

Writing | Symposium 2022

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PROLOGUE

It is strange how memory works at times. The mundane details of my kidnapping, even now, shine as brightly as ever: three precise sharp raps at our door, the dismay in my mother's voice, and the wood underneath my fingernails as I tried to scramble away from those who would take me to the Moon. I recall acutely the rough stone below my feet as I was thrust out of my childhood home and into the cold air of the dawning day, the long scar that ran down the left side of my kidnapper's face, and how it frightened the young fifteen-year-old girl they came to take. I remember looking back and crying out to my mother, but from there on I know nothing. I recall nothing of the words I offered to my beloved parents, not the timbre, the tone, nor the contents. Perhaps I cried like the foolish child I was, or perhaps I begged for my life and asked for them to save me from the Moonmen. The latter is most likely, but one hopes it was not the case. There are times that I try to convince myself that I instead gifted them with words of encouragement, to lessen the pain that comes with losing their only child to the Hegemony. I know now that a child's last words can either serve to haunt or bolster after such a loss.

But none of my failing memories frustrate me as much as the moment I looked back to my mother, dragged from her grasp and into the arms of the men and women that came to collect me. I have tried for years to penetrate that haze but to no avail. When I look upon my mother's face in my memories, I see nothing. My greatest loss is one that I will never truly feel.

All too often, I find my recollections to be devoid of the memories I desire the most. Is this a result of the open and skittish nature of an adolescent child's mind? Or could it simply be a reflection of my bygone humanity? It is when I brush my silvered hair or see my emerald eyes in the mirror, markers of the genetic manipulation which label the Moonmen, that I think more to the latter. There was once a time that I lamented the loss of the chocolate brown hair and hazel eyes which I was born with. Now, my only regret is that I shall never know my mother's face.

The day after they took me from my parents, they strapped me into a rocket. Here, still, my recollection is almost physical in sensation. The curved steel of the chair seemed to actively siphon heat from my body, and I found my only respite in the little body heat radiating from the fourteen other children in the capsule with me. As we prepared to be hurtled from the Earth to the Moon, silence overtook the cramped space, broken only by the occasional whimper or snuffle. At the time, I was much too scared to think clearly, but I surmise that it must have felt so unfair. We were plucked from our warm homes and blasted to the Moon, for a purpose that was much too lofty for teenage children to understand. *For High Hegemon and Hegemony*- words that defined our purpose, and a phrase well beyond our years.

In truth, our fate was sealed from the moment of conception. We were forced into existence within a test tube, created from the marriage of the High Hegemon's ovum and her own cells recombined into sperm. We were gifted from the Moon to infertile parents, both as a charity and a curse. Those unlucky few could know the however brief joy of raising a child, only to have it forcibly taken away as an experiment against our Vat-Borne perfect brethren.

No, we did not go to the Moon that night. We merely returned to it.



CHAPTER ONE- CAMINA I

Of the First Hegemon, only legends remain. She ruled with grace from the Moon, draped in the Cloak of her station, bringing forth an era of peace and prosperity to the Milky

Way. We know She was a Moonman, silver-haired, tall, and eyes of emerald – but that is true of all of the Moon’s children. Or are we children of Her? The common folk believe the Moonmen are descended from the heavens, as demigods, second only to the High Hegemon and her brood. But we are not born. We are created.

I always knew I was different. When my mother discovered that I was literate when most infants could barely walk, she helped me understand who I was. Special, but not abnormal. Tall, but not a freak. Intelligent, but still her mother’s little girl.

When I close my eyes tightly enough, I can still remember the scent of her in spite of the metallic stench permeating the capsule.

Oh, Ma. I felt another wave of despair. My dear mother. They took me from her hands last night. The memory still sears my mind: how she screamed, and how I screamed. Yes, I have always known I was different. I only wish that confirmation had come in a different way. I was set to celebrate my fifteenth birthday with my mother in a few days. Now, I shall spend it upon the Moon instead.

“Did any faint?” I heard a man ask brusquely.

No. I didn’t.

“No, of course not. They were tested. Their genes hold strong.” The answer was returned just as swiftly.

Jeans? No. Genes. My mind was still clouded.

I blinked rapidly, hoping to make out the source of the voices in the darkness. Even in the dim of the capsule, I could tell that my eyes were still red from crying. I was done crying, for now. It had taken two days to reach the Moon, and it had taken me another until I shed my last tear. It was no act of strength. I simply could not cry any longer. The steel walls that surrounded me felt more like a prison with every passing hour.

Stay strong for mother, I decided. I would try.

