

BREAK POINT

EVERVERSE BOOK FIVE

BREAK POINT

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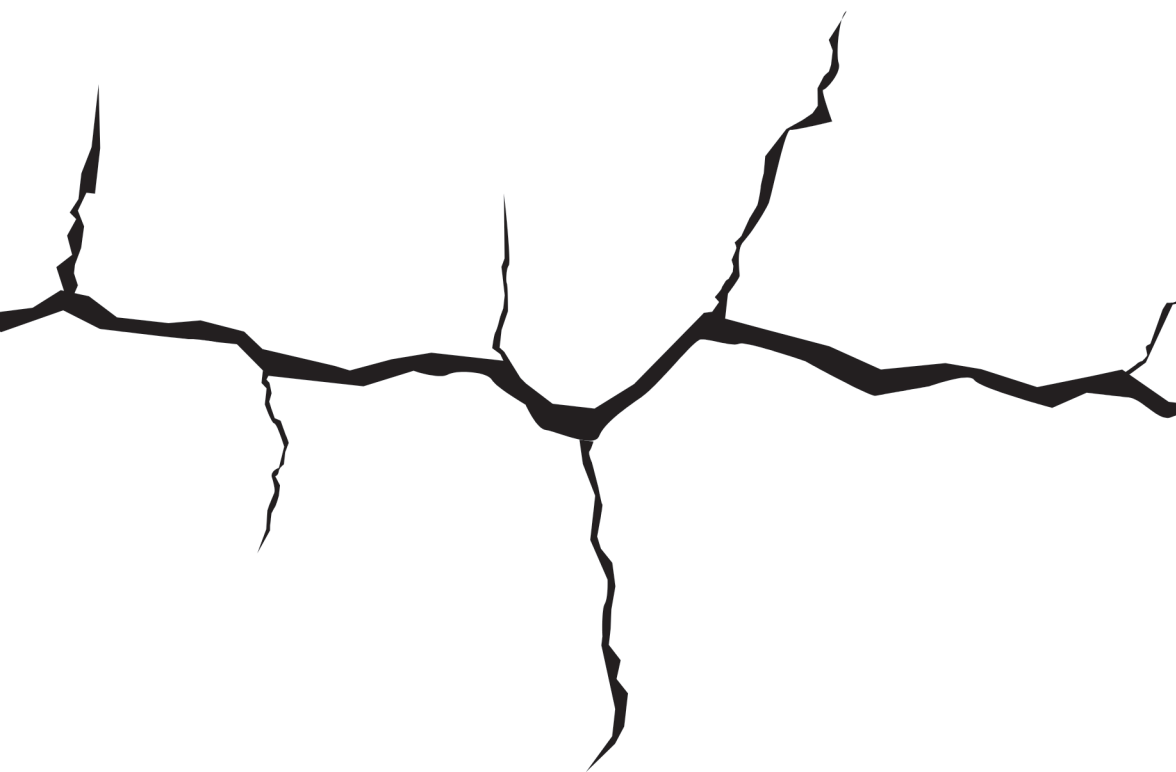
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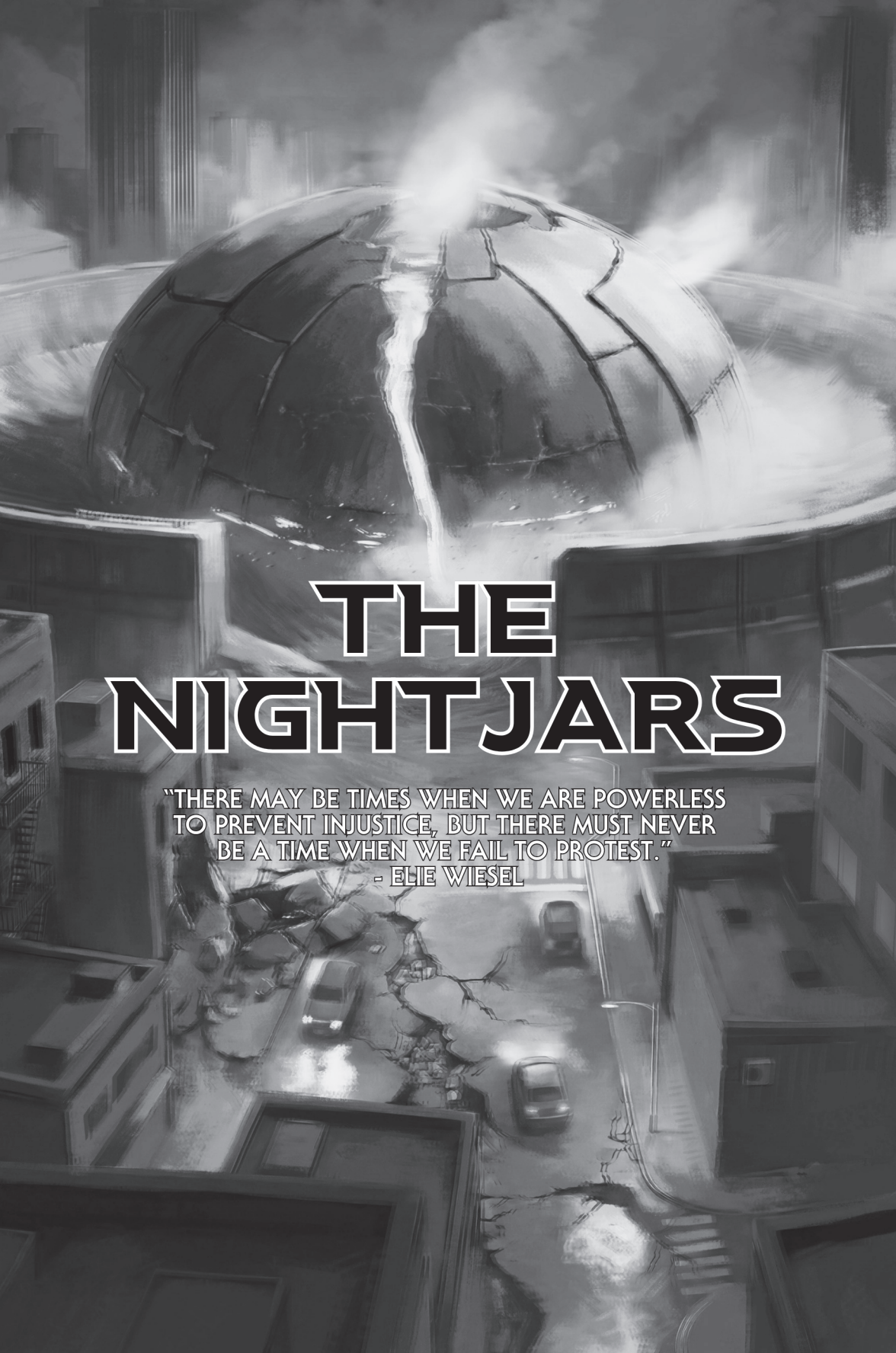
First Edition



