



A HORROR NOVELLA

THE INEVITABILITY OF EVIL

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The Inevitability of Evil

A Sci-Fi Horror Novella

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First edition

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To everyone who said, 'There's something wrong with those three...'

Preface

This novella is written in British English by three separate authors who each have their own distinct narrative voice. As such, you may notice some style changes chapter to chapter as we dance in the horrors of three diabolical brains. Enjoy the grey matter.

We Tip Our Hats to...

Our heartfelt thanks to the legendary, exemplary Anya Pavelle for her proofreading and support. We each owe you an organ and a blood sacrifice.

I

Part One

Where We Started

He'd walked down this path maybe a dozen times. The memory of his last visit was still fresh, but this time felt different.

The familiar crunch of gravel underfoot was the same, but the silence...the silence was new.

It was impossibly dark, and his flashlight couldn't cut through the blackness. The dark wasn't just an absence of light; it felt alive, suffocating like a giant tentacle, a thick black noose around his neck.

He had the growing feeling that he wasn't alone in the darkness. He could sense a presence watching him stumble up the path, hoping to grasp a cold hand on his shoulder and pull him into a lifeless void.

He thought he could hear a little whisper on the wind: *Closer... closer...*

But he knew it was his tired mind fooling him. He couldn't feel a breath on the back of his neck or in front of his face, but he got the skin-prickling feeling that it *was* there, just beyond the light.

His flashlight flickered, gasped, and died.

Now, Ward's only guide to the house was a dim light illuminating the face of the broken figure on the porch. He knew, from snippets of light, that the face belonged to Joe McCain.

The house and its surrounding area was exactly how he remembered as a kid. Same broken fence panels. Same broken porch light that flickered as though it was haunted. And the stories? Well, they remained the same: *The Sightings of Sparrow Road*. Same broken couple inside, only Joe and Marie were the next generation. They say, *History repeats itself and abuse has patterns*.

Moving through the darkness, he felt the same gut-wrenching sensation he'd experienced the first time he walked up this path: ten-year-old Alex Ward, the boy who dared to knock.

A nervous smile broke across his face as he reminisced. How he'd stolen his first tentative kiss from Sandy Mildred for being...brave.

That was another time, a fleeting moment of bravery compared to how he felt now.

It was the silence.

The choking silence.

The never-ending silence.

Shouting and screaming were the usual chorus for this isolated monstrosity.

He carried on towards the house and away from the stale coldness behind him, fighting the urge to look back with every step.

Silence here held an eerie quality that was only amplified by being at the far end of the island, miles away from the next broken porch light.

You're on your own, Ward, you brave boy.

An abrasive voice cut through the silence.

‘Wardy, you move slower than a man on the shitter trying to avoid the missus. Get your arse up here! Stop fucking around in the dark. Jesus, what’s got you spooked? Why, you look more startled than sheep when they hear a hungry wolf howling at the moon.’

Even though Ward could see Joe, his voice felt alien in the darkness, and it unsettled him.

‘You always had a way with words, Joe. Deb said Marie called in about the baby. She said something about a light in the sky? Anything else I need to know before I wake the whole town up?’

Joe McCain flicked his cigarette at Ward’s feet as he retreated into the house, his voice a low, haunting invitation. ‘Shit, I don’t know. Why don’t you come in and see for yourself?’

* * *

‘Marie, look alive. Ward’s here. You wanna tell him what you saw?’

Joe McCain moved towards the fridge, opened it, grabbed a beer, popped the cap, and then slammed the door closed. The noise it made jolted Marie to look up from her hands.

Joe threw the bottle cap in the direction of the sink.

It was dark, but Ward could see Marie had been crying into a dishcloth.

Her hair was matted.

Her fringe clung to her forehead and covered most of her left eye.

‘Why’d you have to go and bang that thing all the time? I damn told you about a hundred times,’ she said as she threw

the dishcloth in Joe's direction.

It landed on the wooden floor without making a sound, like it had seen this play out before and tried to keep out of it.

Joe ripped a chair out from underneath the table and threw himself onto it, slamming his beer down with enough force to send it spilling up and out of the bottle like the sinister tension that had burst into the room.

Frantic, foaming alcohol pooled around the bottom of the bottle; the fizz added an eerie quality to the silence.

'Why don't you tell me what happened, Marie, whilst Joe drinks his beer?'

Marie motioned towards the fridge. 'You think he's the only one who needs a drink around here, Ward?'

'You watch your mouth, woman,' Joe said. 'Detective Ward's a guest. You don't speak to my guests that way. You understand?'

Marie ignored her husband's efforts to put her in check. 'My boy was taken...taken...by a beam of light and I couldn't even...move...let alone stop it from happening.'

Ward opened the fridge, popped the cap, and handed her a beer.

Joe switched his beer to his left hand.

'When you say a beam of light,' Ward said, 'do you mean...'

'I know what I mean, goddamnit. It was a green light that dragged him to God knows wh...'. She broke off and the tears started to flow again.

Joe downed his beer and slammed it back down onto the table.

Ward moved closer to Marie, putting Joe out of his line of vision. 'Ok, Marie. Look, I'm not here to judge. I just need to know what happened, is all.'

She knocked back half of the bottle before facing Ward. Her

eyes told him she believed what she'd just told him. Believed it with every fibre of her heart. 'The light took him and it wasn't no miracle light. This light had evil to it. An evil I've never seen before and never wanna see again.'

Joe slammed his fist on the table. It made both Marie and Ward jump. 'For God's sake, Ma. What the fuck's he meant to do with that?' He rose and moved towards her like a tiger circling its prey. Joe gripped Marie's face and forced her to look at Ward. 'You'll have the whole goddamn town thinking we fucking killed our boy. Green light, my ass. I bet your sister done took him. All part of your big plan to make me feel like shit for staying out last week with the boys. Now tell him the fucking truth, woman. Enough of this light shit.'

Ward stared at Joe. He motioned him to back away from Marie with two pleading hands held high. His stance said, *This is your house and I respect that, but just bring it down a notch or I'll have to bring it down for you.*

* * *

The small, translucent frame of a child, with a glazed expression on its face, lent in the kitchen doorway.

Its eyes were bone-white, rolling back into its head, but there was no mistaking that it was staring at all three of them.

Waiting.

Marie spotted the child first and couldn't find the courage to speak. She tried to raise her hand, but only the hairs on the back of her neck rose.

