

Beware the Cookies

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First Prize Winner

BSFS 2002 Young Writers' Contest

An electric shock woke Bionca up with a start. Half asleep, she rolled out of bed and checked the time: 1:30 p.m. Earth Standard.

"What nut would ring the doorbell at this time in the morning?" she asked herself. "Any *same* person would be asleep right now. But, then again, most sane people wouldn't hook an electric current to their bed so they wouldn't nap through the doorbell." She yawned and managed to shuffle to the entrance of her living quarters. Looking into the peephole, she saw what years of space-training could have never prepared her for: two little girls in matching green vests and skirts.

"No, no. It can't be," Bionca shuddered. "Should I just pretend I'm not home?" She thought for a moment. "I'm going to regret this." Wincing, she cautiously opened her door.

"Would you like to buy some Girl Scout cookies to benefit Troop 9054701236?" the pair chimed in unison.

"Before I answer your question, I have one of my own: How in Hades did you get up here?" Bionca asked them, purple eyes narrowed. "This is a government-owned space station between the Earth and its moon. No one under the age of 18 is supposed to live here."

"It's a funny story, really," answered the taller of the two scouts. "We came your house peddling our delicious cookies only to discover that you were not at home. One of your lovely neighbors informed us of your move. Naturally, we still wanted to give you sugary happiness and clogged arteries, so we tracked you down by hacking into the FBI's computer database. Once we obtained information of your whereabouts, we stowed away on a cargo shuttle and here we are now."

"I have to admit you're persistent."

"Thank you."

"I mean, all of that just to sell me a box of Thin Mints—You do have Thin Mints, don't you?"

"Of course," the shorter girl said and held up a box. Bionca snatched it, threw the money at the scouts, and slammed the door as quickly as possible.

"Why must I be a sucker for mint-flavored snacks?" Bionca asked herself, wiping her forehead. She was about to open the packaging when her television screen turned on.

"Shade!" barked the face of a man on the screen. Bionca gave a quick salute. "It looks like you'll have a job for a change. Clean up on the moon. Report to the launch deck in ten minutes."

"Yessir."

"And do something about that hair," he added with smug distaste and ended transmission. Bionca's plastered grin faded.

"What's wrong with my hair?" Ever since she had signed up for the Earth-Moon Alliance, she had been hassled about her hair. Once ridiculously long, she was forced to cut her messy black hair to above shoulder length. "I know what to do." Her smile had returned, but this time it was devilish.

Five minutes later, Bionca stepped out of her apartment. She had put on her uniformed purple-and-black spacesuit and was carrying her helmet in the crook of one arm. In fact, she had "done something" with her hair, using hair gel to turn it into a spiky mess, instead of just a flat one. She walked over to a transportation tube and momentarily arrived at the docking bay where an environmental systems operator was waiting for her, along with a cat. A purple cat.

"Shade, is it?" asked the technician, his voice reeking of superiority.

"Yep-huh," Bionca replied, remaining cheerful, "just look at my shiny name-tag." She pointed to the plastic ID on her chest.

"Yes, I see—What happened to your hair?"

"Whaddya mean?"

"It looks like you stuck a fork into an electrical outlet... Never mind. It seems one of our satellites exploded, with some highly important components landing on the moon. As it is your job, you have been assigned to recover these pieces."

"Um... how exactly did the satellite explode?"

"Satellites wear down after so many years. It's quite common."

"But *explode*?"

"Ahem," he cleared his throat, "We're getting off topic. As I said, it is your job to recover the pieces and bring them back here."

"What's that?" Bionca asked, pointing to the oddly colored feline.

"That is the Felis 19 (19 for short), state-of-the-art in biological information gathering. She will assist you in your mission.

"Aww, it's a kitty!"

"Correction," said the Felis 19, "I am a full-grown genetically engineered *cat*. Not a *kitty*."

"Aww, it's a *talking* kitty." Felis 19 just rolled her eyes and set about cleaning her paws.

"Your shuttle is over there." The scientist pointed to a small spacecraft about the length and width of half a dozen school buses. Bionca and 19 walked up the loading platform and made their way to the flight controls.

"Whewwwwwwwwwww! I get to fly!" Bionca laughed, sitting down.

"I'm so happy for you," said the cat in a sarcastic tone.

"Thanks," she replied, though aware of the cat's corrosive nature. She pulled the box of Thin Mints out of her bag and offered one to her partner. "You wanna cookie?"