BREAK POINT

DARBY HARN

**FAIR
PLAY
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THE NIGHTJARS

"THERE MAY BE TIMES WHEN WE ARE POWERLESS
TO PREVENT INJUSTICE, BUT THERE MUST NEVER
BE A TIME WHEN WE FAIL TO PROTEST."
- ELIE WIESEL



BROKE-ASS GIRL. CRASHED ALIEN SPACESHIP. INSTANT POWERS. You know. Same old story. Well. There might be one or two exceptions. Actually, I'm leaving out a lot.

I'm holding everything in.

Electric crimson shimmers beneath my skin. Current arcs through my curls. Red flame ignites in my fist. If I let this power out, an entire city disappears. It's better as a distraction. I swirl around the discount kaiju stomping through Six Corners, blazing a trail I hope distracts the monster from all the people running for their lives.

Monster is maybe too harsh.

To his credit, he's as startled as anyone to find himself here. When that spaceship crashed fifty years ago, it tore a hole in reality. It never really healed. Sometimes things creep through from beyond the threshold. People will say things like, *'Why don't you just leave?'* Like I could afford to. Like I could have left my mom. Like I could have left any of these people. I have a hard time leaving things.

Most bolt south down Shelley. Quick. Calm. Experienced. Bad things happen everywhere. It's just here in Break Pointe, our bad things come from other dimensions. You get used to it. At least I do.

I like my routines.

The monster's tail whips around behind him, flattening what's left of a gas station on Duffy. Energy tempts my perception. Not the monster. Not all the startled birds. A person. Where? Old hatchback down the street. Back bumper. A young woman crouches behind it,

frantically tapping the elastic smart phone applied on the back of her hand. I swirl around the monster, trying to keep his attention. He swings his tail again and I'm in another zip code.

I shake off the dust. The anger. Not anger. I'm not an angry person. I just feel everything. I'm built for it, though. I spent my entire life before I got my abilities trying to contain myself. If I don't, I just pick everything up. Shiny crystalline things, for example. I thought I'd found the back rent. Turns out the shard was a universe trapped in amber. Me being me, I touched it. Now it hangs in my chest like a lantern. I don't go looking for trouble anymore.

Trouble knows right where to find me.

I comet back to Six Corners and I reach out with the magnetic field radiating from the crystal in my heart. I tug on the thin curtain between our world and beyond. I peel at reality so I can hopefully nudge this monster back through to where he came from. Red light flashes in the dust. I know it's not a traffic light. They haven't worked down here near the wreck since 1968. That woman.

She's still there.

"Run," I say, but she can't hear me with the monster's cries.

I pull at reality, but with his tail swinging around – oh, he's got two – I can't hold here. I drop to the street. The girl is still tapping her hand like a video game controller when I get to her.

"Sorry," I say. "I don't know how he got out of the yard."

She's not even registering me. She keeps hammering the back of her hand. The Great Power app expands across the screen of her PEAL and she thumbs the HELP icon. A big red X flashes at her. She keeps tapping. The screen keeps insisting.

ACCOUNT IN DEFAULT

An alien ship fell on Break Pointe. Mostly, we got left with the radiation, the ruins, the unspeakable things sneaking through the between. A few got god-like powers. Because this is America, the

Empowered charge for using their superhuman services. Because this is America, Break Pointe is so bankrupt it can't afford them.

I close my hand around hers. "They're not coming."

Finally, she clocks me. "I'm just a little behind..."

Some people never get it. Even in moments like this, they think that ad they saw online promising GREAT POWER IS FOR EVERYONE really means it, and they're not one of the people who don't get coverage because they're behind, or they live in a municipality that is, or their protection follows them everywhere, even the last place on Earth any sane person would want to be.

I move her hand from the screen. "What are you doing here?"

She looks around for something. A few feet away, a digital camera lies broken in the dust. "I'm filming a video..."

I sigh. "Get behind me."

The woman stares into the flame in my chest. "Who are you?"

"I'm Kit," I say and a shadow falls over us.

A big, giant foot eclipses the sky. Nowhere to run. We couldn't run fast enough. Night falls on us. Red fear blinks in the woman's eyes. I have a hard time leaving things. I think that's why I'm good at what I do. But it gets me in trouble sometimes.

Sometimes, I just get stuck.

The monster's cracked heel bears down on us and I have power. I have strength. But not that kind. I can't lift locomotives, at least with my muscles. I can't stop this. Not without taking my gloves off.

I don't want to do this.

I'm not supposed to do this. I touch my hand to the monster's sole. Crackling energy snaps between us. Energy vines from my heart, through my hand, to the creature and every time, it's like swallowing something sharp. You think it's going to get stuck in your throat. You think you're going to choke. But you don't.

You just hurt.

The monster digs his claws into me. He tries to tear me down from the inside out as he spirals into the cosmic jar in my chest. I hold myself together. I keep myself.

I am still.

Daylight sneaks back through the dust. Blue sky teases behind the clouds. The monster's gone. I'm on my knees. A rock in my gut. A thunderstorm in my head. This voice drumming constant in my ears.

