to discuss the situation. Doctor, what are looking at in terms of time?"

It wasn't helping. A Queen was, quite literally, a foreign concept to me. I was still trying to sort out my two lives. One where I

had been sent, uneventfully, to Aechyr. Another where I had been gravely wounded charging into battle. I shook my head and turned off the TV.

I saw underneath stacks of old movies. Movies from another dimension. Cheesy flicks that would love that label. I thought about putting one of them on instead but realized that wouldn't be much better. They would wind up being familiar, but different. In the day, that made them wildly entertaining. But they were given to me to be educational—to get me acclimated to this world. Tonight, they would be neither. Just confusing.

Instead, I tried to bring the day closer by getting ready. I cleaned up and slipped on my usual white T-shirt and camouflage pants. The sun still hadn't cracked the horizon.

And still, the nagging in the back of my head persisted. I looked back to my notebook. I had a sinking feeling that the only way out was through. The rest of the memory, what would be the rest of the dream on any other night, was waiting for me. Maybe to exorcise myself of the dread clinging to me, I would have to read the other entries. Relive it just once more.

I didn't have anything else to do, so I sat down once more. I paged to the last entry. Skimming through it, ignoring the inconsistencies, I found roughly where the most recent vision had ended.

And I leapt in to finish it.

I was lying there.

I was wounded and I couldn't do anything. I was on one side with shrapnel in the other. I was drained of all my energy. Exhausted. Adrenaline did nothing anymore. It was all over. No more screams left in me. And all I had done was rush forward and get killed.

Then he stepped through the ash.

He walked toward me calmly despite the war raging around him. His stride was unworldly, serene, but his body was as real as the dead around him.

He was tall and bone thin. His alabaster skin hugged his skull just a little too tightly. His mouth curled slightly at the edges, making a thin smile. He had a pointed nose, which he might have been holding it high in the air, but that could have been my angle. His eyes literally shone in the dark—a bright eerie green, like two burning ghosts floating through the air. His hair was long and white, the only part of him paler than his skin. At one point, it might have been kept in line. Now, strands blew freely in the breeze. He wore a perfectly black suit. There wasn't even a seam to break it up. His shoes and gloves were equally black, though the shoes glinted in the moonlight.

They, and the rest of him, were spotlessly clean. It was as if he had taken considerable effort to remove any trace of filth. On this battlefield, where dirt seemed to seep into every crevice, that was quite a task. But his neat appearance did nothing to make him seem friendlier. I had the impression that his job back in whatever dim realm he had come from would be to extract the worst fears and weaknesses of his victims. Then, he would systematically use these discoveries against them.

As he carefully stepped forward, avoiding anything that might stain his boots, I noticed his hand. It was cradling some sort of silver sphere, but it was hard to make out. An impossibly bright, piercing light burst out of an opening, already stabbing into my eyes. The light seemed tinged blue, but it was so intense it dimmed everything around it.

He reached me and knelt down, right next to me. I tried to squirm away, but my body didn't cooperate. I couldn't say anything. Exhaustion and fear kept me pinned. As did his mere presence. He briefly scanned over my body. I thought he must have been inspecting

my wounds. It was like he was a doctor examining a terminally ill patient. No, it was as if he were a coroner examining a corpse.

He grabbed my face with his hand and forced me to look him straight in the eyes. The green glow faded slightly and his pupils started to shimmer. I felt like I was looking into two obsidian mirrors. Then, I felt him extract every ounce of my experiences and emotions and understand them fully. I was mortified. Had I been right? Was he now going to use my greatest fear against me? What would it be? Could I handle it? I had a sickening feeling that I couldn't. At that moment, I became convinced that my greatest fear, of everything in the world, was him. He didn't even have to do anything. I was already terrified.

He started to bring up the silver device and I tried to look away, but his hand gripped my head firmly. I was frantic, desperate. Then I saw his eyes change. The green was drowned in circulating blood red. Blood circling two black holes, only hatred escaping their pull.

