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SPVCE

by a. w. karen

>> INTRODUCTION

This story has traveled alongside me for years, served as a source of comfort through my highs and lows. It has seen me graduate high school, earn my Bachelor's, and obtain my Master's. It has been my outlet... a chance for me to share my perspective, my heart, my anxieties. And I am both nervous and thrilled to share SPVCE with the world.

*Accomplishing this dream wouldn't have been possible without:
Jan, the love of my life and my unwavering source of support.
Heather, one of my very best friends and my informal therapist/editor.
Maggie, the Barrah to my Maci and my informal art guru.
My friends and family, who have helped me get through life.
And my grandma, my number one fan and angel in the sky.*

You all mean so much to me; this story goes out to each and every one of you.

Wishing love and laughter,

a. w. karen

>> A NOTE ON *SPVCE* AND ANXIETY

Anxiety is **not** the same for everyone. The portrayal of anxiety in this novel is based purely on my own experience.

This novel is **not** meant to answer the question “What is anxiety?” or “What is the best treatment for anxiety?”. Rather, this novel shares what anxiety is like **for me** and how certain treatments work or feel **for me**.

You might relate to some of the things portrayed, or you might not. At the very least, I hope this novel provides another perspective – one that can help you better understand some of the people around you and across the world.

For those of you suffering from anxiety, I wish you moments of calm. Your worries and your feelings are **valid**. And **so** important. No matter how hard it gets or how lonely you feel, just know there **are** people out there who care.

No pessimist ever discovered the secret of the stars, or sailed to an uncharted land, or opened a new doorway for the human spirit.

—Helen Keller

>> ENTRY 0

How sane do you have to be to make it into space?

...

Maybe there's a secret government formula — a recipe for the perfect space cadet.

1/2 intelligence.

1/6 mental stability.

1/6 brilliant human intuition.

1/6 reasonable health.

But the numbers surely can't be the same for all of us. There's no way to squeeze all of humanity into a single mold.

True enough.

...

That's why not all of us make it into space.

>> ENTRY 1

Starting at a young age, it becomes a race.

Parents raise children with the goal of getting them up into the air, carefully crafting each feather in their children's wings. After all, space means a lifetime of adventure... an adventure that just so happens to be fully funded by the government.

In other words, economic stability for life.

Humanity has reached the epitome of perfect parenting, then, hasn't it? All parents, worldwide, wholeheartedly devoting themselves to their children in the hopes of them achieving greatness and stability. An abundance of selfless beings striving to provide the best for their offspring.

...

False.

Humanity has *not* become the poster child for morality and selflessness. In fact, it's somehow managed to dig itself deeper into the pits of *inhumanity*, weighed down by the greed that bleeds from the hearts of parents. And the hearts of most children, too.

You see, not only are space kids promised lifelong prosperity, but their loving and nurturing parents receive a very similar reward. Guaranteed and disgustingly free monetary support from the government for the remainder

of their lives — no work required. Almost like a congratulations for brainwashing their children better than everyone else.

And the whole brainwashing thing isn't even where their obsession with spacedom begins. I mean, people seek out partners based solely on who'll contribute the most promising genes. Dates have become some sort of two-sided business pitch. Each partner tries to sell themself to the other, touting standardized test scores and blood test results. "Impressive" histories of their ancestors' mental and physical health records.

...

I guess I should be impressed humanity has finally realized it's the inside that counts... but I'm not. I *can't* be.

After all, humans didn't reach this conclusion on their own. It was born from their unhealthy determination to breed the best possible offspring and improve their chances at space prosperity. Why worry about the outside when the brains and constitution of a person are far more important? Beauty is not a factor in the formula for the perfect space cadet.

...

So, to sum it all up, children being raised strictly in love-lacking families to guarantee their parents an easy future — *that* is what the world has become. From a young age, school and studying are all kids know. Parents manipulate their children's relationships, "playdates", connections like a finely tuned chess match. Ancient milestones of child growth are no longer relevant; losing teeth means nothing, and birthdays are just another day in the week. Age is not so much celebrated as feared... each year is one closer to year 10.