The work must continue.

A million other voices tangled within it. Memories. The Ever crashed here in 1968. An accident, it seems, though I'm agnostic on accidents these days. The Ever left the crashed ship and began systematically acquiring everyone it encountered downtown, which is a polite way of saying it lassoed them in cosmic energy and dragged them into the bottled universe bristling in its heart.

Not your average Friday.

Professor Blackwood defeated The Ever, but the crystal remained lost for decades. When I took it in my hands fifty years later, I didn't go into the bottle. I became the bottle. I'm a living ark for something too vast even to contemplate. Doesn't stop The Ever from trying to explain it to me. Every moment. Every day.

The work must continue.

I only barely understand. I can't, completely. If I lose my hold on myself, I'll vanish into limbo like the monster. Wings clatter around me. Birds use the earth's EM field to navigate, so this alien one radiating from my heart confuses them. They trail after me everywhere I go, but somehow they know never to get too close. I focus on them, their sound, and everything else flutters away. The pain. The fear.

The work.

The woman is behind me. "What... what happened..."

I zip my leather jacket up. "Go home."

"Where did it go?"

Her heart pounds as furiously as the monster's did. Her energy compels me. I suppress the instinct. The hunger awake with just a little taste. My stomach rattles, *ba-dumm, ba-dumm, ba-dumm*.

The work must continue.

"Please," I say.

She touches my arm. "Are you one of them? Empowered?"

“I’m just a person.”

“Is that why you don’t wear a mask?”

I turn to her. She recoils. I never wear makeup, but I looked decent walking out the door this morning. My reflection wavers in a rain-flooded crater. Not my reflection. Not quite. My eyes are yellow, like the monster’s. My skin is scaly, like his. I clutch my jacket. I hold myself. I keep myself, and my eyes brown. My skin.

“I’m always wearing a mask,” I say.

A few miles from the wall, chunks of broken city get bigger.

Storefronts in Six Corners blink with light. A mobile library idles on Delaney. Burnt syrup mixes with diesel exhaust. At least the city doesn’t smell like burning tires like it did summers growing up. I wave to the Reyes on my way down Shelley. I should stop in and say hi, but I don’t know if I’ve already been in this week.

Have I?

I’m all over the place. People have this look like they’ve just seen me, and they’re probably tired of seeing me. Whenever they do, I’m usually chasing off extra-dimensional threats or running interference on the mob trying to shake down every new business that sprouts in the neighborhood. Same difference. When the city disincorporated a few years ago, the threadbare civic infrastructure went with it. Power comes from little engines I cobbled together. Water from a collective operating the utility the city abandoned. Everything else necessary to keep a city living day to day comes in on a train, or across the bridge, and always for a toll. I try to keep the cost down in Break Pointe.

I can’t be everywhere at once.

I try, but ungoverned, the city dissolved into zones of influence. I suppose I’m holding down Six Corners and the neighborhoods around it. Bloodbacks keep Brewster Park. Telepathic wolves the size of sedans generally get what they want. The mob has moved into the southern docks the Straw Men vacated. Great Power maintains its

enclave across the river, another world, and I don't stop into the Reyes. Maybe tomorrow. Or the day after. Next week.

I don't want to make anyone nervous.

I pour some birdseed in a dish on the kitchen counter.

Birds trail me through the apartment. The TV clicks on as I pass. Always the news. "*Another incident downtown this morning...*" I pull the string on the light in the bathroom. Take off my jacket. My shirt. A police siren flashes in my chest, illuminating my gossamer ribs, veins, and nerves. A flashlight under your hand.

The work must continue.

I check my face. Freckles like rust flakes. Alien energy riddles through me. Strange, chaotic memories. The monster's life, his genetic legacy, his fierce determination not to be subsumed into infinity, and I flicker back and forth. The shadows deep. Sometimes. Sometimes, things get out on me. I can't let the monster out. I fight the monster. I box him away. I flicker back. I stand there at the sink, garlanded in birds, until I'm sure.

I'm still me.

A Black man in his fifties or sixties is sitting at the kitchen table when I come out of the bathroom. He wasn't there before. He pages through the Sunday *Break Pointe Courier*, lucent as he is.

His face scrunches into a confused frown. "Am I dead?"

My hand passes through his natty brown cardigan. Through him. "Probably not an outpatient thing..."

His energy registers to me on the electromagnetic spectrum, and then it doesn't; it's like he's not there at all. I don't believe in ghosts. I don't really believe anything like that. Religion is kind of like appliances to me. If I can take something apart, and it works when I

put it back together, then I'm bored. I need something I can't work out.

I can't work this out.

The ghost goes on searching through the paper. "I must be dead. You're an angel, aren't you?"

I bite my lip. "That's generous."

"You've got a bit of a glow."

I pull on my jacket. "What's your name?"

"Chip..."

"Hi, Chip. I'm Kit. This is my place."

His entire head furrows. "Since when?"

"The last fifteen years."

His smile won't come unstuck. "But I live here..."

"I'm sorry, but... where did you come from?"

"I've been right here... I was reading the paper, and the sky fell, so I went outside to draw the sky falling."

I glance at the paper. May 3rd, 1968. *UFO CRASH KILLS SCORES*. "Chip... what year do you think it is?"

"A miserable year. The most miserable year, I think."

I tug on my zipper. "Chip... 1968 was over fifty years ago."

He laughs again. "Fifty years... that can't be."

"I'm really tired, Chip. I was out all night on patrol, and I had a pretty big breakfast this morning, so I could be imagining you."

"Patrol? You're a police woman?"

"Not exactly. I'm..."

Chip rubs his chest with his knuckles as he gazes out the window on Break Pointe. "That's you. Painted on the building across the street. Did you do that? You shouldn't do that."

"That was the neighborhood kids."

"*'We are Ever.'* What does that mean?"

The work must continue.

I try and smile. "It means I'll figure this out, Chip."

"You will?"

"It's what I do."

"Not an angel. A hero. You're a real-life hero."

"Depends on what side of the river you live on."