The voices grew louder, and the hatch of the capsule cracked open at the seams. The light that streamed through was strangely white tinged with blue, and I instinctively threw up my arms in an effort to shield my eyes from the glare. I heard a whimper from somewhere behind me, and inside my heart, I smiled.

I am not the weakest here, I noted involuntarily, and instantly loathed myself for it.

“Listen up,” said the first voice. We listened.

“You children may have some predilection for calling yourself Earthlings. You would be frighteningly mistaken.” His voice was soft in volume but edged fiercely in timbre. I could feel his voice etch itself upon my skin.

The shadows that stood in the doorway sharpened into shapes as my eyes finally adjusted to the sudden influx of light. Two men walked in, clicking sharply with each step. The taller one stopped short of the center of the room, and the other continued to walk among us. I could tell that he was inspecting us as if we were livestock, lambs awaiting slaughter. I cast my gaze upwards and caught a glimpse of the men’s faces. Their emerald eyes, short-cropped silver hair, and tall stature betrayed their Moonman lineage, and I bit down the yelp that rose from my throat.

Oh, Ma! I cried out internally once more, as I felt an involuntary wave of anger rise up from my heart upon seeing my kidnappers’ faces.

“I took you from your parents three nights ago,” the tall Moonman continued. “But you were not stolen. You never belonged dirtside. You have always belonged to the Moon.”

He surveyed us again, meeting each of our eyes. When he got to me, I felt as if he knew exactly what I was thinking.

“I can see the hate in your eyes. This is good. You are soldiers, but more than that.”

There were no more sniffles or whimpers now. Even from my position in the front row, I knew that every small face in the capsule was pointed towards the tall scarred man.

“You will have the glory of serving the High Hegemon and Hegemony as the 189th Cohort of Moonmen. You were destined to become more than what you are now- destined to lead the lesser Earthlings. Destined to cast aside your humanity for something greater. It will be you few that shall lead the High Hegemon’s legions against the Outworld Colonies, and Her wars shall be won through your hands.”

Conviction dripped from every syllable of his words, and I almost found myself believing them. He was trying to make us feel special, and I knew he had probably succeeded with the rest of the children within the capsule. *But not me*, I reminded myself. My confidence was not contingent upon his honeyed words. I could only thank my mother for her teachings.

“I am Protectorate Lyon. The High Hegemon has given her command. I shall obey, and you shall become of her legion- that is, for those that are willing.”

“And for those who survive,” spoke the shorter Moonman. His voice had a lilt to it, as if he was singing a song, and I shuddered slightly. His words rang with melody, but also of death. I did not meet his gaze as

he stepped deliberately past me and toward the center of the room, and part of me felt ashamed for my cowardice.

“I am Protectorate Wendell, and I will uplift you from your current Earth-tinged state. You will become of the Moon.” His words were silk, and I felt terror in my heart. “Your foul, unorganized genes will be cleansed by the Hegemony, and your new purity beheld in silvered hair. You have been chosen, yes...” he hissed, “But still you remain untested.”

My terror was not unfounded. Wendell would have me become one of those who I hated most. I briefly considered escape, but the steel harness which strapped me to my chair threw any possible plans awry.

Wendell paced among us, leering at us in turn. “When the procedure is complete, you will be perfect. Strong and tall, unhindered by the Earth’s gravity. Powerful of body and mind, unobstructed by your genetic limitations. Indeed, some of you will die,” he breathed, “but the rest of you will become Moonmen. I look forward to meeting your perfection.”

“Protectorate Lyon,” Wendell said suddenly, “I must go to prepare. Please, do not let me hinder your new cohort.” He nodded at his fellow Moonman and left as swiftly as he came into our lives, his rapid steps clacking upon the steel floor. With his absence, the air felt warmer. Protectorate Lyon stepped forwards so that the lamps upon the walls no longer highlighted the shadows upon his scarred face, and he seemed younger for it. He cleared his throat with a slight cough, and regained our attention.

“In the coming days,” Lyon said, “you will become a unit. You will eat, breathe, and sleep together. You will no longer be a mere Terran, but rather part of a whole. You will become the 189th Cohort.”

“As for Wendell,” he continued gravely, “the protectorate spoke bluntly, but truly. All here shall undertake the Changing, and with luck, all shall survive. Until then, I will impress upon you the teachings of the High Hegemon- how to think, how to lead, and most importantly, how to kill in Her service.”

He walked among us, and in turn, released the bindings which strapped us to the steel chairs of the rocket that brought us to the moon against our will. I involuntarily exhaled the breath that was trapped behind the now freed restriction, and stood up with the rest of the children. The Moonman motioned us to with a slight wave of the hand. Glancing around the room, I could finally see the faces of the other children. There were six boys, nine girls including me, and all were faces marked with worry.