"Aside from the fact that I do not need to eat, don't you realize that chocolate is poison to felines?" 19's tail fluffed up, exactly the reaction Bionca was going for.

"Actually," she stated through her seemingly ever-present grin, "I did."

"Humans..." The cat quickly regained her composure and curled herself up into a ball. Shade shrugged and piloted her small craft onward to the moon.

"So, what's it like being a genetically-engineered talking cat?" Bionca asked to fight off boredom.

"Would you *please* stop with the 'talking cat' thing? It's really starting to get on my nerves."

"Sorry, I was just trying to be friendly..."

"It wasn't working." 19's bitter attitude brought on an awkward silence for the remainder of their trip.

An hour later, the pair had almost reached the lunar surface. Bionca gripped the close-maneuvering joystick and focused on the screen in front of her. Ever so delicately, she eased the shuttle into a landing. Of course, things didn't go quite so smoothly and they wouldn't stop. Thanks to the moon's lack of friction, the spaceship continued to skid along until they smashed into the edge of a crater. With a jarring halt, their not-so-smooth landing ended. Bionca, who had been thrown to the floor, stood up to survey the damage, only to find a mass of white fabric emerging from the flight deck.

"Ack!" she exclaimed, groping for the controls.

"Huh," the cat smirked and popped the balloon-like safety mechanism with a wave of her extra-sharp claws.

"Thank heaven for airbags, eh?" Bionca laughed. An expression that was a mixture of disgust, annoyance, and disinterest—yes: it *is* possible—passed over 19's face.

Bionca shrugged and began keying onto the navigational computer. "According to this, we've just crashed into the Madnor Crater."

"What?" The cat leapt up onto the desk. "But, that's over two miles from our target landing point!"

"Well, the lack of friction left us skidding for a while. The reverse-thruster thingies wouldn't work so I had to improvise. This was the first thing that the radar picked up that was big enough to stop us."

"Why weren't the thrusters working?"

"The fuel line was gummed up and..."

"You didn't fire them at all, did you?"

"Yes I did!"

"Ppff, whatever. So, what's your plan of action?"

"Well, we could always walk," Bionca shrugged.

"I don't think so," the Felis 19 glared at her.

"You don't have much choice in the matter: the land rover's busted."

"What?"

"Yeah... it kinda got pretty banged up in the crash."

"That's just *great*," the cat muttered, hopping down. Bionca hooked an oxygen pack to her back and adjusted the climate-control on her suit.

"Don't you need a spacesuit?"

"No, I'm built to handle lunar climates."

"What about a helmet?" She rapped against her own as a demonstration.

"I only need to breathe once every hour. My blood recycles the excess oxygen not used in cellular respiration instead of just exhaling it out. In fact, I really communicate telepathically. So, technically, I'm not really talking right now. I just move my lips to create the illusion of speech. Pretty interesting, huh?"

"Yes, that it is. We'll probably be gone for over an hour, so I'll take an extra tank of oxygen and a mouth piece, just in case," Bionca replied and placed the items into her bag. "So, what's your job, exactly?"

"I'm supposed to gather information and act as a map; I have the moon's surface memorized one hundred percent."

"Good to know." Shouldering her airtight pack, Bionca and 19 set out to do their job. It was a long, hard trek over the barren moon desert. Actually, Bionca was enjoying herself a bit more than she should have.

"I can fly!" she giggled, jumping into the air with as much force as she could.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you," 19 told Shade. "It's not a good thing to break your leg out here." Bionca stopped her few moments of weightlessness and planted both feet firmly on the ground.

"Do you know how disturbing it is that you can read my mind?" thought Bionca.

"Do you know how disturbing it is that I know what you're thinking?"

"Point taken. So how far are we from the crash site?"

"We should be there right now. Start looking for debris."

"Exactly what pieces are we returning?" Bionca began scanning the ground.

"The navigational computer and the camera."

"Urn, is the navigational computer green and slimy?" Shade asked in earnest.

"What do you think?"

"No, never mind. Of course it's not supposed to be 'green and slimy'! It's a computer! Is any part of the satellite supposed to be green and slimy?"

"No! It's a satellite! It's made of metal and plastic, *not* green slime."

"Ok. Is there supposed to be any slimy green things on the moon?"

"No!"

"What about that thing?" Bionca pointed to something a few yards off.

"What *is* that?" 19 walked over to where her partner was pointing.

"That's what I was asking *you*," Bionca crossed her arms. 19 swatted the questionable green goo. With that irritation, green ooze started piling out of a fissure. "Geez, that can't be good."