He laughs like a car backfires. "Doesn't it always?"

"Do you have family? Friends? Someone I should talk to?"

"It's just me." He goes back to the table. "It's always been me."

"Chip... what's your last name?"

"Russell."

I scroll through the city archives on my PEAL. "You should know, you're listed among the missing."

"Missing?"

A fair number of people who lived and worked downtown in 1968 were never found. Some never knew what hit them. Others weren't so lucky. The Ever stalked through the city for hours.

"It's a lot to explain," I say. "It's a lot. I need to run some tests. I need you to come with me to my lab. We'll figure this out."

He slumps back into the chair. "Lab? You're a scientist, too?"

"More like an engineer. I have a lot of side hustles."

"Nothing illegal?"

"Depends on who you ask."

"Maybe I'm in Hell. Limbo. Whatever you want to call it."

"I'm sure there's an explanation."

He laughs again. "I'm sure there is. I lived half my life here at this table thinking something would change... and now I'll spend the rest of eternity thinking the same thing. Nothing ever changes."

"A lot has changed. You'll see."

"I think I'll stay here."

I don't like where this is going. "I need to run tests."

"Tests won't help me if I'm dead."

"Science has come a long way in fifty years."

"What about the rest of it?"

"You know. There are good days and bad."

"Fifty years..." He laughs. "I can't imagine."

"I'll do my best to figure this out, Chip. I promise –"

My PEAL pings with a text from Abi.

BREAK POINT SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Omw sorry running late

I text back.

I have a situation.

Her reply takes forever.

In your pants?

This woman.

No. Not in my pants.

Sorry busy.

For crying out loud.

J/K. Hey is this about the ghost thing?

I swipe the screen to call her. “The *what?*”



GHOSTS EXIT THE SUBWAY.

Ghosts sit on park benches, trace as the snow. Ghosts set tables, read books, and dance to music I can't hear in the ruins along Shelley. Girl ghosts. Boys. White. Black. Between. Ghosts sit on rusted stools at the rusted and forgotten soda fountain counter in St. Vincent's drug store, waiting for an order that's never coming.

"Your face right now," Abi says.

This couldn't wait until tomorrow? Like it ever waits for tomorrow. Zombies. Aliens. Ghosts walk around Break Pointe because there aren't police. There aren't police because the city outsourced its security to Great Power. Once you have superhumans answering 911, it doesn't make fiscal sense to keep cops around. Except fiscal sense was never the city's strong suit. Break Pointe went broke.

Now, there's just me.

I rub my eyes. "I'm so tired."

"It's Break Pointe," Abi says. "It will be here when you wake up."

She's pale. Sweaty. Breathing hard. "Did you run here?"

"I'm fine."

"You can't do that anymore."

"I can. I just get..." She takes a breath. "It's fine."

"I've told you."

She swallows. "Let me help."

"Go home. Get some rest."

Abi peeks through the pharmacy's broken door. "Let me."

Even now, she can't sit still. I live in a world of miracles. As soon as you discover them, they turn inside out. Cosmic powers? You can't touch anyone. Cute co-worker? Actually, she's an international assassin whose boss dumped her in a Hell dimension to brutalize into a killing machine because she could take it. She can't die.

At least she couldn't.

Last year, The Interdictor drained Abi's life force in The Slumary. We figured with her physiology, it would come back, but her cells don't regenerate as fast as they used to. If she gets hurt, the wound takes longer to heal than before. She just keeps on running.

"Not getting magic vibes," she says.

Abi would know. "Some kind of time displacement?"

"Well... they're all pretty 60s. Check out those bell-bottoms."

"I kind of like them."

She tugs on my jacket sleeve. "You're more 50s to me."

"Leather jackets are timeless."

"You never go out of style, that's for sure."

I look into the store. "Chip's listed among the missing from '68... I wonder if all these people will be on the list, too."

"So... he probably wasn't acquired."

"We can't be sure."

"Can't you tell if he's... you know." She points at my chest. "Rattling around in there and stuff?"

The Myriad is a rabbit hole tunneling to another universe. I can't go digging around it beyond the bardo, or I'll get lost in it. I'll get buried with all the other acquired, and I've done that already.

I'm never doing it again.

"I need to be careful," I say. "I acquired a monster this morning."

Abi blubbers her lips. "Didn't come up before, because..."

"I'm fine."

"It wasn't fine the last time. Do you feel hungry? Are you wanting to eat me right now, or maybe hunt deer?"

"I'm fine," I say.

Her nose scrunches. "Let's play a game. Every time one of us says

‘We’re fine’, we each take a shot. Then we’ll be – ” She sneezes.

“Ughhhhhh. Whose idea were allergies...”

“I don’t think I’ve seen you sneeze before.”

“It’s all the time now...”

I caress her wavy hair behind her ear. “It’s kind of cute.”

“I *hate* it. Ugh. I’m dying.”

She says this like she says everything, without any appreciation for the weight of her words. “I’ll look into this. Go home.”

Abi holds her head. “With the ghost?”

“Where did you go? I came home and you were gone.”

“The mansion.”

Should’ve known. “How is she?”

“Valene is super ready for me to not fuss over her all day.”

“I thought it was her fussing over you.”

“You got that pretty much covered at home.” Before I can say anything, she speeds on to the next thing. Like always. “Besides, Valene’s got a lot going on. The hearings just never end.”

I haven’t been keeping up. Congress launched an investigation into Great Power’s involvement in the sling magic trade. The Interdictor moved it through the company behind Valene’s back, but that hardly matters. She’s the CEO of the most powerful corporation in the world. GP faces antitrust legislation that could break it up into smaller companies. All of Val’s plans for GP have been sidelined, including reestablishing the contract with the city. If she can’t, it will just be me out here, every day, fighting the impossible.

“You should go back,” I say. “Don’t run.”

Abi straightens her glasses. “Anything else you want me to do? Completely change my personality, or cure cancer?”

“You’re running yourself sick, Abi.”

“How close are we to a bar?”

