

PROLOGUE

A WARM ENDING

It was a calm winter morning in the northern province of Tavrobel, Eldorann. The rising sun hid behind the mountain peaks, painting the clouds with streaks of orange, blue, and purple. The mountains, standing stoic and wide, formed a natural gate to the tundras of the North-East—a frozen expanse of ice and snow separating Eldorann from the Ork Lands and their brutal marauders.

At the base of the range stretched a thick forest of pine and birch, its canopy giving way to a valley that ran toward the South-West. At the valley's center, perched atop a hill, stood a solitary house overlooking the land. Its foundations were rough and ridged, weathered by years of wind and frost, yet its presence was unmistakably homely.

At the edge of the cliffs, a man stood against the wind in dark winter clothing, his gaze fixed on the rising sun. His rugged face, glacier-blue eyes, and short beard matched a strong, imposing build. What set him apart were the pointed canine ears and grey husky tail trailing behind him. He was a Demi-Human of the North—a living link between Man and Beast.

Though he appeared no older than thirty, he was nearing a century in age. Eighty-six, to be exact. His most striking feature, however, was his right leg

from the knee down—a black, polished metallic prosthetic that shimmered in the morning light.

The call of a great bird split the sky.

Looking up, he saw a silver owl using the wind to stay aloft before diving toward him. Just before reaching the edge, her wings flared with light, the glow enveloping her body as she shifted into her true form.

An Arctic Elf landed before him.

She was a Huntress—deadly, precise, and experienced. Dark tactical armor clung beneath a thick leather jacket, her auto-adapting boots digging into the snow. A long metallic bow with a glowing string rested across her back, a quiver of varied arrows at her side. Twin daggers hung at her hips, a pistol secured to her thigh, and a black satchel crossed her back. A white scarf shadowed her face, concealing all but her gray eyes—cold and sharp as stone.

“Took you long enough,” the man said, his voice tired. “I’ve been waiting three hours. You’re never late.”

“Forgive me, Paul” the Huntress replied, her voice muffled by the scarf. “The crosswind was heavy.”

He answered with a grunt and stepped toward her, pulling her into a brief embrace. When they parted, she spoke again.

“So, how is he?”

“Better,” Paul answered. “He’s getting used to leaving the valley and seeing the town. He’s even met the daughter of my good friend. From what I’ve heard, they get along well.”

“Good,” she said. “Does he still have nightmares?”

“Occasionally. He still sleeps with us from time to time, but he’s improving.”

The Huntress nodded, then turned her gaze down the mountain toward the house below. With her sharp eyes, she focused on a second-floor window, spotting a boy asleep in his bed. His face was turned away, but a small elf-like ear poked through his dark, curly hair.

“You made it shorter,” she murmured.

“Hmm?”

“His hair,” she clarified. “Did you cut it?”

“You can see that from here?” Paul asked, half impressed. “It was getting in his eyes, so we trimmed it a few months ago.”

She said nothing, taking the time to observe the child’s condition. From what she could see, he was well cared for—clean clothes, tidy hair, new toys scattered around the room. As Paul watched her, he knew what was on her mind.

“You can go see him if you want,” he said, easing himself onto the cliff’s edge.

She turned to him, surprised.

“Look,” he continued with a sigh. “I know it’s been three years. But I’m sure he’ll remember you, given some time. You’re going to take him with you eventually. It would be best for him to know you before that day comes.”

She looked back toward the house, paralyzed by hesitation. As her thoughts spiraled, the boy stirred in his sleep and rolled onto his back.

Her heart skipped.

After three long years, she finally saw his face.

HB / Son of Tamerran

He was twelve—maybe thirteen—his features still carrying the youth and innocence she remembered by. His skin was a warm mocha tan.

“Has it really been three years?” she wondered.

Her gaze lingered, tracing his features until she noticed a thin white scar along his left cheek, shimmering in the morning sun like spider’s silk. The sight drained the joy from her chest, replacing it with quiet sorrow—and resolve.

“No,” she said softly. “He’s not ready for the world waiting for him. He needs to be protected.”

“I understand,” the man said, rising to his feet. “Anne and I will see to that.”

“This will be the last time we meet.” Reaching into her jacket, she produced a strange black device. It felt heavy when she placed it in his hand.

“I’ll contact you with this when it’s time,” she said. “Until then, raise him well.”

Paul stared at the device. It was smooth, polished, and oval-shaped—his reflection appeared in its obsidian surface. The runes circling its equator were foreign to him, ancient in design.

“Last time?” he asked. “What do you mean, last time? We agreed to meet every year.”

“If I continue this pattern, the Apostles may find this place,” she said, stepping toward the sunrise. “There’s still too much I don’t know—where he comes from, who his parents are, why he’s being hunted. Until I understand the full extent of the Apostles’ motives and capabilities, I can’t prepare him. Distance is the only way to keep you safe.”

Concern hardened into anger on Paul's face.

"If you disappear, we won't even know if you're alive," he said, his voice rising. "You said it yourself—you don't know what you're facing. If they kill you and find anything linked to us, they'll come here and take him away. And there *will* be a slaughter. I only agreed to take him in if there would be peace. The last time those demons came here, they took my leg and threatened my wife! I won't risk her life again. If you do this, you must promise our home will never be put in danger again."

She lowered her gaze.

"You know I can't promise that, Paul," she said quietly. "There will always be risk. But I swear—I will do everything in my power to keep you and your home safe."

She extended her hand.

"Do you trust me?"

Paul stared at the device, memories flooding back—his screams of rage, his blood staining the snow, his wife's cries as she was held at gunpoint. That fear had only come twice in his life, and he never wanted to feel it again.

At last, he met her eyes and grasped her forearm.

"I trust you."

Their grip sealed the promise.

Paul slipped the device into his pocket as the Huntress walked toward the far edge of the mountain. She removed her satchel and drew out a fractured yet mended mask with a scratched-out symbol on its forehead.

"We gave him a name," Paul said.

HB / Son of Tamerran

She paused and turned to him.

“We named him Cole,” he continued. “Son of the Tamerrans. I thought you should know.”

Cold wind wrapped around them as she considered the name.

“Cole,” she repeated softly.

She secured the mask over her face. Light flared along its cracks as her body dissolved into white mist, carried away by the wind until nothing remained.

Alone on the mountain, Paul stared out across the frozen wilderness, anxiety pressing on his shoulders.