When children turn 10, they're subjected to the SP10 Exam, which determines whether a child can survive rigorous space cadet training. Those who fail the test are frowned upon and sent back home. Told to

figure out what “ails them” and can “be corrected” before the utterly impossible, last chance exam that occurs at age 15.

These exams are held twice a month — on the middle and final days — and children participate in the soonest one scheduled after their birthday. Kids that pass the SP10 get to “relax” until the next event day when they're sent to the nearest Space Academy to start training for the SP15. These chosen few are pushed to the limit physically, mentally, and emotionally. Pumped to the point of bursting with science, technology, intuition, and “proper mental thought”.

As rigorous as this Academy training might seem, it's nowhere near a guarantee you'll pass the SP15 with flying colors. But it *does* increase your odds by a high percentage... especially if you're comparing the success rates of Academy versus non-Academy kids.

To put it bluntly, “free” kids have a non-zero, but *basically* zero, chance to surpass their Academy counterparts. I mean, to date, only *one* non-Academy child has achieved space freedom. I'm not exactly sure who's to blame for such a statistic.

Are the SP15 proctors just biased towards Academy kids? I wouldn't be surprised.

Do the Academy's exclusive databases really outrank the intelligence and research available to the public sector? Probably. Basic information is shared with the public, but new and advanced discoveries are apparently too juicy for the government to share.

Have to maintain control of the masses' intelligence somehow, I guess.

Of course, there've been crazed parents who hack into the outer shells of the government's databases, determined to snatch the knowledge which their children were unfairly denied. As you can expect, their actions didn't go unpunished.

They weren't brutally harmed — no, never. Our government isn't so cruel or brutish as to torture people who try to steal their secrets. No prison time or death was gifted to these people.

No, the fitting punishment for breaching the walls of the powerful wasn't aimed at the conspirators. Rather, the crosshairs were trained to follow the puppeteers' strings to the source of their pride. The source of their lifelong mission.

An automatic failing score on the SP15 for their children did just the trick.

>> ENTRY 2

It's hard for me to choose the start of my story. Naturally, I won't be able to start from the very beginning. I mean, no one can remember what happens during the baby stages of life. The brain is too new, a fluctuating work-in-progress, to form and retain memory. Honestly, from my toddler years to my 10th birthday, everything progressed normally — at least, in terms of physical growth.

My mind, on the other hand, grew far beyond what it would have in the past. Years and years of unyielding studies and exams will do that to you. I had nothing around to distract me, no air for me to breathe. No breaks, no “play time”. Nobody to just... keep me company. Or talk.

...

I try not to recall the years leading up to my 10th; each time I do, I feel like my brain might explode.

Not that there's anything to recall, anyway. Just some hazy images of my parents delivering me new supplies. Making sure I was taking in *just* enough nutrients to stay alive. Hovering over my shoulder every so often to apply some pressure, not so subtly reiterate how much was riding on my success.

And boy, let me tell you — I loved when they did that.

Sometimes, when I wasn't being stalked by my puppet masters, I would take a "break". Stare blankly at an equation or sentence, pretend I was reading it. I only dared do this when I was ahead of schedule, so my parents wouldn't accuse me of slacking.

There's one such break, a vivid memory, I find myself drawn back to every now and then. I think it's the only memory of my parents I can revisit without further deteriorating my sanity.

It was two days after my ninth birthday. My eyes were glazed over, vaguely staring at the quadratic formula. Different scenarios were tumbling around in my head, cycling through the lives this formula could have on an exam. a values, b values, imaginary terms —

"— to do?"

I blinked.

My brain reeled back to the present, snapping my eyes to attention. My gaze wandered to the wall. Had I imagined it? I swallowed, slightly uneasy.

I had never heard my parents talking before.

For whatever reason, society decided it was "good training" for children to work under less-than-ideal conditions: blasting televisions, flashing lights, and so on. Couldn't exactly tell the machines on a Space Station to shut up or turn off, could we?

It was an excuse, plain and simple. A justification. They couldn't be bothered to turn down their entertainment but didn't want to be blamed for affecting their child's studies. So, they made up a reason — something to help them sleep at night.

...

But this's just *my* hypothesis. My "brilliant human intuition".

The second I heard my mother's voice, my brain switched to high alert. I froze. Held my breath.

Their low murmurs occasionally peaked, dropping bits of data, dots I slowly pieced together to form a picture.