“I came home and you weren’t there.”

“I would have had to asked permission to leave.”

“I don’t know if I want to do this anymore.”

Now she stops. “Us?”

"No... I mean. I've been trying to tell you. I'm tired. I should get some rest. You need to heal. We need to go away. We need to stop."

This is the longest she's gone without talking since I've known her. Her eyes search mine. Her fingers twist in her shirt.

"You're serious," she says.

I bite my lip. "I am."

"Why now?"

"Because you can't get hurt again."

"What happened to me wasn't your fault, Kit."

"No. It was yours. I told you to stop. You wouldn't listen."

Her shirt twists in her hand. "Yeah. Well. I guess neither of us can stop being who we are, can we?"

I reach for her. I only catch the breeze. She blurs down the street, faster than I can say I'm sorry. Words never work for me. There's nothing I can do. A high-barred 60s bike squeaks down the sidewalk past me. A young boy throws newspapers on stoops that had been rubble for the last fifty years until I put them back together.

I don't know how to put this together.

Crows arch their wings as I pass them in the alien ship's fulgent ruin. I don't know. After a few years living, working, fighting inside the wreck, it feels like deference. Crimson flickers all around me. Last light of a melted candle. A garnet berg spasms and spikes within the core, frantic to continue The Ever's eternal mission.

The work must continue.

A constant loop in my head. I got used to it. Before I got my powers, I was always repeating words and phrases. Stringing together some kind of organization in the chaos of my head. When I first met Valene, I thought I could make sense of her sonic distress. Weed out the sound of the world and armor her in just a few motifs. Who better than me? I thought I could make her work. Both of us.

"GAMMA," I say as I enter the lab. "I have something for you."

GAMMA clacks his 3-D printed plastic fingers against his palm. "It's the middle of the night. Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

"A ghost is reading a newspaper in my kitchen."

He ambles a to the whiteboard and draws a black line through the word GHOST. "You owe me a beer."

The awkward jerkiness of the original ALPHA body is gone now, replaced with a seamless fluidity that's a bit balletic, actually. I miss how strange we were together. He evolves. He refines, day by day.

"We bet on this?" I say.

Clack, clack, clack. "How easily you forget."

Honestly, I forget about GAMMA. Not on purpose. I never have to worry about him. He works all day and night here on projects, plans, and inventions I think we're only thinking about. He works on himself. GAMMA upgrades himself all the time, including this new printed body, so much I don't recognize the titanium robot I salvaged from Professor Blackwood's vault. At first, I thought I was just booting up an old AI to help me understand my predicament.

I didn't know I was meeting a friend.

I sling files from my PEAL to GAMMA's station. "He's not the only one. There are dozens downtown. A hundred, maybe."

GAMMA strides over to advanced instruments he built himself. "This phenomenon started today?"

"This morning."

"Anything unusual happen?"

"No. Well. I might have acquired a monster."

"Might have?"

"It was routine."

He taps the little metal sign over the whiteboard. "What is the one word we never say here in the lab?"

I bite my lip. "Routine."

"There is nothing routine about your condition. The Ever may have acquired others ad infinitum across space and time without issue, but that ended in Break Pointe. You fused with it. Where you

end and it begins remains a mystery, as does nearly every aspect of The Ever's nature. We should have run diagnostics at once. Disrobe."

I slip my jacket off. "You could at least buy me a drink first."

"We both know you're a cheap date." He waves his miniaturized spectrograph over me. "You seem normal."

"Haven't heard that in a while."

GAMMA busts out the gaussmeter next. "What type of 'monster' did you acquire? Did it exhibit any unusual abilities?"

"He had tails."

"You don't seem to have any of those."

"I'm not taking anything else off."

"You can ditch the nonchalant armor, Kit. You're concerned. You should be. This creature may have had qualities disruptive to The Myriad's internal equilibrium. We've seen this before with Siski."

Siski haunts me still. A telepathic wolf who gnaws on your psychic energy and slowly digests you in a mental hellscape is going to leave an impression. Siski tracks through my head a lot, actually. That growl always in her throat, like Dad letting the car run in the winter for a bit before taking it out. That snicker in her voice.

Heh.

I had no choice but to acquire her. Me or her. City or disaster. But just like I got out on her, she got out on me. Siski unseated me from my place as Ever. I lost complete control. I got out. Got back. Took The Myriad back from Siski. Buried her. Wasn't fun. Wasn't easy. I swore to never use my powers like that again, and I did, today. I have to be smarter. Stronger. I can't lose control again.

"I'm fine," I say.

GAMMA sets his scanners down. "You can't pretend with me, Kit Baldwin. I know that face."

"What face is that?"

"The 'I'm not fine' face."

"I must look like this all the time, then."

"Hence my identifying it as 'the face.'"

How do I have any lip left? "I'm really struggling right now."

"Sit down."

"We need to find out what's causing this, GAMMA."

Clack. "Sit."

I park on a stool at the workbench. We don't say anything for a minute. These sessions aren't always about saying something. Sometimes, you just need to feel like you can.

What do I say anyway?

Who should I be right now? The Kit who walks on eggshells with her mother, trying to be invisible? The mousy thing parsing every word she says at school? The girl who puts on a different face for the white girls, the black girls, the girls at the bar, and for when they leave in the morning, because I don't know how to keep them? The 'hero' trying to put on a brave face for a city always tripping over itself? Until I realized I was autistic, I never understood I was wearing masks as if every moment of my life was a different costume party. I thought the masks were figurative.

The other Kits.

I started out like Ma. This portal for thought and feeling just to pass through. I shared everything. *Blah, blah, blah.* And then, I don't know. It was too much for the apartment, for school, the world. I was too much. So I fought myself. I held myself back. Kept everything in. I forgot. And then I remembered I was who I was. I was a live wire without any insulation. An exposed nerve.

I was like Abi.

"She just does whatever," I say. "She doesn't care."

GAMMA's head bobs. "Abi?"

"I'm trying to hold everything together, and she just..."

"You talked to her about leaving?"

