

BENEFACTION

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HE KNEW THE chime of 0430 hours marked his last morning as a level-I student. Tomorrow, he'd awake a J. Simon Vires would not miss being an I, or seventeen years old. January first brought more than the opportunity to progress in rank; it aged every meta another year.

Getting dressed took little time for someone who'd followed the same routine for seven years, ever since his first day at the training academy. His roommate dressed in the same silent air. Simon donned his socks while meditating on the most precise insult, but Koleman broke the quiet first.

"Don't worry, Vires. You'll still have Griffin to keep you company."

Simon snapped his training suit over his chest and allowed his roommate a sideways glance. "Yes, at the J table. Try not to miss us, Greggie." He summoned his shoes and grabbed them from the air, then strode from their room without waiting for Koleman's rebuttal.

Idiot will be the only I-level left, Simon thought. His confidence vacillated when he remembered Griffin. No, Griff will make J. He knows I'll kill him otherwise.

He walked a long stride, measured to match the tick of his pulse. Simon slipped his shoes on as he headed downstairs. He was one of the few occupying the stairwell. Most cadets were likely vomiting their nerves in the restroom. Simon didn't need anxiety; he only needed his hands and feet.

Those who'd made it to the dining hall shuffled uneasily through the buffet line, allowing the Tacemus to supply their trays with food they'd be too queasy to eat. Simon cut past the ambling progression and told the Tacemus to give him extra.

Of all ten dining tables, only one bustled with any chatter. The Js had no apprehension; they weren't participating in the obstacle courses today. As the highest level, they had already proved their competence. Simon scrutinized the Js as he strode toward the empty I table. The J cadets were the oldest, on average ranging from nineteen to twenty. A single younger student sat apart from the rest. He was freshly eighteen, same as Simon; they were in the same graduating class. The student found Simon's gaze and nodded with a presumed encouragement that made Simon bristle.

Sheedy won't be my superior any longer. Not after today.

Simon knew he was already ahead of MTA standards. At eighteen, Simon should've been hoping to pass level H, not J. Having a peer who'd

passed all ten obstacles at age fifteen had motivated the cadets to try harder. Simon, McFarland, Reynolds, Koleman, and Burnette had excelled quicker, and now had a spot two levels above the rest of their age group. They were the best, and Simon the paragon.

Half of Simon's meal had vanished into his stomach by the time the rest of his tablemates arrived. He checked each cadet's hollowed breathing and inwardly glinted at their lack of composure. Even McFarland was unable to feign her usual reserve. Simon watched her carefully, awaiting a tremble. Hoping for one. Surely a day as momentous as today could produce *one* weakness in her. She wanted to make J as badly as Simon did, though they had different motivations. She desired validation, while Simon hungered only for prestige.

"You'll eat the kitchen out of stock, Vi."

Simon realized he'd lingered on McFarland too long and turned to his partner. Tyler Griffin beamed widely, but Simon detected a quiver beneath his friend's dark skin. While Simon moved with practiced confidence, Griffin had never mastered his nerves. Worry returned. Griffin, nineteen years old and surrounded by a group of eighteens, had already been outperformed by a previous partner. If Simon made J and Griffin didn't, the latter would wind up with another younger partner – and a slap of humiliation he'd pretend not to feel.

Simon stomped on Griffin's shoe. *Eat something*, he wished he could tell his friend. *Hide your anxiety. Don't look weak*. Although, Simon reasoned, no amount of vulnerability would cause anyone to idolize Griffin less. He had effortlessly claimed the affection of nearly every cadet. No one feared Griffin, but they cherished him.

Griffin recognized Simon's inaudible cue and forced his fork into a mass of eggs. "Sheedy's mute," he said, tilting his head toward the Js. "As usual."

Simon didn't bother sparing the J table a curious look like the rest of his peers. Sheedy hadn't uttered a single helpful word the last few years. Simon knew he wouldn't this January first, either. Cadets weren't to know an obstacle before they encountered it. Although some of Simon's peers had progressed to level J last year, their injuries had prevented them from proceeding through the obstacle. Only the Js definitively knew what the final level contained – the Js, and perhaps a few at this table who'd attempted J but failed.

"Give us one hint," Griffin called to Burnette, who smoothed her blonde

hair and said nothing.

"She doesn't know anything," Simon said. "Sheedy would rather amputate his arm than let a semblance of a hint slip."

"Even one-armed, he'd still beat you," came McFarland's first strike of the day.

Simon's focus, too often preoccupied by McFarland, returned to her more quickly than he meant. Their eyes met. His stomach finally succumbed to an unsure oscillating, and he chastised himself by cutting his nails into his palms.

She's one obstacle you won't beat, Griffin's younger voice echoed.

Simon returned to his breakfast. The most vindictive response was to ignore her; she experienced too much pleasure in riling him. "You're interrogating the wrong person, Griff. If you want answers, ask Koleman. He knows what J is because he failed it last year."