He soon made his way down the mountain, leaping and sliding across rock and ice before entering the valley below. Keeping a steady pace, he made little work of the heavy-laden snow.

Arriving at the front door of his house, he kicked the snow from his boots and entered quietly. Closing the door with care, he sat at the base of the stairway and unlaced his boots, setting them aside to dry.

He lingered there for a moment, considering his new reality.

Taking a breath to steady himself, he rose and moved up the stairs, light on his feet despite his frame.

He cracked open the door to his room. Anne was still asleep, breathing softly beneath the sheets. He could see part of her face and one of her rabbit ears, the other buried in the pillow. After everything that had transpired, it was best to let her rest.

HB / Son of Tamerran

He closed the door without a sound and walked to the other end of the hall, stopping before a door plastered with crayon drawings and rough sketches.

One caught his eye.

It showed him and his wife holding hands with the boy between them.

His chest tightened as he stepped inside.

The boy was still asleep, still lying on his back. Paul sat beside him on the edge of the bed, watching quietly.

He remembered the day he had first found him—his body blue from the cold, unconscious in the arms of a wounded Huntress, both standing at the edge of death.

Scars still marked the boy's frame, quiet echoes of what he had survived.

"What happened to you?" Paul had asked himself that question more times than he could count.

Then the boy stirred, his eyes opening.

"Uncle?" he croaked, his voice small and heavy with sleep.

"Hey, buddy," Paul said gently. "Did you sleep well?"

Cole thought for a moment as his mind cleared.

"I dreamt of a lady," he said quietly.

Paul paused.

"A lady?"

Cole nodded.

"Do you remember her?"

"No," Cole said, looking toward the window. "But I like it when I see her."

HB / Son of Tamerran

Paul smiled, taking the boy's hand. "You'll see her again one day. Just try not to forget her."

"Okay..." Cole yawned, resting his head against Paul's palm.

Paul froze, unsure of what to do. Moments later, Cole was asleep again.

Paul remained there, wondering when it would be right to pull his hand away. Then his own words echoed back to him.

I only agreed to take him in if there would be peace.

Shame gripped his chest as he looked down at the boy.

He was a warrior—a soldier who defended the innocent without condition. And yet he had placed conditions on a child who had done nothing wrong.

"What's wrong with you..." he murmured.

Almost instinctively, Paul lifted Cole into his arms and wrapped him in the extra blanket from the foot of the bed.

Cole stirred briefly, confused, but the familiar scent and warmth of his uncle's chest soothed him. Within moments, he was asleep again.

As Paul made sure he was secure, he reached into his pocket and withdrew the device. His gaze drifted to the window, toward the distant cliff where he and the Huntress had spoken.

With a slow breath, he closed his eyes, gripping the device in his hand, and murmured a quiet prayer.

"Creator be with you."

CHAPTER 1

THE REBEL

Seven and a half years later.

Elsewhere, in a vast tundra of stone and shrubbery, a lone road twisted at the base of the mountains. It was early evening, the sun casting long shadows across the valley, where deer and small game nibbled on shrubs and weeds.

Across the horizon, a dark gray object approached from the west, a distant drone trailing behind it.

Serenity shattered as the drone swelled into rolling thunder.

The object came into view—a car, dust swirling behind it, moving at tremendous speed.

As it tore past, it startled a hare feeding quietly along the roadside, sending it scrambling into its burrow.

The machine rode low on sway-bar suspension, cutting through the air with aggressive aerodynamics. Its heart was a precision-bored aluminum block with steel sleeves and a twin-screw supercharger—built with obsessive detail. Etched into the center of the steering wheel was a single name:

Creed.

A sentiment to the builder's appreciation.

At the helm of this beast sat a young man in black, hand firm on the wheel. He wore a leather jacket, fingerless gloves, and a racing helmet that hid his face. A digital display glowed within the visor, showing his location, the time [14:13], and surrounding weather (15.6 ^).

The road was rough and uneven, steel reverberating through his bones. He turned right, but the car veered left. By instinct alone, he feathered the throttle and guided the wheel, clawing the car back onto the road.

He downshifted, yanked the handbrake, and snapped the car sideways into a controlled drift. Dust billowed. Fire spat from the exhaust. He straightened out and buried the throttle, pushing past 150 mph.

Asphalt gave way to dirt as he entered the jaws of a canyon. Stone walls towered over him, their shadows blocking out the sun. Far ahead, a sign loomed, stark and unmistakable:

**NATIONAL PROPERTY — VANGUARD INDUSTRIES —
STRATEGIC ASSET**

He started a timer on his watch—adrenaline coursing through his veins. Past the sign, a gate appeared around the bend. Time slowed as everything sharpened. He floored the accelerator and braced for impact.

BASH!

Steel chains exploded as the car plowed through.

Sirens wailed, their screams echoing off the canyon walls.

There was no going back now.

He shifted to first and floored it. The machine lunged forward with a deafening roar. Smoke and dust rising behind him.

She was a stallion—

he was her rider.

Now clear of the canyon, the Driver burst into a massive surface mining operation. It was so vast and deep his stomach lurched—like peering into an open maw. Along the outskirts, he threaded between automated mining drones and colossal ore-laden haulers, narrowly escaping their rumbling tires.

High above, managers in a glass-walled outpost pressed against the windows, shouting and pointing at the intruder in black.

“Two minutes, thirty seconds,” intoned the watch on his wrist.

With a sharp snap of the wheel, he shot between two ore haulers, forcing them to slam on the brakes—metal shrieking to a halt.

It was a race against the clock.

Every action mattered.

Every correction cost time.

Stones ricocheted off the undercarriage, rattling the cabin.

Then came another sound.

Whirling turbines.

In the rearview mirror, two hovercycles cut through the dust like predators, armor glinting green and silver.

Enforcers.

They flanked him—one on either side. The leader slammed his fist against the Driver’s window. His voice boomed through a megaphone.

“Rogue operator! You are in violation of national security! Pull over and surrender immediately!” His voice boomed through a megaphone.

HB / Son of Tamerran

The Driver ignored him, drifting along the cliff's edge as loose stone sprayed into the abyss.

“Pull over now or be engaged!”

The Driver's eyes stayed forward.

A sign flashed overhead:

MINING VEIN #34 — 200 YARDS

His fingers hovered over the emergency brake.

“You have three seconds to comply!” the Enforcer warned, weapons flashing.

“Three! ... Two!! ... One!!! ...”

The tunnel appeared and he slammed the brakes.