The cat mentally shrieked and ran behind Bionca.

“Have you figured out what it is, yet?”

“It appears to be some gelatinous space creature.”

“Heh. Who’s the irrational one now?”

“It doesn’t seem to like us,” 19 continued, ignoring Bionca’s remark.

“Here’s a thought: maybe you shouldn’t have swatted it.”

“In any case, I suggest we run.”

“Why? It’s just a little bit of green goop.” The creature continued to form itself into a vaguely ball-like structure. A few moments later, it had a gaping maw with horrendously large fangs.

“Correction: it’s a lot of green goop with sharp, pointy teeth!”

The cat scampered away with both Bionca and the monster hot on her heels. “Quick, this way! It’s an old mining shaft.” Both Bionca and the cat ran inside and slammed the door right before the creature had caught up with them.

Inside, the pair lay panting on the ground. Bionca checked the breathability of the air and decidedly did not take her helmet off. She tossed the spare canister of oxygen to the Felis 19, who inhaled graciously, if that’s possible. They rested for a few moments before deciding what to do next.

“This isn’t possible.” The cat was flabbergasted.

“What do you mean ‘not possible’? The thing just chased us half a mile!” Bionca seemed slightly annoyed.

“But natural life forms cannot exist on the moon without life-support... much less something as big and dangerous as that *thing*.”

“What about you?”

“For one thing, I’m not a *natural* life form. For another, I still need oxygen, which is not present here. This goes against the laws of nature.”

“Did you ever think that nature might have no laws? The slimy green proof is sitting right outside if you want another look!”

“I guess you’re right.”

“Wait. The *cat* is saying that I, Bionca Shade, am right? Wow. Where are the flying pigs? I don’t see them anywhere.” She pretended to look around.

“Oh, the flying pigs are still in development. They should be due out in a year.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.”

“So what are we supposed to do? The oxygen tanks can’t last for ever and big green and slimy out there isn’t planning on letting us leave anytime soon. Plus, we can’t radio for help in here.”

“Didn’t you bring a gun or something?”

“No. I didn’t think we’d be encountering moon monsters.”

“Wonderful, wait, I think I see something that we can use for one.” 19 walked over to a high-powered tazer that was left behind.

“Yippy-skippy! We can zap the thing!” Bionca grabbed it and they marched out of the small mine to face the monster. It advanced upon them, but Bionca quickly countered it and attempted to shock it with her small weapon. It had no effect. “It doesn’t work!”

“Now what are we suppose to do?”

“Hey, you’re the voice of reason, you figure something out.” The creature began to ooze over the human, gnashing its teeth.

“Maybe it’s just hun....” Bionca opened her bag and threw the box of Thin Mints into its mouth. The monster promptly exploded.

“That’s more than just a little odd.”

“Do you think its dead?”

“All signs point to yes. I think you should clean this up and take it back to headquarters.”

“Eww.” Bionca took out a vacuum tube and began to scrape the remnants of the alien from the rocks.

A few hours later, Bionca and the Felis 19 managed to make it back to the space station. They presented their findings to the captain.

“What in the world happened to your hair, Shade?” he asked before anything else.

“Nuthin,” was her only reply.

“Well, you’ve brought back the first evidence of a natural life form existing outside Earth. Good job. And the thing just exploded when you gave it a box of cookies? It makes you wonder what’s in those, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.” She ate a cookie.

“I have just one more question.”

“What?”

“Where is the navigational computer and camera from the satellite?”

“Oops. I knew I forgot something.”

The Bunkie

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BSFS 2002 Young Writers' Contest

The distances fade to black in every direction. There is no boundary in all three dimensions, only black empty space that encompasses everything as far as can be seen. There are no floors, no ceilings, no walls; there is only one theme, dominant and total—there are bunks.

In the dark are rows and rows, thousands of rows, millions of rows, of bunks. The rusty iron bunks stand against the black, stretching out upwards, downwards, to every side. Stacked down to infinity, one row travels three feet wide and a billion feet long bunks head-to-foot in single file, stacked as deep as the world.

Rusted flaking of each row fades into the darkness at both ends, downward, and upward. Between each row is the blackness, a drop into bottomless darkness. The metal pallets of each bunk rest horizontally between skeletal sets of four iron posts, rising upward from the black beneath.

Children sleep in the bunks. The dirty, dust-covered children sleep. The little sleeping children will never wake, are not meant to wake, sleeping forever. Each little one sleeps in his own little space on his own cold little metal mat in the rust and silence.

Some, though—very few—some do wake.