The air whistled. Simon's fingers flexed with anticipation, but Griffin's arm rose first, catching the handle of the knife before it plunged into Simon's eye.

"If you're going to assault Vires, at least aim below his neck," Griffin told Koleman. "We'd all mourn the loss of such an impeccable face."

"If by 'impeccable' you mean —"

A freckled hand covered McFarland's mouth, stifling her insult. McFarland's partner, Reynolds, shook his red head and lowered his arm.

Simon seethed. If Griffin wasn't defending him, Reynolds always managed to rise to the occasion, though he cared more for readjusting McFarland's vitriol than saving Simon's feelings. An attack from Koleman would've been welcome. Entirely insubordinate, of course, but Simon's idiot roommate would go uncorrected. These types of scuffles were meant to be managed by their CO, but discipline had grown lax since Leader assigned the duties of commanding officer to Banks. Koleman knew he could get away with it, just as Simon had planned to escape unscathed with his rebuttal. Griffin had deprived him of that, and he was unappreciative. The last thing Simon needed on the day of the obstacle courses was to appear weak. *No one* would ever have the pleasure of weakening him. Simon could guarantee that.

THE YOUNGER CADETS competed first. They took the shortest amount of time.

In the shade of forest sentinels, Simon and his peers waited at the end of the line. Cadets forged this path in the woods every year. They carried a taut silence only interrupted by the leaves their feet trampled and the invariable encouragement from Griffin.

"We'll finally catch up to Sheedy," he told their classmates. They embraced every word. Even Burnette exchanged her usual haughtiness for solidarity. Griffin had that effect, uniting the most distinct. Koleman alone stood separate from the cluster attached to Griffin. Simon's roommate had always preferred to scowl in solitude.

Noting Koleman's wayward attention, Simon commanded the dead branch he'd been eyeing. He'd waited long enough for his revenge. The limb rose from the ground to reside in Simon's ready fingers. Simon relished in the influx of control he felt over the tree branch not so contrary to the practice staff he wielded every day in class. After swinging it in a swift arc, he jabbed its point at Koleman's face. The latter reacted, but not speedily enough to avoid a trail of blood, a fresh line to match the bumpy scar already dominating Koleman's other cheek. Koleman made to knock the branch from his path, but Simon eased backward, snickering. With teeth bared, Koleman flung himself at Simon, who kept his staggering to a minimum. The two students began to spar as if they'd traded the forest for the elevated platform where the post-training matches took place each evening.

Simon, taller and lighter, shared equal advantage with Koleman's wider build. The two had sparred before—sometimes academically, most times not. They each knew the other's weaknesses. Koleman, an animo, would focus more energy on sending whatever inanimate object he could into Simon's path. Clavio Simon, on the other hand, kept distance between them through the use of the tree limb he swung. Their fight begun in close proximity and gradually drifted to a few feet apart. The other students, perhaps listless and willing to set their attention on anything but the looming obstacle courses, participated with more jeering and claps than their usually milder decorum.

Though the fight appeared equally matched, Simon knew he had the advantage—until Koleman managed to split Simon's makeshift staff into several pieces. Simon ducked, barely avoiding the kick to his jaw, possible now that he no longer had the staff keeping Koleman at bay. Koleman sent the splinters straight into Simon's skin, then surged forward with enough

momentum to knock Simon flat. Simon rolled, hopped to his feet, and immediately felt the iron vice of Koleman's arms around his torso. "*Bear grip*," they always called it. Koleman's signature move usually resulted in victory.

Not today, Simon thought. He shuffled backward and felt the *thump* of Koleman's back against a tree.

"Cadets," someone said.

Disdain followed recognition at the new voice. Simon heeled Koleman in the groin. Petty, but effective in removing the bulky student from his vicinity. He straightened, ran a hand through his sweaty curls, and turned toward Banks.

"Don't you have less annoying ways to release your nervousness?" Banks asked, dividing a bored look between Koleman and Simon. Behind Banks stood McFarland, arms folded in satisfaction.

Simon glared at her. She'd actually fetched the only person who could reprimand him.

Koleman spat a wad of blood to the forest floor. With a slur of unintelligible insults, he stalked ahead, shoving past the H students until they swallowed him.

After adjusting an invisible wrinkle in his training suit, Simon granted Banks his attention. "Banks, you're still here. I assumed Leader would've demoted you by now. I suppose he does have until midnight to revoke your status."

Banks, one of the few cadets almost as tall as Simon, had an infuriating apathy that meant no student – other than Sheedy, perhaps – had ever succeeded in galling him. At twenty years old, he'd reached his final year before graduation. He'd stopped caring about the MTA long before today, however.

The commanding officer massaged the back of his neck and nearly smiled as he said, "Who are you hoping will replace me?"