I glanced up at the stars and moon, at anything but the white glare that was overtaking my vision. It wouldn't stop, and in desperation I closed my eyes as tightly as I could. It didn't matter. The light penetrated my eyelids and burned straight into me. It seemed to irradiate every synapse of my brain and consume my entire consciousness. It bore into my brain, into my very soul. Nothing remained except whiteness.

I waited for it to clear.

It never did.

The sky had been the last thing I ever saw with my own eyes.

||

Aechyr Academy

It was a bright, beautiful day. The sun was out, birds were singing, and I hated every moment of it. What I wouldn't have given for gray skies and a light drizzle.

I was up long before most everyone else. Typical college students don't like waking before the crack of noon, which was fine by me. If the elite students wanted to surrender the space to me, I was more than happy to decompress.

I fell into my morning run. My path took me right into the heart of Aechyr Academy—a huge courtyard in the middle of the campus. It was outlined by red brick paths, dotted by a few tables along the edges, and broken up by shady trees every couple dozen feet. The very center of it all was marked by an elaborate fountain, already bubbling happily along.

I shook my head as I passed it. I still couldn't believe Time Peace—the interdimensional agency that recruited me—put me here. The reason Aechyr Academy could so boldly claim the name of the

nation it belonged to was because of its prestigious history and its ongoing mission. It produced a remarkable number of senators, judges, high-profile businessmen, and all-around important figures. And that wasn't by accident. The country invested a lot in making sure the Academy found potential and cranked out real skill. It was practically a public service, both the schools and the students.

So what in the world was I doing here?

I passed one of the towering pillars which marked the corners of the courtyard. This one was topped with a wolf pointing southeast to the quadrant for Political Theory and Business. The roots of all evil, as the students said.

Time Peace insisted I pay attention to my class in this wing. Intro to Aechrian Civics. Whatever they would have me doing in this timeline, I must have needed to know how its unique country worked.

Professor Martinez, while comparing and contrasting the virtues of a monarchy and democracy, liked to try and catch any dozing students off-guard. My sunglasses probably made me look like I was slipping into a morning snooze, so it wasn't too surprising he had a tendency to call on me unexpectedly.

"Mr. Frost, please tell us one benefit of a democracy over a monarchy," he had instructed on one such occasion.

"You get the leader you deserve," I said, only half-thinking. I realized that snarky sentiment was probably inappropriate for the class, brought on by another night of bad dreams. I snapped my mouth shut. But Professor Martinez waited, expecting me to elaborate. Cautiously, I said, "If the candidate wasn't trustworthy, it was still your choice to elect them. If you're lazy about it, then you can't be surprised who you wind up with. If you give away your power, your vote, you have no one to blame but yourself."

"An interesting insight," Professor Martinez... complimented? To the class, "Keep in mind the implications of where political power

comes from. Someone else, what is a counter argument in favor of monarchy? Miss Criss?" he asked of someone behind me.

A dismissive voice replied, "In theory? That the people deserve better."

I didn't listen to the rest of the answers but glanced around with my eyes safely concealed. No one was looking at me like I was an idiot. They seemed too busy eagerly explaining the virtues of having a symbolic monarch. Maybe they were too busy patting themselves on the back to notice how basic what I said had been.

Now I was selling them short, I thought. I ran past two guys deep in discussion over a pile of papers, their eyes baggy with exhaustion. They hardly paid attention as they walked down the stately staircase sloping up to a building whose pillars subtly reminded me of a capitol building. Even so, the taller guy glanced up and nodded as I passed.

That was the thing. You would think such a successful university would be pretty snooty, right? Not Aechyrr Academy. I couldn't tell you how they had done it, but somehow, there was very little boastfulness around the place. From the teachers to the students, it was all... well maybe not down-to-earth, but close enough.

I passed the northeast pillar, topped by a posturing hawk. Posturing—perfect for the Law and Philosophy quarter, I thought. If you didn't say precisely what you meant to these people, in exacting detail, they would often twist the conversation in an unexpected way. And cut down any attitude that would sour the atmosphere of the place.

Last week, during Professor Perry's Intro to Philosophy class, another student thought their play on the words *a posteriori* was too hilarious not to share aloud.

