To all the Authors who inspired me over the years!

1: The Anomaly

Skyside treats pairing as sacred because it fears unshared power.

It calls partnership balance. It calls obedience harmony.

But power divided is power negotiated. And I was not made to negotiate.

- Found scribbled along the Skyside Civic Code, Section 25.5.63, The Pairing Doctrine

---

Day 0:

The first vow had already begun. Nira heard it through the public channels as she crossed the upper concourse encircling the garden courts, breath sharp in her throat, communication crystal burning unanswered near her shoulder.

Davan had hailed her nine times. The tenth one flashed and vanished while the crowd answered the officiant in one voice.

“Two bodies. One Consciousness. Two Minds. One Intent”

The words rolled across the Garden Court in perfect unison. Hundreds repeated them as the red giant was eclipsed by the yellow sun while the radiation shield above Skyside shimmered with a colour Nira had never seen before.

The yellow sun had moved across the red, and the whole court burned under a strange, sharpened light. A Reddish Gold without the warmth that should have been. Red had been pressed thin around the edges as the Red and Yellow lights fought to hold their own. Every white surface looked ceremonial and perfect.

The Ascension Wall stood at the centre of the Garden Courts, the focus of today’s ceremony.

Names in gold climbed its face in paired columns, year after year, cycle after cycle. Officer and partner. Power divided, balanced and made safe. This ceremony was the embodiment of the Paring doctrine followed dogmatically by the Skyside.

By sunset, if Nira did what she was supposed to do, her name and Davan’s would be written there too. Together as they had dreamt and promised with all they felt for each other.

The pulsing of her crystal again shook her out of her reverie. This time it was not Davan.

```
TAMPER ALERT: GARDEN COURT EAST ADMINISTRATIVE ANNEX.
```

MAINTENANCE ACCESS PANEL 7. MANUAL INPUT DETECTED.

Finally! Nira scanned across the Garden Court, beyond the rows of ceremonial seats and gold-white banners, the eastern annex rose behind glass and shield lattice pinpointing the location of the tamper alert.

Shear take them! I will have to run across the gardens if I need to reach them quickly. But that might also alert the saboteurs.

She looked at the Ascension Wall, then past it. Trusting her instincts, she ran across as the vows filled the Garden.

Gasps of the audience followed her first steps, as many pairs faltered in their vows. A steward, teeth bared, reached for her sleeve and missed. She cut between two rows of seated officers, crossed the ceremonial path, and passed close enough to the wall that the gold names flashed across her vision.

Nira Vaesh and Davan Norel. Her and her partner's names fled from the wall, the ink leaking out, evaporating.

"Nira."

She heard Davan before she saw him. He stood beside the lower dais in formal blue, exactly where she should have been waiting with him for the ceremony. His sash was already fastened, his hair set perfectly.

His expression nearly stopped her. For one breath, his expression held her in place more tightly than any order could have. Stunned and hurt in equal measure. She stared at him long enough to see that hurt turn into cold fire of betrayal of his trust in her.

She did not stop.

Six days earlier, they had stood before that same wall, close enough to touch the blank space where their names would go. Six days earlier, Davan had taken her hands and told her that every piece returned to its place eventually.

Six days earlier, she had believed in the promise of the Skyside

---

Day -6:

The Ascension Wall was quiet in the pre- dawn. Shadowsider crews who had been polishing the lower panels, testing banner lines overhead had just left to make their way to the elevator pits. Shadowsiders worked through the night to maintain the Skyside. But they were banned from touching the Yellow Sunlight.

Nira stood close enough to see her reflection in the blank section reserved for the new Force intake. Davan stood behind her, hands resting lightly on her shoulders.

“There,” he said.

She followed his gaze. Two empty spaces. Side by side which were not theirs yet. But almost.

“In six days,” Davan said, “that stops being a possibility.”

Nira smiled despite herself. “You make it sound like a military operation.”

“It is a military operation. The objective is permanence.”

“That is romantic.”

“It is better than romantic. It is effective.”

She looked back at him through the reflection. His face was bright with certainty.

The wall trembled faintly as the city readied to ascend 10,000 ft. Every morning the same cycle repeated to ensure everyone’s survival.

Eight clamps in the four directions released as lift chambers took load. The turbines caught the red-sun thermal rise before the yellow sun scorched the surface and turned the bay hostile.

Skyside called it ascent. Shadowside called it survival.

“We are the best pair in our year,” he said. “We have a line on the cleanest placement path. The strongest board position is ours. Just six days, Nira. Then no one gets to separate us. Ever.”

“You sound very sure.”

“I am always sure about completed systems.”

She turned to face him.

“We are not completed. Yet.”

Davan took her hands.

“Every piece returns to its place eventually.”

He said it warmly. Nira wanted to believe him. The academy bell rang before she could answer signaling the start of Final placement duels. Davan smiled.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s make the evaluators remember where we belong.”

The first bell ended the round. The second meant Nira had three minutes to remember how to stand.

She dropped one hand to the dueling floor and forced air into her lungs as she used the other to wipe blood from a gash in her head. The academy hall swam in hard dual tone light. Cadet pairs filled the viewing tiers, all of them pretending not to stare too closely. Placement evaluator pairs stood behind the glass gallery above, still as statues in formal blue.

Every duel mattered this close to The Decadal Shift. Officially, final placements were decided by years of merit records, aptitude reviews, discipline marks, and pair cohesion assessments. Unofficially, everyone knew the last week changed lives.

A good showing could put a pair on Spire security. A bad one could bury them near the elevator pits for years, managing transit disputes and Shadowside curfew failures.

Across the mat, Davan was folded over one knee, one hand pressed to his side. His dark blue cadet uniform was scuffed at the shoulder. His eyes had gone red and his jaw was set.

That was much worse than the hit. A hurt Davan was manageable. An angry Davan was not. Nira crossed the mat before the referees could separate them and hooked a hand beneath his arm. She let out a grunt of pain, but refused to let go.

“Dav,” she said quietly. “They are Foreseers. They are unbeatable for a reason. They see the move before the move. We knew that going in.”

“Everyone knows that. But you don’t get to dominate if you just conform to what everyone expects. You get to dominate by taming the wind and the shears.”

He looked past her to the other pair.

Tarel and Miv had not even bothered to reset their stances. They stood loose and clean, breathing easily, pale academy sashes untouched. Foreseer pairs almost always moved like that. Calm before impact and calm after it.

The city trusted people who could see consequences before causing them. Foreseers were the elite pilots who would steer the city to survival every morning. No one beat them ever.

Davan spat blood to the side.

“The plan was to survive,” Nira said. “That was the win.”

“Your win.”

“The evaluators know what they are.”

“The evaluators remember who scores.”

Nira hesitated, unsure of how to handle Davan. The restart bell rang before Nira could think of anything useful.

Tarel and Miv moved before the sound had finished. Nira dropped into guard and gave them nothing. She did not strike them, feint or committed to any move.

Foreseers saw probabilities. And probabilities shifted instantly the moment you thought of an action. Give them a choice and they would already be waiting at the end of it. So Nira made herself still. Her body wanted to flinch, to strike, to answer the insult of being read before she moved. She denied it.

She shifted half a step, expecting Davan’s shoulder at her back. She found only empty air.

Tarel's weight shifted left before Miv committed to any strike. Miv’s eyes unfocused slightly as if seeing patterns only he could. Nira mentally filed the pattern away.

She blocked the first blow to her ribs. But the second caught her jaw. She blocked a third and the fourth one cracked her rib. A perfect Foreseer pair working brutally with four hands. The moment Nira decided the next action, the counter for her would already be in place. Every defense created an opening for them to exploit.

Nira bent back to dodge a strike and found a kick sweep her legs out from beneath her. She tried to retreat and found her pinned from both ends even before she took a step. It felt like she arrived late inside her own body. She could not fight one Foreseer, let alone a synchronized pair on her own.

Miv leaned close enough for only Nira to hear.

“Your partner left you.”

Nira opened her mouth in anger when Davan hit Tarel from behind. The Foreseer dropped hard. Miv turned a fraction too late, surprised for the first time.

Nira struck once, clean across the face, and Davan was on him before he hit the mat.

“Davan!”

He did not stop as he followed the attack with a sequence of well placed punches.

The referee pair crossed the floor. One seized his shoulder. Davan twisted free and raised his hand again before Nira caught his wrist with both of hers.

“Enough.”

For one breath, looking at his near feral expression she thought he might throw her too. She filed it the way she filed things she was not ready to look at directly. Then his eyes found hers and he let her pull him back.

Spectralite Menders moved in. Tarel was conscious, barely. Miv was not moving at all.

The senior referee stepped between the pairs, face held in that flat Skyside expression that converyed disgust had been converted into procedure.

“What was that Cadet? You do not keep pummeling a victim on the ground. You are not a Shadowsider. Behave like a Skyside officer with a code even though you are not one yet.”

Davan wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“They are used to blocking attacks before they happen,” he said. “Their tolerance drops sharply once the attacks land.”

A few cadets in the gallery laughed before remembering not to. Nira did not.

“You left me.”

“I convinced myself that I was leaving,” Davan said. “So that is what they saw.”

“You used me as bait.”

“No. I used their certainty against them.”

“And that is not the same thing?” Nira said raising an eyebrow.

His smile returned.

“No,” he said. “It is better because it is effective.”

The referee’s eyes cut to Nira.

“Cadet Vaesh. Take your pair off the floor.”

Your pair. It always hurt Davan when they did not even refer to him. Not Nira’s partner. Not Davan. Just ‘*Your pair’*. As if the two of them were a single civic unit. She bowed because that was what the moment required. Davan bowed a second later, too shallow to be sincere but deep enough to pass. They had won against all odds and expectations. Won because of Davan. And the evaluator pairs would have clocked that. Even if the referee pairs did not like it.

They returned to the Ascension Wall after the duel because Davan wanted to see the placement boards again. That was what he said, but Nira knew better. He wanted to stand where victory looked inevitable under the dual suns. The heat was fierce, though

nowhere near the strength it would be once the city descended at night.

“Maglev Spires posted two open support tracks overnight,” Davan said.