Covered in bruises.

Waiting.

She found little comfort in Joe's firm hand around her chin.

For a split second, she wished it would wrap around her throat and force her to look away from what she knew to be the soul of her dead child.

The room descended into anarchy.

In that moment, she knew death itself would be more comforting than what she was being forced to see.

Toes exposed.

Waiting.

Ward saw the frantic look on her face and followed her gaze. When he saw the child, he couldn't comprehend it either. It was so far beyond what his mind was prepared to accept, that if he'd done anything other than stare, he would have immediately shut down, sending him into a world more unresponsive and darker than the one he knew.

His senses were fading and his mind was hurling into mayhem with each passing moment.

His breathing became uncontrollable and urgent.

Stay in the now. It's not real.

He was one prolonged breath away from collapsing into a world where light, or anything close to it, simply didn't exist.

A restricting sensation crawled around his throat like a python looking for its first meal after a brutal, bitter famine.

Feeling a shift in the tension, Joe turned to see what had distracted the others.

The boy's eyes flickered. His arms shot out towards Marie, his mouth exploded into a deep hole of pain and sadness...then his head snapped back in a violent rage.

'What the fuck?!' gasped Joe.

The child vanished.

* * *

All three stared at the space where the child had stood. All were struggling to put their thoughts into words. A chill lingered in the air, but the temperature was climbing back towards normal, which, with the sea being a stone's throw away, it was always cooler than most places.

'Please tell me you saw that too and I'm not losing my mind over here,' said Joe.

'I saw it. I'm having a hard time believing it, but I saw it,' said Ward as he pulled a chair from under the table and sat down. He was worried that his legs were about to give way and didn't want to be so vulnerable with aggression hovering in the room.

'My boy!' cried Marie. 'That was my boy!'

Joe gripped both of her shoulders. His face suggested to Ward that he was contemplating wrapping his hands around her throat, so he was relieved when he moved down her arms, grabbing her wrists and pulling her to him.

'Our boy! That was our boy! You did this to him. What did you do, Ma? What did you do?!'

Every ounce of her body pulled away from him, then collapsed onto the table.

* * *

'That...was...my boy,' Marie cried.

Ward put his hand out to touch hers. Joe slithered closer to him, eyeing him up as he moved within swinging distance.

'I know how you feel, Marie. Believe me, I do, but you'll have to tell me what happened, every detail, if we're going to find him again.'

Joe stepped back. 'Don't be daft, Ward. He's dead. We've just seen his fucking ghost.'

Ward looked up at Joe. 'I've been doing this as long as you've been driving your grandad's tractor, and nobody is dead without a body. That's my way, and I *will* find your boy. Dead or alive, I promise I'll find him.'

Marie sobbed heartily.

Ward took her hands in his. 'Marie, look at me. Marie...'

Slowly, she lifted her head.

'I promise you, I'll find your boy. You might not like what I find, but I'll find him. What we saw...he's at least two years younger than that, isn't he?'

Joe opened the fridge and gave Ward a look. He was on thin ice, and another beer down Joe's neck would only make it thinner. 'He's right, Ma. It was definitely our lad, but it wasn't at the same time. Looked much older. That ghost boy was full on stood up.'

'Can you tell me what you saw again, Marie?' Ward asked. 'Joe, if you wouldn't mind just drinking your beer and letting her finish uninterrupted this time, it will help her think and help me get the picture.'

Joe snapped the cap off his beer without turning to Ward. The fizz cut the silence. 'Sure thing, Columbo. Tell me what to do in my own home again, though, and I'll smash this fucking bottle into your nose, you understand?'

Ward cocked his head, withdrew his left hand from Marie, and clenched it under the table – out of sight, out of mind. 'I understand, Joe. Marie, please...what did you see?'

Marie looked up at Ward. It was dark, but he could see her eyes were shot with blood, and she had tiny red pin pricks on her cheeks. She placed her hand into her apron and pulled out a box of matches. 'Would you mind grabbing a couple of candles from that drawer to your left, Ward? It's too dark in here now.'

Joe stomped over to the drawer, took out two candles, and threw them at Ward before storming out of the kitchen.

Ward took the candles and placed them between himself and Marie. He placed his hands on hers and tenderly took the box of matches from her.

‘Let there be light,’ he said as he struck a match and lit both candles.

‘I’m sorry about what happened to Jessica,’ Marie said. ‘She was such a wonderful woman, Ward. Such a beautiful soul.’

‘Marie, this isn’t about me. Tell me what happened to your boy when you went into his bedroom. He was in his cradle, right?’

‘He was when I left him. He was asleep. He looked so peaceful. Joe was bounding about making all sorts of racket, but he just slept. He was so perfect when I left him, Ward.’ She started to sob again. Ward rubbed the top of her hands to try and comfort her.

It was the same way he’d comforted her when Mindy McFerce had ridiculed her braces.

He wanted to stroke her hair again, even kiss her eyelids like he’d done when they’d still had hopes of being crowned prom king and queen, but Joe was already on a warpath. Ward didn’t want to have to put Joe down whilst the baby was still missing. Marie had enough to worry about; she didn’t need a dead husband to clean up off the floor.

‘What happened when you came back, Marie?’ Ward asked.

‘I can’t,’ she sobbed.

‘You can. I’m here. You can tell me, Marie. I’m here, here to listen.’

‘He was floating above his cradle. Motionless. Content. This green light illuminated his tiny face, then the light started

dragging him out of the window. Dragging him up and out of the window and into the night sky, but...I couldn't move. It was like I wasn't even breathing. All I could do was watch it happen. Watch as my only child...left my life.' She sobbed, but despite the rattle in her voice, she continued. 'As...as he floated out of the window and...up into this light in the sky, I felt my lungs burst and I just screamed. I just screamed...'

* * *

Ward rubbed her hand again, comforting her the only way he knew. 'I'm sorry to probe you, Marie. I'm just trying to do what I'd normally do.'

'I understand, but I don't know what else I could say.' She looked up and stared at him. Her hopeful eyes were still wet from the tears, but she'd stopped crying.

'I know, I know, you're doing really well. Did you notice anything else before that happened? Any noises or anything?'

Marie thought for a moment. Embracing the silence between them. She wanted him to kiss her. She wanted him to tell her that everything would be alright and that she'd wake up from her nightmare to find him cradling her in his arms while her boy slept silently beside her.