"Thank you for sharing, James," Professor Perry had replied with an easy, if thin, smile. "I hope we'll be hearing just as much from you in our discussion groups."

James shrugged this off, seeming to think that was the worst coming his way. He was wrong.

“And that brings us to synthetic versus analytic,” Professor Perry said minutes later. “James, let’s have another witticism, if you will. Something better than the obvious, if you can.”

James was, in fact, winding up for another lowball when the professor beat him to the punch. His request took the wind from James’ sails. James’ quip was delivered a lot less impressively and got a far less enthusiastic chuckle.

“Two out of ten,” the professor said sadly. “Let’s hope your quiz scores are better.”

As I continued to run, the stately red-brick buildings turned to simple, modern buildings. A lot of white walls and big glass windows. This was the northwest, the quarter guarded by a sleek fox where the departments for Arts and Sciences were. The Science department tended to soak up much of the Academy’s resources, and it dwarfed the jealous Arts wing. Still, it seemed strangely appropriate that the two shared a quadrant.

As if to prove my point, a small pack of excitedly yammering students nearly got hit by a frisbee. They had their heads in the clouds and had totally missed the ultimate frisbee team coming out for early practice. I tried to guess what had distracted them from the real world: a fascinating scientific idea, or a new artistic aesthetic?

“Heads up, Candlestick,” the guy who tossed the frisbee said, laughing in embarrassment.

Candlestick. Arts, it was then. I remembered a story going around about how someone nearly burned down a theater set after knocking over a lit candle that had been intended to make a set look more “authentic”. Authenticity became a bit of a dirty word in the department after that, I heard.

It was hard to figure out the nicknames that flew around sometimes. Like a particular guy who partied too hard and passed out on a pile of jackets and woke up with creases all across his face. He was soon dubbed Leather-Face. Bonus points there, since he thought he was something of a tough guy. But was that an endearing nickname or reminder to shape up? Hard to say. Maybe the test was if a professor started picking it up. “That’s what the kids are calling you, aren’t they?”

Yeah, that was definitely the line. It might sound kind of awful, but punishment was public, while praise was private. At least when it came to the professors. As for students... glancing back, it seemed Candlestick was smiling at Frisbee Guy now. Sometimes taking a few lumps brought the students closer together.

And no group on campus was more tightly knit together than the Navy cadets. I passed the pillar supporting the Bison, which marked the way to the Naval wing. Other Academies would train the Army or Air force. Here, it was the Navy. I should say that the Aechyr Academy I was describing was actually one of four Aechyr Academies. We were in Academy West, on, you guessed it, the West Coast of Aechyr, which housed a healthy-sized dock for passing naval vessels.

As soon as I stepped over the imaginary boundary into Navy territory, I felt the atmosphere change. Somehow, the air was crisper, more intense. I hesitated. And then I turned back towards the courtyard. Whatever my dreams and inner convictions said, I felt wrong being there.

By now, more students were starting to mill about. I recognized several of them in a particularly thick group. There was Isiah, tall, dreadlocked, always with a grin and a helpful attitude. Denisha, still on her phone even as she talked with the group, no doubt keeping a close eye on her schedule along with the other conversations she was having in cyberspace. Scarlett, hair matching the name, off to the side, quiet, yet capable of gently steering the conversation when she did speak up. Michael, eyes always half-closed like he was about to

fall asleep, chiming in on some technicality in the conversation, one hand making sliding gestures, while the other was stuck in his pocket. And then there was David.

David Greene. David was friends with everyone. He had a friendly face, warm, green eyes (appropriately enough), and his brown hair was left kind of shaggy, wavy. Despite his young looks, he was by far the most mature freshman on campus. I, unfortunately, was subject to his gentle, yet iron will all too often.

Because David was team leader.

David was in the middle of the overlapping conversation in the huddle of students, and yet, he still noticed me pass by from across the courtyard. He managed to pick me out, meet my eyes, and nod in just such a way that I knew meant “come talk to me.” He did it all without missing a beat. Of course he did.