"It's not hope. Assurance. Koleman would make a better CO than you. Which is pitiful, because I'm not certain he understands proper diction."

"I'll be sure to recommend him to Leader." Banks gestured to the broken branch on the ground. "Be careful with that twig you're playing with, Vires. Wouldn't want to hurt yourself." He slipped into the crowd behind him. He didn't jostle the students like Koleman had, but they moved out of his way nonetheless.

Simon's chest heaved. He loathed Banks; McFarland knew that. He spun on her next. "Well done, McFarland. That might've earned you another coddling pat from Leader. Unfortunately, that won't help you pass J."

"I'm not the one who needs help, Vires. Some of us are actually skilled." She dragged her eyes along his bloody, sweaty appearance before striding off with Reynolds at her heels.

Simon ripped splinters out of his arm. He hardly felt their stinging. His pride burned worse.

Griffin sighed. In this Koleman-Simon disagreement, he'd played an uninvolved observer. "I'm not sure you won that," he said.

"I always win, Griff."

"Our sudden isolation makes me think otherwise."

Simon glanced from his bruised arm and noticed the absence of bodies. His former audience had merged with the crowd ahead, leaving a gap the length of several yards between Simon and themselves. "You need to stop being sensitive to the amount of attention you are or aren't receiving," he told Griffin.

"Oh, you know this lack of attention has nothing to do with me. I'm not the one who gets death threats." Griffin grinned. "I don't need to know how to fight as much as you do, Vi."

"You do if you want to pass J." Simon saw the way Griffin's grin fixed itself too tightly and knew his friend hadn't needed a reminder about what lay ahead. "Don't be anxious about it, Tyler," Simon muttered. He let Griffin's first name escape; the other students would not care to eavesdrop on this conversation.

"Anxious?" Griffin chuckled. "Who says I'm anxious?"

Simon didn't bother answering.

HE SEPARATED FROM Griffin outside the arena and followed Woods, the I-level instructor, toward the starting point. The arena – contained by sheet metal taller than the trees – had enough space to hold four contestants at one time; Simon would enter with Lunn, York, Burnette, and Lewis. The courses themselves were his challenge, not his peers, but he intended to beat them as well.

Woods offered encouragement and left them before their respective doors. Simon hurried to start first. "Commence," he told his watch. The three-second countdown began. A well-aimed kick sent the door folding

inward. He stepped through level A's obstacle and readied himself for B.

The courses did not change every year except in minor details, such as arrangement. What did change was the time and injury allotment. After passing, a cadet could not receive a single injury the following year on the obstacle already passed. Cadets would not be demoted to a lower level if they performed poorly on a previous obstacle, but they would automatically fail that year's obstacle, even before they arrived at it. If Simon failed B, he'd instantly fail J.

Fortunately, he had no intention of failing any obstacle today.

His watch gave him ten seconds to scale the towering pole of obstacle B. Simon was not permitted to jump but had to one-handedly climb the pole, which contained a spigot at the top that drenched all climbers in a continual waterfall; gripping a slippery pole did not come easily to a young cadet attempting to pass B. This obstacle tested strength and courage. He'd heard of cadets too petrified to manage the climb.

At the top of the pole, Simon had a glimpse over the wall that contained obstacle C. The red glow from the dim room gave away the location of each elevated platform jutting from the walls. *Different positions*, he noted.

Another ten-second time limit blinked on his watch, half of last year's time. Simon balled his fists and leapt from the pole to the highest platform in room C. It dropped once his toes found stability, forcing him to leap for the next closest ledge below him or risk plummeting to the bottom. If he did not touch every platform, he failed. Fourteen platforms in total, with ten seconds to reach every one.

He landed on the floor with one second left.

This year, his watch provided him with no cooldown time, but ordered him straight to the door for room D. Simon wrenched it open, eyes already prepared to face the brightness that contrasted the room he still straddled. Obstacle D consisted of an illuminated floor that buzzed. Crossing the lengthy room was complicated by the fact that some floor tiles would shock him if he stepped on them. He could not cheat the room by jumping across; the ceiling hung intentionally low, and Simon, at 6'3", stood taller than most. He would cross the room relying on hearing alone. One misstep and he failed D.

Eyes closed against the distracting brightness, Simon stooped low and listened. D demanded that he isolate the vibrations emitting from the floor to ensure which tiles were safe to cross. He stretched from tile to tile

without opening his eyes once and found the exit. He remembered the first time he encountered obstacle D at age thirteen. He'd gotten shocked – same as the entirety of his graduating class, including Sheedy. They'd all stayed C another year. The following year, every one of them had passed, only to get stumped again by obstacle E.