Nira flexed her wrist sore from stopping him.

“Already?”

“Not publicly. But the boards are moving. And we need to be ready when they align. Festival escort, outer court circulation, Spire-adjacent logistics. All the high visibility posts are possible if we do not look unstable this week.”

She heard the last part clearly.

“If I do not look unstable.”

“If we do not.” Davan insisted.

“We are going to be a pair Davan. Say it transparently.”

Davan turned from the wall.

“Nira.”

“One anomaly became ten.” Nira said, more forcefully than she had intended.

“One variance became ten because the Alignment is six days away and the shield grid is under load.” Said Davan holding up his hands in a calming gesture.

“The structure is too regular.”

“There is a whole department monitoring the shields.”

“The department is monitoring thresholds. Not the patterns below threshold.”

“And we are not on the Force yet.”

“And that does not make the data less real.”

“No,” Davan agreed. “It just makes our access less defensible.”

That stopped her, because he was right. He usually was, in ways that made argument harder. He stepped closer, lowering his voice.

“Listen to me. This week is not normal. Every senior officer is watching for Alignment panic. Every cadet wants to prove they see what others miss. If you take an unproven ‘pattern’ to headquarters without authority, Vick will not call it diligence.”

“I am not panicking.” Nira said exasperated.

“I know. I did not share that anomaly with you for you to obsess over.” said Davan gently.

“Then believe me.”

“I believe you saw something in it that I did not. You still do. But can we not wait one week? You can investigate this later. Just one week is all I am asking.” His expression softened.

It wasn’t false, exactly. But just slightly off.

“Every piece returns to its place,” Davan said.

Nira looked at the wall. Two blank spaces waited in the intake column.

Vaesh and Norel. She could almost see it.

“This will too,” Davan said. “Let the department do its work. Let me do mine.”

“Which is?”

“Placement. A career and a secure future for the both of us. Forever.”

Davan reached for her hands and folded them between his.

“Six days,” he said. “That is all. Six days until the pairing, until we join the Force and until everything we trained for stops being provisional.”

“I know that, and I believe in the future you are building. Our future.”

“Then promise me you will not do anything that puts it at risk.” Davan pleaded.

Nira looked at their hands.

Pairing was not marriage. Though it was the only other thing similar to a marriage in the civic code. A good pair made the city safer because each pair ensured the safety of the city. She had believed that since she was old enough to understand the wall.

“I would never put a shear in our pairing,” she said.

Relief flooded across his face. Nira hated that she noticed. Then he smiled, and it almost stopped mattering.

“Good,” he said. “Then chase your numbers, if you have to. I will make sure we still have somewhere worth standing when you are done. Just be careful.”

She smiled and kissed him once. Then she took her kit and left before either of them could turn the promise into another argument.

Both suns burned through a cloudless sky. Every tower cast dual shadows.

The yellow sun stood closer to the red than it had the day before. The Alignment was tightening by the hour, and the radiation shield over Skyside shimmered faintly at the edge of sight.

Most people did not notice it but Nira did. People treated the shield as invisible. But it was the reason for their survival. People valued Fore-Seer pilots, but they forgot the shield engineers like her father. Fore-Seers would be visible actively piloting the city daily through the ascent and descent cycles. But the shield engineers had an almost equally critical responsibility to maintain the shields. But that was invisible work.

She hailed a cruiser to the Elevator Spine and spent the ride rereading the anomaly chain.

Two seconds in Outer Ring Sector Six. Depopulated zone. No injuries. No alert threshold crossed. Nothing worth reporting.

Except the same two-second gap had appeared yesterday. And kept appearing precisely at hourly intervals for 9 hours. Each one buried under a correction clean enough to look procedural.

By the time she reached the Spine, all Shadowside elevators had been sealed behind ballast doors as was usual when the yellow sun was overhead.

If neither she nor Davan showed Spectralite powers by the Alignment, they probably never would. She had mostly stopped thinking about it instead focusing back on the anomalies.

Nira did not sleep that night. By the time the red sun lifted over the bay, she was still at her station, her cold tea untouched, and shield logs open across three panes.

The yellow sun had not risen yet. The shields were in night-state with low charge and a passive lattice. There was no solar load yet. And no reason for the anomaly to appear. But she still could not let it go.

At 04:44, the clamps released with a resounding boom and the eight status markers turned green. The city shuddered as the engines fired. Nira felt herself being strapped down by the suppression fields which activated during ascent and descent cycles.

At 04:48, primary shield ignition began and the shield strength climbed. Nira stared at it with bated breath. No anomaly. The shield held steady. Nira let herself breathe.

Twelve percent.

Twenty.

Thirty-seven.

Fifty.

Nira exhaled, the tension she had not known she was holding, slowly leaking out.

And the outer Ring Sector Six failed. Exactly as before. Nira stopped breathing. But the failures didn't stop.

Sector Nine, Twelve, Seventeen and then the six others failed in quick succession. The exact same sectors, in the exact same order from yesterday. Ten failures in eleven seconds and the city-wide lattice dropped.

Every shield marker vanished. There were no color codes or labels or warnings. Just absence. Then the system came back.

```
PRIMARY LATTICE RESTORED.
TOTAL INTERRUPTION: 57 SECONDS.
CLASSIFICATION: WITHIN PRE-ALIGNMENT THRESHOLD.
```

Nira stared at the final line. Within threshold.

The shields were under incredible load as the city ascended nearly 10,000 feet in about thirty minutes. Every cycle, Nira was grateful for the safety coating which prevented any loose articles from shattering or injuring others. But not today. She felt suffocated, trapped, as she was forced to look at the same screen and hope that the shields didn't fail mid ascent or worse mid day when the radiation was at its peak.

The public dispatch arrived the moment the city stabilized and the suppression fields released Nira.

> *Minor synchronization delay detected during morning shield ignition. No action required.*

The Force directive arrived before she could process it.

> *Cadet Nira Vaesh. Report to Outer Ring Sector Six for aid, reassurance, and civic reconciliation.*

A final line appeared beneath it.

> *One Shadowside maintenance worker remains unaccounted for following scheduled exterior service.*

Nira grabbed her kit and ran. Behind her, the logs began correcting themselves.

2: The Cascade

The system everyone sees is the system you are meant to see. Beneath it runs the one that actually decides everything.

No one designed it to be hidden. It became hidden because the people who understood it stopped explaining it to the people who didn't.

That is not conspiracy. That is efficiency.

- Found annotated in the margins of Skyside Civic Code, Section 31.7.12: Institutional Transparency and Public Trust

---

Day 0:

Nira rounded the corner just in time to see a figure fleeing in the distance, hugging the shadows. The maintenance panel was alive and evolving rapidly.

For one second, the holographic crystal display pretended to be ordinary.

```
GARDEN COURT EAST ADMINISTRATIVE ANNEX
MAINTENANCE ACCESS PANEL SEVEN
CEREMONIAL LOCK: ACTIVE
NO FAULT DETECTED
```

Behind her, the Festival of Alignment continued.

The second vow rolled through the public channels, as thousands of voices joined back into one clean rhythm. Above the Garden Courts, the shield shimmered under the twin overlapping suns. The red and gold sunlight normally would have cast twin shadows if not for the eclipse.

Davan was still somewhere behind her beside the Ascension Wall. Waiting for her in formal blue. Waiting at the spot where her pair should have been. He would represent both of them as a pair. Alone if need be. He would hold out hope till the very last second. Nira pushed the thought away and forced open the deeper logs. The ordinary display vanished, and the pattern appeared.

The same nine-sector chain from morning ignition five days ago had returned, but now the failures were cascading into one another exactly like she had seen six days ago. There was no clean recovery window. There was no time for the city to reset individual sectors before the next failure arrived.

Sector after sector was exposed to the lethal radiation from the twin suns. The local corrections in the dropped sectors cascaded into the next failure. The city was trying to

save itself in pieces and feeding the cascade by treating everything individually, instead of as a well-connected system.

Within the next two minutes, unless she did something, the citywide shield would drop right in the middle of the alignment ceremony. Nira immediately opened emergency commands on the panel.

ACCESS DENIED. CEREMONIAL LOCK ACTIVE.

She tried Force Cadet clearance.

ACCESS DENIED. CEREMONIAL LOCK ACTIVE.

She tried maintenance aid override. For half a breath, the panel accepted it. Then the screen flashed clean.

NO FAULT DETECTED.

Nira stared at the words. She wanted to break the panel and its denial. Behind her, the vow reached its response.

“Two minds. One intent.”

Nira pulled up the reserve map as she had earlier. She did not have command access or systemic controls or any relevant permissions to counter this. She was just a cadet. And she was out of options. But she could see just enough to analyse where the power wanted to go.

Nira looked at the available reserves. The nearest one was not in the outer ring. It was right here in the Garden Courts. The warning appeared immediately as she tried to move it.

REROUTE WILL REDUCE GARDEN COURTS SHIELD RESERVE. CONFIRM AUTHORITY.

She had no authority. That was the whole problem. The next two sectors dropped in quick succession. And then she saw a way out. Another profile was open on the interface. Presumably, whoever she had chased off. DRAV KELD, Shadowside Guild. Nira hit confirm from that profile. The system barely hesitated as the sections opened up.

The reserve moved and power bled out of the Garden Court, slamming into the outer ring. The cascade buckled as the next failure in the chain stabilised. Nira sighed with relief as the cascade stopped advancing.

For one breath, Nira thought she had caught it. Then the panel beeped again.

SHIELD RESTORATION STALLED

The failed sectors stayed grey and unresponsive. Despite her intervention, the shield on those sectors never came on. Nira's hands went cold.

"No."

She tried the restart sequence, auto and manual re-balancing and anything else she could think of.

ACCESS DENIED. CEREMONIAL LOCK ACTIVE.

She tried again and again, but she could not change anything.

Nira looked from the grey sectors to the eastern annex doors across the gardens. Someone had used the ceremonial lock against the city. Someone had known the system's vulnerability. And the one move she had been able to make had not been enough.

Five days earlier, she had tried to explain the first half of this pattern to Vick. He had looked at her like she was a tired, inexperienced cadet. Which she was, but that didn't mean she was manufacturing facts.