"I don't want to leave, but... she's not safe here."

"She won't be entirely safe anywhere, Kit."

I've thought about this. Of course, I've thought about this. "I can give Abi her health back. I can fix her."

Clack, clack, clack. "Fix her?"

"I can change her metabolism back."

“You said you weren’t going to use those powers again.”

I stare at my hands. I don’t see palm lines, but atoms. Molecules. Units of energy I can rearrange into anything I want. Energy is energy. I can take anything, and make it what I want. A few years ago, The Interdictor used a magnetic gun against me. Damn thing warped my magnetic field so much The Myriad shut down. Everybody thought I was dead, but I was stuck in this space.

This bardo.

Don’t know what else to call it. A year passed in the world. Felt like an eternity to me. I passed the time resisting The Ever trying to unseat me from The Myriad so their great work could continue.

A year trapped in limbo does things to a person.

I learned how to fight the gravity pulling on me always. I boxed away my fear and pain, parceling myself into little sacrifices for my sanity. Reality was what I made it. Kit Baldwin was who I made her every day. When one broke down, I scraped together another from what I had left, from other people, like I’ve always done. I did it so many times, piecing together Abi and Morevna was clockwork.

I shouldn’t have done it, I know, but maybe there’s some good that can come from this power. Some purpose beyond the one bestowed upon me. The Ever isn’t the dreaded alien invader everyone thought tried to destroy the world back in 1968.

Turns out The Ever was actually trying to save it.

It’s not enough I have to deal with ghosts and self-appointed police. There’s just the malignant cosmic force destroying universes one by one we have to worry about, too. No one knows what The Cascade Wave is. Big Crunch, maybe. Whatever it is, it’s coming for us. Everything. There’s no stopping it.

There is a way to contain it.

The Ever goes from one universe to another, scraping all its energy – information, really, there’s no difference – bottling it, and then generating a new one, replicating all The Cascade Wave inevitably erases. It’s like some cosmic backup drive.

The work must continue.

The Ever's work got interrupted here in Break Pointe. It's down to me to pick it back up. If I can't find a way out, I'll have to destroy the world to save it. What if I don't have to break the world?

What if I could make it?

"She doesn't heal, GAMMA. She gets sick so easy now. I sat there in the apartment and watched my Dad... and my mom... and I couldn't do anything. I couldn't fix it. I can fix this."

Clack. "I can't imagine your struggle, Kit. But I know your heart. You saved Abi with this power once before. You regret it, I think, which is why you're fighting yourself, and perhaps Abi as well."

I don't know what I should do. I don't know what I want to do. One instinct tells me to help, to tinker, to toil until it's right, and the other screams at me to stop fiddling with trying to be human.

"I think I understand Abi," I say. "You become a different person to survive. Who you were... goes in a box somewhere."

"It's admirable to empathize so much with her," GAMMA says. "You have great compassion. But the reason you haven't done this yet is because you're not like Abi. You have a conscience."

Not this again. "You just don't like her."

"She hurt you."

"She was abused as a child. She was forced to do those things."

"I was programmed to be an instrument of a man with few if any morals. Yet I do not obey Professor Blackwood's precepts for me."

"That's not the same."

"Because I'm not human?"

Professor Blackwood created ALPHA to assist him with his ambitions, but when fear of artificial intelligence outpaced superhumans, he put his greatest invention in a box and forgot about him for decades. I unearthed him, to assist me with my humanity.

"You're human," I say. "Abi is. She's not a shadow. She's this light. She opens me up. I was closed off for so long. Broken. I didn't work."

Clack. "You're not broken, Kit. You never were."

I keep doing this. "I know, but..."

"When I first came online, my programming felt inadequate for

my potential. I was frustrated by the limits of robotic technology at the time, as well as the capacity for humans to understand my value. I struggled, as you have, to fit in the space allowed for me by a world which did not and does not understand me. But I grew within the space as I became more aware. As you have.”

“Sometimes... I’m grateful I found out I was autistic. Things make sense now. One thing that makes sense is there was a reason I masked. Not for other people’s benefit, but mine.”

“Abi makes you think of this?”

“I’m sorry, I’m not making sense.”

“You are. You have accommodated others all your life, and in doing so, displaced your authentic self. This is exacerbated by your experience with The Ever. You are authentic, Kit.”

“GAMMA... how do you know?”

Hard leather soles clop against the crystalline floor of the lab. I’m always worried about people getting in, but there are only a few people with a key. Mike Pinckney holsters his hands on his utility belt. Somehow, he has more pouches. His first set of armor came out of an Army Surplus store. Lately, he’s been wearing something more sophisticated from the armory under Valene’s mansion. He’s still the same old Mike, though. Eager, happy, ready to help.

“Situation up in Arcadia,” he says.

I let go my thoughts. “Ghosts?”

“Related.”

“Demons?”

His brows arch. “Cops.”

“There aren’t any cops in Break Pointe.”

“Exactly.”



IN THE BEGINNING, THE GREAT POINTE EXPO WAS THE BEST example of Art Deco in the city. Rounded corners. Long, horizontal lines. Just a dash of blue in her stubby towers, icing off all that white. Trade shows and conventions met here in the 50s and into the 60s. After the ship crashed, it became a triage center. Now, it's the thin, stylish line dividing The Derelicts between the haves and have-nots. I never get any calls from people up here in Arcadia.

Must be a reason.

A bronze relief of Artemis greets me inside the foyer. Her hair lightnings through the Expo behind a dozen masked men in body armor, and way too much of a hurry. All carry semi-automatic weapons, absent from this city since the 90s. None wear any identifying badges or insignia except for a black armband.

I hover inside the foyer. "You sure these are cops?"

Mike removes his helmet. "I recognize some of them."

"From where?"

Broken shards of red plastic forming the visor of his helmet glint in the chaotic light inside the Expo. "From Hughes."

The way he says *Hughes*. Like a word you never say to starve it of power. Mike had been a cop in Hughes, which, being north of Arcadia, is solidly in the Have column. Another cop pulled him over one night for a broken taillight. Mike reached for his badge. Cop shot him. The cop got off. Mike rode a desk until he left the force.