SCREECH!

The hovercycles overshot him in a cloud of dust. In the same instant, he wrenched the hand brake, spun the wheel, and snapped the car into a perfect skid.

It slid into alignment before the tunnel.

With a burst of power, the car roared into the earth, plunging deep into the facility.

At first, the caverns were wide, his engine reverberating off the rock.

Then the walls closed in.

Mistakes would be lethal here.

The Enforcers reappeared in the mirror, carving through the tunnel with ease. Smaller and lighter, their cycles hugged jagged walls, turbines screaming as they closed in.

The lead Enforcer keyed his comms.

“Dispatch, do you read?”

“Loud and clear, Commander Thornwood,” said a woman, her voice crackling through the interference. “Have you apprehended the suspect?”

“Negative,” Thornwood replied. “This one is bolder than the others. Requesting permission to engage.”

A pause.

“That’s a negative, Commander. Those veins are laced with pure Terrarium. One stray shot and you’ll be blown into the stratosphere.”

Thornwood gritted his teeth. “Understood. Maintaining pursuit.”

His lieutenant broke in, breath ragged.

“What’s the play, Commander?”

“Stay on him, Hildar. These tunnels lead to a dead end. Once there, he’s ours.”

“Roger that.”

The chase intensified. The Driver tore through razor-thin passages, skimming drones and jagged stone. Despite their size advantage, the Enforcers struggled to keep up.

“How is he doing this?” Hildar shouted, nearly clipping a drone. “It’s like he knows this place!”

“Just stay on him,” Thornwood growled. “We’re almost out.”

The tunnel narrowed to its tightest choke point, then burst into a straight chute of carved stone. At its far end, a pinprick of daylight burned.

The Driver floored it.

HB / Son of Tamerran

“He’s getting faster!” Hildar shouted, visor pelted with dust and stone.

Thornwood’s eyes locked on the crimson taillights ahead.

“Let him run. He’ll stop when he sees the cliff.”

Daylight burst across the windshield.

The Driver squinted as his vision adjusted. He had burst onto a massive cliffside platform stacked with containers, landing pads, and idle hovercraft.

Ground crews scattered.

Pilots froze.

Workers dove behind heavy equipment as the pursuit tore across the platform.

By some miracle, no one collided.

The far edge of the platform was nothing—a sheer drop.

Still, the Driver pressed harder.

“What is he doing?” Thornwood muttered, a chill climbing his spine.

“Commander?” Hildar voice cracked.

Thornwood didn’t answer. His hands trembled on the controls.

Five hundred meters.

Four hundred meters.

“Commander?!”

Three hundred.

Two hundred.

“COMMANDER!”

“Disengage! Disengage!” Thornwood barked, redirecting thrust as drag panels flared.

HB / Son of Tamerran

The Enforcers whirled to a halt just short of the precipice.

The car did not.

It flew off the edge.

For a heartbeat, gravity vanished. Inside the cabin, the Driver floated against his harness as loose items drifted around him.

His hand shot upward and yanked a red handle.

A roof panel blew free, releasing a massive parachute that opened with a violent crack, wrenching the car mid-descent.

From the ridge above, the Enforcers watched as the black machine glided toward the canyon floor.

Inside, the Driver gripped a joystick duct-taped to the console, guiding the descent. At a hundred feet, he flicked a switch. Suspension pistons snapped down, preparing for landing.

The car slammed into the earth with a bone-rattling **THUD**, bounced twice, then skidded to a stop. Dust swallowed it whole.

He jettisoned the chute and tore off across the canyon floor, disappearing into the wilderness.

Above, Hildar whispered, "He's insane."

Thornwood keyed his comms, still staring at the fading trail.

"Dispatch. Do we continue the pursuit?"

"That's a negative, Commander. The suspect has left your jurisdiction and entered No Man's Land. Border Patrol has been notified. Return to post."

"Roger that."

HB / Son of Tamerran

Thornwood turned away from the edge, blood hot with frustration. Behind him, Hildar lingered, staring into the canyon as if trying to understand what he had just witnessed.

“So that’s it? We’re just giving up—after all that?”

“Unless you’re keen on a thousand-foot drop, be my guest,” Thornwood snapped. “Otherwise, turn around and get back to post.”

As Thornwood sped away, workers swarmed the platform, shouting questions, demanding answers. He ignored them, sirens blaring to clear a path. Hildar gave one last look at the fading dust trail, shook his head, and followed his commander.

CHAPTER 2

THE WAGER

The climb out of the canyon was steep and treacherous, the path carved by seasons of ice and rain. His engine snarled as he forced the machine upward, gravel skittering over the edge with each surge of power. After a final twist, he crested the rim—the ruins of a colossal bridge stood before him. Worn and ancient in appearance, yet precise and advanced in design.

Granite blocks, each weighing dozens of tons, had been cut and placed with flawless precision. Its partially exposed infrastructure revealed a steel skeleton seemingly immune to rust and decay. Not a single rivet or weld had been used, but held together by perfect geometry alone. In ages past, it had been a seamless wonder spanning the canyon. Now, it stood as a monument to a long-lost era—when projects such as these were once considered ordinary.

Beneath its shadow gathered a crowd of racers. Their exposed engines gleamed, polished to a mirror sheen, headlights casting sharp beams across the surrounding arches. Some cheered at his arrival; others greeted him with hostile glares.

The Driver eased to a stop and stepped out of the vehicle. Removing his helmet, he revealed his identity.

HB / Son of Tamerran

Cole Tamerran, now nineteen years of age, stood quietly before the restless crowd. Apart from his tanned skin, disheveled hair, facial scar, and hybrid ears, his most striking feature was his eyes.

They were a rich imperial blue, threaded with faint traces of indigo. At first glance, they appeared no different from any Human's. But as the evening sun caught the iris, they narrowed into vertical slits—reptilian and unnerving, like those of a viper.

At the center of these Arctic Elves stood a group of three Nobles, surrounded by expensive cars and equally expensive attire. They were twenty to twenty-two years of age, groomed and confident, effortlessly entertaining the provocative girls who lavished them with attention.

The first was Justix Honor, who carried himself with effortless arrogance. His hair was white as snow, his skin carved ivory, his eyes a brilliant silver. A descendant of a long line of lords, his family possessed assets across the continent of Agarath. With corrosive charm and sharply angled features, he wore a white-and-steel racing suit that matched the exotic hypercar he leaned against.