For almost an hour, she had hated him. And she had nearly believed him for the last four days.

Day -5:

Officer Vick received her in a room designed to make haste feel unwelcome. A clear glass connected the white, pale walls. Two simple chairs and a sturdy desk furnished the room.

It was the kind of Skyside room where panic arrived already guilty. Nira stood because she had not been invited to sit. She could not even tap her foot as she waited for Officer Vick to read her report twice. That should have reassured her. But instead she felt a big issue. He was not dismissing her without looking. That would have been easier.

He was reading carefully, which meant the problem was not that he had missed the pattern. The problem was that he had somewhere to put it.

"Cadet Vaesh," he said at last, "how many Decadal Alignments have you served through?"

"None."

"How many have you studied in operational detail?"

“Four cycles of accessible training records.”

“Four cycles.” He set the crystal down. “I have served through four, studied forty.”

Nira kept her hands still at her sides, unsure if she needed to respond. With Vick, it was always better to be quiet when unsure.

“Shield irregularities before ‘The Alignment Ceremony’ are not unusual. Increased solar radiation, eclipse interference, and yellow-sun load shifts are the primary external causes. Exterior maintenance, ceremonial re-routing and a hundred other things are the internal causes. The grid behaves differently this week because the city behaves differently. And none of those reasons are good enough for you to explain your finding?”

“Frankly, Sir, no.”

“I do not think you understand what you are insinuating.”

Her hand tightened on her kit.

“This is not an insult,” he said. “It is experience. Every decade, good cadets see patterns in the noise. Some of them are even real patterns. Most are not useful ones, though. You need to learn the difference.”

“But these are the same sectors. In the same sequence.”

“Outer ring sectors, which are depopulated sectors. Precisely for the reason that those sectors are the first to fail in case of an error. That is the system.”

“They failed at the same recovery intervals. That is not plausible without intent.”

“Automated recovery was successful. And now you are making my points for me.”

“The logs corrected themselves. Someone must have…”

“That is what logs do when data sync is delayed.”

“That is also what logs do when someone modifies them, what to say.”

Vick’s expression did not change. But something behind his eyes closed a fraction.

“Careful.”

Nira heard the warning clearly, and she pushed anyway.

“Sir, the correction is the pattern. Each failure is small enough to ignore because each one arrives with an explanation already attached.”

“And your explanation is conspiracy based on those very same observations?”

“My explanation is sequence.”

“No,” Vick said. “Your observation is a sequence. Your explanation is that adds up to a nefarious intent. On the Festival of Alignment, no less.”

That stopped her. Not just because he was right. Everyone she had brought this to kept being right in ways that did not help. She had been saying that to herself since her powers hadn't manifested. That she hungered for something more. She pushed those thoughts down.

Vick slid the crystal back toward himself.

“You are not on the Force yet. You are five days from pairing. Five days from intake, but just one escalation away from forcing your review board to ask whether you stabilise under pressure.”

“I am stable.”

“Then act like it.”

Outside the glass, two officers passed with Gold and white festival sashes over their uniforms. Vick lowered his voice.

“File your observations as supplemental. Do not access shield logs beyond cadet clearance. Do not reroute anything, and especially do not interfere with festival preparation. If there is a real issue, the department will see it.”

That almost felt like guidance. But it also felt like a cover-up.

“And if the department is part of the reason why we are not seeing it?”

Vick stood. “This meeting is over.”

Nira snatched up her kit and stood to leave. At the door, he spoke again.

“Cadet Vaesh.”

She stopped at the door.

“If you are right, you need proof. If you are wrong, you need discipline. Right now you have neither.”

Nira left quickly without another word.

Davan was waiting near the Elevator Spine. Neither leaning nor pacing, just waiting. Even here he would want to look perfect. He never liked to let others see his uncertainty. He had always known how to make stillness look intentional.

Morning traffic moved around him in paired streams. Officers, cadets and festival staff made the bulk of the traffic. All of them were wearing some variation of gold, white, or formal blue.

“You went to Vick,” he said.

“I filed a report.” Nira sighed.

“You went to Vick.”

“They sent me to Sector Six yesterday.”

“And?”

“And the record changed before I arrived.”

“Good.”

“No, Dav. Not good.”

“Nira.” Said Davan gently.

“The missing return was reconciled AFTER the shield failure.”

“Records update.”

“AFTER the failure,” emphasised Nira.

“Records often update after the event they record as the data syncs. That is standard. Is it not?”

She looked at him.

He gave her a small smile, the kind he used when he was trying to pull her back from an edge without admitting he thought she was standing on one.

“I did not come here to fight,” he said.

“That would be new.”

“I came because I have something to show you.”

He lifted his crystal and opened a placement projection. The air between them filled with lines. A small label popped up on each branch highlighting the path.

MAGLEV SPIRES

OUTER COURT CIRCULATION

SPIRE-ADJACENT LOGISTICS

FESTIVAL ESCORT RESERVE

COMMAND VISIBILITY TRACK

Each route branched into officers, boards, recommendations, sponsor names, and possible intake rankings. Nira stared despite herself.

“You built this today?”

“I started before the duel.”

“Of course you did.”

His face brightened, and for a moment he looked exactly like the boy she had chosen at fourteen, before the choice became destiny for life.

“Look here at this branch,” he pointed. “If we get placed in Maglev Spire logistics, it might be a heavy duty for six months, but that specific reporting line runs through Captain Sol Veyr’s office this year. She is known to rotate command support every quarter. If we perform cleanly, we move into ascent coordination by second cycle.”

“You spoke to Sol Veyr?”

“I spoke near Sol Veyr.”

“Dav.”

“I… cultivated awareness,” said Davan cheekily.

“That is not a thing.”

“It is absolutely a thing.”

She almost laughed. That was the worst part. He had done this for them. Not only for himself. The ambition was near enough that he could taste it. She could nearly taste it too. He had spent the day building a future with her name inside it.

A future she hoped she still wanted. A future that still fit the wall. Davan saw her soften and pressed carefully.

“Spire work gives us visibility without vulnerability. It keeps us away from lower-deck transit disputes. It puts us near the ascent systems, but not inside them. It is a clean path with strong sponsors. And most importantly, minimal political contamination.”

“By political contamination you mean avoiding Shadowside postings? Find a way to not cross paths with half the population of the city?”

“It means avoiding duties with low cost benefits. Avoiding duties that stall careers.”

“Show me your gears, Davan. For once, can you be clear?”

“I have always meant the same thing. I want us where we can actually matter. And I know you wanted the same!”

“I am trying to matter right now. Finding a pattern which no one else has reported helps us. Doesn’t it?” said Nira softly.

“No,” he said gently. “You know it does not. You are just trying to be right.”

The words landed harder than they should have. Nira looked away. Davan touched her wrist.

“Come with me to the board review tonight. Let the shield department do its job. Give me one evening to protect what we have built.”

“My report is still open.”

“Then let it remain open.”

“The pattern is still evolving.”

“Then the system will catch it.”

She looked at him.

“Do you really believe that?”

He did not answer quickly. That was what made her listen.

“I believe systems catch what they are built to catch,” he said. “And I believe people destroy themselves trying to force systems to become something else overnight.”

“Is that what you think I am doing? Just trying to oppose the systems out of what? Stubbornness? Spite? What?”

“I think you are five days from everything you had said you wanted. Dreams and goals you had wanted with me. I am afraid you don’t want me anymore.”

His thumb brushed once over her wrist.

For a moment, Nira let herself imagine the wall again.

Vaesh and Norel.

Then her crystal chimed with an incoming Shield Telemetry report. She opened it before

she could stop herself. Davan saw her face change.

“Do not,” he said.

She closed the alert for now. Not because he had convinced her. But because she had no proof yet. But she would find it. She just needed to dig a bit more. She spent the next hour going through the future plans with Davan. They ended the night not fighting for once.

Davan watched Nira leave. She did not go toward the board review chamber. Of course she did not. He had expected that.

She crossed the Spine concourse with her kit pressed against her side, head lowered, already disappearing into whatever pattern had taken hold of her.

For a moment, Davan considered calling after her. Not because it would work. His communication crystal pulsed before he made it. It was a Private channel with no crest displayed. He tapped his crystal, accepting it.

“Cadet Norel.”

“Officer.”

“The recommendation board has reviewed your placement profile.”

“That was fast.”

“You have been visible for some time.”

Davan allowed himself half a smile.

“Visibility was the point of the exercise.”

“There is a path available.”

The words were careful. Not an offer yet. A test maybe? Davan needed to focus and keep it together. A misstep now could ruin years of effort from him and Nira.

Davan started out across the Garden Courts towards the Ascension wall. Festival crews moved around in paired lines, laying gold runners along the ceremonial path. By sunrise, the court would look ancient and inevitable.

“What path?”

“Spire-adjacent logistics. Command observation. Sponsor review after the first quarter if the performance warrants it. It is not formal, yet. But it is real.”

His hand tightened around the crystal. That was the path he wanted. Not one of the

paths. The one which was perfect for his goals.

“And Vaesh?”

The pause on the line stretched long.

“Cadet Vaesh’s file has acquired variance,” said the officer.

Davan looked around the path as the Shadowside workers adjusted the gold runners by a finger’s width.

“Variance is not failure.”

“No. But unresolved variance near intake becomes risk we are not comfortable introducing in this path.”

“Nira is not a risk,” Davan said more forcefully than he had intended.

“She has filed two supplemental reports in twenty-four hours. Both outside expected cadet responsibilities. Officer Vick has flagged her for pressure review.”

“Vick flags anything he cannot categorise before lunch.”

“She is becoming increasingly difficult to place.”

“She has always been difficult to place. That is exactly why she is valuable.”

The silence on the other end changed. Davan felt it instantly. So he pivoted smoothly.

“She sees patterns in data other people reduce to noise,” he said. “That can look unstable to officers who prefer annotated and usual reports.”

“That sounds like defence.”

“It is an assessment.”

“And your assessment is that the pair remains viable?”

Davan looked toward the Ascension Wall.

“The pair remains optimal,” he said.

“Optimal pairs can still be separated before formalisation.”

“I know the Pairing Doctrine.”