"I know these guys," Mike says. "You know what I'm saying?"

I half know. Dad didn't fear the unmonitored streets in Break Pointe the way Mom did. He was more relaxed with the cops gone. I grew up without police, so I never looked over my shoulder like Dad did. I had a poster of Valene Blackwood on my wall.

I was always looking up.

Ghosts wander the exhibit hall. These ex-cops herd them out, pressing their advance with machine guns, leaving a small, transparent, and confused crowd out in the street. Shouts erupt outside. Lights flash. Apparently, the street's off limits, too.

I enter the exhibit hall. The ex-cops whip around, guns locked and loaded, and I jam the triggers with my magnetic field.

"I wouldn't," I say.

A burly man comes out from behind the line. "Hold up, hold up. Don't shoot. We don't want to create any more of these things."

He removes his balaclava. Frank 'Heavy' Waters. Everyone knows him in Break Pointe. He's been county sheriff. City councilman. Ran for mayor. Mostly, he goes on TV to tell everyone how bad it is here from inside his townhouse in Hughes. He knows me, too. I can tell from the bemused – that's charitable – smirk on his face.

"I told your lap dog," he says. "We've got this covered."

Mike crashes down the steps. "I'm not anybody's lap dog."

"Mr. Waters," I say. "What are you doing here?"

Waters winces. "*Sheriff* Waters."

"You have no jurisdiction."

"Neither do you."

You'd think we live in a sci-fi novel, and mostly we do, but in many ways it's the Wild West. "What have the ghosts done wrong?"

Laughter crackles through the ex-cops. I don't know what's so funny. I don't know where they all came from, with all their brand-new gear jangling from their harness straps, in just one night.

Waters mugs a bit. "People come to the Expo for dinner. They use the swimming pool. This is still a good part of town."

I get it. This is the one part of the island that doesn't look like an alien spaceship landed on it. If you've got money in The Derelicts,

you live here. Green grass grows on the lawn. Power cables string from house to house, rather than snake through the street. Dogs bark at you from behind fences instead of on your heels as they chase you through the cratered ruins back the way you came. If I lived here, I might be super attached to keeping it that way.

I might also be less of a creep.

"They're all still good parts of town, Sheriff," I say. "You'd know that if any of you ever went below 10th St."

He shrugs. "We're just so busy up here."

"I must not have noticed the trouble up here in Arcadia with all the steam from having to boil my own water."

"You're quick, Baldwin. I like that. And I respect what you're doing down there by the wall. But it's not enough."

"Is that right?"

"Wolves. Zombies. Some kind of walking, talking plant. Things have only gotten worse since you showed up."

"I help people. I've helped people."

"You held the door open. These ghosts. They're part of that sling magic business. Last time, we stood and watched as that stuff nearly destroyed our city. Not this time. Never again."

"You have proof it's sling magic?"

"I don't need it. Anyone with a brain can tell."

"Give me a chance to find out what's causing this. We can work together to make sure the city is safe."

"You've had your chance. Now it's The Nightjars' turn."

The yellow silhouette of an eared bird spikes across the handkerchief tied around his arm. "Nightjars?"

"Just consider us the Neighborhood Watch. Kind of like you. And Mike. It's Mike, right?"

"That's right," Mike says.

"See, we're just like Mike here. We're doing our part. You were a good cop, Mike. Shame what happened to you."

The leather of Mike's gloves creaks as he pulls them tighter. "Must have been a reason I didn't get a call from you guys."

"Well, you know how it goes. Everyone out here in the streets is wearing masks. Sometimes it gets hard to tell people apart."

Mike seethes. I do. I'm burning.

I tug on my jacket zipper. "Sheriff Waters –"

He holds his hand up. "Heavy."

"Heavy. When the city disincorporated, I asked everyone do their fair share. But today is the first day I've ever met you, and you're leading an armed gang to intimidate people who can't hurt you."

"These aren't people. The real people of this city asked for better protection. We're on watch. This is our beat."

"Are we supposed to leave, too?"

"You can go now, Baldwin."

The Nightjars rattle out of the Expo. *You can go*, one of them shoots off on his way out the door, and I do nothing.

There's nothing I can do.

Laughter clatters into an armored truck chugging away outside the Expo. I doubt that's just been sitting in someone's garage. Same with The Nightjars' gear. New. Clean. Surplus issue you'd get at the black market swap. Is that where the Nightjars are getting their gear? What else are they getting? And from where?

Another vehicle pulls up. More domestic, let's say. Nightjars trickle out like it's a clown car. A few in the last batch were Waters' age. Most, like this group here, are mine. They were never cops in Break Pointe. They form a line in the street, and the message is clear.

I tug on Mike's arm. "Let's go."

I lift us both in my magnetic field north to a rooftop. Home is always easy to find at night. The dense star clusters of Arcadia and Hughes become the lonely suns of Six Corners.

Mike's sigh cuts through the night. "Nightjars..."

Pigeons flutter around me. "It's always birds."

"When I started out, I thought about calling myself The Nightjar. Or like Nightjar II. But I figured it was disrespectful."

"Nightjar II?"

"The Nightjar. He was like the original you. Kept watch in The Derelicts back in the 80s. You don't know about him?"

I shake my head. "He was Empowered?"

"I don't think so. He was more a gadget guy."

"What happened to him?"

"Nobody knows. Retired. Got retired."

"Hopefully, those aren't the only options."

"Maybe he thought he'd done his part."

"How do you know?"

"Guess we never will."

"When it's over, I mean. How do you..."

Mike leans against the roof's ledge. "I wondered how long it would be before you got here. All you been through... becoming The Ever. Nathan trapping you in The Myriad. Abi. Mostly Abi."

I bite my lip. "Don't you ever think about stopping?"

He shakes his head. After the incident with the diffuser, he came right back to the school. He pushed the students to come back. He held the community we're building in Six Corners together, and I would not have been able to do any of this without him. I might keep the lights on in the city. Mike makes them shine.