Concerned. Enough. More. Boy.

The words laid themselves before me, and I began my work. Connected different dots, different words, trying to produce a logical answer. Word after word after —

...

Oh.

They were concerned. I didn't stand a chance. My efforts weren't enough. But they had one more try. Another child — a boy.

...

My vision went black.

I felt like I was watching myself from the outside, like a wave of sheer disbelief had shoved me out of my body.

To hear my parents — my unrelenting puppeteers — had *no* faith in me was... numbing. Nauseating.

Infuriating.

What had I done to lose their trust? For nine years, my *entire life*, I did what they demanded, no questions asked. No retaliation. No tears.

No reasons to give up on me.

...

My computer screen blurred, and I fought the urge to blink. I didn't want the tears to fall or the sobs to wrack my body. I didn't want to give them the satisfaction, to make them think they'd broken me. *They* had already given up on me, but I sure as hell was not about to.

I rubbed my eyes, pressed my palms into them until stars exploded behind my eyelids. A breath freed itself from my chest. I could do better. Exceed their poor expectations. Live for the logic and throw out everything else.

Mind over man.

...

A few weeks were all I needed to master the art of suppressing my emotions. I didn't talk back or give any indication I heard them talking that night. If anything, I got quieter. More observant. I kept my ears open and my mouth shut.

And I stopped taking "breaks".

Sleep became a luxury I could no longer afford. The time I saved on sleep was spent studying subjects better suited to my tastes... in the hopes I would find something to look forward to each day. Something enjoyable enough to make all the other shit palatable.

Unfortunately for me, becoming a studious robot was apparently the only way I could make my parents appreciate me. They doubled down on my daily assignments and exams, bought me the best supplies and computer software. I guess draining myself of my personality was the key all along. I was finally showing promise.

I never heard them repeat those hushed words.

>> ENTRY 3

The first important person I met on my perilous trek to spacedom was a girl by the name of Barrah Carmen. On the day of the SP10, we were herded into the same enormous lecture hall, anxiously eager to prove we were worthy of a Space Academy's resources. None of my other future crew members were there that day; they didn't live in the same province as me.

Barrah did, however. I will forever be grateful for that.

Despite how many of us were seated in the hall, the air was deathly quiet. The whisper of a whisper would break out every minute or so, an imaginary breeze blowing through the hall's non-existent windows. The only noise I could discern with certainty was the ticking of a massive digital clock on the wall.

Now, I can't tell you why a digital clock would be ticking, but I have no doubt its design was intentional. The ticking and tocking felt like subliminal messaging, discouraging us from saying a peep. I guess the other kids were content to obey and just sit beside each other in dull, boring silence.

I, however, was not.

This was the opportunity of my lifetime, a chance to study what fascinates me most: *people*. Their words, their thoughts, their actions — why they are who they are. The technical term for my favorite field of study?

Psychology.

...

The scientific form of stalking.

I was quiet for about five minutes before my body started shaking with excited energy. Peeking to my left and right, I decided to engage the girl to my right. The boy to my left... didn't seem like he'd provide the liveliest of conversations.

His eyes were downturned, staring blankly at his clasped hands. Shoulders hunched, no facial expression. Everything about him reeked of disinterest and exhaustion — like he was too tired to care or too uncaring to put in the effort.

He seemed like he'd just... given up.

...

I mean, I'm the first to admit our lifestyles aren't ideal, but there's no reason to give up completely. Doing so is like betraying the privilege we have as living, breathing human beings.

Plus, space is our *one chance* to escape the boundaries erected around us on Earth. Why wouldn't you at least try to reach it? Give your all until the bitter end?

I wanted to shake the boy, ask him, "Why shut down now?!"

...

But I didn't. A machine can't run if it has no energy left.

I angled my body toward the girl to my right, eager to see what she had to say. Her eyes were focused intently on the humongous clock, almost like she was trying to count the milliseconds as they passed. A never-ending stream of numbers coursing through her brain's circuits, chasing all her other thoughts off the road. A highway completely devoted to logic.

I couldn't help but feel like we were cut from a similar cloth. I leaned to the side slightly and looked up at the clock.

"A-Are you ready... for today?"