At eighteen years old, Simon was no longer intimidated by the wayward beam of room E. To further disorient the contestants, this room offered no light, forcing the cadets to once again readjust their eyes. The floor buzzed as well, providing another distraction from the thin, high beam cadets had to cross in utter darkness. If they fell, the electrified floor awaited them. In years before, his watch had allowed him injuries. Today, Simon had fifteen seconds to travel the convoluted beam from the door to the exit, all without incurring injury. He moved too quickly onto the beam and nearly lost his balance. Tightening his core, Simon travelled the beam that jerked diagonally in its unpredictable pattern. His watch vibrated with the last second as Simon burst into the room containing obstacle F.

He did not need to consult his watch to know that he could not receive an injury in room F. That did not unhinge him. What did was the time allotment. Within fifteen seconds, he had to move through the maze of crisscrossing lasers that had scorched his clothes last year. *Maze haze*, they called obstacle F.

After a five-second assessment of the trajectory of each beam, Simon darted through with the knowledge that he had ten seconds to cross a dozen treacherous yards. Duck. Swipe left. Jump. Duck again. Simon's lanky frame forced him to stoop for most of his trek. He leaped over the final beam with two seconds to spare.

He'd begun sweating as he stepped into the tunnel that comprised obstacle G. This low, dim tunnel curved beyond sight. Obstacle G proved the only *course* of the ten obstacles – a mile-long track he'd need to travel without crashing. The motorcycle awaited him at the track's mouth. He straddled the bike, secured the helmet over his head and the padded jacket around his torso, then released the clutch.

ID-140944 Course LvL: G, the text on his helmet visor glowed. This obstacle excited him. One minute to complete the dangerous motorcycle track made for a respectable challenge. Last year, he'd done well with two minutes. To shave time, he hiked the speed up to sixty and zoomed forward.

The first challenge appeared as a glass wall that dropped from the ceiling mere feet in front of Simon. He swerved left, then instantly right again to avoid a pit in the track. McFarland had fallen into that abyss her first time. Instead of gloating at the memory, Simon felt an uncomfortable clench in his stomach as he recalled the extent of her crushed bones.

The floor ahead glistened with water Simon knew would shock him, so he aimed for the narrow bridge that carried him over the charged liquid. The final crevice waited ahead. Simon directed his bike for the ramp and adjusted the throttle. If he missed the ramp, he'd miss the jump and fail G.

Another glass impediment leaped in front of him. Simon lurched right and felt his arm skim the tunnel's wall. His shoulders tensed. He'd nearly sustained an injury. The bike continued at seventy-miles per hour, narrowly avoiding another blockade before squeezing onto the ramp. It brought him to its top and threw him into the air. The motorcycle's roar reverberated from the pit it soared over. He landed on the opposite side rougher than last year, skidding so violently that he knew he was inches away from losing control. Simon managed to straighten his bike, then slow, until he drifted to the door for room H.

He tossed his helmet to the ground and craned his arm to view the elbow that had brushed the wall. The jacket had not ripped. Beneath it, his arm showed no welt or tear. His shoulders could relax.

His watch chimed at him. Simon slung his legs off the bike and removed the jacket; it was permitted only for obstacle G. An equipment rack beside H's door awaited his gear, but he left the helmet on the floor and his jacket strewn across the handlebars. After shaking off his sweat, Simon kicked open the door.

In a small room, about the size of the one he shared with Koleman, a single obstacle prevented him from marching toward the exit behind it. The towering obstacle resembled a manhole cover, one large enough to completely block his path. The silver coin, tall and wide as the room, faced Simon without ceremony. H had always seemed underwhelmingly dull to Simon. Not in difficulty – it *did* prove a challenge to him, and he had failed his first attempt two years prior – but in variety. To pass H, one had to telekinetically move the coin thirty degrees, ensuring an easy path around it. Telekinetically affecting this object was challenging due to the object's material; for it was not simply a large manhole cover, but a magnet drawn to the opposing pull built into the wall and ceiling. The magnetic coin

fought all resistance; succeeding in this course required not only accuracy but strength. *Mental* strength, enough confidence in one's telekinesis to move the magnet and walk past it, all while continuing eye contact with the obstacle.

Simon was a clavio, not an animo like Burnette and Koleman, who were the only two to pass H on their first attempt. He hated that this course demanded only one skill. Physically moving the coin would not do; it released a shock if touched. He outstretched an arm, tightening fingers as he concentrated on rotating the obstacle. Telekinesis, to some degree, did rely on physical strength; his arm felt the tension as the magnet fought his efforts. Simon glared, now feeling a throb in his temples. *Stupid, stupid....*

"Move!"

The magnet groaned. It turned slightly, revealing a thin gap he couldn't fit through. His arm tremored and the headache increased. He stepped closer, eyes on the magnet, not allowing a blink for fear of losing his minimal control over the obstacle. It hummed with charge, with energy, with the desire to return to the attraction that sought to pull it away from Simon. His eyes watered. He stood a foot away now, fingertips close enough to make contact.