“Then you know there are mechanisms. Quiet ones. If one half becomes professionally exposed before intake, the other does not have to fall with her.”

For one moment, Davan said nothing. The runner finally aligned and the workers stepped back. The path looked perfect.

“No,” Davan said.

“No?”

“I am not accepting a separation track.”

“Loyalty is an admirable trait when applied in the right situations.”

“It’s not just loyalty.”

Davan kept his eyes on the wall.

“Separating now would degrade the structure.”

“The… structure?”

“Our profiles. The structure our placement case is built on. Our demonstrated skills and compatibility built over the years. The evaluators have watched us for years. Removing Nira this late introduces instability into both our files.”

“And keeping her?”

“Keeps the system intact.”

“Her deviation might continue.”

“She will stabilise. The last hour proved it.”

“You sound certain.”

“I am always certain about systems that I build. And we have built this pairing over the years.”

“She does not sound complete.”

“She is not the incomplete part.”

The silence on the other end made Davan second-guess his stance. Then he softened his voice.

“Nira wants the same future as I do. She is tired and frustrated with the current system. She is close to something she cannot yet prove. Once the board review is done, once intake is secured, and the pairing is formalised, the variance would resolve itself. Either the system would realise its mistake or Nira would, and that would be the end of the variance.”

“Do you believe you can bring her back into alignment?”

“I know I can. And I trust that she can let it go once she has completed her investigation.”

“Is that your final answer?”

“It is the only answer that matters.”

On the wall, a second team of Shadowsiders arrived to polish the base of the wall. One worker wiped the blank intake panel until it reflected the court in clean gold.

Davan looked at the blank space where their names would go.

“And this variance will be resolved by the Festival?”

“Yes.”

The voice waited. Davan understood the unasked question. If not? He smiled faintly.

“Every piece returns to its place eventually. You can always count on that.”

The channel ended. Davan remained by the glass, crystal still warm in his hand. A loud crash caused Davan to spin around. The worker polishing the base of the Ascension Wall had dropped his equipment, wet polish spreading across the floor in a dark smear.

Davan sighed and moved to the worker. He picked up the polishing cloth and held it out without looking at the wall.

"Careful," he said. "These names are not easily earned."

The worker took it. "Apologies, sir. We’ll ensure the ceremony is memorable."

Davan glanced at the access badge. "Keld."

Davan didn't wait for a response as he turned his mind back to the plans for the upcoming days.

He never noticed Keld making his way toward the access panel on the eastern wall.

3: The Scapegoat Protocol

People estimate the importance of their actions based on what it cost them. Time, effort, choices. But it is never that. The value that others get out of your actions determines the value.

And I know what is of value to every single target.

- Found annotated in the margins of Skyside Civic Code, Section 12.3.12: Value of Shadowside

---

Day 0:

Nira desperately called the Shield Monitoring Division.

“Category 1 Emergency. Several sectors in the outer ring segments are exposed. My re-balancing stopped the cascade but did not bring the rest of the sectors back!” Shared Nira rapidly even before the Department liaison spoke a word.

“Hold, please,” said the liaison coldly.

“I see you still don’t have either the proof or the discipline. So let me impart some.” Came the cold, clipped voice of Officer Vick.

Nira nearly dropped her crystal right there.

“Since you have used unauthorised access to tamper with the shields, depleting the garden reserves during a Decadal Shift event, I will ensure you are charged with terrorism. Please stay by the panel unless you want me to add the charges of absconding to your list. Am I clear?”

“Clear. You don’t have to believe me. There is another person here who actually sabotaged the shields and set the cascade in motion. Just lock out all the interfaces in the garden courts, and I’ll wait for you to arrive.”

“You don’t get to dictate that. But, in case you are wondering to try something, all the interfaces were already disabled the moment you initiated an unapproved and illegal transfer. This is the last line you will ever cross.”

Nira didn’t wait for the lecture to complete. She needed to catch that fleeing figure more than ever now to prove her innocence. If she could just catch him, she could salvage this debacle. Slightly.

Blood thundered in her ears, warring with the dreadful thoughts of being banned for life, her life's work and Davan's evaporating in front of her eyes. She closed her eyes, clenching her fists in a desperate attempt to control her spiralling thoughts.

As she rounded the corner towards the nearest maintenance interface, she found a Shadowsider dead ahead, fumbling with another interface, desperation writ across his face. He was sweating profusely, clearly agitated and holding his anger on a slim leash.

Drav looked up, frustrated, as he saw Nira descending on him like a predator.

"Drav, Stop!" Nira panted as she cautiously stopped at a safe distance from Drav. The Shadowsiders never carried any weapons. They were barred, but she could not take any chances with a saboteur who wanted the entire Skyside exposed to the dual sun radiation.

Drav searched desperately around, but the only other exit led directly outside where the red gold sunlight shone bright.

Nira caught Drav looking at the exit and the sunlight, and she understood.

"No, Drav! Please! You don't have to step into the sunlight! We can still find a way! No harm was done. I stopped the Cascade. You can still live!" said Nira, desperately trying to talk Drav down. To calm him down.

Drav's eyes kept shifting, his breathing fast and shallow.

"What use is life without meaning? The Skyside used us, abused us, and forgot us. You have a whole wall full of names just for Graduation! We get ours only when we die! Year after year, you sit and think of new ways to choke us! That is what those names represent!" spat Drav, spittle and sweat flying from his lips as a dam broke in him.

Nira's hands shook, sweat beading on her forehead. She hoped Vick and the team were hurrying to find her.

"I understand you. I can empathise with you!" said Nira, holding up her hands in a pacifying gesture.

"I can… Sorry. I can not." Said Nira, shaking her head.

"I can not relate to what you must have gone through. It was my dream to get my name up on the wall. I worked my life for it. But I am not sure if it is even worth it anymore."

"You have no idea what it is to work till you fall from exhaustion. You have no idea how it is to be treated like spare parts. While we pull triple shifts to maintain the whole city's infrastructure, Skyside can not be bothered to decorate for your own vanity ceremony! You get to sleep! Shadowside has not slept in decades! This event that you have can be had any other day of the year. But no, you have it on the day of the eclipse when the

radiation is at its peak! And today they will feel what the radiation does to you when you have no shields!”

Drav took another hesitant step towards the sunlight.

“Drav, please think of it. There is no escape. If you step into that sunlight, you will die. You know that! Do you want that to be your last statement? To be remembered as a terrorist if at all?”

“No. They will remember the dangers of this day, and they will shift the ceremony to some other day. The Shadowsiders will no longer die to rush to prepare for this day, being forced to maintain the shields and everything powering them till we die!”

“No. They will not. If the shield had failed, then maybe. But if you step into that sunlight now, you will die, and they will find a scapegoat. Likely me in this case. But they will find someone. They will not change the longest-standing tradition, and an event that unites the entire Skyside just for a sabotage attempt. A failed one at that!”

“It failed because of your meddling, right?”

“Yes. It did.”

“Then you leave me no choice. The least I could do then is take you down with me!”

Before Nira could react, Drav started sprinting towards the sunlight and his doom.

Drav turned away from the persistent Skyside girl as he ran. He had run once before too. That one had been towards his doom as well.

The unfiltered light at the end of the corridor was blinding, growing larger with each step as his mind slipped backwards.

His son Rael’s grease-stained smile arrived first.

It especially shone on days when he could barely stand after harrowing double or triple shifts. His son had a knack for lightening the mood and dragging along with it.

The boots gave him away first. It was a rhythm unique to Rael, the exhausted, loose-limbed swagger of an optimistic boy trying to prove that working on the shields hadn’t broken him. Yet.

Rael’s hands shook badly, his teeth grinding to suppress the pain he felt as he handed Drav a bowl of soup.

“The Atmospheric pressure was more stable than my hands today!” Rael would joke, never even mentioning the chemical burns across his hands from working in the smog

outside the city.

Alarms on ring sector 6 went red again on just a usual day. Corin, who had grown two doors down, burned his hands to ash, manually holding the shield in place for twelve extra seconds. Corin didn't have any hands left to grab anything as he fell from the city into the bay. That was the day Rael's swagger died as well.

The system did not mourn; it filled vacancies. Corin's locker was cleared by dawn, and Rael assigned Corin's shift in addition to his usual shifts. No one else could be spared since The Decadal Shift preparations were underway. A slot opened, and a slot was filled. That's all the system cared about.

The dreadful wait every day became a physical weight Drav could not put down. The clock became the enemy. No bootstep by ascent time of 4:44 made the silence in the quarters sharp enough to stab. Every second felt like an eternity.

Drav saw Rael comeback diminished after each shift. The body pain competed with his grief to hollow him out. The terminal on the wall didn't chime; it gave a low, mechanical thud. Before Drav even looked at the screen, a sudden, violent wave of nausea hit him.

The air in the room instantly lost its taste. His hand hovered over it, his chest locking tight in the fraction of a second before his eyes actually registered the red font of the casualty notification.

Drav didn't weep for Rael as he chiselled his name on the Shadowside wall of Myrtyrs. He didn't cry when his chisel split his palm open, marking Rael's name in blood. The system didn't care when the aged Drav signed up for the decoration crew, graveyard shift.

So Drav didn't care as he found the issue causing sector 6's failure. Drav didn't care when he broke every rule to build what he needed. Without Rael, there was nothing to care.

Drav built on the initial failure. He tested. He planned. And he chipped away at every obstacle ruthlessly. He locked the sequence. He ensured he could move in the Skyside without detection and without touching the sunlight.

His goal was too important to rush. He would put an end to this tradition of celebrating the Decadal Shift. A tradition which celebrated Shadowsider death and blood.

Drav felt a tug on his jacket. Damn! That girl was still persistent! Drav shrugged her off easily and dived into the sunlight, laughing as Rael would have.

For Rael.

4: The Forbidden Step

Whoever said that any well laid plan only lasts till the first crisis never understood planning. A true plan accounts for all the probabilities and scenarios. Any plan lacking that was never a plan to begin with.

A true plan ensures control over all variables. Including the enemy's.

- Found Scribbled along the margins of "Skyside vs. Shadowside: A History of Vehl's Reach", Chapter 7

Day 0:

For Rael!