I won't lie, I resented having to report to David. He hadn't done anything to me, he was easy to get along with, and I wasn't jealous. He just irritated me. And he irritated me because I had no right to be irritated with him.

When I hated David, it was because I could see the ghost of a familiar pain. But his didn't linger, it didn't fester. It had forged him. I resented that he had come out of his suffering whole. It didn't leave me room to make excuses for myself.

I changed my course slightly and stopped in front of a small unoccupied table within sight of the large group. I took a sip from my water bottle as I waited. David didn't come up immediately, of course. Although it was no secret that our little group associated with each other, we didn't play up our ties. To the contrary, we preferred to go our own ways when we didn't have to be together. Usually, this was just fine with me. Right now, when I had to pretend to take a rest while waiting for his conversation to finally end, it was less so. But he didn't make me wait long.

“Meeting tonight,” David said when he arrived. He wasn’t trying to talk in a whisper or to speak in code or anything. He disguised any importance in the message with an air of casual conversation. Sometimes that was the best approach.

“On campus?” I asked. We had met a few times in the dorms to go over some very, very basic information. I had never liked that idea. The rooms were fine, but they were small, and cramming four people in was never pleasant.

David was way ahead of me. “Nope. Pick you up on the corner of 4th and Arbor. Bring Blake.”

“You’ll have Randy?” I asked.

“Yep,” he replied. “We’ll get you all caught up.”

He looked more closely at me for a moment, deciding what to say, or if to say it. Finally, “You hanging in there?”

“I’m fine,” I answered. It was a bad lie.

David thought carefully for a moment longer.

“Give it time,” he suggested. “How about the campus? Getting familiar with it?”

“Yep,” I said curtly.

“Good. We take things one step at a time. Soon enough, you’ll be bored. It’s just the change at first that gets you.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said skeptically.

I regretted taking that tone. I had just invited him to pry further. If I had a mind for social stuff, I would have latched onto the excuse he provided. I would have agreed and he would have to drop it.

I think. I couldn’t be sure how a conversation with David would go. Despite being no older than me, he was already a spook—a spy. Everything he did, nice as it seemed, might have more than one meaning.

David nodded. "Okay then. See you at six." He rapped the table once with his knuckles, turned and walked away.

Not what I had expected. Was I being too harsh on him? Or was I overthinking everything? There was too much I didn't know. Tonight should help. 1800 hours. Good.

I immediately set off on my jog again. The crowd David had been a part of had dispersed, and there were many more students in the courtyard now. It seemed morning had reached a critical mass. Classes were about to start for most students. Not for me just yet. I pounded the pavement, keeping my thoughts from circling each other faster and faster.

And just as I started beating away the distracting mind clutter, I ran straight into someone.

Stumbling back to my feet, I muttered, "Sorry."

"Watch it," the guy I had bumped into said. When I finally tore my eyes from the ground to see him, I was kind of surprised. He stood next to two other figures; all three of them were wearing the unofficial school uniform.

Hardly anyone actually wore the "uniform." It was just a convention for job interviews or if you were out representing the school. But these guys had bucked tradition. In the exact same way. The usual navy of the blazer and slacks was replaced with a dark gray, and their dress shirts were black instead of white. They kept the tie dark, but now it was nearly invisible against their shirts. No club or team pins, though the school patch, a modification of the red and pale gold flag of Aechy, was still prominently displayed. The black eagle set against the bright quarters of the flag somehow looked more ominous on them than it had anywhere else.

The only difference between them was that first guy had rolled up his sleeves. That, and his hair was slightly longer than the severe cuts of his pals. The black locks were swept back casually, but his affected attitude couldn't maintain the carefree illusion.

“Well, no wonder you can’t see where you’re going,” he said, seeming to relax a little. “You trying to be a trend-setter?”

He was gesturing towards my sunglasses. Of course he was.

After my mistake, a little ribbing was justified. Didn’t mean I had to like it. Deciding to get this over with, I lifted the glasses to my forehead, revealing my pallid eyes.

“They just help me see,” I explained simply.