'No. Nothing,' she said. 'I've put him down a hundred times before, and nothing felt different about this time. I only opened the window because it was warm and he doesn't sleep well when the heat is like this. Why did I open the window?! Oh, God, if I hadn't opened the window...' She broke off and settled her head on his hands.

'Hey, hey...you opened the window because you're a great mum and you wanted him to be comfortable. You couldn't have

known that...'

He felt the tension and pain in her body. He felt her dead weight on his arms.

Then he saw Joe standing in the doorway.

'When you two lovebirds are done,' Joe said, 'there's a fucking circle in the yard you might want to check, Detective. You know, do your job...instead of encouraging that shower of shite.'

* * *

Ward stepped out into the open air. Joe was behind him like a shadow, close enough to feel his stale breath on the back of his neck.

The night was calm, silent, and impossibly dark. Darker than when Ward had arrived.

He looked up at the night sky, but the impenetrable darkness continued. All-encompassing shadows surrounded them.

Ward tried to find the wooden rail that led up to the house, but he clutched at air and almost lost his footing before Joe grabbed the scruff of his collar, pulled him upright, and pushed him towards the rail.

'Watch your step there, Superman,' Joe said. 'Lois would be mighty disappointed if you busted your face open on the way out. She needs you to find her boy. Save the day.'

Ward found his footing and turned back towards Joe. 'He's your boy too, Joe. You not concerned?'

Joe jumped off the final steps and squared up to Ward, towering over him in a way he hadn't before. His whole frame filled Ward's vision and added to the darkness. 'If you weren't a fucking cop, I'd knock your head clean off. You hear me, bitch? Go and sniff that fucking circle or some shit and stay out of my

business. Just 'cause your wife is fucking dust don't mean you can try and slide into mine.'

Without warning, Ward was shoved hard in the chest. He stumbled backwards and hit the ground with a thud. The soft, wet grass cushioned his fall, but the sudden collapse of his legs made his head spin.

He felt around at the black ground, his fingers searching for something to hold his senses together, but the feeling of needing to breathe had already kicked in.

He felt his chest tighten, and his vision blurred around the edges.

Then he felt a never-ending darkness close in on him. A ringing invaded his thoughts, and he couldn't focus. Flashes of his wife's fearful, tear-ridden face flooded every inch of the darkness. Shattered, fleeting visions intoxicated his surroundings.

Screams.

Death rattles.

Silence.

His breaths became shallow and more frantic.

The moisture in the cold night air burnt his throat as he tried desperately to get oxygen back into his lungs.

Only silence.

He clutched at the cold, damp earth around him and pleaded for a slither of light.

A flower. A butterfly. Anything with an ounce of beauty to fight away the fear.

He was a fly caught in a spider's web, waiting to be eaten. Fighting frantically for a way to leave the all-consuming grief that was trying to destroy him.

Then his breathing seemed to stop, and the intensity became

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unbearable.

His wife's face flashed again, only this time it was still, cold, and lifeless.

What Went Wrong

3 Days Old

The baby was cold.
And covered in blood.

A bone cradle chafed his chubby, naked limbs, crunch, crunch, *crunching* beneath the weight of his wails. He peed an amber splash on the sticky floor, shrieking himself into insanity.

But no one came.

Well, no one he would consider someone.

Scratches peppered his plump cheeks. Shallow welts. Globby bruises. All ghosted with apology. The baby knew little, but he knew he shouldn't hurt this much. Even at three days old, he tasted hate. The feeling skewered him, bitter and devouring. He liked it. Hate listened when nothing else did. He could use it. Control it. Cuddle it in this cold, damp hell.

His shrieks faded, his shivers stilled, but his hate remained, rising.

* * *

6 Months Old

Time blurred.

The baby knew he was broken before he knew his name. His body grew while his mind didn't, and he only remembered scraps. A greasy lamp. A tattered blanket. Two things shouting. Panic for a roof.

Then there was this room. Or was it the same room? The baby didn't know. Everywhere felt dark and bleak, stuffed with slimy fury and groping shadows. The baby wanted to *leave*, but he couldn't walk, couldn't talk, could only *scream*.

Still, the things ignored him.

Still, the hate listened.

The baby chewed this hate till he became it, and hate stroked his fragile, bald, gash-mottled skull. *Shh, shh. There, there.* His lullaby was scorn.

He could sit now. Though no one watched, no one cared. Not the things on the ground, nor the things in the sky. He fell more than he rose, added his own bruises to his skin. Violet blooms. Indigo blossoms. A pain garden thrived on his delicate flesh. Someone should have noticed this phantom baby, his strangeness, but work, bills, school, sports, friends, family, money, life.

The baby was alone.

* * *

One Year Old

Something was wrong.

With the baby.

With his world.

The dark consumed him, the drip, drip, *drip* of despair. The baby shouldn't know this feeling yet, but he knew its depth like an ancient womb. He hovered in nothingness, poked and prodded, his sobs swallowed, his screams harvested.

These things liked his screams.

But not his tears.

They scraped his sorrow away. Replaced water with blood. Painted his face agony-red, then shimmied through puddles to slap a shadow.

The dark belched him here. To a cramped room, a splintering crib, an empty fireplace filled with ash. Voices blared behind a crooked door. The baby didn't know the words, but he knew the hate. Liked the hate. Wanted the hate to be his, not theirs. He tried to stand. Toppled against the wall. Cried through the blood.

The voices didn't pause, didn't help. They speared the baby's eardrums, and he clapped grubby hands to his bleeding skull. He wanted it to stop, them to stop, everything to finally stop, stop, *stop*.

The voices ballooned. They stretched into monsters attached to those things, different things from the dark, but the light offered no shelter. The baby crawled away. No one saw. Took his first steps. No one knew. Said his first word. No one heard.

'No, no, no, no...'

* * *

Two Years Old

They taught the boy. Words. Sounds. But he didn't like the noise.

The dark caged him more and more. He seldom saw the light. When he did, he found other things like him. Squashy bodies. Bulbous eyes. Toothy mouths that smiled instead of frowned. He didn't smile. He hadn't learnt how. They had weird strings growing from their heads, their brows. The boy didn't have these strings. His skull and face were smooth, empty. Stark and white as bone.

The boy tried to share his hate with them. It was all he knew. The squashy things cried, *shrieked*, when his ragged nails dug into their flesh. The boy didn't understand. This was what was done.