To his right stood Beleg Fodreth, born of high-ranking military leaders and government officials within the Eldorannian Empire. Built like a wall, with short-cut hair, he wore a jacket of digital arctic camo, heavy boots planted firmly in the dirt. The knife at his side appeared ceremonial—more a symbol of authority than a tool of survival. Aviator glasses concealed his eyes, leaving only the scar on his brow exposed.

To the left stood Haleth Malacar, future inheritor of one of the largest merchant companies in the Northern Nations. Taller, thinner, and wrapped in

glowing fabrics, his presence was bombastic by design. Black and neon-yellow patterns adorned his clothing, crystal earrings caught the light, and painted neon lips, curved into a smirk that relished spectacle and scandal.²

Due to the scope of his family's empire, Haleth commanded access to rare resources and advanced technologies, backed by a seemingly endless flow of income. It made him a powerful ally to both the Honors and the Fodreths—and to much of the Imperial Government.

Cole spotted them, walked to the trunk of his car, and retrieved a package. He slammed the trunk shut and moved toward the trio. They met him halfway as the crowd fell silent.

Justix spoke.

“I have to hand it to you, Snake Eyes. I'm surprised you followed through. But then again, you never walked away from a wager.”

Cole said nothing. He tossed the package at Justix's feet. The Nobles flinched at the sudden gesture, murmurs rippling through the crowd.

Justix bent down and picked up the parcel with a faint chuckle. The smile faltered when he broke the seal. Inside lay a roll of parachute wire, marked with neon paint where a deliberate cut had been made—undeniable proof of sabotage.

“You inspected the entire parachute?” he asked with a smug grin.

Cole did not respond. He stood in silence, eyes cold and sharp, never leaving Justix.

“Fair enough,” Justix concluded, tossing the package aside.

HB / Son of Tamerran

With a snap of his fingers, he summoned one of the girls behind him. She stepped forward, pulling a golden card from her cleavage. Holding it just out of reach, she let it fall at Cole's feet.

Laughter rippled outward.

The young woman looked Cole over, taking note of his worn clothing, and sneered in disgust before returning to Justix's side. The rest of the women were already moving through the crowd, distributing similar cards to select individuals.

Cole knelt, unbothered, and picked up the card. The laughter rose again, mocking his inconvenience.

"A deal's a deal, Snake Eyes," Justix said as the girls returned behind him. "You won the wager—and with it, fifty percent of the pot."

"With the rest going to the fools who bet on you," Beleg added dryly as a woman took his arm.

Cole ignored them.

He removed a small device from his pocket, scanned the card, and studied the data streaming across its display. His eyes sharpened as the analysis ended with a soft chime.

Footsteps approached.

Cole turned to see Justix closing the distance.

"So, do we have an accord?" Justix asked, extending his hand.

Standing before Cole, he made his height advantage clear—at least four inches taller. Cole barely looked up, his attention still on the card.

“What did they receive from this wager?” Cole asked, breaking his silence.

Justix blinked. His brow furrowed.

“What?”

“What did the recipients receive from this wager?”

Justix scoffed.

“Imperial Credits, as usual.”

Cole met his eyes with a steady glare.

“Then why is there crypto on this card?”

Justix’s smile vanished. Voices flared like sparks in dry grass.

“This card has crypto too!” a man shouted, waving his card overhead.

The crowd erupted, accusations flying as they closed in around Justix.

“What do you mean crypto?”

“We were promised Imperial Credits!”

Golden cards flashed through the air as the space tightened, threats stacking over one another.

Justix’s companions observed in cold silence.

“You think he can turn this around?” he muttered.

Haleth exhaled a colorful cloud from his jeweled vape, smiling faintly.

It smelled of cherries.

“Have faith, Fodreth. He’s seen worse. He’ll turn the tide.”

Haleth offered the vape. Beleg waved it away.

“He better. Or he’ll lose a lot of clout being outdone by a half-devil.”

Justix raised his hands, posture steady.

“Relax. Relax! The crypto is backed by silver and carries equal value to Imperial Credits. The Code states wagers may be paid with any tender equal to the amount owed.”

The uproar dulled—but only slightly. All eyes shifted back to Cole.

“As long as it is accepted by the winner,” Cole countered.

Justix’s jaw tightened.

“And why won’t you accept it?”

Cole lifted the card. Light reflected in his reptilian eyes.

“Because this crypto is tied to your family’s bank—under your name. If you sold your shares, it would collapse overnight and trigger a mass sell-off.”

“And why would I do that?” Justix snapped. “The currency is strong. It’s performing well.”

“Because you would gain everything and face no legal repercussions,” Cole replied evenly. “Per the contract your lawyers coughed up, a year of ownership was required. The debut was seventeen months ago.”

“I have my reputation to consider,” Justix argued, voice like ice.

Cole narrowed his eyes.

“Just like you did with Envidia?”

Justix stiffened.

“Wait—he really did that?” said one not too far away.

“Yeah. Quarter of spring. Dumped his shares. Market crashed right after,” answered another, eyeing Justix with contempt.

Justix was losing ground with every second.

“You see, Justix, I’d rather not place my winnings—or my wallet—in the hands of a man I don’t trust,” Cole explained.

His gaze drifted to the silver-and-white hypercar in the background. Then back to Justix—his pupils contracting like razors.

“And if I refuse your tender, the Code grants me the right to take whatever I see fit.”

The crowd followed his stare, eyes widening in realization.

Justix burned red.

“That car is worth more than this wager!”

“I know,” Cole said flatly, dropping the card at his feet. “But I feel it’s necessary.”

Justix swallowed his fury. He forced a smile that looked strained, pulling out his check book. As he wrote down the necessary information, his eyes lit up for a moment but continued to finish the check.

Justix no longer appeared cornered, but relaxed. Confident.

Something wasn’t right.

Tearing out the check from his book, Justix held out his hand.

When Cole reached for it, Justix didn’t let go.

“What’s wrong with you?” Cole asked in disgust.

“I finally understand you know,” Justix said quietly.

“What?”

“This isn’t for you, is it?”

Cole ripped the check free, turned—and froze. He read it once. Twice. Then looked back.

“You doubled it?”

“Yes. Just in case your ‘family’ has trouble securing a loan in the future. More so than they already do now.”

Cole’s blood ran cold.

“Seeing as my family owns the largest bank in the provinces,” Justix continued, circling him, “I have access to every financial record. Including that of Captain Paul Samuel, Son of the Tamerrans.”