It groaned again and jerked, so quickly that Simon had to leap back or risk getting touched. The magnet twitched, oscillating between Simon and the invisible draw. With a grunt, Simon swept his arm as if opening a door. The magnet rotated another few feet, enough space for him to slip around it. Without breaking eye contact, he edged along the wall, sucking in his chest as he passed the magnet. Its energy pulsed. As soon as he knew he had cleared it, he blinked. The magnet got sucked back to its former position and blocked the room he'd just occupied. It would've smacked him in the face if he hadn't moved.

Simon inhaled. He wiped his sweaty brow on his arm and turned to I.

Each year, the newest obstacle proved the hardest. Level I had demonstrated itself no differently, but Simon hadn't been the only cadet last year who'd considered obstacle I on a vastly superior plane of difficulty. Of course, he'd outwardly excluded himself from those conversations.

After shaking tension from his arms, Simon walked into the utter lightlessness of room I. The door clicked shut behind. Darkness enclosed him.

His watch vibrated with a ten-minute countdown. Last year he'd been allowed twenty.

Simon knew, from recollection and the open air he could feel, that he stood on a short ledge overlooking a canyon. A rope net waited below to fail him. He'd barely skimmed it last year during his plummet to the pool beneath the webbing. A single gap existed in the net, one cadets were required to blindly aim for. How did one jump toward a hole one could not see? By listening.

The cadets, who never received instructions or hints before encountering an obstacle, had learned to experiment with all senses before attempting the unknown. Simon had stood on this ledge last year and listened a full five minutes. This year, he allowed himself one. Water, even stilled, produced an audible disturbance, but Simon did not have time to analyze tiny fluctuations of frequency. Instead, he shouted.

"Water."

The word echoed back at him. It squeezed into cracks and slapped against surfaces. He called again, rotating slightly. He repeatedly broke the silence until he'd completed a 360-degree inspection. He heard where his word had met a fluid resistance. The small pool lay straight ahead. Simon gathered oxygen – the last free inhale for a while, he knew – and jumped.

Wind cooled his sweat. His toes automatically curled, anticipating the gap in the netting. He refused to entertain the idea that he'd overshot. Thread brushed Simon's skin, and he grinned, feeling water engulf his torso a split-second afterward. His shoes touched the pool's bottom, and he jetted himself to the surface. The scent of stuffy air drew him toward the pool's single exit; still blind, he depended on other senses. Simon heaved himself out of the water and instantly smacked his head on the proceeding tunnel's roof. Part one of obstacle I was complete; now remained the psychological taxation that made a blind freefall simple by comparison.

A low, narrow, and lightless tunnel separated Simon from obstacle J. This underpass provided precisely enough room for a crawl toward the dip in oxygen, because part two demanded that cadets crawl in tight confinement with minimal air to breathe. Several cadets had lost consciousness last year; Simon assumed desperation had prodded them.

Simon elbow-crawled through the passage. His head hit the first blockade. Dead end. He scooted back, clothes making mud out of the dirt. The feel of wet earth would mark his route in this maze.

To crawl in confinement, no light, and little oxygen, with innumerable blockades to remind the cadets of their lack of control – this part of obstacle I had caused half of Simon's peers to fail. Griffin, too sanguine to succumb to psychological strain, had found part one harder.

"Claustrophobia?" he'd said. "I thought that was a myth."

Simon would not admit to having claustrophobia. It took too much will power that, currently, he expended on controlling his frustration. Doubt kept beating his confidence like a persistent branch. Simon did not mind the dark as much as the inability to breathe properly. His thoughts grew muddled as his path continued toward a series of dead ends, each more mocking than the last. *I did this before*, he reminded himself. Not under such a tight time limit, however.

Another wall touched his head. Simon stretched out an arm and gritted his teeth. Before pushing himself back, his fingers found a bulge. A knob. With a jerk, Simon twisted.

Clean oxygen licked his sweat dry. He squinted at the sunlight outside the tunnel. The same barricade of bushes prevented him from witnessing level J. Frustration grew like oxygen had given it fuel. He'd taken too long in I, having nearly met the time limit with four seconds remaining. Would that be good enough? Last year, his injuries had prevented him from attempting J. Not another year would pass with Simon still level I.

He dragged himself free from the tunnel. At last, he could stand. Simon rose. Muck caked his suit and skin. He imagined it marred his face, too. He'd wash before he saw McFarland.

"*Vain Vires*," Griffin would've chortled.

His watch buzzed with the verdict. Simon's jaw locked. He glared at the bushes even his height could not overcome. Rules would not confine him to level I. Koleman had likely proceeded, as he had last year. Sheedy had reached J at age fifteen! If something kept Simon from proving his competence....

He burned a gaze into the face of his watch. *Proceed*, it read.

Triumph thrummed in his veins. Nothing would impede his success. Simon kicked through the vines before him. At last, J would reveal itself.