They look... weak. I made an effort to empty my own visage from the anxiety within my heart. I steeled my resolve once more. If I was ever to see my mother again, my focus was to be non-negotiable.

“Come with me, my children. I shall walk with you with every step. Already, I feel the weight of the High Hegemon’s will upon me. As should you.” The Protectorate walked out of the room, and I followed. The first steps I took upon the Moon’s surface were unexpectedly light. Within the steel of the capsule, I had almost forgotten that I had left the Earth behind, but now each step I took within the weakened gravity served only as a grim reminder of my new situation. Behind me, a child tripped and fell, with a loud yelp and a delayed crash. Lyon continued to walk, his long strides quickly outpacing us, and I realized that my

first test had already begun. I could almost feel myself turning back, in the unwise impulse to help my fellow man, but I did not even glance at my fallen comrade. My only path now was forward. Even now, I could feel the weight of my sin.

The Moon's gravity was my first challenge to overcome. While we did not float with each step, it was less than that of Earth, and enough to send at least four more of my cohort to the ground during our journey.

Long strides. A confident step. I observed Lyon's gait, and mimicked his cadence and pace. I did not fall, and followed as the protectorate led us into a long room, lined with a long steel table against the wall. Atop the metal surface lay bundles of steel and silver, each marked with our names. I could see mine near the end of the room, reading in neat block letters: Cadet Camina, #4601. Lyon stood to the side and motioned towards the spread.

"Children. You are now hereby commissioned as Cadets under the High Hegemon's glory. Put on your armor. Strap on your dagger. You will wield both only in service of the Hegemony."

My armor, like the others, was finished in matte grey, brightened only by the silver markings of the Moonmen- a shiny circle, flanked on either side with crescents. The dagger was polished steel, wide at the base, but long, tapering to a sharp point. We not have the silver hair of the Moonmen yet, but our uniform would unmistakably mark us as such.

I removed my dress reluctantly, and slid into my new jumpsuit before strapping the chestpiece. The pauldrons slid on easily, as did my vambraces and leggings. Upon my right hip, I found a sheath already in place for my dagger. As I slid my blade into its scabbard, I realized it was placed at just the right height- high enough to reach, but low enough so it would not interfere with my movement. It was almost as if they knew where to put it.

Did they? And how? My mind raced with possibilities. I have never seen a Moonie until two showed up at our front door. I've only heard the stories, but every child has- stories of bravery, bastions of our great Hegemon and the Hegemony they protect. But also, stories of caution, stories meant to scare children into good behavior for fear of reprimand from the silvered peacekeepers of the galaxy.

My discarded dress lay before me, in a crumpled heap. It was a birthday gift from my mother, in both of our favorite colors- a deep azure blue. I picked it up again, and resisted the urge to hold the fabric to my cheek. *Oh, Ma.* Within the fabric, I could almost see her outline against the vast ocean serving as a backdrop near our home. I could almost smell the salted air, see the unbroken blue of the horizon, and hear my mother call my name. With one swift motion, my back to the protectorate, I stripped the ribbon from its back and tucked it beneath my left vambrace. A smarter child would have left the dress behind, but I could not leave her behind- no, not yet.

Suddenly, a loud crash and a bang came from behind. I spun around, hand on my dagger's hilt, only to see a boy on the ground, with another larger boy standing upon him. I scanned their chest for their names: Tycho, the heavy-set boy, stood over Yon, the one sprawled out on the ground. Behind Tycho



stood two others, one boy and one girl. Both were larger than the rest. I glanced at our Protectorate's face. Lyon's face was impassive as he watched. *Another test. I thought. But one of our own makings, this time.*

I too, watched them impassively, careful not to show my disgust upon my face. Tycho was a survivor as well- just that of a different brand.

For one to rise, another must fall. I could understand his logic, even if it was not to my tastes.

Yon struggled to his feet, still unused to the low gravity, before addressing the larger boy in front of him.

"You tripped me, Tycho," Yon said, his voice as shaky as his stance.

Tycho smirked. I hated him already. He stepped forwards, towards Yon, with the confidence the other boy lacked.

"That sounds like an accusation, midget." Tycho gave him a push, and Yon was sent to the ground once more. He roared with laughter, and beside him, a few others joined him. I watched as Yon shivered on the floor, much as I did against the metal restraints in the pod only a few hours ago. But I stayed my hand. There was little benefit to my involvement. It would be best to let Tycho establish dominance over the boy, and to find my own path towards survival. I turned away, but I could feel myself grimace involuntarily.