'No, Cain. Bad, Cain,' a stern lady scolded. She shoved the boy into a madman's arms. He had named the boy, but he never used the boy's name. Behind him, a madwoman shook her head. She did that a lot. She also forgot the boy a lot. They all did.

Back to the room. Then back to the dark. Shadows slithered over the boy's pale, prickled skin. Inky tentacles suckled his face. He cried, and cried, and cried. Mist kissed his blood-jewelled scratches as he waddled away, his nappy dropping, soiled. Shadows followed. If the boy were normal, he would think this a game, but normalcy was a fantasy, a fallacy, *wrong*. He stumbled across slippery metal. Dread robbed his tiny heart. Terror smashed his lungs. His little legs scurried quicker, *quicker*, but the dark was always faster. They caught him, tossed him into the bone cradle, now larger and sharper, like the boy.

Images sputtered through the muggy air. Plastic toys. Wooden trains. Plush sweaters. All things he never had.

'Stop,' the boy bawled, his second word. 'Stop, stop, *stop*.' The images stopped. The shadows didn't. They probed him again – searching, seeking. The boy screeched and slashed the air, the shadows, till his fingers fractured. Pain ripped him apart. Music caressed his sawtooth tears. He recognised the tune from the ground things. They sang it while they cried. The boy bawled harder, a bone-splitting sob. The music roared louder, till the words became bombs.

'Stop, stop, stop, stop...'

* * *

Five Years Old

The boy grew odd.

He knew what he shouldn't, and he didn't know what he should. In school, his scribbles were violent. Bitten-down crayons tore every page. Markers popped in watery death. Pencils snapped; their shards carved his wrists. Teachers asked him why, but he didn't have the words, and even if he did, he wouldn't have told. No one believed him, and no one ever would.

When he knifed kids with scissors, they called him troubled. When he howled for escape, they called him mental. A few would have helped, if they could have helped, but they couldn't. The boy was absent most days, anyway. The madman and madwoman said he was sick, hurt, tired, off. He was all of these, but he was also lost. His grades suffered, like him, but they were enough, unlike him.

The boy would have worried, if he had time to worry, but the

dark stole most of his time. The hungry dark. The greedy dark. The slimy, blistering, ever-feasting dark. He was their meal. Tendrils wriggled in his ears, nose, mouth. The boy choked on shadows, then on vomit. Tears scrawled anguish down his naked skull. He was still bald, still hairless, still pale and moon-spun. Circular scars dappled his head and neck. Glacial eyes pierced the gloom. He gnawed his chapped lips, scrawny arms crossed, back hunched, body spasming from the chill. Hate spread inside him, a comfort, the only one.

Shadows writhed, tangling in mucky threads. Wormy splats echoed against metal. Wet squelches bounced off glass. Lights and sounds hovered midair, an assault of people, places, and things the boy didn't understand.

'No, no, no, *no*,' he wept. 'Make it *stop*. Let me go.'

He curled into a skeletal ball, but the dark curled with him, licking his bumpy spine. His limbs convulsed against the unforgiving floor. Bruises mottled his translucent skin. Scratches snaked over every vein. Bones creaked, groaned, cracked. Sobs bubbled from his blood-glugged mouth as needles punched his shoulder.

The boy stopped. Flopped. *Limp*. The dark gulped his tiny body down its tentacled maw. Pain died, but hate died, too, and the boy wanted hate to *live*.

As he drowned, he heard the madman bark, 'Wake up.'

But the madman didn't understand. The sky wasn't the dream.

The dream was the ground.

* * *

Ten Years Old

The boy had no friends.

He liked it this way.

Without friends, he was free. No one asked how he was doing. No one cared where he was. He couldn't blame them. Even he didn't know where he was most of the time.

But there was the rare occasion when he shone a little too bright. Did the wrong thing. Shoved the wrong kid. Said the sky was alive.

At an abandoned playground, they found him.

'Think you're better than us?' a ground thing asked.

The boy laughed. It was a raw, serrated sound, a rusty blade over concrete. *Better.* The boy laughed again. The ground things blinked. They didn't understand. Their squishy eyes wobbled in their vacant skulls. The boy had seen inside those skulls. He knew there was nothing worth saving.

'You hurt Jack,' one of them said.

The boy hurt a lot of things. He didn't know their names. He wasn't here long enough to remember them.

Walking away, the boy tracked the ground things' clumsy footsteps. *Go away, go away, go away, go away,* he pleaded. Swings creaked in the tepid breeze. Paint peeled off a rumped slide, its surface beaded from recent rain. The sky cleared to a striking blue, and clouds skimmed the sun as the footsteps trod closer. *Leave me alone, leave me alone, leave me alone, leave me alone.*

They didn't.

A jab found his ribs with a twig-like *snap*. The boy doubled over, clutched his gut, as a third laugh rolled through him. He could laugh or cry, but tears brought more tears, so he laughed.

Besides, this was fun. Pain erased fear, and he cherished their hate. Ground things didn't scare him like sky things. They were boring, listless creatures. Grow up, grow old, die, rot.

Predictable.

The boy liked predictable. He spat on their shoes and made their cruelty his god. Maybe if the ground things bloodied him, the sky things would no longer want him. Maybe they'd no longer beat him, poke him, squeeze him, taste him. So the boy urged violence into a storm. Copper soured his tongue. Gore burst in his throat like rotten fruit. Forged from agony, he spasmed, joyous at escape as he convulsed on the grass-furry ground.

But the shadows still came.

A scream tore from the boy's mouth. Eyes swollen, body bruised, he crawled away from the tentacled dark. Clammy tendrils pressed at his pulse. Slime lathered his skin, a chunky mucus that stung every wound. He kicked and thrashed, hit and flailed, but it was useless. *He* was useless. Useless, over, done.

His skeleton slumped, a bag of bones. 'Why?' he rasped, voice desperate. 'Why, why, *why*, *WHY*?'

He'd asked the question a thousand times, but the dark had never answered before, and they did not answer now. Shadows smothered him as he sank.

* * *

Fourteen Years Old

The teenager drifted. He was flotsam, wreckage. He skimmed time's skin while other ground things made plans about a future they didn't understand.

The dark possessed him. Needles in the night. Poison-tipped scalpels. Vomit-thick drugs and electric torture. Shadows drilled his brain, shocked him with cattle prods.

And he changed.