These woken ones must face the solitude. Theirs is a world in which everyone else is sleeping, each stored away in the cold and rusty iron grids of nameless children.

Music faded into the silence, subtle, quiet. It rose and fell in harmony, in beauty. It was ordered, but not repetitive or predictable, its theory a dance, elusive. Strings, strings and faint voices, intertwined to form balanced patterns of warmth.

A little boy stirred.

The little boy began to dream. Dark lines of red twisted and writhed their way into his dark unconsciousness, baby snakes sliding all over and around and into each other. The pulsation of the serpentine colors made the boy nauseous. They twisted and turned further and further into his mind, burning and boring, until he screamed.

The twisted throbbing ceased abruptly; the lines gathered together in the black, four of them, four lines shifting themselves, sliding thoughtfully until at last they rested in the pattern of a rusty-red rectangle, three feet wide and five feet long, above the boy.

Eventually the boy realized that his eyes were open. There was a dark plate of metal within the rusty rectangle above him.

He stared at the rectangle, following the shape of the lines that had invaded his silence. The lines did not move again.

The boy was lying flat on something cold. He lay in that position for a long while, not moving, staring at the four edges of the rectangle above him. Slowly, after a long time of motionlessness, he extended his arm above his face. He examined his hand: small, thin, covered in a layer of dark red dust. He dropped it back beside him, sending up a cloud of dust. His chest convulsed and eyes shut as he coughed harshly, his rasping sounds echoing in the metal around him. The boy waited for a long time before opening his eyes again.

The dust slowed its movement and drifted downward, each separate speck red against the darkness, each a tiny silent world, each returning to the decaying metal from which it came. Shivering slightly, dusty eyelids held tightly closed, the boy waited for stillness to resume.

There was music. A little child, a girl, a toddler, heard it drifting down from the dark places above, soft, hardly audible. Whispers of order and beauty, of strings and light, airy elven laughs floated to her. She had been sitting; she stood on her bunk, her head not tall enough to reach the bottom of the bunk above.

The music stopped: silence. In the darkness the child reached out and held the rusty red bedpost to her left.

She listened. The sounds drifted to her again, the stringed music and voices almost inaudible. She leaned out, over the divide, holding the post with her left hand, straining to hear.

The bunks whispered to her

—Come sleep.—

The child looked at her bunk. She paused, suspended over the depth by her left hand on the rusty iron bedpost.

—Come back.—

Small child eyes stared at the bunk, wide. They turned out to the darkness. The child abruptly reached out her right arm over the divide, fingers wide, an old dead tree branch, reaching, reaching

—Come sleep.—

Anger appeared on the child's face, the anger of a toddler. Her eyes became wet, reflected the red rust. She spat on the bunk.

The bunk let go.

A rusty bedpost came loose, the iron giving way, the four-foot section of post spinning away, dark red fading into blackness. In the silence the child followed, slowly turning

over and over, falling tumbling slowly The bunks watched her fall, a million faces, each space in between each bunk an empty eye in the noiselessness, and did not blink.

Dark thoughts, boyish wisdom, came to the boy.

<They are the enemy.>

They were watching him; he could feel it. He could not get away from them, he stood on them, breathed on them, thought on them. Flaking iron surrounded him on every side, continuing far into the distances, a cage with no edges, the rust smearing dark red on his body and scraping his hands and getting underneath his fingernails.

He was alone.

He was trapped in a prison of never-ending iron, alone.

The bodies around him, the sleeping children on every bunk, were trophies of their victory.

<I am not asleep. I am not asleep.>

The bunks noiselessly mocked at him as he looked at the world of sleeping bodies. Whispered laughs flowed through the iron bars of the bunks, whispers into the woken boy's brain,
—*Hahahahahaha*—from every side.

Music floats down from the distances upward, lightly brushing past iron posts and plates. The warmth, the peaceful order of the voices and strings, wash over the sleeping bodies of children.

A shaggy-haired boy stirs.

Small hands reached up, grabbed the plate above him. A small, dusty body pulled itself up, feet against one of the iron posts. The boy carefully walked his feet up the post, then collapsed into the upper bunk, rolling onto it, laying flat, chest heaving,

<breath, breath>

he was tired. To climb upward on the bunks was difficult.

A small clanging pierces through the blackness, reverberating in a few metal bedposts. From the inscrutable darkness in the distance upwards, the clanging descends, down, down, at regular intervals.