Screamed Drav in his mind as wave after wave of unbearable pain enveloped him. The thought consumed Drav as his body burned, turning various shades of raw red and charcoal. The skin darkened at the edges first, as if his life force itself shied away from the sunlight.

He had known exhaustion. He had known hunger. He had known the slow ache of old injuries that never fully healed because rest was rationed beneath Skyside. He had known the deep bone pain of double shifts and the sharper pain of waiting for a son who did not come home.

This was different. It built itself through him layer by layer. Searing skin first, pouring fire through blood and nerves.

His hands turned into claws as his knees buckled, sending him sprawling on the grass-covered ground as his screams tore through the grounds. The scream stopped Nira dead in her tracks.

"Drav!" shouted Nira.

Drav barely heard her over the overwhelming pain, his mouth hanging open. Ash spread across his jaw and down his arms as his skin cracked in thin lines.

Yellow sunlight poured into him, and every part of him tried to consume it. He had stepped into death. He had wanted death. Not because he was brave.

Because he was empty. Because Rael was gone and the system that killed him would celebrate above the blood of those it never counted.

Drav had imagined one clean end. But his body had other plans.

The sunlight split across hidden channels beneath his skin. It hurt so badly that thought became impossible. Then veins of golden light opened across his arms.

He felt stone heating beneath his feet. Metal rails trembling along the wall. Crystals around him fractured and melted under the overwhelming stress of power. Irrigation pipes carrying pressure. Power lines choking under reroute locks. Emergency doors waiting for commands.

Drav stared at the waves of heat coming off him, melting the very ground on which he had fallen. Drav lifted one arm and a nearby emergency door flew clean off its hinges.

He could feel the immense power flowing through him, though the pain never receded.

I can bring down the shields after all! I can make them pay for Rael!

For a heartbeat, his eyes locked with Nira, freezing her mid-stride. Something in his expression shocked Nira, causing her to run towards cover.

Drav raised both his arms, trying to send that immense power to bring down the shields. Drav tripped and fell as the ground shifted under his intense heat.

The entire floor of Garden Court trembled and shook as light leapt from his fingers and detonated nearby. Superheated steam burst from the irrigation pipes.

Nira could not take her eyes off the screaming Drav. And right before she thought the screams would stop soon, his skin split, showing golden veins made of molten light.

“Impossible!” whispered Nira to herself as she saw the heat radiate from Drav, melting ground, stone and metal alike. Drav looked at his own hands as if they belonged to someone else.

Drav turned towards her, his expression conveying the extreme, savage pain he felt even as his body became taller and stronger. Absolute, unbearable pain. Nira’s dread increased as she saw the veins on Drav’s body pulse, as if about to release the pressure of such extreme power.

Nira ran and dropped behind the maintenance divider she had passed earlier. The divider was decorative from the Skyside side, carved with flowering latticework for the Decadal Shift ceremony, but she knew the truth of its construction. Beneath the polished face was a service-grade heat sink connected to the garden’s climate regulation

system.

It was not meant to stop a blast. Nothing in the garden was meant to stop this.

But it was meant to redirect excess thermal load away from ceremony crowds, making it the best bet.

The light hit, and the divider screamed.

Heat poured around both edges like water around stone. Crystal petals fused into warped glass. The polished surface blistered, split, then folded inward as if a giant hand were pressing from the other side.

Nira curled behind it, one arm over her head, and felt her sleeve smoke.

The blast did not expand evenly. That was the second impossibility. A normal explosion radiated as fire consumed and pressure spread.

This moved through systems.

The light struck metal first. The metal carried it. It raced along shieldwork seams, down crystal conduits, into irrigation channels, across decorative inlays, through maintenance rails beneath the floor. Anything designed to conduct power, heat, water, or signal became a path.

The garden was not being destroyed by fire. It was being used by it.

Nira forced her eyes open through the glare.

Drav stood at the centre of the exposed terrace, shaking violently. The golden veins under his ashen skin pulsed in time with every flicker of the shield remnants overhead, which had a small hole in it, but still held.

He was not controlling the force. That was obvious.

His hands were open, fingers spread wide as if he were trying to drop something too hot to hold.

But the systems around him answered anyway. A service column near him brightened from within. Its maintenance crystal overloaded and burst. A row of ceremonial lamps ignited one by one as if multitudes of power had been routed to them.

The floor beneath him melted in a widening circle. Anything Drav touched burned.

No. Not only burned. Obeyed first. Then burned.

He staggered and grabbed the side of a pillar to steady himself. The carved stone blackened under his palm. Gold lines raced from his fingers through the pillar’s inlaid

crystal inscription.

Then the pillar split down the middle under the heat stress it was never meant to bear. Drav snatched his hand back with a cry as he lost his balance again. But his palm kept burning. Not flame. Living Sunlight trapped in flesh.

Nira stared. Her mind tried to reject the conclusion and failed. A Shadowsider in yellow sunlight was not dying. He was destruction incarnate. Untrained and uncontained destruction.

Every Skyside shield equation she had ever studied rearranged itself inside her head around one impossible fact.

If one terrified Shadowsider could do this by accident, then what would a trained one do? What would a hundred do? Was this the reason for the Skyside obsession of keeping Shadowsiders away from yellow sunlight?

A section of roof collapsed as the pillar gave way completely.

Nira rolled away as a support beam slammed into the floor where her legs had been. Heat chased the impact, lighting the beam from within. She scrambled backwards, coughing through dust and steam. For a moment, the entire court vanished behind white pressure. Nira ducked behind the ruined divider as superheated vapour tore past her face.

Think. She had to think. Panic would kill her faster than Drav would.

There were three systems adjacent to the garden courts. The irrigation systems were useless and blown to bits already. The crowd control might be slightly useful in dodging and escaping. And the shield system was already under critical lock.

But the shield reserves were already depleted. Depleted by her. That reserve was the only thing that might help her.

Nira crawled toward the half-destroyed maintenance interface. Sparks spat from the panel. The crystals half cracked and melted but still functioning partially. She grabbed the edge of the crystal and screamed as heat seared her fingertips.

She yanked her hand back, shook it once, then tore a strip from her sleeve and wrapped it around her palm before trying again. The interface accepted her touch on the fourth try.

```
WARNING: UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS ACTIVE.
```

“No one cares,” she hissed through gritted teeth.

She forced open the emergency garden controls. Vick had disabled all interfaces the moment she initiated the unauthorised transfer. But the system was damaged now.

Locks held on clean systems. Broken systems had edges.

And Nira was an expert at figuring out patterns.

Nira tried digging relentlessly to access the reserve intake. She could find the required settings in her sleep. Which was fortunate because the interface was barely readable in the current state.

Drav thought of Rael's name carved in the Shadowside wall, cut by his own shaking hands, blood in the grooves because the chisel had slipped and he had not cared enough to stop. He pushed himself back on his feet and looked around. Drav saw the Skyside girl through the steam.

The girl was at a broken interface. Bleeding and burned and still working. Still trying to save the Skyside he so despised. Relentless. Why was the Shadowsider the only one burning alive? They all will. She should have run.

She should have done what the Skyside always did and called someone else to handle the cost and consequences.

Well, she will pay for it, and Skyside will pay for it. Today. In full.

Drav gathered all the power in his hands and slammed them down, unleashing hell.

Nira felt a wave of dread rising as she felt a feeling of intense hatred directed towards her. She looked up in time to see Drav staring at her, eyes filled with hatred and determination. For one instant, Nira felt him inside the system. Then his power slammed into the same control layer she was touching.

The interface burned under her wrapped hand.

Nira bit down on her own sleeve to keep from screaming and rerouted faster.

"Come on," she whispered. "Come on, come on, come on."

There! She enabled the protocol, which allowed the reserves to pull power from public infra in cases of emergency to ensure that the shields never failed.

It wasn't difficult since they were already depleted.

Drav's progress staggered as the power flowing through the infra suddenly depleted and started flowing into the reserves. Drav's next few attacks were absorbed by infrastructure. Drav's pain and anger were palpable even at this distance.

Shear take her! Will she never give up?

The infrastructure obeys first! Burns later! Drav's eyes fell on the shield lattice already damaged from his previous attacks. It was unstable. Drav pulled against it with all his power. The anchor allowed him to escape the glass hole he had been in the ground. He stopped his power output the moment he was out of it.

Drav looked at his hands. He still melted the ground he was on. The Skyside will never forget this day! Drav turned and started walking towards where the ceremony had faltered to a halt after the ceiling had collapsed.

Nira's mind raced as Drav pulled himself out of the infrastructure drain. A trained Shadowsider under yellow sun would be impossible to imprison inside the city. Skyside's whole doctrine relied on the belief that Shadowsiders avoided sunlight because sunlight killed them.

But what if the rule was never protection? What if it was containment? The thought was so dangerous she almost missed where Drav was heading. Nira looked around desperately for a way to stop him. The shield canopy!

Above the garden, the damaged shield canopy had begun to fold inward. Drav's uncontrolled power kept hitting it in barely controlled pulses. It was going to collapse. The collapse could not be stopped. But it could be aimed.

She opened the old service schematic from memory and found the release pins for the canopy's western arc. Still locked. She grabbed the physical lever beneath the interface. It was red-hot.

She wrapped both hands in her torn jacket and pulled. Nothing. She pulled till her lungs burned. The lever moved half an inch. Her palms burned through cloth.

The release pin fired. The western arc of the canopy gave way. For one breath, the entire structure hung in the air like a decision. Then it collapsed straight onto where Drav had been moving. The impact shook the garden. Drav vanished beneath falling light and crystal.

Nira's heart stopped. Then the wreckage glowed. Gold spread through the collapsed canopy. The whole mass lifted. Not physically at first. It trembled, weight arguing with power. Then Drav rose from beneath it, one hand raised.

The canopy fragments hovered above him, all of them burning from within. He was not holding them with strength. He was powering the control lattice still embedded in the broken crystal.

Nira stared. Even untrained, even in agony, he was commanding infrastructure by instinct. Badly and poorly. But commanding it. Then his concentration broke. The canopy fragments shot outward.