A familiar landscape dominated his sight. Simon lived in the woods; he ran through them every morning. This forest appeared no different. Perhaps complacency to lower his guard.

He stepped toward the trees and awaited some threat. After peering

around his surroundings, he spotted a door that glowed with the word "EXIT." Presumably, Simon had to cross the seemingly innocuous grounds and reach the exit. The challenge would no doubt reveal itself once he began walking, so Simon sauntered forward. Noise tickled his ear, noise as familiar as the terrain. It beat with unrepentant chaos.

His fingers curled. Simon knew exactly what could produce that sound, that erratic pulse. He knew why level J would demand its cadets to overcome this. He knew that he could. Easily. He'd done it before.

Not Griffin.

A fight raged within him. Koleman would delight in this obstacle. A vengeful notch in Simon would also relish in the thrill of satisfaction. If he began this obstacle, he would not fail it. Simon would make J, and Griffin would still be the oldest I. Leader would assign Griffin a new partner, one inadequate compared to Simon. He trusted only himself to protect Griffin on missions. Without a partner as proficient as Simon, Griffin might not survive another assignment.

Simon crouched and ground a fist into the earth. Pride churned against loyalty. *It's Griffin's fault for being weaker than me.* Simon bit his cheek until iron salted his molars. *I'm better than Koleman. I deserve J. I've earned it.*

Humility did not rise to contradict him. Simon would have found such a cry unrecognizable. He knew only the truth of his own proficiency. While others lagged, he bested them all. Only he was a clavio, master of staffing. Winning had never appeared as a choice to Simon. If a challenge could be overcome, then Simon would mount it without hesitation.

If I beat J, Griffin loses.

Simon cared about winning. But he cared about one thing more.

He stepped back, smacked his watch, and said, "Finish."

EVERY STUDENT TAKING the courses had a J-level sentry, a monitor more thorough than a wristwatch. Simon had thought little of his until he took hold of the rope that descended before his face. Whoever had lowered the rope would have witnessed Simon's hesitance and eventual surrender, but Simon had yet to find a J impervious to threats.

Unless it's Sheedy. But he'd never break confidentiality. I'll merely have to appeal to the rules.

The rope finished its climb. Simon steadied his feet on the stadium's roof and found himself facing Banks.

His knuckles tensed. Simon had forgotten Banks, whom he viewed as one set apart from the cadets. Monitoring Simon was Banks' retribution for their earlier disagreement.

Commanding Officer Banks inspected Simon with more than his usual boredom. A wrinkle of interest elongated his face. "You didn't attempt J," he said.

Simon set his teeth. The two should've felt a stronger kinship, as both shared a distaste for the MTA's stringency, but whereas Simon practiced nonchalance concerning rules, Banks found every way to undermine them.

"You've normally absconded by this time of day," Simon said. "The prospect of your impending demotion must be fostering obedience."

A whip of late-morning breeze – still frozen with winter – struck the two students in the cheeks. Banks ignored the lashing and said, "I'm impressed, Vires. Evidently, there's more to you than arrogance. Unless I misunderstood, and your deliberate failure had more to do with a guilty conscience over what you'd be fighting."

"Guilt? I'm unfamiliar with the word."

"Odd. You have such a *bombastic* vocabulary." Banks narrowed his eyes; Simon chose to perceive that as a reaction to the sting of wind. "Why'd you pass on J?" Banks said. "You could've beaten it."

With any other student, Simon would not hesitate to dangle a threat. Intimidating Banks into silence would require a subtler tactic. "Leader doesn't realize how many times you've shirked lessons, but I've counted."

Banks expelled a soft chortle. "No need for a blackmail attempt, Vires. First, I don't care about getting a reprimand. Second, I have no intention of divulging your secret. Not that compassion *should* be a secret."

"You don't know what you saw, Banks."

"It's really a shame. You'd be an asset, if you fought for the right side." The words left Banks as slowly as leftover water leaves its faucet.

"I fight for the only side that exists," Simon said.

Although shorter than Simon, Banks carried more height in the words he never said. He'd always held that air, the weight of veiled knowledge. Simon understood the value of that weight, but never the full volume. Perhaps that was the impetus for his dislike of Banks; Simon hated when another knew more than he did.

Banks shook his head, revealing nothing and still managing to expose just how much Simon had to learn. "Keep lying to yourself and one day

you might believe it, Vires." Banks turned toward the wind and dropped from the roof.

THE ACADEMY PROVIDED a swift means of travel for cadets who completed the courses and, presumably, staggered with injuries. A husk waited for Simon at the base of the stadium. He climbed into the ovular pod that floated a foot above the earth. Once he jerked the steering mechanism, the husk raced forward. Minutes later, the husk deposited him by the academy's entrance. Simon stepped from the machine. It zoomed backward with a hum.