Something sparked in Cole’s chest.

“Stay calm. Walk away,” he told himself.

Justix stepped in front of him, cutting off his escape.

“From what I read, he joined the ARROW Division fresh out of high school—the tip of the spear of the Eldorannian Military,” Justix said, his voice calm and authoritative. “Here, he served in dozens of deployments to defend our borders, fighting against the onslaughts of the Battle Orks. Here, he became a legend and a deadly marksman, solidifying his name as the Shadow of Death. He brought honor to his departed family, being the last of his lineage.”

Cole stood rigid, heart pounding. The sounds of the crowd dulled, fading into a distant hum as each word struck deeper than the last.

“But then came you,” Justix continued.

The pause was deliberate.

“The half-spawn of a heretic Forest Elf and some wretched Reptilian.”

Laughter rippled through the crowd—sharp, ugly, and eager. Cole’s vision blurred. He blinked hard, but a tear still slipped free, trailing down his cheek before he could stop it.

“In spite of the nature of your blood—and the consequences thereof,” Justix went on, “he and his wife took you in as their own. A decision that removed them from the favor of the very Empire he swore to defend. Quite foolish, honestly.”

Something hot and violent surged through Cole’s chest, spreading outward like wildfire. His hands trembled at his sides. Justix saw it—and smiled.

“Shut up,” Cole growled.

“Honestly,” Justix said, unfazed, “I have no idea why they didn’t submit you to the authorities after finding you half-dead in the mountains. Most likely abandoned by your whore of a mother.”

The crowd roared with laughter.

“I said shut up!” Cole shouted, crushing the check in his fist.

“And the best part?” Justix asked the crowd, spreading his hands theatrically. “He was found with amnesia! Undoubtedly a blessing to that ‘mother’ of his—having no shame left to carry.”

“I’m warning you, Justix!” Cole yelled, tears spilling freely now.

“You know,” Justix said, stepping closer, lowering his voice as he locked eyes with Cole, “others say it was out of pity when they saved you from that mountain. But truthfully, it was to numb the pain of their stillborn child.”

“Justix!” Cole roared, his restraint finally splintering.

“They never wanted you,” Justix said coldly. “You were a substitute. You could never replace their child, Snake Eyes.”

Something in Cole snapped.

He surged forward, fist clenched, rage eclipsing reason.

“I SAID! SHUT! UP!”

Before the blow could land, Justix caught his fist effortlessly, twisted, and yanked him forward. The world spun as Cole was flipped onto his back, the impact driving the air from his lungs in a brutal gasp. He barely managed to his knees before a heavy strike caught him across the skull, sending him crashing back into the dirt.

The crowd roared for violence.

Some jeered. Others cheered. Not one lifted a hand to intervene. They delighted in the suffering of a ‘devil.’

Cole staggered, chest heaving, ribs screaming with every breath. Something warm ran down his face. He wiped at his brow and stared at the blood smeared across his fingers.

Slowly—defiantly—he forced himself back to his feet.

Justix scoffed and lunged.

Cole raised his forearm just in time. The impact felt like a hammer blow, rattling bone and nerve. He answered with two quick jabs and a wild haymaker. Justix slipped past them with ease and drove a right hook into Cole’s jaw.

CRACK!

Stars burst across Cole’s vision. His legs buckled as he stumbled backward, only for the crowd to shove him forward again, trapping him in the fight. He swung once more—desperate, unfocused.

Justix laughed, weaving aside before driving his knee hard into Cole’s ribs. The force folded him in half. Cheers erupted as he hit the ground, his head swimming.

“You really are a half-devil,” Justix taunted, circling him again. “A selfish one at that.”

Cole wheezed, coughing blood into the dirt. He clawed his way upright and threw a jab. Justix parried, twisted his arm, and sent an uppercut crashing into his mouth. Pain exploded as his lip split.

“If you really cared for them, you would have erased your name to restore theirs,” Justix continued as Cole stared down at his hands, blood pooling in his palms. “But you can’t do that, can you?”

He swung and missed—two sharp blows slammed into his ribs before he could recover.

“But it was never about them. Was it?”

A palm struck his nose. White flashed behind his eyes.

“You were just too busy leeching off their legacy.”

Another hook snapped his head sideways.

“You never gave a damn about them!”

Cole reeled, half-blind, vision spotted with stars. He swung again and hit nothing. The counterstrikes came fast and merciless. The girls shrieked in delight, their laughter cutting deeper than any blow.

Justix grabbed him by the hair and collar, yanking his head forward, and slammed his knee into Cole’s face. The crack echoed sharp and hollow. Blood poured freely from his nose and brow.

Cole staggered back, dazed—but Justix surged after him, ramming an uppercut into his diaphragm. Something snapped. Cole lifted off his feet, breath stolen, and collapsed to his knees.

HB / Son of Tamerran

The crowd roared.

Cole's senses faded for a heartbeat—then crashed back all at once.

While he writhed in the dirt, Justix kicked him in the side. Once. Twice. A heel smashed against his cheek. Then his ribs. Dust kicked up with every strike. The air filled with jeers and cruelty.

And then—

Silence.

Cole lay broken, coughing blood, one eye swollen shut. Above him, Justix stood tall, breathing evenly, a checkbook still in hand.

“Here,” he sneered, scribbling before tearing the check free and dropping it onto Cole's face. “Have another. For we all know—you could never repay their sacrifice.”

The paper stuck to his bloody cheek.

Cole groaned and forced himself upright inch by inch, his body trembling, joints popping in protest. He peeled the check free, spat blood and mucus across it, and shoved it hard into Justix's chest.

“I don't take handouts,” he rasped.

The crowd erupted—some laughing, others staring in stunned silence.

Justix snarled and drove a fist into Cole's face.

BAM!

This time, Cole didn't fall.

He leaned into the blow, absorbing it, never breaking eye contact.

Justix froze.

What stared back at him wasn't pain—it was raw, unfiltered hatred.

He stumbled backward, heart lurching as a sudden hush fell over the crowd. The air turned cold. Heavy.

Cole's voice cut through it like steel.

"Are you finished?"

Justix said nothing.

"Then we have an accord."

Cole turned and limped back to his car, stuffing the original check into his pocket. The engine roared to life, echoing beneath the ancient arches as he drove west, into the fading sun.

Behind him, the racers stood motionless, suffocated by silence.

A man finally stepped forward, breaking it.

"So—where's my check?"

Justix shot him a venomous glare.