I could almost hear the cogs in her head grind to a halt.

The girl slid her eyes away from the clock, and we stared at each other in silence. The sustained eye contact quickly became too much; my eyes fled, set out to examine her appearance.

Her eyes were the color of dirt — the blackish, brownish kind that appears after a heavy rain. Her hair was short, black; her skin a rich shade of caramel. Its brown hues contrasted the bright white camisole and red skirt adorning her figure. I couldn't help but glance at my pale arm, my gray clothes, wondering how dull I must've looked compared to her.

The girl hesitantly reached out a hand to me, palm facing up, and I just... stared at it. Debated if I should try to shake it at such a weird angle.

After a brief stalemate, I mimicked the gesture; she gently grabbed my hand, began tracing shapes into my palm. A strange, ticklish sensation. Is this a new type of greeting? Something from a culture I know nothing about?

...

Lightbulb.

She wasn't just drawing shapes — she was writing *letters*. My brain rewound itself, collecting sensory data, connecting the dots, piecing together the phrase:

I can't speak.

I frowned. An ailment? Not one I've heard of before. Our society has to have treatment for such a thing, right?

Maybe it's psychological, a self-inflicted voice block. A subconscious decision to be silent due to a past trauma or personal oath.

...

Well, only one way to find out.

"Can I ask why?"

Back to writing on my palm.

Birth defect.

“Oh.” The word left my mouth before I realized how stupid it sounded. “S-Sorry, I mean — well, I’m sorry to hear that. Ah — I guess I’m not really *hearing* that though. I-I mean —”

The girl smiled, her shoulders shaking. I grimaced slightly, muttered another apology. Way to show your social ineptitude, Maci.

It's OK. Your name?

“Maci Layton. You?”

Barrah Carmen.

“I like it,” I admitted, smiling. “It’s unique. Unique names are good.”

She gave me a thumbs-up. Before I could ask anything else, a jarring alarm rang through the hall, bringing our unusual conversation to an end. The SP10 was about to begin... and so was the rest of our lives.

-V-

I wish I could recall the details of the SP10... I think. Most likely a slew of intuition-driven scenarios and physically taxing obstacle courses. Or hours upon hours of boring multiple-choice questions.

Really, it's anybody's guess.

You see, everyone who takes the test has their memories wiped afterward. Obviously some sort of government strategy to ensure no one takes the test and divulges all its secrets.

There's no sense of privacy with any of it. You have *no choice*. It's good luck on your test, then good-bye to the experience. I mean, I guess it's a kind of experience you don't really *want* to remember, but still — as

someone devoted to the human brain, I should have the right to decide what's kept in mine.

Regardless, I'll spare you the details of the five years following the SP10; they weren't exactly pleasant or eventful.

After all, I failed the exam.

>> ENTRY 4

I have to admit — failure can teach a person many things. It stimulates emotions and ideas in the mind that act like viruses or cures to a personality. You'll be shaped by the successes and failures in your life. Most of them will even change you for the better.

...

My failure just made me mad.

Sure, it's human nature to fail to perform in high-pressure situations. But, of all people, a person enveloped in psychology and the functionality of the human mind should know how to control anxiety and maximize performance.

My failure literally made no sense.

...

But I accepted it — I mean, it wasn't the end of the world or anything. I had time to reconfigure my approach and prepare for the SP15.

Would it have helped if I could remember what happened during the SP10? Of course. But you take what you can from an experience... which was literally nothing.

I was hopeful anyway.

...

My parents weren't.

Five years later, I wasn't the same sheltered child who stepped into that enormous hall and eagerly talked with Barrah. My puppeteers were the ones to thank for this; my failure had apparently blinded them, made them think I flunked the SP10 *on purpose*.

Who in their right mind would do that?

...

Lucky for my parents, I wasn't like that boy from the SP10 — I wouldn't pull the plug. I would pretend I was performing for them, keep my mind intact and hungry for the freedom awaiting me in space.

No matter how tight they tied their strings, how hard they yanked me around, *I* would remain in control.

-V-

When I stepped into my province's Space Academy on the day of the SP15, I was bombarded with pristine uniforms and emotionless faces. Lines of cadets marching in perfectly creepy unison.

The sight made me smile.