“Not very well, apparently,” Sleeves replied. “Maybe next time you should lean into the blind schtick and get a walking cane instead of worrying whether your Ray-Bans were in season. At least then if you’re still clumsy enough to run into people, your tap-tapping along will be a warning to those considerate enough to mind their own business.”

Huh? That wasn’t right. Sure, you were supposed to be ridiculed for doing something ridiculous, but not for being something different. Not for something you couldn’t help.

I’m not always good with reading a situation. But I should have trusted my gut as soon as I thought something was wrong. Because in the next moment, a hand snapped away the glasses.

“Let’s see these, Slick,” Sleeves said. “Very American. Ostentatious and tasteless.”

Some comeback about matching outfits caught in my throat. My brain had just gone from shock to lockdown. I was completely blind, only seeing a thick fog of white before me.

When my mind finally whirred back into motion, it flooded with hate and determination. But I remained perfectly still. I couldn’t do anything without my sight. For now, I couldn’t let any of my feelings show.

“Here,” I vaguely heard Sleeves say as the others snickered. I focused on where the voice came from. It was close.

I felt the hand approach my face again. That's all I needed.

Like a striking snake, my arm shot out, grabbed his hand and squeezed. He yelped in surprise. That was just the start.

I grabbed his collar with my free left hand. Pulling on this new anchor, I released my right and brought it around. My mental picture was right on. I felt my knuckles connect to his jaw. And then the others collided into me.

The fight devolved from there. It wasn't some martial arts exhibition with crisp moves and decisive strikes. It was a scuffle. Our bodies awkwardly collided as we piled together, throwing punches and throwing each other around. It was more wrestling than anything, and Sleeves and I hit the ground early, and hard.

I wasn't letting go. I had Sleeves, almost by the throat, and that was all I cared about. I focused on the grip more than anything else. I could have bent iron with that grip. In the blind haze, that grip was more solid to me than the ground, which sloped up to hit me again and again. The tangle of limbs and blows didn't make anything clearer, either. I was moving to add energy to the scuffle in the hope that something would come back around to hurt them.

I heard a new voice. Something else was kicking and pulling at them. Good. More ammo, I thought.

For a moment, I was freed from the mass of limbs. Just enough to launch into a new assault, swinging at the collar I still held tightly. My hand was starting to seize from the force of my grip.

And then a bellowing roar cut through the mad scramble. Its raw authority shocked me to my senses. I finally let go.

As I got to my feet, dusting myself off, I realized I had no idea where my glasses were. But then, I felt someone gently pressing them against my arm, with just enough force to let me know they were there.

"Here," Blake whispered.

Blake Anthony. My best friend. He had been the one to jump into the fight. It had been a stupid thing to do, of course. But I had already lowered the bar. Even if his charge hadn't been effective, I would have still owed him for that. For the sentiment alone. Especially since Blake couldn't fight to save his life.

I slipped the glasses on and he came into focus. He didn't look banged up, actually. He seemed like his usual self. He was a couple inches taller than me, though his hair was several inches shorter. The black tuft was vaguely spiked upwards, though that was less out of a sense of style and more the natural state of those bristles. It had always stuck up in some fashion for as long as I could remember. It was only now when it was cut shorter and as we were growing up that it started to look, well, good. His long face was tense and serious at the moment, but his dark blue eyes sparkled as usual. *We got 'em, buddy*, they seemed to say.

For a second, at least. Suddenly, they lost a little of the hidden triumph. And then I noticed it, too. At first, I thought my eyes were just adjusting after the fight or something, but no. The dark blobs in my vision didn't go away. Something was on my lenses.

I turned away from the small crowd I could hear gathering. I pulled off my sunglasses and wiped them against my T-shirt.

"What is it, blood?" I asked, suddenly realizing that a white shirt might not be the best tool for that job.

"They wrote something on there," Blake answered. "Kind of silvery ink."

I scrubbed harder, then threw the shades back on.

"It's still there," Blake said, twisting his mouth in awkward embarrassment.

"Is it permanent?" I hissed. I wasn't mad at him, of course, but suddenly the humiliation of the moment had doubled. I was already wiping at the lenses again.