Another clang; a scraping sound joins the clanging. One of the stacked rows begins to shake slightly. Audible grunts now accompany the scraping and periodic clanging. A small figure is climbing downward. His shaggy brown hair rests on his dirty neck and rag-covered shoulders.

The shaggy-haired child lets his feet drop to the next rusty plate below, Clang, bare dirty toes find a new perch. The body follows down over the edge of the plate, scrape-grunt, and falls onto the bunk below. Sitting up, the feet go over and down again, Clang, follows, scrape-grunt. Down, down, Clang, down, scrape-grunt, down. The child grows smaller and smaller in the distance away downward, now almost too distant to see, fading away into the darkness.

The bunks watched, smiling. Corroding whispering laughs rang in the iron.

These bunks were the same as the ones below.

The little boy was lying down, on his back. His tired head let itself turn sideways to rest on the rust of the bunk; he saw the tall, thin boy that was sleeping there, skeletally thin arms crossed over chest, face up.

Tall, pale, the sleeper's facial features were tight against the bone, matching the contour of his skull; his eyes were sunken in. He was twice as tall as the little boy. Red dust lay in a thick layer over his body and in his open mouth. His limbs were as thin as his bones. He was dressed in dirty rags, and did not move.

<He is not small like me.>

Sitting up, the little boy moved to touch this strange, tall one.

—*Stop.*—

He hesitated, then continued to reach for the tall one.

—*Stop.*—

He paused.

<Why?>

—*He will not wake.*—

<Not wake?>

—*He is asleep.*—

<Not wake? He is not small like me.>

Silence. The boy's thoughts dispersed in the blackness, fading through the spaces between each rusty-red bunk.

<He is different.>

Nothing. Silence in the dark.

<Not wake.>

Small eyes look on the pale face of the sleeper. Two small hands reached out, smeared dark red with rust, calling for another to wake.

<Not wake.>

He shook the tall sleeping boy. The sleeper's long pale neck swayed from side to side from the push-pull-push-pull of the shaking. The shaking stopped; his head continued to sway slightly, then stopped.

Two small, open, shiny black eyes stared into the lids of the sleepers' closed, sunken eyes. The woken boy closed his dark eyes, stood and turned, hand on post, and opened them to look out at the rowed-and-columned children in grids of iron, at the hundreds, the thousands, the millions, the billions.

The woken boy screamed. His young, rasping, tormented sounds fell upon sleeping ears and silent, watching iron;

—*Ha ha ha ha ha*—

from every post and plate.

A girl crouches on an otherwise empty bunk. She is short, thin, with large cheekbones, a sharp chin, and small mouth. Her eyes are shiny-dark, and large, huge in her head

She listens to the music. It sweeps down from the distances above, flows over her, its voices, its singing and plucked strings, its bowed strings, its caressing and warm strings.

Slowly, softly, the music stills, slipping away upwards.

A thin hand longingly follows the music, reaching up and out.

—It is not real.—
The girl spins, startled, eyes wide and searching Both hands are inside the bunk
 —It is not real.—
A hesitation, then confusion creeps into her face.
 —We are real.—
 Silence.
 —We are real.—
The girl looks out on the bunks, on the endless sleeping bodies in every distance.
 —Come.—
Eyes wide, searching the darkness above, reflect the dust in the air. The girl points upwards into the distance.
 —It is not real
 Come sleep.—
The girl looks, waiting.
 —We are real
 Come sleep.—
 Silence.
Sadly, somberly, the girl shakes her head, side-side, side-side, side-side, eyes downcast. Her knees bend as she sits. Bent knees slowly straighten, legs stretch out, a body settles down to meet the bunk. Her head comes to rest against the iron.
Her eyes close.
A chest begins to take prolonged breaths in drowsy rhythm.
The bunks watch, waiting. Eventually the breathing becomes too faint to hear, leaving her in silence.

Standing on the bunk of the tall sleeper, the woken boy looked out on the never-ending expanse of bunks. The stacks of rows lay out before him, massive patterns of iron and still bodies.

<They will not wake.>

Two paths in the dark dust on his face began to clear away under his slow, dripping tears. Bright, slightly muddy skin shone through the dust.

<They will not wake.>

He rested his head against the post, held it, leaned into it, crying.

<They will not wake.>

His back turned to meet the post. He leaned back, sat down; arms held knees to chest. A head tilted back against the post.

<They will not wake.>

In the blackness and iron, the boy began to close his eyes.

The bunks are laughing.

A slight tremor rises from far below through every iron bunk, ringing in whispered revelry.