He walked purposefully toward the clinic, as if he'd been summoned. Murmuring came from within. Before he reached the door, Koleman stepped from the room. Simon's footfalls garnered his attention. Koleman, eyelid bruised purple, simpered. His jagged cheek scar wrinkled as he blocked Simon's path. "Enjoy J?"

Simon resisted the desire to clip him in the other eye. "Fortunately, I'm nothing like you."

"Don't act sanctimonious. You know the truth, and you still like it."

Simon darted a glance around the hallway. They were alone, which Koleman knew, but that gave him no excuse. "Truth?" Simon hissed the word and moved closer. He relished that his height forced Koleman to crane his head upward. "I'll assume you're not referring to something that's strictly confidential. Surely even you aren't that much of a twit, *Greg*."

Koleman's jaw rotated. Hatred burned in his eyes and Simon's chest.

Let him touch me. See what happens.

"Careful, Simon," Koleman whispered. "Red assignment in two days. I might misfire."

"I'm faster than a bullet."

"But is Griffin?"

Simon shot his hand toward Koleman's neck, spurred only by the heat of instinct. This time, Koleman was prepared. He caught Simon's elbow and twisted. Pain seared Simon's eyes as Koleman shoved him into the wall, keeping the arm unnaturally angled.

"Call me 'Greg' again and I'll break your other arm." Koleman pinched Simon's elbow until it popped.

Simon's mind went black with agony, and he blindly lashed.

Koleman thrust him back again and sniggered. "See you in class,

Simon."

Simon kicked out and met nothing. Koleman's footsteps edged up the stairs.

He heaved. His elbow twanged with vigor. At every exhale, he released a dozen mental insults. If Simon ever got the chance, he wouldn't misfire to hit Gregory Koleman; he'd aim with intention and smile.

"*See you in class,*" Koleman had said. He'd assumed Simon had defeated J. That sole consolation shifted into bitterness when Simon imagined Koleman's reaction once he realized his mistake.

An assortment of Simon's peers consumed the clinic, whether stretched across the beds or sitting on the edge of their partner's. A quick inspection told Simon that he'd fared better than them all. McFarland had a leg propped on a cot. She winced as the nurse wrapped her inflamed ankle. When she caught Simon staring, she lifted her chin as if unaffected by the pain.

He lingered at the cot's foot. "J?" he asked her.

"Spare your gloating, Vires. We've all endured enough of your arrogance for one day."

If she'd made J, her desire for approval – even Simon's – would've prompted her to mention it. The stitch in his elbow stopped throbbing so hatefully.

"Perhaps next year, McFarland," he said, not bothering to check her reaction before strolling away. That felt close enough to a victory.

Several cots in, Griffin rubbed the back of his neck with closed eyes. Yellow bruising made a contrast on his dark skin. Bandages wrapped both wrists, gel glistened on pink welts, and his knee cap swelled.

Simon sat beside his friend, eliciting a flinch. Griffin glanced sideways; the haze over his brown eyes indicated the presence of numbing medication.

"You're alive!" Griffin blearily grinned. "And you've managed not to get a single injury on J. How's that possible? Even Sheedy got injured."

Simon dragged fingers through his curly hair and eyed McFarland. She was distracted by an exchange with the nurse. "I didn't –"

"A face like yours must repel injury," Griffin continued. "Well, much as I would've enjoyed not having Koleman in the same class, I guess we're already used to him. Maybe the veteran Js can keep him from gloating too much."

"Koleman made J."

"Unfortunately. I think only four of us did. You, me, Koleman, Burnette."

Comprehension unraveled slowly in Simon's mind. Griffin's remark carried no logic. *Did he mean – ? No, that would mean....*

"You... passed J," Simon said.

Griffin's brows puckered. "It could be the meds, but it sounds like you keep reiterating everything I say."

Pain bit Simon's palms, but he did not unclench his fists. Acceptance raged against denial. Griffin spoke under the influence of medication that evidently misconstrued his thinking; only that explanation would Simon consider. To acknowledge otherwise would suggest that *Griffin* had accomplished something Simon hadn't. Simon's excruciating, humiliating sacrifice – Griffin's logic meant it had been for nothing.

After a difficult minute of silence, Griffin tried a chuckle. "You passed too. Right?" His dark eyes widened with a doubt Simon had never seen directed toward himself.

He stood so quickly it jostled the cot; Griffin caught himself and made an exclamation. Simon did not linger to hear what his friend would say next.

His shoes thudded in the hallway in his march toward the academy's exit. The front door slammed behind Simon. He stalked into a wind as bitter as the acid destroying his gut. Onward he hurtled, down the lawn, beyond the shed, and into the seclusion of the forest. A tree with few branches loomed above his head and seemed to laugh at his smallness. He punched the tree and swore; and when that trunk split inward and began to careen, he used his telekinesis to keep it upright so he could punch it again. Beat after beat riled upon the bark that had done him no wrong, until more splinters existed in his knuckles than the trunk itself, which had shriveled to sawdust at his feet. When he'd expelled most of his rage, he finally discharged his telekinesis. The remainder of the tree – once towering and now reduced by several yards – toppled into the neighboring pine. Simon readied himself for an avalanche of felled trees, but the pine he'd diminished did little damage to its neighbor.