“It looks like it’s on the inside,” Blake noted, faintly curious.

I wiped at the inside and then slapped them back on my face. Even before he could speak, I could tell by his relieved expression I had gotten it this time.

Dourly, I asked, “What did they write?”

He grimaced. He was never good at hiding his emotions, and I could tell this time he was feeling confused about the meaning, but he was sure it was embarrassing. “It said ‘student driver,’” he explained.

Ha. Ha. Very funny. I hope they found my fist doing a head-on into their leader’s jaw just as riotous.

No time for catching up though. The uniform club had finished getting to their feet, and while the instructor (definitely former military) had waited for us to recover, his patience had run out.

“All of you,” he barked at us with undertones of disappointed outrage, “should be ashamed. You call yourself Academy material? Is this Academy standards? I don’t want to hear it!”

One of the uniform club had started to open his mouth to protest. Big mistake. The instructor’s gaze was terrifying enough to wither even the cocky arrogance of the three thugs.

“All of you are reporting to the dean, and tell you the truth, I hope some of you didn’t finish unpacking,” the instructor roared on. “I dare say it would save some of you time. Now move!”

He swatted the air with his hand, indicating the way to the dean’s. He made sure we were separated, a couple of witnesses between our groups. Still, there was a moment where the gray-suited students passed right in front of us as we set off.

“Keep your eyes open, Slick,” Sleeves said, the taunt left in an undertone, but still obvious enough. “Here there be monsters.”

Here there be monsters. That was something of a motto in Aechyr. Apparently, they had a rich folklore of various monsters that would stalk the night, and that led to the saying becoming so common. It was a strange statement of pride from the people of the country. We fought monsters, it usually meant. We fought monsters, and we won. It wasn't supposed to mean "we are the monsters."

I was sitting in the waiting area outside the dean's office. The space looked like it belonged to an old courthouse. It was all polished, elegant woodwork, from the secretary's large desk, looking uncomfortably like a judge's podium, to the hot benches where I was sitting. The stark sunlight shining through the tall, arched windows on the right was gradually warming the stale air. And it did nothing to cheer up the place. When Aechyr Academy handled discipline quietly, you had to worry.

We were being taken into the dean's office one at a time. Everyone but me and one uniform had already gone back into the large dean's office. Even the witnesses had been questioned.

The door to the office opened, and Blake was shooed out towards the waiting room's side door, conveniently away from those of us waiting. From me. Not that we had tried to communicate. We were on the same wavelength. *Let's not make it any worse by inventing a lie.*

The last uniform was summoned past the large desk and into the office. That just left me alone in the room with the secretary, who was now burying herself in her work. She didn't need to keep an eye out for conspiracies anymore.

I sat back and waited for the time to pass as my gut tightened. David was going to kill me. All I had to do was lay low until tonight. All I had to do was lay low, period.

I heard someone else walk in from the hallway that fed into the waiting room. My head shot up, and I turned around. It was

Scarlett, the red-haired girl from the courtyard. *Oh, another witness*, I thought. I looked back at my knees, embarrassed, again.

“He’ll be right with you, after this matter is finished,” the secretary told her.

I guess maybe she wasn’t another witness. Great. Even better. If I was holding up a meeting because of my screw-up... well, even better. I really needed to trade the glaring sun for rain.

After an eternity, the uniformed guy was let out, and the dean called, “Frost?”

I let out a deep breath, trying to exhale my tension, and stepped through the door. Inside the woodwork was darker, more somber. The light wasn’t as glaring and sound didn’t echo hollowly like outside. In theory, it was more comforting.

In theory.

Dean Foster, a smallish, older man with only the faintest halo of hair left, sat behind the wide desk. He had the typical wiry professor glasses perched on his thin nose, which itself was slightly out of place on his round face. After a couple of quick clicks on his computer, he leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers behind the piles of file folders covering his desk.

“Mr. Frost, please tell me what happened,” he instructed. “Don’t leave anything out.”