The whispered laughter sends echoes bouncing lightly off of metal plates, then growing still in the vast darkness. All is quiet.

Silence.

The little boy's eyes shot open. He had seen the bunks as he lay against the post, almost asleep, drifting away. They were

crawling, twisting, serpentine, dark rusty-red and iron, constricting children, lulling them, wooing them to sleep in the folds of their scaly coils.

<They are the enemy.>

He looked out again over the deep space between him and the next stacked row of children.

—Jump.—

The black depth loomed in front of him, yawning, open, calling.

—Jump, if you are awake.—

<Why?>

—A woken child could jump. But you are not awake. You sleep, sleep forever.—

<I do not sleep.>

—Jump. Be free of us. You do not need to stay. Jump.—

The flaking iron of the bunks around him called him, urged him, pulling, pulling him downwards into the darkness.

Two dirty feet slid forward. A toe peeked over the edge of the bunk.

He involuntarily began to crouch, preparing to push into freedom, into <Dark>

<STOP.>

A pause. The boy suddenly withdrew back into the bunk.

<No.>

The little boy sat down, his little dusty, rust-smear body shivering.

<No, I will not.>

He rested, eyes open, shoulder against a post. The bunks grew silent, and faded back into the quiet iron.

A little teary-eyed boy sits sad-faced next to a tall, pale sleeping boy.

He is alone.

A song brushes past him, quickly, a faint singing voice. He stands. Mouth open, he listens to the music.

It sweeps down from the distances above, flows over him, its elven voices, its plucked strings, its bowed strings. It caresses him, warm, closes in through his brown rags, through his dusty and smeared skin. He takes it into himself. His eyes close, head tilts back, arms raise to either side, enraptured.

Slowly, softly, the music stills, slips away upwards. It whispers and strokes his face, leaves him warm and longing and pulls away into the darkness above.

The little boy's arms return to his side.

<I am not asleep.>

He looks upwards, dark eyes following the rusting iron up until it fades into black. Two hands grasp the plate above him, pull up, feet carefully walking up a corroding post. A little dusty body falls into the bunk above, chest gasping.

<breath, breathe.>

A little boy stands, eyes dark.

<I am awake.>

Dirty hands grasp the plate above, and climb.

Falling Apart

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BSFS 2002 Young Writers' Contest

He steps into the room and I go silent. He is nothing more than a shadow to me. Dressed in black, only his eyes, as cold as steel and as brilliant as fire, are barely illuminated by the lights in the room. Nervously, I squeezed my own hand as I felt the air in the room suddenly cool several degrees. I can feel his eyes staring into me as I rise up from my chair across from the table. He is one of the top leaders in this organization, I told myself over and over, and he alone holds more power in his hand than perhaps even God. Never have I seen any emotion from him, no sadness, no fear, and no mercy. Why do I feel so uneasy around him? The table is long, black lacquered, and surrounded by the remaining DAWN leaders. The last of the great underground.

I know the rest of the leaders are looking at me. They're waiting for my news and their eyes bore holes through me. They are waiting for my command. In my father's absence, they leave intelligence to me. The headset hums in my ear and whispers my fate, their fate, and perhaps the fate of the world as I lift the set from my head and place it down upon the table. Solemnly, I get up as soundlessly as possible and I hear my black boots clanking over the metallic grated floors. I approach him, trying to keep my head held high yet still finding myself unable to look him in the eyes. Into the eyes of a god. I walk to the direct right of him and, evading his gaze, stand beside him. What I speak to him, I speak only to him. My lips were almost touching his ear as I whispered.

"Everything just fell apart."

I left the room shortly after, not being able to deal with my own emotions without looking disgraceful. I found solace in my quarters. The room was cold and barren with only a table and a few chairs to fill the emptiness. Gray walls and surgical steel flooring watched and supported me as I breathed in and out and sat down in an icy chair. I clasped my hands together, as if in prayer, and bowed my head. My hair slipped past my ear and smoothly brushed my cheek. I let them down, I thought, my father... my comrades... I let them down. I stared down at my black boots through my hands. It was silent for a moment as I lifted my head and got up again. No time to feel sorry for myself, I thought, this room is only an escape. The network needs me there now more than ever. I turned around to face the door and in it, my reflection was twisted. My dark eyes were skewed against my porcelain skin.

I smiled a little. I used to be just a little girl, I thought,

pushing the stray lock of hair back behind my ear and staring for a moment. Where did that little girl go? Have I truly spent my entire life inside these walls?