It was subtle at first. Seconds raced by on broken wings, then minutes, hours, days, weeks. He didn't notice the loss; time always fled him when he needed it most. The madman called him slow. The madwoman called him lazy. *Go faster*, they snapped, but the teenager couldn't, already at light speed. He was a frozen star, red as blood, dim as hope, balanced on a horizon he could never reach.

The teenager dulled himself with beer. If he couldn't feel it, it couldn't feel him. He became dizzy, disoriented, a waterlogged corpse. But time kept slipping – and space, too. He swore he saw things move. *Crazy*, they told him – the ground things, the beasts. He didn't care. He'd been called worse, but never better.

'There's something wrong with me,' he told his headmaster one day.

The headmaster sighed. He didn't remember the teenager. The boy was mostly absent, but his grades were okay, and okay was enough. 'Adolescence is a difficult time, Cain. I'm sure everything will sort itself out soon. You're fine.'

'I'm *not*,' the teenager said. Teeth bared, he showed the headmaster his inside, the inside where the sky had planted thorns, pricklers, and spikes. 'There's something *wrong* with me,' he repeated and punched the desk. Skin ripped from his

bone-white knuckles as he stabbed the headmaster with steely eyes. He was still scrawny, hairless, and scarred. *Not* fine. *Not* okay. *Not* all right and what everyone wanted him to be.

The headmaster's bushy brows furrowed into one. 'Mr Ward, we take insubordination seriously here in Ramsey.'

'And there is something *seriously* wrong with me,' the teenager said again, but the echo faded like ink in a pond.

Frazzled, the headmaster scrubbed his drooping face, then wrung his hands in exasperation. 'Go back to class. You'll feel better. I have a meeting. Sorry I can't help.'

The teenager didn't move.

'*Now, Cain.*'

Before the teenager could protest, time mutinied. It smeared into an emotional tapestry of the headmaster's escalating words and reddening face. His arms wagged in frustration as the teenager tried to leave yet couldn't. Panic squirmed through his veins, but in seconds, time settled again.

'Out,' the headmaster bellowed. 'If you won't listen, get *out*. You're suspended for a week.'

'Please, I need help,' the teenager begged.

'You don't need help. You need discipline.' With a rough grip, the headmaster escorted the teenager into the hall, then slammed the door in his face.

Hot, heavy tears fell from the teenager's eyes. He fled the school before anyone could see him cry. At the edge of his vision, he spotted a ground thing. Scrawny. Pale. A lot like him. Then it vanished. Or he vanished. Didn't matter in the end.

Feet stomping, heart pounding, the teenager sprinted almost four kilometres to Port Lewaigue. When he reached the beach, he collapsed. His knees smacked claggy sand. Silky water lapped at his thighs. He fell into the surf, rooted his forehead

in the Irish Sea. Water soaked his uniform, and wind chilled his raw skin. Maybe if he ran far enough, hard enough, the dark couldn't reach him. Maybe the school would believe him. Maybe his parents would, too.

No.

None of them would.

The teenager was damned since birth.

'Lost?' a woman asked, approaching. Armed with knives and pills, she reached out a temptation-drenched hand.

The teenager startled and hauled himself from the beckoning shore, scurrying away. The woman's question followed him, then her cackle, high and shrill. Though he needed escape, he couldn't afford debt. He just wanted to forget himself like everyone forgot him. He wanted the dark to forget him, too.

So he ran home, slower now, a weak jog instead of a fierce sprint. The madwoman was out, and the madman was asleep. The teenager stole a bottle of Manx whisky, then retreated to his room. Drink scorched his throat. He relished the fire after endless ice.

Time raced again, but he didn't notice. His parents didn't, either. Neither did the neighbours or the school or anyone else on the entire isle.

The dark noticed, though.

Raven tendrils slid over the teenager's wasted form. The boy who was no longer a boy screeched at the damp dark, at the bulging bone cradle, at the slimy, metal cage that plagued him always.

'No,' he sobbed. 'Don't. I want to go home.'

But the teenager had no home.

More needles. Shocks. Pain. Rage. Shadows sedated the teenager till his sobs became murmurs. 'Please,' he prayed, but

he didn't know where to pray. Not to the sky. There was nothing up here except night and nightmares. And not to the ground. There was nothing down there except worry and an empty world. But the teenager kept praying. It was all he could do.

'Please, please, please.'

Tentacles sucked his skull.

'Please, please.'

Blood swam with his tears.

'Please.'

He was gone.

* * *

Eighteen Years Old

The man died a thousand times.

He woke groggy, in a churning sea of time, his room clawed to disarray. Again, he survived. Again, the dark revived him. No matter how often he left, it always dragged him back.

Knives dripped red on the floor. They had healed his wrists with puckered scars. *No. Set me free. Let me go.* They didn't. So the man cut again, angry slices through weeping flesh. He carved crimson letters into his skin, curses in a language the ground things didn't understand.

The sky things understood, though. They prodded him less, shocked him more, frightened by this new thing they had made. Each time they mopped up the man's blood, poured life back into his skull, the man fuelled his hate. *Let me die*, he howled after every salvation. And after every salvation, the sky things

fondled him in their slurpy tongue: *We did. It didn't work.*

The man was confused, but not as confused as he should have been. Confusion was a luxury, but he was hope-poor and anguish-stricken. No time for curiosity when even time itself abused him.

He hacked himself apart again and again. Shadows strung him back together again and again. He was trapped. Caged. Mortified. Done with this moth-eaten, tumbledown existence. Neither here nor there. Neither sky nor ground. He floated in limbo, the monster in the middle of two very different hells.

The madman and madwoman kicked him out, swept him out the door. He was only a bit of dust that had clung to their floorboards for eighteen neglected years.

The man wandered for weeks beneath a robin egg sky. Over billowing land. Through curling mist. Across heather, ruins, and desolate beaches, their sorrow a mirror he didn't want to see. He wore holes in his soles. Tore his clothes to shreds. And hate walked with him. Whispered in his ears. Impaled him with truth. Riddled him with lies. The man worshipped this hate, his sole companion, fed it his rage, let it drink his pain. Hate listened when nothing else did. Soothed him. Comforted him. Told him it would all be okay.

During these stilted, dangerous weeks, the dark stole him more. It groped him. Abused him. Tortured him with false promises and barren dreams. The man became reckless. He wanted *out*. So he punched, kicked, shrieked, bled – fighting against the dark with every drip of his soul. *Let me out, let me die, let me out, let me die*, he begged, shattered, but the shadows grew. There was no escape from the dark side of the moon.