I obeyed. When I got to the part about throwing the first punch, I hesitated. I had an impulse to throw in a bit about them striking first, but I quickly realized that would never hold up. I braced myself internally and told him the plain, simple truth.

When I had finished, he sat for a moment thinking. Finally, he flipped open a file and turned up a page.

“I understand you’ve had this condition for a while,” he said.

“Yes,” I lied, remembering my cover story.

“Don’t misunderstand,” the dean said, entirely flatly, “we are taking very seriously the way the other students behaved towards you. We take mistreatment based on disability or other characteristics very seriously.”

I bristled slightly but didn’t say anything. Obviously, what he was saying was in my favor, so I wasn’t going to interrupt. But disability? I hadn’t thought of myself as having a disability. I didn’t like that.

“Having said that, I find your response disappointing,” he continued. “Aechyr Academy students are held to a higher standard, and you don’t dispute the accusation that you struck first.”

I really hoped that didn’t mean this had all been my word against theirs. *Please don’t tell me I could have just lied. Shoot—maybe no one else actually saw the start of the fight.*

“We take this very seriously, and we’ll have to look into whether or not you’re still a good fit for this Academy. However, before a final decision is reached, you will be notified, and have an opportunity to request a review of the decision before a disciplinary committee. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I said numbly. It was as bad as I had feared.

“Is there anything else you would like to say now?”

My mind went blank. I wished I could have thought of some brilliant speech, like a dramatic closing statement in a lawyer movie. Or some straight-from-the-heart plea to change his mind. Or anything, really.

But all I could say was, “No.”

The dean considered for a moment, looking like he wanted to press on, but he didn’t.

“Very well,” he said. “You will have my preliminary decision within twenty-four hours. You’re dismissed.”

I got up, feeling like I had just missed a big opportunity. The secretary didn't bother to look up or show me out from the waiting room.

"Hey," someone said.

I blinked. Then I remembered that there had been someone else in this room.

Turning back towards Scarlett, I said, "Uh, hey," like an idiot.

I don't think we had exchanged two words before this point. The only other time we were in a room together was in the Civics lecture hall. And now here she was, walking right up to me. Her red bangs were frayed over her heart-shaped face, stopping just short of her faint blue eyes. They almost paled into gray, like an iced-over lake, but they weren't as cold as that sounded. Does that make sense? Well, it was true. Somehow, the wispy blue was warm.

"How are you? Are you alright?" she asked.

"Uh, I'm alright," I answered automatically. That wasn't true, of course, but that's what you said to people you didn't really know. Then a couple moments later, I realized she was asking if I had been hurt. In that case, I had more or less given the right answer. I was sore, but no real damage had been done.

"Right, that's good," she said. "What'd the dean say?"

"So, I—" I rubbed my neck. Oh, what did it matter? Odds were I'd never see anyone at the Academy again. "I messed up," I admitted.

Scarlett tilted her head and glanced away. "I guess," she said. "I saw what happened—honestly, they were looking for a fight."

"I threw the first punch," I pointed out.

"Yes, technically. But those guys kind of had it coming."

I raised an eyebrow. "You know them?"

"Well, you know Charmies," she replied with a shrug.

She must have seen my blank look, even with the sunglasses. She smiled slightly.

“Sorry,” she said, stifling the grin. “It’s an Aechrian thing. You’re new here right? American?”

It always surprised me how Aechrians could somehow tell I was from the States. To my ears, they didn’t have an accent, and neither did I.

“Yeah,” I said, trying a smile myself. “Just got here. Not exactly a great start.”

Scarlett shrugged. “Do you mind if I ask you something?”

“Sure, go ahead. I’m an open book.” I nearly slapped myself for that one. Why did I say things that will get me in trouble?

Scarlett bit her lip for a moment before pressing on. “I don’t mean to pry, but do you really need those to see?”

“These things?” I asked, taking the sunglasses off for a moment, flipping them around, and sliding them back on. Why was I acting like such an idiot? If Sleeves had seen me then, his impression of Americans would surely have been validated. “Yeah. It’s a rare condition. Head injury.”

If you asked me, that part was kind of true.