These students no doubt believed they were ten steps ahead of me and the other "free" kids. Little did they know how harsh training could be in an unregulated environment. How years of silence and solitude make you impervious to pointless intimidation tactics.

I took a deep breath and entered the hall. Bring it on, Academy kids.

-V-

The human brain likes to blame Fate for strange coincidences or circumstances. It's like a... coping mechanism for our fear of the weird and unknown. A hand-wavy explanation for statistically unlikely events.

A habit I understand well but choose not to follow. I like logic. I stick to logic.

However, finding myself seated beside Barrah Carmen — of *all* people — on the day of the SP15 *did* make me reconsider the whole Fate thing for a moment.

...

Just a brief one.

At first glance, I didn't recognize her. Barrah's hair was longer, constrained into a perfect bun. Her vibrant clothes were gone; a dull grey uniform had taken their place. Everything that made Barrah stand out in our first encounter had been drained away, leaving behind a shadow. Just one of many in a sea of cadets.

But when our eyes locked... instant recognition. Her gaze was as strong as ever. Intent. Focused. Powered by a thriving internal machine.

The blank expression on Barrah's face loosened to reveal a tight-lipped smile. I didn't for a second believe she was unhappy to see me, just assumed the Academy had a strict closed-mouth policy. No talking. No smiling.

"Why are *you* here?"

...

Okay, scratch the "No Talking" rule.

I blinked, refocused on my surroundings. Whoever was talking sounded *pissed*... and that made me curious. I followed the voice, eager to observe my first in-person confrontation.

My eyes landed on the face of some Academy kid, who was glaring... at me? We stared at each other, his emerald green eyes burning with unwarranted anger.

Honestly, I felt like I'd been forced into a staring contest against my will.

Not knowing what to say to him, I just stayed silent. Busied myself with inspecting his appearance in my peripheral vision. His hair was shockingly white-blond, a stark contrast to his warm and sun-kissed skin. Tan with a bucket of freckles on the side.

The boy shifted ever so slightly in his seat, seemingly made uncomfortable by my silent staring. He tried to keep the fire burning in his eyes, but the flames were flickering.

"What, you deaf?" he barked out. I could practically feel the discomfort in his tone, the desperate desire to have control of our conversation. "Why — are — you — here?"

I blinked at him. Furrowed my brows. "I'm not deaf. But even if I was... why're you talking like that? Speaking slowly doesn't bring your words to a frequency the deaf can hear. It just makes you look ignorant."

I glanced back at Barrah, strangely exhilarated by this new human interaction. She raised her eyebrows, a mixture of amusement and concern in her eyes. Her head gave the slightest shake.

"Wow," guffawed the boy. "You've got guts. Or you're just too damn stupid to understand your situation. Recognize where you are — *who* you are — in comparison to us. You're not a student. I can tell that by your drabby ass clothes."

We both looked at my outfit. Sure, it was no fancy uniform — just a plain dress, leggings, rubber boots. Dull. Inconspicuous.

...

Guess it's never been in my nature to try and stand out.

"You're right," I replied, shrugging. "I'm not a student. And if I find other students behave like you do, I'll be quite proud to say I'm not."

The hostile kid shook his head, faked a sigh. To his right, another student shifted in his seat, his eyes flitting between us. "A new person has been here for five minutes and 47 seconds, and you're already picking a fight, Murray?"

Murray rolled his eyes, making the other boy frown. "You know I can't tolerate rejects. They show up just to embarrass themselves."

"I'm not a reject," I interjected, not about to let some Academy kid talk down at me. "I'm the same as any of you."

"Yeah, okay," he muttered. The smirk on his face set my blood on fire. The pristine uniforms and robotic lifestyle had apparently gotten to his head, transformed him into some smug, condescending asshole.

My teeth gnashed themselves together. My eyes bounced from his muscled arms to his calloused fingertips to the worn rubber soles of his shoes.

"Yeah, okay," I mockingly grumbled back at him. Our eyes locked together. "I hate to break it to you, hotshot, but specializing in the physical artes does *not* make you any more prepared for space. It just makes you a brute."