"The accord was settled," he growled. "Now piss... off."

The racer retreated immediately.

Justix stormed to his car, tearing the check from his jacket and ripping it in half before flinging the pieces aside. Beleg turned to the crowd and barked a single command.

"Scatter!"

They obeyed without hesitation, starting their cars and speeding off in random directions.

As Justix settled into his seat, one of the women leaned in with a napkin.

"Here, babe. Let me get that—"

He slapped her hand away.

She recoiled in fear.

Justix stared ahead, watching Cole disappear beyond the horizon, his grip tightening on the wheel.

“F***ing half-devil.”

At the same time.

Cole’s hands trembled as he drove. Every breath sent knives through his ribs. His mouth tasted of copper. He glanced into the mirror and barely recognized the battered face staring back.

“That... hurt,” he muttered.

He blew his nose, then noticed the crumpled check resting in the cup holder—fifty thousand Imperial Credits.

Cole leaned back, eyes burning.

“I’m sorry, auntie.”

CHAPTER 3

THE HOUSE OF TAMERRAN

The road ended at the edge of the forest. Entering the valley on a gravel driveway, Cole looked up at the Tavrobel Mountains, painted by the silver light of the Twin Moons. It should have been beautiful. But tonight, it meant nothing.

Headlights swept across fields of tall grass, revealing the familiar silhouette of a home in the distance. The house was dark, except for a lone porch light, waiting for him.

Parking beside the walkway, Cole killed the engine.

The night closed in around him, dark and oppressive.

He looked at his watch: [11:17 PM]. Six missed calls. UNCLE.

A pit formed in the bottom of his stomach.

“This won’t end well.”

He stepped out of the car and limped toward the porch, his boots tapping on the stone walkway. Reaching the front door, he hid his face with the hood of his jacket and a dark bandana. Taking a key in his hand, he paused and drew a slow breath.

1... 2... 3...

The key turned, and the door swung quietly.

Silence.

HB / Son of Tamerran

The air hung with the past aroma of a meal long gone. He stepped inside, shadows surrounding him. He placed his backpack on the hardwood floor and brushed his fingers along the wall, searching for a light switch.

Click!

The lights snapped on, but not by his hand. On the other side of the living room was Paul leaning against the far wall, arms crossed, eyes waiting. Silence fell between them—thick, suffocating.

Cole stood frozen in the night. Paul watched him for a moment, then broke the silence between them.

“Why the mask?” he asked, his voice sharp and cold.

Cole turned his head, keeping the light from his swollen eye.

“You missed dinner again. Any thoughts on that?”

“Sorry,” Cole muttered. “Lost track of time.”

“Mm.”

Paul moved to the television, remote in hand.

From the stairwell came the hush of slippers on wood. Cole glanced up — a pretty woman draped in a robe, loose hair, and slippers.

This was Annette (Anne) Tamerran, Paul’s wife and loving partner, a Demi-Human of the North. Her appearance lingered somewhere between twenty-four and twenty-six, with a slim, youthful figure that hid her true age of seventy-seven.

Her dark eyes softened at the sight of Cole—but disappointment lingered within them. He looked away, guilt stabbing his chest.

The average lifespan in this world stretched beyond two hundred fifty years, with most reaching their prime between twenty-five and thirty. That prime endured for centuries before age finally began to show.

Her represented animal—the arctic hare—revealed itself through her white ears tipped in black, with a small tail hidden beneath her robe. Her skin was fair, her lips soft, and her black wavy hair framed her face gently.

The TV flashed to life, and eyes turned to the screen.

“At approximately six-fifteen this evening, a rogue driver with a modified vehicle broke through the southern gate of Vanguard’s newest mining facility...”

The anchors’ voices filled the room over chaotic footage: a shattered gate, taillights weaving past an ore truck, speed tearing through dust and steel.

“Estimated top speed: one-seventy-three metrics per hour. Insane, right, Reina?”

Cole’s eyes dropped to the floor.

“...after evading law enforcers, the suspect entered Mining Vein Thirty-Four,” the female anchor continued. “As you know, Terrarium ore in its unrefined state is highly unstable.”

Body-cam footage took over—the intruder braking hard, swerving into the tunnel. Paul’s stare bored into Cole.

“Reaching Delivery Platform Five,” said the male anchor, “Commander Thornwood believed the chase was over—until the suspect accelerated off the edge.”

The footage showed the impossible: the car plunging into the canyon... then a parachute deploying mid-fall.

The signal cut as the suspect vanished into the North-East.

Paul shut off the television. Silence surrounded them once more.

“Why did you do it?” Paul asked, anger straining behind his voice.

Cole said nothing and continued looking at the floor.

Having had enough, Paul marched over and slapped Cole hard across the face. He snatched his collar and slammed him against the wall.

“Why did you do it?!” he demanded.

“No!” Anne rushed forward, hands on Paul’s hands, eyes pleading. “Don’t!”

Paul took a deep breath. He let go, stepped back, and noticed a red mark on his palm. Anne turned to Cole as he covered his face, blood dripping from his bandana.

“Cole?” she asked as she moved to him. “Please... take off your mask.”

He hesitated, then peeled it away. A bruised cheek, swollen lip, black eye, and a nose bent and bleeding. Anne gasped, reaching for his face. He recoiled in pain, but she gentled her touch, dabbing with her sleeve. Cole stopped her as he turned away, not wanting to stain her white robe.

Paul’s fury cracked as concern flashed in his eyes, then vanished behind steel.

“Who did this to you?”

“Does it matter?” answered Cole, wiping the blood himself.

“It might.” Paul took his chin and turned his head side to side, inspecting his bruises. “Now, why did you break into Vanguard’s mine?”

Cole looked away, his brows furrowed. Paul noticed this.

“You were Shadow Racing, weren’t you?”

Cole tightened his lips. Paul was correct.

“Cole!” Anne gasped. Cole looked at her with sad eyes, and she looked away in disappointment.

“I made it clear to never take part in that,” growled Paul looking down on Cole. “So, what are you now? A Punk and a liar?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“I took a bet.”

“From who?”

Cole swallowed. “Justix.”

Anne blinked as if she were slapped. “The Honor prodigy? Why would he be involved with Shadow Racing?”

“Clout, girls,” Cole speculated, crossing his arms. “I don’t know and I don’t care.”

“Then why take his bet?” asked Paul.

Cole’s jaw set. He wasn’t ready for the real reason, so he gave another truth instead.