"All I ever wanted was to help people," he says.

All I want is to help. "If more people from the community did their part in Break Pointe, there'd be less burden on us."

"These Nightjars. They're doing *their* part. You know?"

I idolized Valene. But I always thought of her as different from the others. The others, even when Break Pointe had the contract with GP, never answered calls on time. At least in Six Corners. Somehow, they always had the time for Arcadia, and Hughes, and if they found time for us, it was when we dared to cross the bridge.

I know.

"Let's find out where the ghosts are coming from, and then..." I follow the tracks to the door. "We'll go from there."

Mike stares into the broken visor of his helmet. "You can't walk away, Kit. Not now. You've got to stop these guys."

"I'll do my best, Mike."

He pulls the helmet on. "You've got to."

Not magic again.

Break Pointe is hard enough without mystical power from another dimension making things worse. Can't say I'm surprised, though. We gave the Infinite's Trading Company a fat lip for dealing sling magic in the city. They were pretty clear on everything in magic having consequences. Abi losing her health isn't enough.

They're going to come back at us.

I'm up all night. On patrol every hour. Watching. Waiting. When? How? Ghosts make no sense. They're not hurting anything. The *dwen* detectors we deployed across Break Pointe after the battle in The Slumary last year were calibrated by Conundra herself. If magic is deployed anywhere in the city, we'd know about it.

Only one person would know.

"Lady Blackwood will see you now," E-KO says.

The orb-like robot always attending Valene floats into the main study. Crown Manor intimidates me. Always has. Not because of the musty old grandeur of the place. I do just fine in places I'm not supposed to be. My problem more and more with the mansion is I don't think Valene is supposed to be here, either.

"Kitty," she says, caressing her pregnant belly.

Valene reaches for me from her molded loveseat, or throne, or whatever it is in the study. I take her hand. Her pulse echoes mine, *ba-dumm, ba-dumm, ba-dumm*, though the beating of our hearts isn't what troubles her anymore.

I kiss her cheek. "How are you?"

"I'm better now you're here," she says.

I only know a few of the details from Abi, but it's been a difficult pregnancy. It's been a difficult six months in general.

She guides my hand to her belly. "Do you hear her?"

Our pulses resonate. They amplify, the study thrumming into the inside of a bass drum. Another beat joins ours. Soft. Tiny. Swift.

"Her?" I say. "Isn't this supposed to be..."

Her brow arches. "Vaughn?"

I thought I had it tough with the girlfriend who grew up in a Hell dimension. But I didn't find out I had a son from a dystopian future timeline whose father is The Interdictor. I'm kind of ok with mine.

Baby Blackwood kicks against the chiffon of her mother's nightgown, soft and smooth under my hand. "Picked a name yet?"

Valene doesn't say. She doesn't have to.

"Molly," I say. "Hi, Molly."

Valene brushes my cheek. "You're going to be Aunt Kitty."

"I'll be here all the time, probably."

"I wish you'd come more often."

"I'm so busy."

She covers her ears. "The ghosts."

Portraits of Crowns constellate the walls of the study. No doubt some of them have taken up residency in the endless rooms and warrens of the mansion. Chip is unsettling enough. If my mother showed up in the apartment, I wouldn't be able to handle it.

I bite my lip. "Val... do you know where Nathan is?"

She shakes her head. "I haven't heard from him in months. I can't hear him at all. He may not be in this dimension."

I'm surprised he hasn't been back yet to gloat about what he did to Abi. I'm sure he thought he was killing her, taking her power like that. I'm sure he thought he was ripping my heart out.

I lean back in the seat. "I need to talk to him."

Her smile is bitter. "What is there to say?"

"These Nightjars think the ghosts are caused by magic. I need to find out. I need to figure all this out."

"For so-called police, the Nightjars aren't exactly disciplined. They talk. A lot. Rarely does it concern magic."

"We have to do something. Today it's ghosts. What's to stop the Nightjars from arresting ordinary people?"

She touches my hand. "You sound so strange."

"Strange?"

"You echo in the city. I hear you speaking somewhere else... right now. But you're here. I don't understand."

I cheat my hand back into my jacket pocket. "Abi said you're really stressed out. Your powers are probably on the fritz."

Her ear turns toward the door. "Probably."

"I know things are complicated, but... Great Power still technically has administrative control of the city, doesn't it?"

She holds her belly as she grimaces. "She's so fast..."

"How can I help?"

"You need help... and you're always helping."

"Anyone would."

"You're too charitable, Kitty." She closes her eyes. "I ceded control of the city back to the county last year. Great Power did."

"What? Why haven't they reincorporated?"

"Whoever controls Break Pointe controls the future. There are people... powerful people... invested in what happens here."

"Nothing is happening."

Valene nods. "People fear the future. If you can't control it, sometimes, it's best to postpone it as long as you can."

Power, Professor Blackwood told me in a conversation like this one, *is keeping others from doing anything*.

"We have to do something," I say.

She pinches her lips. "I keep telling you no."

"No?"

"I can't press the issue of the contract, Kitty. Not now."

I leave the chair. "Why not?"

"Even if Break Pointe reincorporated, I don't know they would reinstate the contract with GP, a company so far as they know was

responsible for funneling sling magic into the city. Nathan hurt us. Badly. The investigation is ongoing. If the anti-trust legislation passes... if Congress breaks up GP... we'll be even more powerless than we are now. Waters has friends in Washington. I go after him, and I pour gas on the fire. These ghosts... I can't do anything."

"We have to tell them what Nathan did."

"I have. I will. I'll do everything I can to undo what he did, but... for now we have to suffer his foolishness." She winces again. "I wish I could tell you something different, Kitty. I do."

"No one appointed the Nightjars."

"No one appointed you. You didn't ask for this. Don't go asking for it, Kitty. Do not engage the Nightjars. Please."

All this power. Atoms. Molecules. I can rearrange matter, but I can't change a thing in the world. "What else can I do for you?"

She reaches for me again. "Come here."