Simon clenched his bloody knuckles and yearned to assault something else. If Koleman had materialized beside him, Simon did not doubt he'd beat his roommate into ash. The desire burned so deeply that Simon

longed to return to level J, and not simply to prove himself.

Koleman's right. I would enjoy it.

Irrational anger would misplace itself without fail; thus, Simon turned his resentment next to Griffin. Was his friend and partner of five years *better* than Simon? No one, ever, surpassed Simon. He alone was the best of his peers.

Aren't I?

An image of Sheedy sought to contradict his assurance. Yes, there would always be Sheedy, the peer Simon had grown up with, had excelled alongside, until Sheedy defied all expectation by passing J years before the rest of his class. Sheedy did not fit into Simon's calculations, so the former was often ignored, or considered an outlier who did not matter. Yet Sheedy proved Simon's imperfections, as did Koleman, Griffin, and Burnette. Simon could not consider himself the best when he knew that, at the very least, three others matched him, and one outperformed him.

However, true at that reasoning was, this occasion had not been one of inadequacy, but of misdirected loyalty. *Compassion*, Banks had termed it. Simon had intentionally abdicated J to help a friend who had not needed his compassion. Griffin's success should've prompted excitement, but Simon knew only bitterness. He could never tell his friend his choice for fear of embarrassing them both. No one must ever discover the weakness that hid beneath Simon's proud exterior.

A vibration grazed his wrist. Simon checked his watch.

Meet w/ Leader pronto.

Simon had forgotten about his course review. He had never cared much about Leader's good opinion. Today, he most certainly would not have it.

Every step toward Leader's office dragged. Simon stalled his stride upward to the second floor, where Leader's white door gleamed like the tooth of a Grifter. He rapped once before swinging the door open.

"... assessments. Ah, Vires." Leader gestured to a spot before his desk. "You're late. Close the door behind you."

The reprimand did not bother him so much as the presence of Griffin, Koleman, Burnette – and Banks. The three newest Js, as well as the one who'd monitored him during the courses. Simon heeled the door shut, then moved next to Griffin, who was giving him the wide sort of look he reserved for moments when Simon did something rash. Koleman eyed Simon's mangled arm and grinned. Simon curled his fingers and ignored

all but Leader.

What are they doing here? What am I doing here, in a room full of Js?

Another presence nudged Simon's attention. The Tacemus stood by the bookshelves and spared Simon no glance, meaning his own thoughts were free to roam undetected. Still, Simon always guarded his mind around the Tacemus. He hated the knowledge of utter vulnerability.

"As I was saying," Leader smoothed his tie, "no reassignments this year, since you leveled up together. Tomorrow you report to Banks. He's the new instructor. Any questions?"

Burnette shook her head. Griffin said, "Nope, sir." Simon had plenty of questions but kept his mouth sealed. To hide his confusion, he focused on the pain in his arm; it kept his expression hard.

"Good. You're dismissed." Leader summoned his grid and accepted it from the air.

Koleman left first, followed by Burnette. Griffin hesitated by Leader's desk, but Simon's attention finally went to Banks. He stared right back at Simon. Barely, just enough to give Simon certainty, Banks nodded.

Simon's cheek muscles twitched. "Let's go," he said to Griffin. Partner and partner left the office for the louder hallway outside it. Only once they'd put a floor between themselves and Banks did Simon unclench his jaw.

"Banks is J instructor?" he murmured to Griffin.

His friend nodded. Their uncomfortable moment in the clinic would go unmentioned; Griffin never lingered over moments of tension. "Still CO, too," Griffin said. "At least you'll continue to get away with your obnoxiousness. Sheedy never would've allowed it. Oh, Sheedy *did* get a promotion. He's teaching the As."

Simon had no interest in Sheedy right now. A repeated line threaded his thoughts: Banks had done him a favor. Somehow, he'd manipulated the data so it would appear Simon passed J. It sickened him, most of all because he knew Banks had not cheated the system as a friendly gesture. No, this was a message. Banks' trick had rooted Simon to a single course of action. To tell Leader would mean admitting that he was a meta weak enough to choose partnership over achievement. Simon had no choice but to accept his unearned position as a J.

He'd never felt such disgust over a promotion.

On the fourth floor, Simon shrugged Griffin away and headed to bathe.

Afterward, he closed himself in his room. He opened his clothing drawer and heard paper crinkle. It lay flat on his training suit. He did not recognize the handwriting, but he knew it belonged to Banks. It gave him the answer he'd already realized.

"One day I'll want a favor in return."