“Because I wanted to,” he admitted to the shock of Anne and the scowl of Paul.

“Explain,” demanded Paul, his tone harsh.

Cole's voice rose, his words spilling out of him.

"Ever since that monopoly arrived, everything's gotten harder. From the price of food to the energy bill, it's all gotten harder. They buy out the competition, fix prices, and bleed us dry while the Empire turns a blind eye and subsidizes their operations with OUR taxes!"

"That doesn't matter," Paul snapped. "You endangered lives."

"I knew what I was doing!" Cole fired back. "I hit the gate during supper. Most of the crews were off site. And ore movers are slow and predictable."

"You went through a vein of raw Terrarium!" barked Paul. "Terrarium!"

"They mine more than Terrarium, Uncle! It's always found near other valuable elements, and Vein Thirty-Four had none! I'm not an idiot!"

"And that is exactly the problem!" Paul roared, canines bared. "All that potential, wasted on gambles and people who don't give a damn about you. Look at your face!"

"Stop it!" Anne wedged between them, pressing her hands on their chests. "Please!"

"Well, forgive me for trying to fight back!" Cole shouted, stepping forward. "They're trying to take everything from us because you won't sign their damn contract! I won't stand by and do nothing!!!"

"That's not your fight to fight!!!" countered Paul as he moved into striking range.

“I SAID ENOUGH!!!” screamed Anne, her voice thundering throughout the room.

Silence froze the air. They looked down on her, who glared at them both.

“There’s no point in talking when you’re like this,” said Anne as she glared at both of them. “We’ll finish this tomorrow.”

“But I —.” Cole stammered. Anne cut him off.

“But nothing! What you did was wrong. Stop making excuses.”

Her eyes cut to Paul. “And you. Master your temper. Both of you! It brings nothing of value.”

The two men locked eyes, fire burning between them. Cole looked away first, and Paul exhaled, stepping back.

Cole and Paul stared at each other with fire in their eyes. But as Cole looked away, Paul took a deep breath and stepped back. Taking his chance, Cole tried moving to the stairs. But Paul cut him off.

“Keys,” said Paul, palm out.

Cole bristled, then saw Anne’s glare. He dropped the collection of keys into Paul’s hand.

“Good,” said Anne with a softer voice. “Now go upstairs and wash up. I want to get a look at you.”

Cole climbed the stairs, weight dragging with every step. He closed the bathroom door behind him and felt the atmosphere press down on him.

He looked in the mirror. The swelling had gone down — barely. However, his body still trembled in pain. He stripped carefully, wincing as the

bruises across his torso flared. Worst of all was his upper abdomen: Justix's uppercut left a dark bloom that spread like ink in water.

While undoing his belt, he paused to hear the conversation Paul and Anne were having downstairs through a vent in the floor. Due to his unnaturally sharp hearing, he could make out every echoing whisper that flowed through the vent, giving him a third-person experience.

"You could have handled that better," said Anne, being heard rummaging through a closet.

"How else was I supposed to handle that?" Paul argued. "He broke into a multi-billion credit operation, was intercepted by enforcers, and drove off a cliff to avoid arrest! He could have been imprisoned, or dead! His reputation is already tainted."

"His *reputation* is not his fault," said Anne in Cole's defense. "You know what they say behind his back. What people think of him."

"I know. I know," Paul sighed. "I just wish he wouldn't risk his life like this. He can do so much better, and he just — doesn't."

Cole turned on the bathroom fan, drowning out the conversation. He stepped into the shower and twisted the knob, and felt the shock of cold water.

Steam soon covered the glass as warmth flowed over his bruises and cuts. He gritted his teeth as every touch brought a sharp and lasting pain; so much so he buckled over at times.

Stepping out of the shower while toweling his hair, he saw his reflection again. Scars — thin lines, jagged scrapes, some from a blade, others from claws; even bullet marks. They covered him from temple to torso, yet he had no

memory of their origin. This, along with every memory before being found by the Tamerrans. This bothered him deeply, yet every attempt to remember resulted in the same punishment: migraines, nosebleeds, and panic attacks. He shook the thought out of his head, stopping the cycle before it began.

Aside from the scars, he had a lean and athletic build. Thanks to his ridiculous metabolism, he barely had enough fat to keep him warm, which was never much of a problem since the cold had little effect on him.

His eyes dropped to his nose. Crooked, swollen, and bent to the left. As he tapped his fingers on the bridge, a shock of pain struck him. He gasped sharply. Taking a closer look, he realized the damage went deeper than expected.

“This is going to hurt.”

He pressed his fingers into the bridge of his nose as tears swelled in his eyes.

“One... Two... THREE!”

CRACK!

Agony and lightning, thunderous pain shot through his skull with so much intensity that he could feel it in his teeth. He growled and gasped, knuckles white against the porcelain sink, blood dripping into the basin. As the storm lifted, Cole opened his eyes to see his nose was straight once again.

Cole rested his head on the sink to recover, only to be startled by a knock on the door.

“You okay in there?” Anne’s voice was soft against the wood.

“I’m fine,” he lied, cleaning the sink.

The door opened. Anne stepped into the room with a medical kit. She froze as Cole jumped out of his skin. He was buck naked.

“Auntie!” he complained, covering himself with both hands.

“Oh hush. I used to bathe you.” She tossed him his pants and set the kit on the floor. “Get dressed. I want to take a look at you.”

Moments later he sat on the floor, her chair behind him. She worked with steady hands, tilting his head toward the light, brushing ointments and laying bandages. His head rested against her thigh as she examined the swelling, including the goose egg on the back of his head. Last of all, she applied a numbing cream to his nose and set it in place with a splint.

Something warm touched Cole’s cheek — a drop. He looked up. She was on the verge of tears, struggling to compose herself.

“What were you thinking?” Her voice shook as she pressed a bandage over his eye. “Is this the man I raised? A rogue? A liar?”

“No, Auntie, I—” his words stumbled. “I just... I had to—”

“To what, Cole?” Her tone sharpened. “To throw yourself off the edge of a cliff to protest Vanguard? Don’t insult me.”

“I—”

“Stop lying!” she snapped. “Because I know that you would NEVER do something so reckless!”

He looked away, chest tight.

“Just tell me the truth, Cole,” Her fingers threaded gently through his curly hair. “Please.”

He sat in silence staring at the wall. After a moment of thought, he struggled to his feet before walking to the door.

“Where are you going?”