On my headset, news still buzzed like an annoying mosquito. Only I couldn't kill this one. The news reports were confused, each one contradicting the other as they ran together loudly in my ear. It was too much for me to handle and I felt like I was suffocating. I gripped the headset tightly and ripped it from my head, smashing the piece into the door. Silence. I was sick of being the informant. I didn't want to hear anymore reports. The door slid open and I froze. The headset laid at my feet, indifferent to it all.

"Naomi."

I couldn't look at him, not again. I bowed slightly to him.

"Sir.. please forgive me...! was only getting back to the network." I said formally.

"Naomi, look at me." He said.

I looked up at him, staring at his hair instead of his golden eyes.

"What happened today was not your fault... DAWN will never be crushed so easily." His words were flecked with vengeance.

"But Gabriel—sir... all we built... it's been betrayed... inside our own system." I argued, speaking with sudden rudeness.

"And we can deal with that. We *will* deal with that. The network needs you there now. DAWN needs you there now, Naomi." His tone never changed. I went to pick up the headset from the ground, touching the cold floor with my fingertips. I placed it back on my head and bowed to Gabriel.

"Yes, sir." I murmured softly, as I turned past him. It seemed a longer walk than usual back to the network. Already, I could hear the questions being asked in the complex systems. Questions of treason, sabotage, and murder. I hold no answers, only to have faith in Gabriel, that the young and brilliant leader will be of service to the disoriented masses of DAWN underground leaders everywhere in this world. Gabriel, who came to us two years ago, quickly rose to the top of our circles. He was a confident and respected young man who had conferred often with my father, the founder of DAWN.

But, Father had left to meet with several committee heads in New York, USA and since his departure, I had had an uneasy feeling. That feeling cemented when reports of an attack poured in. My father and several important leaders in

our organization were all murdered, leaving the rest of us in the current state of chaos. *Gabriel*, my father had told me, *Gabriel will realize my dream... I trust him with DAWN and with your life.* My life...

Not much of a life to speak of. I was raised in the underground since I was young. My mother? I don't know. I don't want to know. I was only 20 years old when Gabriel came to us. He was 23. A rogue of sorts with dark hair that scattered into his eyes and fell roughly on his shoulders that were sculpted with muscles. He had caused quite a stir within DAWN and was by far the most honest and questioning individual I had ever known. Yet he had an air of mystery, always wearing black and his hands always covered by black gloves. I don't think I've ever seen them. Perhaps my life began when I met Gabriel... or perhaps it ended.

I myself was originally a tactician. I was never really interested in combat, but I coordinated any and every attack or assassination needed. The role of network informant came when Gabriel replaced me as head tactician. He was always around me whenever I was working for some reason, and I suppose he caught on to tactics quickly that way. One could say I taught him what I knew because I felt sorry for the rogue. But he surpassed me. If his mind wasn't such an enigma, I would probably like him. Yet there is something locked away behind those eyes. Something he probably isn't willing to admit to even himself.

I sat down inside the network terminal. The large screen's familiar glow sat warmly on my cheek. Already thousands of screens filled the window, glowing madly as I spoke commands into the headset. My fingers typed furiously as I spoke, turning into an electronic symphony. I edited world news reports, omitting facts and placing in false ones to mislead the entire world. One by one, each story upon the screen died as I finished and little by little, I felt more at ease with my lies. Deception. I was told once that women were born and bred to deceive. Perhaps that's why they stuck me here. Finally, after three hours, I completed my work and sat, thirsty and tired, in my chair. The glow on the screen was almost a comfort now as I relaxed my tense shoulders and sighed.

My eyes hurt from staring at the glowing screen and I rubbed them absently, not caring about the tears I slowly let escape. I felt something then, not a cold wind, but a presence among the shadows. Watching me, always watching me. I stood up slowly, letting my headset fall around my neck, and looked out to the terminal. The presence was gone.

On screen however, I could see lines beginning to blur and twist. A distorted buzzing sound came from the terminal along with the gradual increasing of a low hum. And suddenly, the screen died. Blackness fell around me as a great loud sound filled my ears and the metallic floor gave a sickening wrench. I flew to the ground by the force, feeling my skin pressed against the grating so hard that it hurt. The shaking

stopped and I stumbled back to my feet, staring wide-eyed at the terminal screen. Red numbers flashed upon the screen with a code I'd never seen before...a code I'd never thought they'd use. Code number 384. Attack.