Nira threw herself flat as burning crystal tore across the garden and smashed into nearby trees and buildings.

Drav staggered. He looked less human now. Not because his shape had changed. Because the pain had hollowed everything ordinary from his face. His skin remained ashen, cracked by gold. His eyes burned yellow-white. Every breath left light between his teeth.

For one second, she thought he might ask for help. Instead, he turned toward the Ascension Wall.

“Rael,” he said.

This time the word was audible. Barely. Drav looked at Nira. The gold in his veins dimmed by a fraction. His lips moved.

“Rael.”

Nira nodded, tears stinging in her smoke-burned eyes.

“I know.”

She did not know enough. But she knew that name mattered. Drav tried to smile. It looked like pain remembering kindness.

Drav collapsed. Not dead. Yet. His knees struck the fused stone. The golden veins flickered wildly under the ash of his skin, starved and surging at once. The power inside him, no longer fed evenly, recoiled through every path it had opened.

Nira realised what would happen one heartbeat too late. The energy had nowhere to go. Drav folded around himself.

Nira ran with all the energy left in her. She knew it was too late for her this time.

Light imploded. Then burst outward in one final uncontrolled pulse. The blast was smaller than the first. More contained. It carved a shallow glass crater into the garden ground. The tremors shook everything three blocks away. The tremors sent a crack up the Ascension Wall.

The heat wave raced down the drainage, hard enough to rupture pipes three corridors away.

The shock wave sent Nira flying. Nira hit the floor. This time she did not get up quickly. The world rang. Dust fell like grey snow. When she finally lifted her head, Drav was nowhere to be found, completely vaporised.

For a moment, the garden was silent as if trying to deny the truth of the day. Alarms shattered the silence, distant and useless. Nira welcomed the darkness encroaching

her vision as emergency personnel flooded the Garden Courts.

5: The City Lies

There are two kinds of people in the world. One kind works tirelessly to either fit or excel in the existing systems. They pay the highest price.

The others are the system themselves. They pay nothing.

- Found scribbled along the margins of "Skyside vs. Shadowside: A History of Vehl's Reach", Chapter 10

Day 0:

Nira jarred awake from a sudden alarm to her right. She opened her eyes. Or rather tried to. It seemed like her body had had enough and was flat-out refusing to acquiesce.

Soft medical chimes pulsed above her head. Sterile air hissing through vents forced sensations on her exposed skin, causing her to shiver. Her throat tasted of metal.

She forced open her eyes to a white ceiling hovering above her. Pale gold light diffused through a shielded window. She shook her head, trying to dissipate the images of smoke, screams and broken canopy and with it the terror of golden veins opening beneath ashen skin.

For one impossible second, she thought Garden Courts had been a fever dream. Then pain arrived.

It moved through her all at once, from skull to spine to fingers, sharp enough to force a sound out of her. Her right hand was wrapped from wrist to knuckle. Her left shoulder had been immobilised.

Thin lines fused to her arm ran from her arm into a diagnostic frame beside the bed, each one glowing with calm institutional blue. Mender's tech. It made sense given the amount of beating her body had taken.

She tried to sit up, and the restraints tightened around her. Nira froze. These were not medical stabilisers but were actual restraints. She stared at them as if willing them away.

Her breath went shallow, trying to deny the reality of it all.

A pane of glass stood beyond the bed. It was not a window but an Observation bay.

Beyond it, two officers watched her without expression.

The door to her right opened before she could speak.

Officer Vick entered, fidgeting with a crystal in one hand and wearing the same clean uniform he had worn in her memory. No soot. No burns. No sign that he had stood anywhere near the impossible thing that had happened at Garden Courts.

Behind him came a woman in administrative grey, carrying a recorder. She did not look at Nira. Vick stopped beside the bed.

“Cadet Nira Vaesh,” he said.

Her mouth was dry. “Garden Courts.”

His face did not move.

She swallowed. “How many?”

The woman tapped the recording crystal with pursed lips.

Vick glanced once at the woman, then back at Nira. “Cadet 100324 is awake, coherent, and responsive. Good.”

“How many?” Nira repeated.

“A public casualty report will be released after final verification.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the only answer YOU are cleared to receive.”

Nira stared at him. Slowly, the room sharpened around the edges. Why was there no Mender present? This was not recovery. This was containment. She pulled against the restraints once. Pain flared down both arms.

“What happened to Drav?”

Vick’s gaze held hers.

“Who?”

For a moment, Nira heard nothing except the recovery lattice humming above her bed. She laughed once. The sound came out cracked.

“I thought I was the one blown up! Don’t do that.”

Vick tilted his head. “Do what?”

“Do not stand there and pretend he was not there.”

The woman in grey made a tutting sound.

Vick stepped closer. “Cadet, you suffered acute radiation shock, severe resonance overload, and possible hallucination under eclipse exposure. I would advise caution before making statements you cannot support.”

Nira felt a wave of dread and nausea gather within her, ready to burst.

“He was at the interface. I saw him!”

“No. He wasn’t, cadet.”

“He used two different maintenance access panels. I chased him off one, and he was trying to access it after you cut off access to all panels!”

“No. That was all you.”

“He ran into the yellow sun.”

Vick’s eyes hardened by the smallest degree.

“No Shadowsider entered Garden Courts during the incident. They are not allowed to touch the Yellow Sunlight, as you very well know.”

Nira stared at him.

The room seemed to tilt, though the bed had not moved.

“Systems logs,” she said. “Pull the interface logs. His credentials were used.”

“They were.”

“Then you know.”

“Yes,” Vick said. “We know exactly whose credentials were used.”

The woman in grey touched the recorder crystal again.

Vick placed a crystal holo-projector on the adjustable tray beside Nira’s bed and turned it towards her.

A report unfolded in clinical lines.

```
DECADAL RADIATION ANOMALY - GARDEN COURTS INCIDENT
Primary Cause: Unauthorised shield reserve transfer.
Responsible Operator: Cadet Nira Vaesh
Sky Force Candidacy: Terminated
```

Pairing Status: Suspended

Her pulse climbed so fast she thought she might have a panic attack right then.

“No!” was all she could manage through the numbness spreading through her.

Vick ignored her. “At 08:14, you initiated an unauthorised withdrawal of Garden Court’s shield reserves and routed it. At 08:29, when the depletion destabilised the shield during peak dual sun eclipse, you attempted to reverse the transfer.”

“No! That’s not what happened!”

“The reversal overloaded the shield lattice and threw the system out of sync.”

“That… that’s not… true!” said Nira, shaking her head.

“The resulting destabilisation caused the explosion, structural damage, and civilian injuries at the Garden Courts, interrupting the Festival of Alignment. A first in nearly a century.”

Nira strained against the restraints as her anger broke through. “I rerouted reserves because the outer shields were failing! I saved the city! You should be thanking me!”

“The outer shields were failing because you moved the reserve.”

“I moved it to stop a cascade.”

“For which you had no proof or intent and were explicitly warned against.”

“I did not create the cascade.”

Vick leaned in just enough to impress every word clearly. “Then who did?”

Nira’s answer was immediate.

“I have been telling you that. Drav did!”

Silence settled. Vick tapped the holo-projector once.

A second document opened containing an official death certificate. Nira breath caught as she read the name on the certificate.

DRAV KELD. SHADOWSIDE MAINTENANCE TECHNICIAN.

Then she saw the date. Six days ago. The day she had been called to investigate a missing Shadowsider.

Her mind reached backwards before she could stop it. Her mind had been focused on the shield drop and the cascade sequence. Her frantic search through service tunnels

most Skyside engineers never entered.

The body had been recovered from a sealed maintenance recess. The death certificate had been pushed through with barely a glance because no one wanted a Shadowside death hanging open during Decadal Shift preparations.

And her signature was at the bottom. Nira stared at it until the tears in her eyes blurred the letters.

```
Certifying Technical Witness: Nira Vaesh.
```

“No,” she whispered.

Vick’s voice softened, which made it infinitely worse.

“You certified Drav Keld dead five days ago.”

“I certified a body. I was focused on the cascade and not on the body.”

“You certified Drav Keld…”

“The identification came through the registry. It was already there when we found the body. I never thought to question the system!”

“Ok. But you thought to question the much more advanced and secure shield system, did you not?”

“Yes. But I did not know him. I never met Drav till today!”

“And you claim he sabotaged Garden Courts?”

“He did!”

“After being dead for five days? Unlikely.”

Nira looked up at him. And for the first time, fear broke through the rage.

“That body was not him. Please, you have to believe me!”

Vick watched her like an engineer watching an unstable system.

“Do you understand the problem with that claim?”

“Yes,” Nira said. Her voice shook. “I understand exactly what problem it creates for you.”

The woman in grey stopped fidgeting. Vick went still. Nira forced air into her lungs even though every breath hurt.

“He was alive. He was there at the Garden Courts trying to execute a cascade to bring

down the shields. He told me why he did it! Rael. I don't know who or what that is. But if you investigate, you will find it."

Vick did not blink. When he spoke, his voice had become entirely procedural.

"Cadet Nira Vaesh is demonstrating post-traumatic fixation on fictional chain of events."

"Don't be a reductionist! Don't put your head back in the sand! This never would have happened if you had just believed me!"

"Possible cognitive impairment from radiation exposure."

"He stepped into sunlight!"

"The subject needs to be tested for mental stability." Said Vick coldly, his eyes burning with silent, controlled anger.

"He did not die."

"Subject continues to insist the deceased worker was present at the incident site. She needs to be tested for hallucinogens."

"He burned and then the city answered him."

The words left her before she could make them safer.

Vick's face changed ever so slightly. Anyone could have missed it. But Nira had spent enough hours arguing with him that she knew. Beneath the officer persona, beneath that arrogant certainty, beneath the official story already sealed, was a knot of fear. Somehow he knew. She was certain of it.

Perhaps not all of what she had seen and experienced. Not the golden veins and = the way metal had lifted before Drav's hands moved. Not the way infrastructure had obeyed him before it burned him apart.

But he knew enough to fear the sentence. The city answered a Shadowsider standing in Yellow Sunlight.

Vick reached over and switched off the recorder. The grey woman's jaw dropped in utter shock at the blatant disregard of protocol.