“The truth,” he answered, opening the door.

He found Paul waiting in the hall, arms folded, face unreadable. He had been listening. Cole met his eyes for a brief moment, then limped down the hallway and entered his room. His family followed close behind.

The room smelled faintly of graphite and old wood, sized for one person. It had all a person needed; a closet, drawers, a bed, and a table. On the table lay designing equipment, an advanced desktop computer, wooden carvings, pencil shavings, and leftover blueprints. On the walls were portraits of exotic and classic cars, strategically placed around the room.

Cole dropped to a knee as he rummaged under the bed, dust rising as he dragged out a battered shoebox. He set it on the table, reached into his pocket, and pulled out the crumpled check he'd hidden there.

He turned to them, a knot forming in his chest.

“The truth is, I never got hired by R.O.R. (Republic of Racers). I've been Shadow Racing. The owner didn't tell you because I bought my parts from him.”

He opened the box. Inside lay stacks of imperial credits, checks, precious metals, and rare stones—heavy and packed tight, all gleaming in the lamplight.

Anne's eyes widened, but Paul remained unimpressed. His silence scared Cole more than his fury.

HB / Son of Tamerran

“I knew adopting me cost you. A lot...” Cole began. “Business dried up. Friends left you behind. And your standing with the Empire was ruined.”

Cole glanced up. Paul’s face had not changed. He began to tremble tears broke though his eyes.

“I calculated the damages, adjusted them accordingly, and decided to pay it back any way I could. This—“ he motioned to the box “—is why I turned to Shadow Racing.”

Cole handed the box to Paul, not daring to look into his eyes. He stepped away with his face to the ground, hearing the sound of Anne choking on her tears. Grief tore him apart as words spilled out of him like a broken dam.

“I know you would never approve. I’m so sorry I lied to you, but it was the only way I could ever pay you back. I’m going to renounce the Tamerran name to restore your honor before the Empire. I will then leave and go south, find work, and start from scratch.”

It was over. He had confessed everything. He stood before them in silence, shaking all over, tears falling to the ground. Months before, he imagined being calm and confident in his confession. But now he was reduced to a sobbing, bleeding mess.

CRASH!

Coins and gems scattered across the floor. Cole looked up — and found himself in the tight embrace of his uncle.

“Don’t you ever say that again,” whispered Paul, his voice on the edge of tears.

Cole froze, eyes wide. “Uncle?”

“We never cared about the money, son,” Paul pulled back just enough to look him in the eye. “We only cared about you.”

Anne came forward, tears spilling freely. “If we had to, we’d do it all again.” She folded into them, wrapping Cole in her gentle warmth.

Cole struggled at first, but shattered in their arms, weeping on Paul’s shoulder. He tried to turn away, but Paul pulled him back in.

“Don’t be ashamed of your blood,” Paul encouraged. “For the Creator Himself put you into this world. That itself is enough on its own.”

Cole’s chest heaved, wiping his tears as he forced his emotions down. His eyes turned to the floor, seeing the silver and paper scattered across the floor. “What do we do with that?”

Anne picked up a coin, rubbing it with her thumb. “How much is this worth?”

“Around 1.7 million credits on the low end,” answered Cole, kneeling down to gather the fortune.

Paul let out a long breath, almost a whistle. He glanced at the crumpled check in his hand. “And you said you couldn’t get hired?”

“They told me my credentials weren’t enough.”

“But you graduated top of your class,” protested Anne, helping him gather the coins.

“They wanted someone with Imperial certification. And they didn’t want to risk their reputation by hiring me.”

Paul rubbed his beard, eyes narrowing in thought. “When did you last speak to Toshiro?”

Cole blinked. “Professor Agatte? Not since Rio left for Shuto. Why?”

“He has notoriety in the world of academia.”

Cole groaned, turning away. “Not this again.”

“He could sponsor you,” Paul pressed. “Help you get into university and earn your certification. Once you become a master technician, you can find work anywhere you want.”

“They’re not going to take me, Uncle. We’ve been over this. It won’t work.”

“Cole, we don’t know that,” said Anne as she placed the box on the table. “You only applied by yourself, not with him endorsing you. Besides, he was your tutor in high school. I’m sure he would be willing to help if you were to ask.”

“What about his reputation?” Cole’s tone sharpened.

Anne’s voice was soft. “He’s an immigrant. I’m sure he knows how to deal with that.”

“Yeah. An immigrant from an allied nation,” Cole shot back.

He leaned against the wall, face grimaced. “Look, I don’t want to involve anyone else in my problems. It’s hard enough for you as it is. Why risk their standing for something they can’t benefit from?”

“Because he’s our friend, Cole,” said Paul, stepping forward. “And we would do the same for him.”

Cole fell silent, looking at the ground.

“What about the tuition?” he asked quietly.

“We have this, don’t we?” answered Anne, her hand on the box.

“But that wasn’t for me. That was to pay off the damages,” he protested.

Anne placed a hand on his shoulder. “That wasn’t your fault, Cole. All we want is what’s best for you. So don’t worry about the money. We’ve been doing this for ten years. Another four won’t hurt us.”

He met her eyes — pleading, soft, unyielding. His pride cracked as he let out a breath.

“Fine,” grumbled Cole as he turned to Paul. “I’ll give it another shot.”

Paul smiled ever so softly. “Good. I’ll contact him tomorrow.”

He turned to the door, then stopped. “Also, I’m putting a tracker on your car.”

Cole blinked. “What?”

Paul crossed his arms. “It’s that or I pull your engine.”

Cole smirked bitterly, leaning back against the wall. “Well, there’s not much else I have to do outside of town anymore.”

Paul nodded and stepped out the door.

Anne lingered, came close, and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you,” she whispered.

He managed to smile. She returned it before closing the door behind her.

Alone, Cole took the box, shoved it under his bed, and sat on the mattress. His eyes wandered across the room, taking it all in silence—sketches pinned to the walls, scattered blueprints and pencil shavings, dormant computers.

HB / Son of Tamerran

His gaze drifted to the ceiling. Here, a painting—expertly crafted—displayed the night sky; every constellation, every phase of the Twin Moons, from beginning to end. Anne’s masterpiece, made from colors he could hardly name. Every time he looked, he found something new.

He lay back, his mind drifting into the stars. Fatigue bled through his amazement. He then reached out for the lamp and killed the light. Darkness settled around him, leaving only the painted heavens to glow above him.

His thoughts melted away, and sleep embraced him.