Later, when the man was older, everyone asked each other *why*. Why his talons? Why his fangs? Why his searing venom

and spiny thorns? These questions were the only things on which ground and sky agreed, on this ignorance that sprouted a demon. They could have pointed to these early years, to the agony, to the despair, but they didn't. Even at their end, they never understood him, never paid attention to the baby, boy, teenager, man, beast. He slipped through the cracks, then became a ghost, haunting and breeding guilt, shame, and regret. No one liked him. Few related to him. But everyone feared him, both fools and saints.

The ground fucked up.

The sky did, too.

Both cowered beneath the weight of their sins as the sun fell down and the stars bled Cain.

How We Ended

The Nexus. The minds of a people melded together in a growing web of synapses, reaching out, touching and spreading. Seeing in all directions, feeling past, present, and future across an endless ocean of possibility. An organic supercomputer holding the consciousness of a hundred thousand Ceph's. It expands finger-like fungal hyphae, reaching out and accepting new initiates.

Cyan stood by the edge of the void, gazing down at the vast basin and its phosphorescent glow. She felt her Progenitor take her hand and turned to gaze into the eyes of her closest relative.

Her eyes over-lubricated; she tried to hold back her ink. Spilling here would be humiliating, but not unexpected or without precedent. Cyan was determined to hold her emotions in check, if only for her Progenitor's sake. As she closed the gap between them, she reached out with her tendrils to seek a connection. They touched foreheads while their tendrils entwined. 'You're ready?'

'Cyan, don't be sad. You will always be my most genetic similar, and I will always be your direct Progenitor. We are

family, and I am fortunate that I can join the Nexus.'

'Yes. Of course. I didn't mean to suggest otherwise.'

'Some of our genetic lines have not been so fortunate. They have been left to degrade, their function unsuitable for the collective consciousness.'

'I know. It's just...I wish we had longer while you were an individual.'

Progenitor's tendrils stroked against Cyan's face. 'You greatly impact my emotions.'

'As you do mine.'

Their tendrils fell apart. A smile graced the Progenitor's face, and she nodded, spreading her arms wide.

Two guardians of the Nexus came forward while Cyan stepped back. They lifted Cyan's Progenitor, one by each arm, and carried her towards the edge. Her feet dangled over the edge of the chasm that led down into the basin, into the sprawl of sparkling neurones.

Through Cyan's feet, she felt the connection to the group as the ceremony began. An abrupt flood of communication. A bubbling of emotion, thought, vision, flooding towards her, embracing her within the observing group. All outward thoughts were the same. In unison, they sent, 'To the Nexus we are called, where all thoughts are one. Your experiences and intuition strengthen us all. Into the depths you fall to see the past, present, and future. Forever we exist in the Nexus. Currents take you.'

A convulsion passed through the guardians holding the chosen over the edge. Their bodies squirmed while they held their grip on the initiate. The thoughts of Cyan's Progenitor surged through them for all to receive. 'I am prepared, I am ready, I shall fall and rise as part of the great consciousness.'

Prepare to hear my words.'

Then Cyan watched as they cast her Progenitor over the precipice into the depths. The fluid rippled with the impact as the Progenitor's body vanished beneath the surface.

Every member of the ceremonial party waited without passing a public thought. This was Cyan's first time witnessing a joining to the Nexus. It was an event only observed by those entrusted with the governance of the Ceph people, and those who were directly responsible for the Nexus itself. One close genetic companion was allowed to escort a new consciousness to this point in the journey, and the Progenitor had asked Cyan to be her last personal contact as an individual. It was an honour, but it was also ink spilling.

'She rises,' the adjudicator, the most sacred member of the Nexus keeper's court, said.

From within the pool, the waters stirred as writhing nerve clusters broke the surface. Synaptic cords intertwined to form tentacle-like tendrils, not unlike those that adorned every Ceph's face, and rose. Wrapped within them, dripping from the waters of the Nexus, was the Progenitor. Her eyes were wide open but unseeing. The Nexus lifted her until she reached the edge of the precipice once more, and it placed her standing on the surface. Her feet connected with the connective tissue that covered the floor and allowed the Ceph, who watched, to communicate.

'The Nexus thanks you for bringing Teal. Her knowledge and wisdom are great, as is her emotion as Progenitor of Cyan. In return, we bring you a warning for our people.'

A wave of emotion flooded across the public synapses. A warning from the Nexus was serious, and rare. These moments were for the sharing of wisdom, ideas that would benefit the

whole of Ceph society. Warnings were not given lightly.

‘There is one who will wipe thousands of our individual consciousnesses from existence. There is one who will take lives upon lives and blink them out of existence. The Nexus can feel their screams. It is not one of us, but another species, sentient but savage.’ Teal, who was no longer an individual, raised a hand, and in the mist above, images appeared. Star systems and routes, a map, a genetic sequence. Images that could only be seen by those connected as it was cast into their mind, giving the illusion that it appeared in the air. ‘You have been warned. The Nexus suggests intervention.’

‘Intervention by what means?’ the adjudicator asked. Their thoughts were unsteady, unsure.

‘Individual intervention by our people. We see no more than that. What has come before will pass again; what has passed shall come once more.’

The images left, but the memory of them remained in full. Then Cyan watched as the body of her Progenitor shrank as the tendrils used the no longer needed organic matter as a source for nourishment. The flesh seemed to dissolve until all that was left was the brain stem, now wrapped in new nervous tissue that reached out from the basin below.

Silence held for a moment. Not a single public thought crossed the interconnected local nerves until Cyan broke it. ‘What the fuck was that?’

* * *

Memory is a fiction. The gaps in information filled in with the glue of imagination to hold the web together. The Nexus made sure there was no glue needed.

‘Every witness reported the same coordinates in time and space. The creature that destroys a thousand of us appears at this point. We will take action to save ourselves.’

Not a single thought was effused as the project lead spoke. She was a Ceph of advanced years, due to step into the Nexus herself in a matter of weeks. Her wisdom, for an individual, was near unquestionable.

‘The vessel is prepared, it’s...this is ambitious,’ the government representative said.

‘This undertaking has spanned several of your predecessor’s roles, Glaucous. All of them have questioned the expense, the hours of work, but all of them concurred with the Nexus in the end. Are you the first who knows better than our collective wisdom?’