"Officer?"

"Leave us."

She hesitated.

"Now!" said the officer in a barely audible whisper. But it was enough to send the grey

woman flying out of the room.

The door sealed behind her. For several seconds, Vick said nothing. Then he took the projector from the tray and held it against his side.

“You are alive because the city needs a contained explanation.”

Nira’s throat tightened. Vick stepped closer, dropping his voice further.

“Listen carefully. Garden Courts suffered an extreme Decadal radiation anomaly triggered by unauthorised shield manipulation. That is the official story. It is what the city needs and what the public will know. It does not cause riots in half the city. It does not send every Shadowsider in the city running toward sunlight to test a rumour.”

“It is a lie.”

“It is what is needed. I have sealed up everything. No one knows and no one ever will. It is the only version that keeps the city standing.”

Nira felt something inside her go very quiet. She thought of Drav laughing as he ran. Not in triumph or madness but in stabs of a sharpened grief until it became action. When you had nothing more to lose, living didn’t matter anymore.

She thought of Rael’s name whoever it might be. Of Drav’s sabotage and death. Of Davan and his plans for the future. And her own slim chance of survival. This room and these restraints. The clean report the city needed with her own signature turned into a lock.

“You are going to make me the saboteur.”

Vick did not deny it.

“You moved the reserve and depleted the Garden Courts.”

“To save people, to stop the cascade.”

“You initiated the reversal.”

“Because Drav was going to kill them.”

“There was no Drav at Garden Courts.”

Nira closed her eyes. The system had already decided what could be real. It was just trying to decide if she would fit in it anymore.

When she opened her eyes again, Vick was watching her carefully.

“You will be charged with unauthorized emergency manipulation, negligent depletion of

civic shield reserves, falsification of recovery action, and obstruction of Decadal safety operations."

Nira almost smiled.

"You are not charging me with terrorism?"

"Not if you cooperate."

Nira understood. A smaller lie in exchange for silence. A ruined career instead of a public execution which could destabilise the whole city. A single guilty cadet instead of a city built on a buried truth.

"Systems hold. This time by consuming me," Nira said, laughing bitterly at the irony of it all.

Vick's jaw tightened.

"I would choose your next words very carefully."

"Does it matter? The system will always do what it needs to. I am not even a cog in it."

He leaned down until his face filled her vision.

"No one saw Drav because Drav was dead. No one saw a Shadowsider survive sunlight because no Shadowsider did. No one saw the city respond to him because infrastructure does not answer grief. Human or otherwise."

Nira's pulse slowed. Every word he spoke shaped what he feared.

"Then why are you here without the recorder?" she asked.

Vick straightened. For one breath, neither of them moved.

Then the recovery room lights shifted from soft gold to clinical white. Somewhere beyond the walls, the public announcement system chimed. A calm civic voice began speaking across the ward, across Garden Courts, perhaps across all of Skyside.

"Preliminary review confirms that today's incident was a result of a localised Decadal radiation anomaly aggravated by an unauthorised shield reserve transfer. The responsible cadet has been identified and is being punished as per the Skyside Civic code. All operations remain stable. May the systems hold forever!"

Nira listened until the announcement repeated. Then she turned her head toward the shielded window. Beyond the frosted glass, Skyside still stood. Proud and tall.

Of course it was. Skyside did not fall when it lied. It only made others fall when it needed to.

Vick moved toward the door.

“You should rest,” he said. “The inquiry begins tomorrow.”

Nira kept looking at the window.

“You buried him under my name.”

Vick paused with his hand near the door panel.

“No,” he said. “You buried him by not doing your duty effectively and chasing patterns in the air.”

Then he left and the lock engaged behind him.

Nira lay still in the white room while the city hummed around her, smooth and alive and innocent by official declaration. Her hands throbbed beneath the bandages.

Then, very slowly, she pressed her injured thumb against the restraint cuff. Pain flashed immediately and she ground her teeth and pressed harder.

She wasn’t trying to escape. There was no escape from this. She just wanted to remember where her body ended and the lie began.

Outside, the announcement sounded a third time.

“The systems hold.”

Nira closed her eyes.

No, she thought. Someone holds them. And someone is always buried underneath to hold it.

6: Every Piece Returns

If you can not be bothered to put your life and goals above everything else, why should anyone else? You are solely responsible for all the successes and failures. And if you failed to ascertain the trajectory of the variables impacting your own life, you should never be part of impacting anyone else.

-- Found Scribbled along the margins of "Skyside vs. Shadowside: A History of Vehl's Reach", Chapter 20

Day 0:

Nira left the hospital with a sealed medical discharge, a suspended candidacy, and a city that had already decided what she was. No one said saboteur to her face. And that was way worse.

The Mender on duty avoided her eyes as she removed the diagnostic threads from her arm. The threads were fine like hair, and they lost their characteristic brilliance as they lost contact with her body. Two patrol officers escorted her through the recovery wing, trying to pretend they were not guarding her.

Outside, Skyside was beautiful. That felt obscene too. As if it, too, denied the horror she had survived. Something that still continued to destroy her life.

Vehl's Reach floated at cruising altitude, 10,000 feet above the thickening gold-brown haze of Elyndra Prime's lower atmosphere. Far below, the bay boiled beneath a quilt of mineral vapour. The mountain pylons had withdrawn into the dusk, their clamp sockets glowing faint red along the ridges like old wounds.

The city had risen cleanly. Systems had stabilised.

Garden Courts had reopened under partial shield cover, though several western terraces remained sealed behind white civic screens. The official notices called them restoration zones.

As if trying to call them anything but a grave. The grave of Drav Keld.

Nira stood at the hospital portico with one hand gripping the strap of her bag, the old reflex so automatic she barely knew she was doing it. Her shoulder throbbed beneath the immobiliser. Her right hand burned under the bandage. Every breath felt borrowed from Drav and Rael.

Then Davan stepped from the waiting alcove. He looked exactly as he had before everything broke.

Clean coat. Calm face. Sky Force pin bright at his collar. Hair wind-tossed in the careful way that made him look less polished than he was. He had always known how to look human without losing authority.

“Nira,” he said softly.

Her throat closed up immediately. She had prepared herself to feel anger from him, disappointment even. Or the formal distance of a broken pair, a pair that had been ripped apart. She had not prepared herself for gentleness from him.

“I came as soon as they cleared visitors,” he said.

“They cleared you?” Her voice sounded strange to her. Scraped raw with emotion held on a failing leash.

Davan gave a small smile. “Eventually.”

She looked away. Of course they had cleared him. Davan was not under inquiry. Davan had not moved reserves. Davan had not signed a dead man into official silence. Davan had not destroyed their future with five minutes of panic and one impossible truth.

He held out his hand. Nira stared at it, disbelieving.

“You don’t have to,” he said.

She placed her bandaged hand in his, gently squeezing it as if unsure of her injury or himself. Davan remembered everything useful, everything kind, everything that made life feel less like a system and more like a shape someone had made for her by hand.

They walked in silence through the outer promenade until the hospital towers fell behind them. The edge of the city waited beyond the windbreaks.

At cruising altitude, the rim was one of the few places in Skyside where the city admitted it was suspended above death. The transparent barrier curved outward from the walkway, nearly invisible except where sunset light touched it. Beyond it, the world dropped away into cloud, smog, heat, and distance.

The twin suns were descending. The red giant hung low and vast over the western haze, staining the sky in ember and blood. The younger yellow sun burned above it, smaller and sharper, its light cutting through the red glow in clean golden lances. Where both lights crossed, the clouds became bronze glass.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Nira sat on the low rim bench because her legs would not hold her anymore. Davan sat

beside her, close but not touching.

Below them, the city's shadow stretched across the haze.

"They said I shouldn't talk about it," Nira said.

"I know."

"They said it would compromise the inquiry."

"I know."

"They said my memory is unreliable."

Davan turned toward her. "Is it?"

She forced herself to look at the sunset instead of him.

"No."

He waited.

That was one of the things she had loved about him. Davan never filled silence because he was afraid of it. He let silence work. He trusted it to bring truth up from wherever someone had buried it.

Nira swallowed.

"I keep seeing him," she said. "Not his face. I don't want to talk about his face. But the moment he stepped into the yellow sun."

Davan turned towards her, gently squeezing her hand again as if to assure her that she was not mad. That he at least would believe her.

"What happened?"

Her fingers tightened around her bag strap.

"He should have died."

"Because of the Yellow Sun?"

"Because everything we know says he should have died." The words came faster now, pushed by the pressure in her chest. "Shadowsider physiology under yellow solar load, especially during Decadal amplification, should result in cellular collapse, neural burn, organ failure. We have manuals. We have incident classifications. We have diagrams."

"And did he collapse?"

Nira shook her head.

“No. He burned first.”

Davan’s breath caught. There! He would say I was mistaken. Why would anyone believe Nira?

“Burned how?”

Nira looked at him, grateful, and continued in a shivering voice.

“Like his body was failing. Like the manuals were right for one second. Skin ashen. Vessels flaring. Pain, real pain.” She closed her eyes. “Then something changed.”

The wind pressed against the barrier, low and constant.

“What changed?” Davan asked.

“The city noticed him.”

Davan did not answer immediately.

Nira opened her eyes, unable to bear the seared memories anymore.

“I know how that sounds,” she said.

“I’m not judging how it sounds.”

“You should.”

“I’m asking what you saw.”

Her chest hurt. “Power. Not like a tool. Not like an interface. Not like a person touching a system from outside.” Her voice shook. “It was as if he became a command the city understood.”

Davan looked at her carefully. “And that frightened you.”

She laughed once, breathless and bitter.

“Frightened?” She finally turned toward him, then immediately looked away because his kindness was unbearable. “I have never been so afraid in my life.”

“Of him?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” She dragged her good hand across her face. “He was going to kill people. I know that. He wanted the ceremony to feel what he felt. He wanted Skyside to look up from the Wall and understand that the systems could hurt them too.”

“And you stopped him.”

“I used him.” The confession came out before she could soften it. “I pulled the surge through him. I used the reserve intake, the canopy fragments, the emergency lattice, anything that could take load. I saw what he was becoming, and I turned him into part of the system.”