Murray opened his mouth... and no sound came out. He simply stared at me, mouth gaping; I blinked back. His friend quickly covered his face, hiding an amused expression. It wouldn't surprise me if I was the first person to ever push back at the hothead... but being *told* I was would sure make me feel good about myself.

Murray recovered pretty quickly, turning around with an angry grunt. His friend slowly lowered his hand. Hanging his arms over the back of his seat, he smiled lopsidedly.

“Man, I wish I'd had that kind of a comeback when he first made fun of my specialty.” Murray shot him a look, which the boy placated with a sheepish grin and wave of his hands. “H-Hey, you weren't exactly nice about it.”

“Yeah, well, you're the idiot who said you chose math cause it's 'fun'. Of all the words to describe math, *that* ain't one of 'em.”

I ignored Murray's attempt to earn back the fuel he believed he had at the beginning of our conversation.

“I think math's fun,” I admitted, trying not to sound too enthusiastic. “I mean, it's like the art form of logic — if that makes any sense. Like... it's comforting to know a structured path exists that leads to the right answer.”

Murray groaned, turned back to face the front of the room. His friend tilted his head at me, eyes questioning.

“I've just always liked numbers, I guess.” My eyes shied away from him. I wasn't sure why he was examining me so closely, but it made me uncomfortable. Desperate to deflect his curiosity away from me.

“Gotcha,” he replied after a beat of silence, surprisingly willing to accept my vague response. Part of him *had* to be intrigued — morbidly curious as to what specialty justified my appreciation for math. Another part of him probably didn't care. After all, I was basically a stranger to him at this point.

...

But maybe some *miniscule* part of him knew what my reaction really meant: my specialty is *not* one people view favorably. In a society so obsessed with space and technology, specializing in such a human-centric field is deemed impractical. Illogical.

Useless.

“Ah, I-I'm Alan Ren, by the way. If you care to know.” Alan's eyes shifted nervously. I gave him a small smile.

"I do. I'm eager to meet new... people." I just barely stopped the word "specimen" from leaving my mouth. It didn't feel right to call him that to his face. "I'm Maci Layton. Nice to meet you."

...

Alan. I locked in on his appearance as he spoke quietly with Murray. Pitch black hair, fair skin. Eyes blue like the ocean. A stark contrast to the raging volcano beside him.

A light tug on my sleeve pulled me out of my thoughts.

I turned to Barrah, and we exchanged smiles, a genuine one on her face this time. I held out my hand. She gently grabbed it and began to write words, almost as if we'd communicated this way all our lives.

Good to see you.

"You, too. Ready for today?"

Yes. Eager. Good luck.

"Yeah... it's just mind over man, you know? That's kinda my 'good luck'. I'm not one to believe in things like luck and stuff."

Barrah searched my eyes, looking for something I wasn't completely willing to share. She nodded, traced her finger along my palm once more.

Mind over man.

I smiled. "Mind over man."

>> ENTRY 5

I felt for the longest time I knew all there was to know about the SP Exams and the Space Academy... but I was stupidly oblivious. After the SP15 ended, a stranger escorted me into a small room and told me to wait. At this point, I was dead inside. Exhausted. Too tired to remain standing.

I collapsed ungracefully onto the floor. Let the overhead lights burn into my eyes. Visions of formulas and platforms and buzzers and flashing lights and emergencies. One by one, the events of the past who knows how many hours dragged themselves lethargically through my mind.

I don't know how long I laid there. Physically, it wasn't *that* long... but mentally? I grew an eternity of mental years on that cold, tiled floor.

...

The lights disappeared.

Another stranger's face loomed over me. Someone else pulled me up by the arm and dragged me out of the room. Down a hallway. Through a door. The hand let go, and I found myself mourning its loss.

The hallway was large, constrictive. Windowless walls. My eyes refocused, registered other people were in the room with me. Nine others, to be precise.

...

Nine?

Hundreds of kids walked into the Academy that day. Why were the 10 of us herded together?

...

Lightbulb.

We were different from all those other kids. We weren't just test takers — we were the *owners*. We had managed to take the test and keep it. A memory, an experience, a trial we get to twist into some sort of gratification and indication that we are worth the effort.

That we deserve to go to space.