The politician squirmed beneath the project lead’s gaze. His tendrils bunched close around his chin.

Cyan spread her fingers out a little further on the mound, slipping beneath some of the narrow vessels that passed over it. Several Ceph were sitting around it, palms to the surface, so they could all hear the thoughts of the discussion.

‘If I might interject—’

All eyes turned to her, and for a moment, she hesitated.

‘Since the day my Progenitor joined the Nexus, we have focused on this threat to our people. How so many thousands could have perished at this moment in time. We all understand Representative Glaucous’s role is to question the expenditure, but we are now far beyond the point of turning back. Representative, may we record your concerns as a matter of record, and move onwards?’

The politician lifted his hands from the ganglia, the tumour-like mound serving as the focus of their thoughts. He made

a clicking sound, a vocalisation of displeasure. It was a rare sound among the Ceph, and it lacked subtlety. ‘You are the specialist?’ he said, slapping his hand on the nerves to reopen the connection. The sudden jolt of emotion in his action caused some at the meeting to flinch, but not Cyan.

‘I am the specialist. Since the day of the warning, I have spent my time working with this team to prepare for our task—’

‘Then I doubt you are capable of viewing this without bias.’

‘You jumped up, prawn,’ she snapped. ‘Busy yourself with the tedium of government and leave the saving of our species to people less concerned with their own social standing.’

The politician stood, his fronds standing to attention. Both hands pressed against the nerve ganglia to the point where the mucous layer was swallowing them. ‘How dare you?’

‘How dare I? You have come here with the sole intention of ensuring you have made a public show of your doubts to score political points. You have no intention of doing anything to stop this mission and merely need to show that you are involved in the undertaking. Otherwise, you risk appearing as impotent as you likely are. So swim back to the shallows where a child like you belongs.’

Clicks of shock came from around the tumour, but the project lead sent mirth. ‘Not very kind, Cyan.’

‘I apologise. I meant to be honest, not unkind. We are days from launch where the crew and I will leave all Ceph we have ever known, and he comes here to question the necessity of our life’s work.’

The politician, Glaucous, appeared to recognise this was not a public forum as he glanced around the group. Thoughts of shock lingered, but there was overwhelming annoyance, frustration, and an unexpected amount of animosity levelled

towards him. 'I..have misjudged this forum,' he finally sent. 'I do not appreciate being spoken to in such a tone, and it will have repercussions, but I wish only to note my concerns.'

'Save your repercussions, Glaucous. I'm about to be thrown through a vortex powered by a Dyson sphere in the hope of saving thousands of Ceph. We have harnessed the power of a star to give us what we need to traverse space and time, to reach a point we never even knew existed. What do you intend to do? Dock my wages?' Cyan said, pulling her hand from the ganglia mound and turning away.

She had no way of knowing what else they said as her connection was severed, but her patience was as dry as the beaches when the tide went out. In hours, she would board the vessel and only be able to hope that one day she might return. In two days, she was being sent to quell the beast that would end thousands of Ceph lives...and she would do it with kindness.

* * *

She followed behind the first lieutenant. His name was Periwinkle; they called him Lieutenant Perry. The large Ceph carried a high-velocity projectile weapon designed and manufactured with the help of the Nexus by the finest Ceph engineers for this low moisture environment. Behind her, following in single file, were two more of the crew. The team of support Ceph were all experienced in exoplanetary incursions. Cyan knew they had been in battles, that they had killed living organisms, but the carrying of weapons and violent acts were unusual amongst Ceph.

While she was, as all Ceph were, against such abhorrent acts as violence or murder, she could acknowledge that some would

be required to carry out such heinous deeds. They had her respect. There weren't many who would give up their chances of becoming one with the Nexus to protect their species from hostile threats. She was, however, not convinced lethal weapons were required on this mission.

'Specialist, we are one hundred steps from the target. They are located in that manufactured construction. There appear to be other life forms present,' a private said, interrupting Cyan's thoughts.

'Do they present a threat?' Cyan asked.

'They are physically larger than us, and built for this hostile, arid environment. If they attack, we must not hesitate. They have hard skeletons.'

'Internal calcium-based armour. It's weird,' a private interrupted.

'We all know about their biology,' Cyan said. 'I was asking if they exhibited threatening behaviour?'

'We don't know. The swimming teeth do not exhibit threatening behaviour until they are threatened.'

'These things are not the swimming teeth. They dwell on dry land. They are aliens.'

A thought from behind. 'Freaking crusties.'

'Crusties? Sounds a little offensive,' Cyan said.

'What's wrong, Specialist, are you into friction burns?' the private said. Mirth passed through the group.

'Stow it, Private,' the lieutenant snapped.

Cyan smiled. This kind of humour was good for morale. She understood that. 'It's not me I'm concerned about, Private. I'm sure one of these dry things would find you irresistible. You'd better hope your cloak works, or they'll mistake you for one of the local foods.'

‘They can’t see us, can they?’ the Private said, thoughts laced with fear.

‘As long as the suits are working, we don’t believe so. There is a chance we might appear in some form, but it is slim and likely to be exceptional. Little more than a translucent afterimage.’

‘Like ghosts?’

‘As you say. Spirits, like the hallucinations of those who spend too much time with the Nexus.’

They trudged forward in silence, the suits they wore doing most of the hard work against the gravity of this planet. The lack of moisture made the visibility clear, but the colours were too bright. It seemed every part of the visible spectrum burned through the thin air. Gone were the soothing blues of their homeworld, replaced with the violent scatter, as if their sky were a prism.

‘It’s so garish,’ Cyan said, forgetting for a moment that they were connected.

The lieutenant’s thoughts were gentle. ‘You can turn down the spectrum on your HUD, Specialist.’

‘Yes, of course, it is just interesting to observe it this way.’ A lie, but then, she was allowed her pride.

The construction was angular. Everything seemed to be at ninety degrees, straight-edged and uniform in an unnatural way. ‘As primitive as we imagined,’ she said, breaking the silence that had fallen between them.

‘They fight natural forms, nature itself. Operations warned us to watch for edges, corners. They round nothing,’ Lieutenant Perry said.

‘Their world is in pain. So they inflict pain on themselves.’

‘By bumping into corners?’

‘A minor example. Pain is everywhere here.’

‘And pain creates monsters.’