Davan’s voice stayed quiet. “You saved Garden Courts.”

“Did I?” Her eyes burned. “I destroyed us. I destroyed him. I don’t know if I saved them or only changed how they died. I don’t even know whether he died because of me or because the city couldn’t hold what he became. And nothing changes for anyone, except for you and me.”

“Nira.”

She could not look at him.

“I broke us for nothing,” she whispered.

The words took something out of her. Davan was silent.

Nira kept going because stopping would mean hearing whatever came next.

“You had everything planned. The pairing. The career path, the sponsorship.

The apartment above the eastern gardens. You made it all possible, and I signed one body wrong, chased one missing worker too far, moved one reserve line, and now every door you opened is sealed shut.”

Her breath hitched.

“I am so sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?” he asked.

She stared at him.

“For ruining your life.”

His face changed then. Not much, but enough for her to be aware of it. A tiny softening around the mouth. Almost pity.

“Nira,” he said, “my life is not ruined.”

The relief that tried to rise in her chest felt dangerous.

“It will be. They destroyed our pairing.”

“Yes.”

“They terminated my candidacy.”

“Yes.”

“They will never let me near a control system again.”

“Absolutely.”

She flinched. Davan looked back at the sunset. “But none of that ruins my life.”

“You are right! There should be a way to prove what actually happened. One of the systems would have picked him up here. No one can hide from the systems. And his energy was biological. The signature would be different. You are right. I can prove my innocence. I just have to prove that the cascade was real and everything would be fine.” Said Nira excitedly.

“Interesting. You still can not let go of that itch to prove the cascade despite it having blown you up. Literally and figuratively. I think the emitter would need adjustments after all.”

Nira’s fingers tightened around the bag until pain sparked through her hand.

“I don’t understand.”

“I know.”

Something in his tone shifted. It was still gentle. And that was what made her afraid. Davan watched the twin suns as if admiring a painting someone had hung for him alone.

“You said you didn’t want to name him,” he said.

Nira went still.

“But we should be precise now.”

The air between them changed as Davan turned his head.

“Drav Keld.”

Nira froze.

Not because he had said the name. But because he had said it without disbelief. Without needing her to explain. Her hand moved instinctively to her bag. Davan’s hand got there first.

He took the strap from her gently, almost tenderly, and lifted the bag into his lap.

“What… What are you doing?” Nira asked, shocked.

Her voice was barely a whisper. Davan opened the clasp. She should have stopped him. She definitely wanted him to. She thought that clearly. She even ordered her body to move. Her body just refused.

He reached inside, past her spare diagnostic crystals, her broken stylus, the folded discharge cloth, the small packet of pain suppressants she had not wanted to take. Then he withdrew a small device which looked like an emitter.

It sat on his palm like a dead insect. Smooth and black, it was almost featureless except for a faint ring of rose gold crystal threading around its edge.

Nira stared at it. The world narrowed to that little circle. She had seen it before. She did not remember it, but some part of her mind recognised the weight of it, the wrongness of it, the way her fingers had always found the bag strap for the last few weeks at least. Maybe more.

Davan held it up between them.

“You carried it very well,” he said.

Nira’s lips parted, and this time no sound came out. His shoulder crystal brightened.

A thin pulse of blue-white light moved across the Sky Force pin at his collar, then climbed to the embedded communication crystal fixed at his shoulder seam.

Davan looked away from Nira and spoke to someone she could not hear.

“Directive complete.”

“Yes,” he continued. “Subject survived recovery, retained key sensory impressions, and repeated the Garden Courts event under emotional stress.

But the subject can not let go of the need to prove still. We will have to dispose it after all.”

Nira could not breathe.

“The emitter has been recovered from Ex-Cadet Nira Vaesh,” Davan said. “No external suspicion at this stage.”

Nira listened, too stunned for words. Davan was focused on the voice on the other end. Then his expression cooled.

“No. Drav Keld’s emitter was vaporised with him. As planned, after Rael’s death, his

grief was weaponised and targeted after he received the access codes from me. The events after he initiated the cascade have been retrieved from the primary witness. That much is clean."

Nira's stomach turned over. Davan glanced at her, almost fondly.

She stood rapidly, looking all around, fearing an ambush. Davan always has a plan. He would not be acting like this if she could just run away.

"I have also confirmed a secondary strategic asset," he said into the crystal, not bothered in the least about Nira looking around for an escape. "Skyside command does not believe its own public classification. Vick buried the incident because he is afraid of what Garden Courts proved."

He smiled faintly.

"Yes. That secret has astronomical value."

The yellow sun dropped closer to the horizon. The city lights began to wake behind them one by one. Davan's voice remained eerily calm.

"If the Twilight Court wants exclusive possession of that truth, then my terms change. I will be placed next in line for succession to the Supreme Justice. Not advisory track. Not provisional consideration. Next in line."

Nira's eyes filled with tears.

No! This was not the same person she had felt guilty for! This was not her partner!

He listened again.

"No," Davan said. "The right information at the right time is leverage."

A longer silence. Then he nodded.

"Good."

The shoulder crystal dimmed as Davan turned back to Nira.

For a moment, he only looked at her. The way he had looked at her across study halls, across pairing evaluations, across every carefully arranged future she had believed they were building together.

"I am sorry," he said.

Nira shook her head. The movement was tiny.

Systems, please no!

She could not say it; she was too overwhelmed by the jumble of thoughts.

“You were always the stronger technical mind,” Davan said. “That is why they chose you. That is why I chose you too.”

Tears slid down her face. He stepped close enough to smooth one away with his thumb. Nira flinched back at his touch. The touch of a stranger.

“But systems do not advance through brilliance alone. They advance through position.”

He leaned nearer, voice soft enough that no passing monitor would catch it.

“Climb the barrier and jump to your death. That’s the best you can do for me, dear. You can take your time to decide.”

Nira barked a disgusted laugh.

“You think I will make it this easy for you? I will figure out the trap you have laid here, and I will ensure that you pay for everything.”

“I knew you would figure it out easily.”

“It was you who gave Drav the means to enable the cascade in the first place. You shielded him from the Yellow Sun and Skyside patrols. You gave me the sequence to study. You orchestrated all of this, and for what?”

“I said you figured it out. Now you are just showing off. All this is for my future, of course. I always have a plan. Did you really think I would tie my future to your whims?”

Nira was thrown by the simple honesty. That alone made her sure that there was a trap afoot. She needed to think quickly if she was to escape this.

“What now? I am not jumping. And I doubt you can throw me over.”

“Oh, I don’t need to throw you. You will jump of your own free will.”

Davan tapped a crystal, and it showed three different recordings.

Nira killing Rael. Nira killing Drav and covering it up. Nira practising how to ensure that cascade brought down the shields.

Nira stared at it in disbelief.

“That is not me!”

“Of course not. That is a Former imitating you exactly. They wear many faces. The same former, in fact, who you certified as Drav’s dead body five days ago. One tap and this goes to the media. No terrorist survives an hour against such proof. If you jump, you will

have a shred of dignity left."

Nira turned slowly. Terror widened her eyes while she prayed for the Systems to hold her. She moved one step, her hand reaching up to grab and pull herself up the safety barrier.

"Please-"

The word ripped from her throat before she realised she had a voice. She kept climbing anyway. "Please, I will disappear; I will not bother anyone. I will-"

"Do exactly as I told you," said Davan, not unkindly.

Nothing in his face moved. No calculations shifted in his expression. Nira understood with the last rational thought that there was nothing left in Davan to appeal to.

Cold and unforgiving wind rushed in as if trying to force her back. The twin suns filled the world. Nira swung one leg over. For one heartbeat, she stood between city and sky.

Shear and Wind! Nira thought, looking back at everything over the last few weeks, every word and every action of Davan taking on a sinister tinge.

Davan watched her with calm admiration, almost proud of his accomplishments.

"Neither you nor Drav were supposed to survive. Both of you were just helping me prove a point. Both of you exceeded my expectations, though. I thank you for that."

With one finger hovering threateningly on the crystal, he simply said, "Jump."

She did. No scream followed her. Only the wind heard the screaming in her head. Davan stood at the edge until the haze swallowed her completely.

Then he returned to the bench and sat where they had been sitting moments before. He placed Nira's bag beside him. The small emitter rested hidden in his closed fist.

Across the horizon, the red sun lowered beneath the smog line. The yellow sun burned above it, sharp and golden, painting Vehl's Reach in impossible beauty.

Davan inhaled slowly.

"Every piece has returned to its position. The future is as secure as it can be. My Future," he said.

No one answered. There was no one to listen, except the city itself.

Below him, the city lights brightened. Transit resumed along the rim. Garden Courts continued its restoration. Civic announcements promised stability, recovery, and the endurance of public order.

Vehl’s Reach floated on as the system held effectively.

And somewhere beneath all the mundane, everything had already changed.

The Decadal Shift began as a simple question: What does it take for the system to crack?

Nira, Davan, and Drav are not the heroes of The Parasite Wars. They are the reason it happens. The events in these six chapters set something in motion that will take a decade to surface and when it does, it will look nothing like what any of them intended.

Thank you for reading before Book 1 begins.

- R. R. Panwar

The Infection Protocol
The Parasite Wars, Book One

Vehl's Reach must rise to escape the heat every morning, balancing a society built to decide who deserves the light.

When a terrifyingly precise city-wide attack upsets the balance, Echo-Seer Rhea Vale follows the death echoes, uncovering clues her superiors would rather ignore. Kael Arisht-Vire, a former detective infected with the Invercilium, an alien parasite consuming him from within, hunts the institution that destroyed him, while nine distinct consciousnesses battle for control of his body.

The Pyre's Wake is someone who understands the city's infrastructure better than the people who built it, and has been waiting a very long time to weaponize that knowledge.

Three lives. Three agendas. One city on the brink of catastrophe, and a buried truth about who controls the light.

The Archivist
Weekly dispatches from the Aeshan Continuum

Canonical lore. In-world records. Craft notes on building a sixteen-book universe from the ending backward.

Free. Every Tuesday.

https://a2rkcreative.com/the-archivist