“Sorry to hear that,” she said.

“Nah, don’t be,” I replied, waving her off. “It happens. You know, with a guy like me, always bonking my head.” I mimed doing just that. “Bound to be a little brain damage,” I joked.

She half laughed at that, but in an awkward, I’m-just-going-along-with-this sort of way. “Don’t say that,” she insisted a moment later, pulling my arm away from my head. I felt an electric shock where her fingers touched my skin. “I doubt you’ve done that much. Honestly, you don’t seem like the type.”

“Miss Foster,” the secretary interrupted the conversation. “Alan will see you now.”

“Okay, thank you, Miss Clarkson,” Scarlett answered before turning back one last time. “Well, if you do decide to stick around, why don’t you come by this Saturday? Some friends of mine are throwing a welcome-slash-welcome-back party now that everyone’s settled in. It’s something of a tradition. You’d have to try really hard to get in trouble there. You can make some new friends, see that not all of us bite.”

“Uh, sure,” I said. I didn’t really do parties. “But I don’t really think it’s up to me whether I stay.”

She looked at me kind of funny. “Isn’t it?” she asked.

Before I could think of an answer, or even figure out what she had meant, she walked towards the dean’s office. As the door closed, I shook myself back to my senses. I think I had made myself look like an idiot yet again in that conversation. But I felt a little better. I think someone was actually on my side.

I was taking the long way out when the secretary called back, “Mr. Frost!”

My heart dropped. But I walked back.

“Dean Foster would like another word,” the secretary informed me. Yeah, I had figured.

I nodded and entered the office again. The dean was still behind the desk. I didn’t even see Scarlett at first; she was off in a corner.

“I have a proposal,” the dean said, sliding a piece of paper across the desk. I sat down and picked it up tentatively. It was a standard form, a waiver or something. A large section in the middle had been scrawled in hastily by hand.

Before I could read the details, he continued, “In light of the circumstances, if you agree to waive arbitration, we will reduce the

disciplinary action to a one-month suspension, along with an agreement that any similar infractions that may occur will be grounds for immediate expulsion. This would be the same punishment for all parties involved. No favoritism.”

Huh? I mean, wow. That was good—that was great! I didn’t believe this. *How—?*

“Do you understand what this means?” the dean asked, perhaps thinking my stunned silence was confusion.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said hurriedly. “As long as I don’t do the committee thing, this is the punishment I get.”

“That’s correct,” he agreed. “What do you think? Do you agree?”

“Yes,” I said immediately. “Absolutely.”

The dean looked a little annoyed at my eager agreement, but said nothing, instead handing me a pen. I quickly scribbled my signature and handed the form back. He didn’t look me in the eyes. I didn’t really care.

“That will be all,” the dean dismissed me. “I hope I won’t hear you bragging about this incident, Mr. Frost,” he added, this time looking up at me as I was rising from the chair.

In all seriousness, I replied, “No, sir. Not a chance.”

“Good,” he said. “Remember, not a toe out of line,” he added, and then returned to his papers.

I had just stepped outside the Administrative Building, wondering what had happened, and what I should do with my day, when Scarlett stepped outside.

“Right. I hope, then,” she said, placing a note in my hand, “you’ll be there this Saturday. Celebrate some school spirit.”

My brain only locked up for *half* a second this time. “Yeah,” I said. “Sounds good.”

She smiled. “Cool. Bring some friends.” And then she walked off.

Scarlett Foster. At long last, it clicked in my mind.

“Hey,” I called after her. She turned back for a moment. “The dean—Dean Foster. Is he—?”

“My uncle,” she answered, smiling again. “I don’t get many favors, so don’t come asking for any more.”

“Got it. Thank you! I owe you one,” I said.

“That’s what the invite’s for,” Scarlett answered coolly, and turned away once more.

I looked down at the short note with the address. To my mild disappointment, her phone number wasn’t on there. But really, I had no idea what I would’ve said. The only thing that mattered right now was that I’d somehow gotten out of this one intact. Despite it all, things were turning out all right.

Guess the day should be sunny after all.