DAWN main headquarters under attack. It was unfathomable. There must have been an explosion somewhere in the primary sectors of DAWN. With any luck, the core hadn't yet been infiltrated. I yanked my headset onto my head and spoke rapid commands, sending messages to other DAWN agencies to tighten security. I sent messages to the primary sectors, to try and figure out what had happened. There was no response. Another loud explosion sent me into a wall, cracking its structure. They're getting closer, I thought. The cold presence I felt had returned. Gabriel.

"Naomi, we're under attack. Acting for your father, I have to ask you to evacuate," he said.

"Who is it? Who is attacking?! Tell me, Gabriel! Is it the same group who attacked in New York and killed my father?! Is it them, whose existence I must deny to the world?" I shouted in blind rage. "The attackers... is it they who whisper into my ear, in this God damned thing?!" I grasped my headset firmly for emphasis as I spoke and searched the eyes of the god before me.

"I am sorry for your loss, Naomi. The entire organization is. Now is not the time to blame me!" he shouted, grasping my shoulders. "Leave now!"

"I'd rather die than run away from those cowards. They took my father away, they took his dream away and I'll destroy every one of them!" I shouted back.

"Naomi! Have you lost your mi—!"

Another explosion.

This time, I could feel the explosion's heat on the metal floor as the force of Gabriel's body threw me down to it again. I could feel the material of his jacket on cheek as his gloved hand pulled me up and we ran. Past the corridors I had played in as a child. Down the halls I had slept in on lazy summer days and by pictures I had memorized. Was it all ending? Darting down a twisted flight of stairs, we found ourselves inside the lowest chamber of DAWN.

"Tell me, Gabriel... is it them?" I asked, choking over my emotions.

"Yes. The very same group who threw explosives into the committee head meeting and then shot any survivors. They've found us," he said, his voice still bereft of emotion as he loaded his gun. I heard ammunition click into place as I put my headset around my neck.

"Gabriel, I have the authority to destroy this building. You know I have the codes. There is no use in protecting me or having me run away," I said, my eyes narrowing.

"Your father," he said as he stared straight into my clouded eyes. "He wouldn't have stood for your reckless destruction of this building. He trusted you to me should things have

gone wrong.”

“Why you?! You haven’t done anything to help me! You took over my post, you took the affections of my father and now you won’t let me do my job!” I shouted, grabbing the material of his jacket and glaring at him. His face was close to mine as he put his hand on my tense shoulder.

“Naomi,” he said kindly, trying to quell my anger, “please be quiet. They’ll hear you.” I let his jacket go and sat with my back to him, tears stinging in my eyes. I was helpless. Hours passed with Gabriel holding his gun, waiting for an unseen enemy, and me holding my knees to my chest as I listened to more explosions rumble through the building. There was barely enough room for the both of us; my knees pressed against the metal grating on the walls. Bright flashes of light would rain starlight upon us in the shadows. Gabriel watched the vicinity like a hawk, his eyes glowing a dull amber color whenever the lights passed over him. The room would shake and I would clutch my knees tighter, squeezing my eyes shut. After what seemed like an eternity, silence filled the establishment. Silence and dreamless sleep came over me that faded into sweet unconscious oblivion. I awoke to the soft touch of Gabriel’s hand on my shoulder. He signaled me to follow him as we cautiously made our way up the stairs. The smell of corpses overwhelmed my senses as I fought the urge to scream.

The glow of blood upon the confused illuminated screens

and the metal floor greeted my eyes, as did the twisted faces of my comrades in agony. My eyes were wide open and my hands were shaking. Years of dedication and nothing but death to show for it. My mind felt like it had lost its grip on reality. I looked to Gabriel.

“G-Gabriel... they’re... I...” my words were broken by fear. Broken by sadness. An unfamiliar feeling. Surrounded by darkness. Surrounded by comfortable shadows. “Gabriel...?”

“Naomi,” he said softly, “we have survived. DAWN will survive. Do you know why I joined DAWN? Do you know why I took your post?” he asked, speaking to me soothingly against my hair, “Because I could be near you then. Because I never wanted to leave your side. Your father asked me to protect you, but I would have even if he hadn’t asked. Now you must show me the strength I always see in you. Now you must honor those who died today and thank them for their sacrifice. Every one of them was willing to die if it meant your safety. Because you are the center of DAWN, Naomi. The world moves at my command, but I want to move it so that it moves for you. This is what it takes to move the world. And it is your world, Naomi.”

Near me...? That was the secret behind his eyes. My world...? That was the dream in his heart. A dream he had harbored for so long. A dream I would fight to make come true. For my father. For my comrades. And for Gabriel. Forever.