‘Not monsters,’ Cyan interrupted. ‘Don’t fall into the drift. That current only pulls us down into suffering. We help, and we save ourselves.’

‘Kindness is the answer,’ the lieutenant and the two privates said in unison.

They breached the entranceway, a large panel of wood. Small pieces of metal around its edges formed a rudimentary lock. It took one private barely a moment to open it without causing any harm. Inside, flat walls formed a narrow channel that led to an incline interrupted by short, uniform levels.

‘Weird,’ Lieutenant Perry said. ‘These floors aren’t large enough to serve a purpose.’

‘They are designed to aid in rising to the next large level.’

‘Why not use a ramp?’ a Private asked.

Cyan held back an angry response. *Kindness*, she reminded herself. ‘Gravity is higher here. A ramp is harder to walk up. Remember, they are dry and they do not connect to their surfaces like we do.’

‘But they have ramps in some places.’

‘Yes. Perhaps it’s more about construction.’

‘But you said—’

‘Now is not the time.’

‘How do they speak?’ the same private.

‘They use sound waves,’ Cyan said. ‘This was in the briefing and the pre-mission—’

‘The private was a late addition to the team,’ the lieutenant interrupted. ‘She has done her best, but there was a lot in the mission pack.’

‘A late addition?’ Cyan asked.

‘The original Private had some difficulties.’

‘Difficulties?’

‘They were unkind.’

Cyan froze for a moment and looked back at the two privates, then forward at Lieutenant Perry. Unkindness was a curse that often came from those most hardened by the worst the galaxy had to offer. ‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘There’s no need to be fearful, Specialist. The other private did not drift far from the waters of kindness; they will easily catch the current once more. It could happen to anyone, *not just those of us who protect the Ceph.*’ The last he conveyed with a clear undercurrent.

‘I apologise.’

‘No need. Now let’s focus.’

The lieutenant was the first to step over the threshold, and he pointed to his right at another doorway. This one was open. Cyan followed, then hesitated as she observed one of the local inhabitants. They were staring at a box while lying prone on a soft furnishing. She quickly adjusted the suit’s settings to focus on the sounds emanating from the device. The HUD and inbuilt organic interface reacted to her thoughts. The screen itself was invisible to anyone but her, as it was cast into her brain’s visual centre.

‘It watches more of its own species,’ Lieutenant Perry said. ‘It is one of the forms of entertainment we spoke of.’

‘Stupid,’ a private said. ‘Why have it on that box when they could impulse cast?’

‘Private. When you get back to the ship, I suggest you continue your studies. This species cannot integrate their synapses with others.’

‘They’re...alone?’ The private didn’t bother to hide the revulsion from her thoughts.

‘Kindness, Private,’ the lieutenant sent. ‘Kindness *and focus*.’ Then he began his ascent. This species was large, and the ‘staircase,’ as they called it, was awkward for the Ceph’s smaller strides.

As he reached the summit, the lieutenant held up a fist, and they paused in a line on the ascent to the second level. ‘When we enter this room, we hasten. The specialist takes the subject, and we exit through the silicate screened entranceway to the side. The drop is far. Make sure you are prepared for the landing. Three, two, one...’

* * *

‘Death might be a simpler option,’ Cyan said with a sigh.

‘Simpler, but not kind or legal. Do I need to reschedule your psych evaluation?’ the captain asked.

‘No, no. I’m just saying what they’re all thinking, what *we’re* all thinking.’

She checked the system, designed to be as comfortable as the womb. A laboratory grown uterine wall lined the interior of contraption, but she acted as the umbilical cord and the crew were all part of the placenta, giving this cursed child a chance at something else. *External reproduction is so much simpler.*

‘Cyan, you’re the specialist. Is this the kindest way?’ he asked.

‘We have to give him opportunities to grow, to develop as he is supposed to. All the studies—’

‘All the studies suggest this is the best way. You always say that. I’m asking, as your captain, do *you* think this is the best way?’

She hesitated, then took a step back, silencing their conversation for a moment while staring into the crib. It moved, making

that high-pitched noise it so often did. Moisture leaked down its face. A wasteful act that she had discovered was not dissimilar to an ink spill.

‘It makes noise,’ the captain said, placing his hand on her shoulder.

‘It does.’

‘Is this the kindest way?’ he asked again. The responsibility for their success, the pressure of saving thousands of lives, was on the captain’s head. By asking her, he was transferring that load. ‘I am following the protocol that was agreed upon at the start of this mission. We must not deviate. It is still early.’

‘Protocol you helped to plan. You witnessed the Nexus warning.’ She felt herself tense but kept their connection loose, light as a feather. ‘I was there – by luck, not by choice. The Nexus sees in all directions, and it understands more than we can ever hope to comprehend. We must have faith.’

‘I have faith in the Nexus. It’s those who interpret the finer details that I must question. That is part of my role, Cyan. I do not doubt you personally.’

‘Thank you for your kindness,’ she said, careful to push the sarcasm away from her connection. ‘Shall we continue?’

‘Very well. Is it awake?’

‘Yes, and it’s “he.” His species likes to define that sort of thing. We must try to be considerate.’

‘Kindness is the answer,’ the captain said.

‘Kindness is the answer,’ Cyan responded, then pulled her shoulder away from him, ending the conversation.

They had travelled further than any Ceph ship on record had ever travelled. Beyond their humble binary star system, not unlike this one. Contact with their small blue orb ended long ago, and would not return while anyone they knew on

Ceph still inhabited their individual forms. At least, she hoped most would be with the Nexus. They might meet the future generations of the ones they now saved. It is said that you can reach the consciousness of an individual through the Nexus, though it takes great meditation and nobody speaks of it. *I will speak to my Progenitor when I return. If it takes all my time as an individual, I will tell how she and I saved all Ceph.*

Allowing doubt to creep into the mission wasn't an option, but as she stared at the small fleshy creature inside the crib, she couldn't help but wonder. They had built the crib out of the same calcium armour it possessed within its flesh, something familiar to it, a kindness. *True, they are large, and mostly dry, but are they as fearsome as we imagined?*

The captain placed a hand gently on her shoulder once more. 'Have you managed to communicate?'

'I have attempted, but my research suggests they barely communicate with each other at such a young age,' Cyan said, 'so I did not expect success. I will try again.'

'We have but days before we must return it—'

'Him.'

'We have only days before we must return *him* to his own Progenitors. This is the kindest way.'

'True.'