-V-

The 10 of us were marched into yet another room, one that did absolutely nothing to alleviate my exhaustion. Metal covered the floor, the walls, the ceiling. Every inch consisted of some shiny material, save for a three-foot-wide band that followed along the top of the walls. This portion was made of glass and angled in such a way that it reflected all who looked into it.

And let me tell you — it wasn't exactly comforting to see your physically and mentally drained visage every time you looked up.

Metal tables were scattered around the space with four or five metal chairs seated at each one. Tablets with flashing screens were stacked on top of them, waiting to be read. The sides of the room were lined with what looked like top-notch computers. In the center of the room was a pyramid of cardboard boxes with strange symbols along their sides.

An older man wearing an obnoxious uniform ordered us to form a line and offer our right wrist. So many clinking medals hung off him that I could only listen to him when he stood still.

At his command, a group of men appeared in front of us with strange contraptions in their hands. In robot-like unison, they reached out, clamped the contraptions around our wrists, and left as fast as they'd arrived.

My arm felt heavy. I glanced down, seeing some kind of a bracelet. A thick, black band that was cold and snug against my wrist.

I instinctively tugged on it, my skin prickling with unease.

The Jingly Man cleared his throat as he stared us down, his eyes slinking from person to person. No blinking. No expression. I knew instantly I didn't like the guy.

Between him and the tacky trinket on my wrist, I found myself growing more and more uncomfortable. The discomfort poked at my brain, jostled me awake. I have to be alert; I can't afford to be off in loopy land.

"I suppose congratulations are in order," the man began, his voice a deep, raspy beast fighting to crawl from his throat. "You made it this far. You're above average. Second place."

...

Aggravation.

I knew he was choosing his words in such a way to provoke us. Of all the people to mock and call "second" in anything, we were not the ones. We who had just gone through hell and actually survived to tell the tale.

...

You know, I often pride myself on my ability to resist provocation. I study psychology for a living — I know the triggers, the behaviors, the traps to avoid. How to think and act apart from the norm, to be a member of the 1%.

But at this point in time, I was failing. And I *knew* it was happening. I was powerless to stop myself from reacting like any brainwashed, arrogant, genius child would... and it was pissing me off.

"But second place isn't good enough. I know you all are aware of this. You live to be first. You were *created* to be first. Here's your chance to prove your birth wasn't pointless. The final test."

...

You have *got* to be kidding me.

He motioned behind him to the metal room... and with that wave went my sanity. "Here you'll see a simplified replica of a short-distance travel pod found on the Space Stations above us. You will treat this pod as if it was your own. Familiarize yourselves with it — quickly, of course. It will be your duty as a group to navigate a specific scenario."

I fought the urge to groan. If this man was planning to make me rely on someone else's capabilities to achieve my lifelong goal, then he had another thing coming. Don't get me wrong — I have nothing against working in groups; the Space Stations themselves are run solely by crews.

But in this situation, I had no way to know how these other people would perform. I hadn't had time to observe them, dissect their personalities. Figure out who works hard and who hardly works. I didn't want to come this far only to lose it all because someone didn't *care* as much as I did.

Jingly Man let out a horrible attempt at a chuckle. The sound made my ears hurt. "Relax. Although we will be looking for an overall success rating from the group, you will each be monitored closely and your contributions to the scenario noted. You will pass this stage by your work alone. No one can pull you down. Nor can you rely on someone else to raise you up."

I wanted to feel relieved, but I was still *really* aggravated.

"The drill will commence in 10 minutes and consist of a problem you could very well face up in space. Your task is to identify what is wrong within

the system and eradicate the errors. There is no set time limit. Understand, however, that certain complications grow exponentially worse as time goes on. The drills are randomized. Even we, your evaluators, do not know what will occur. I can confirm, however, that all items you may need are in this room. The knowledge needed for your chosen drill may or may not exist here. That part depends on you."

Another test? Some old-fashioned goose chase? The thought made me want to lay on the floor again. Pretend this wasn't happening.

I mean, I wasn't concerned about the knowledge needed for the drill. Looking down the line, I noticed every other person was an Academy kid except for me. As stuck-up as they might be, they were bound to be well-trained and well-versed in the machinery of the pod replica.

No, the thing that worried me was the abused state we were all in. *I* certainly wasn't ready to face some ticking time bomb of a space catastrophe. The dead atmosphere in the room made me think *no one* was.

"The last thing I am obligated to say before I take my leave is this: do *not* treat the drill like a game. Doing so could make everything you've done up until now pointless. Your life's purpose —" He paused, his eyes locking with mine. "— obliterated."

...

Fear.

The emotion sparked in the back of my brain. Jingly Man's emotionless eyes had morphed into dark, haunting orbs, shining bright at the thought of destruction. The eyes of a Grade-A psychopath.

...

Moments like this make me wish I didn't understand others as well as I do. I didn't want to recognize what sort of horrors lay dormant in the brain

of someone with eyes like his. I didn't want to acknowledge the lack of control we had... the Jingly Man had it all. And he *loved* knowing he did.

I forced myself to look away from him despite not wanting to show weakness. I don't lose staring contests. I don't allow myself to be discouraged.

But I was too disgusted to care.

The sound of medals scraping against medals reverberated around me as he walked past us and out the door.

"Good luck," he rasped. I forced myself to breathe.

...

A devastating silence crowded around us.

I kept hoping someone would do *something* to free me from my brain's bizarre spiral. A never-ending chorus of metallic noises and raspy words and murderous eyes. Going and going until everything froze on a single thought.

10 minutes.

How long has passed already?

An eternity, surely... yet another mental eternity of years for me. I'm getting old, huh? Grays probably sprouting in my brain. Effects of age on the brain: loss of memory, loss of cognitive abilities, loss of —

"T-Two minutes and 33 seconds to go."

Fresh air.

I blinked a few times. Restlessness broke out around me. The disembodied voice was given form as its speaker stepped out from the line and walked toward the middle of the room. Something clicked in my head.

...

Alan Ren?

A small wave of relief washed over me. At least there was one person in our temporary crew I could count on.

One more link broke out from the chain. A girl. She practically tripped in her haste to get to the boxes in the center of the room. “Whoa, groovy. Haven’t seen this since... jinkers! Or — jinkies? Junkos?”

My brain short-circuited. I had no idea what the girl was saying, but I was *definitely* intrigued.

The rest of us followed her lead, stepping away from the wall. A few people fluttered over to the computers, others to the tables to examine the glowing tablets. I held myself back from the commotion, content to watch everyone else come alive.

Their mannerisms, their interactions with the room... the first batch of data regarding my crew members. Not enough to draw any impressive conclusions but enough to build some first impressions.

“You okay?”

A new voice. I focused on the face in front of me: another boy. Tall, gangly, with reddish hair and pale skin... *unnaturally* pale.

I tried not to stare, but his skin seemed unhealthily transparent. Like it was stretched to the max over his bones, just barely keeping his insides on the inside. It took a lot of effort to tear my eyes from the blue highways on his arms. Genuine concern swirled in his hazel eyes.

“Well, okay in the loosest sense of the word, I guess,” he added with a tired laugh. I appreciated his attempt to lighten the mood.

“Yeah. I’m functioning, at least. And I’m using the loosest sense of *that* word, too.”

We shared half-hearted grins.

“Irving. Eugene Irving. I’d shake your hand, but —” He stared down at his gloved hands for a moment before clasping them behind his back. “— who knows what germ party’s going on in here.”

"Hey, no complaints here." I held up my hands, shrugged. "I'm not a touchy-feely person anyway. Well, I'm kind of a feely person — emotion-wise anyway. Not so much touchy."

...

Stop talking, Maci.

"I don't even know what I'm saying anymore." A more genuine laugh; I relaxed. "My name's Maci Layton. I —"

Beep! Beep, beep, beep!

The wall across from us separated, revealing a large screen and the words *10 seconds remaining*.

"Ah. Forgot about that."

"We're not ready," I muttered. "No one could *possibly* be ready right now."

7 seconds remaining.

"Could we not do it and just say we did?" Eugene asked.

"Believe a lie strongly enough and it becomes truth? Doubt will always be there to remind you when you least expect it."

Eugene turned to me, eyebrows raised.

3 seconds remaining.

"Harsh. You got a better way to handle this?"

1 second remaining.

"Mind over man," I whispered, walking toward the center of the room.

A siren blared out. The final test had officially begun. And no one was ready for what was about to happen.