Is this who I would become? Someone willing to let others suffer for my gain? My thoughts raced back to the first child who fell in the corridor, unused to the moon's gravity, as we left the pod. Was the cowering boy in front of Tycho one and the same? I had not looked back then.

I had no choice, I thought. But here, I had chosen to turn away. *It is the way back home,* I reasoned. *Back to my dear Ma.* I closed my eyes briefly.

Yon struggled to his knees, only to be pushed down again, with an almost careless nudge of Tycho's boot. There was little hope for the boy now. Even had Yon succeeded in standing, there was little recovery from the humiliation Tycho dealt him. Within Yon's downfall, Tycho would cement his throne, and I stood only idly by.

Stay strong. There was nothing to gain. I would not intervene. *Keep going. Don't look back.* I found myself once more in the hallway where I left the child behind me on the ground. *I had no choice. This is how I shall survive.* I could feel my shoddy rationalization deep within my psyche, nudging slightly at my conscience. *Is this how Moonmen are made? Is this who I shall become?* I closed my eyes once more, but this time with resolution- I had made my decision.

No. I stepped forwards. Tycho noticed, but I did not care. *I would not shed my humanity just yet.*

“Ah yes, his knight in shining armor.” He sneered, and glanced to the side looking for approval from the rest of our group. “What a fine role reversal this is. If only the fool on the ground was as strong as this girl.”

I scoffed. Only the weak needed the approval of their followers.

“Not going to say anything? Not much in that brain, is there?” His band of toadies roared with approval at his perceived snark. I continued forwards. He was bigger than the rest of us, but so was his ego. We were not Moonmen yet. The armor may label us as such, but we had not an ounce of training—something he failed to consider, head lost in his fervor. A thoughtless mistake. I was close now, close enough to see him breathing harder, nostrils flaring slightly. He was angry, or maybe anxious. *A good sign.*

The boy moved forward, intent clear. His face was one of grim determination, and his right hand curled up into a fist, ready to strike. I would not offer him the chance.

It was a simple movement. I slammed my foot into his shin before he could complete his sentence. He collapsed, but not before I caught him on the way down with another strike between his legs. I observed as he sunk to the ground, almost comically, choking on his own spittle. Those more merciful would have stopped here. *I would have stopped here*, I noted. But such feelings were for the weak. I had sealed those predilections deep within already.

No. He started this. I would finish it. I crouched down next to him, half whispering, just loud enough so his posse could hear me.

“Tycho. You thought you were bigger and better. But when you’re on your knees, it doesn’t seem to matter.” I grabbed his ear and twisted. He howled in pain once more.

“Today, you will rise back to your feet,” I continued, “but you should remember this position, Tycho. Because if you come near me, insult me, or defy me in any way...” I twisted once more. I could see blood welling from where it attached to his skull. He cowered and struggled against me in vain. I held on.

“Tycho. Look at me.”

He did.

“If you defy me again, Tycho- I will bring you to your knees once more, with one difference. You will never rise to your feet again. Is that understood?”

He struggled to nod. I loosened my grip as a reward. “Do you understand?” I hissed.

He nodded again, with a hint of frenzy. I let him go and wiped the blood on my hand on his jumpsuit. As I turned to walk back to my station, I thought I saw a hint of a smile upon Protectorate Lyon's face. I dared not to look back. This would be the last time I caused such a disruption.

Yon stood up, in my path. He dusted himself off, and looked at me with a strange face as I walked past him towards my post. I did not blame him for his confusion, not when my feelings mirrored much of his own.

What have I done? I considered my position briefly, before breathing in sharply. The air on the Moon has never tasted more stale.

CHAPTER TWO- CAMINA II

She is depicted in children's books and by the Temple as God, pure of heart and a soul as white as the trim of her unblemished armor. At times She is winged, halo upon her brow, her Cloak billowing around that ethereal form. The First, the Founder, the Undefeated, the Starlight- She had many names, and She was perfect in every way. Or so we are told. As murky as the legends are, I know at least this for certain. The Moonmen were not made to rule. Not even the best of us. Not even the First.

The morning came swiftly and abruptly. There was no true day or night upon the Moon, only the unending lunar sunshine, relieved only by the cold darkness of space at a brutal biweekly schedule. At times, we would catch a glimpse of the Earth through a glass biodome accidentally left untinted, a pale blue marble hanging in the blackness above, serving only as a grim reminder of what we had left behind. As Protectorate Lyon led us through the steel hallways of the Lunar Base yesterday, I would steal occasional glances at the barren grey world outside, hoping to see the planet I left behind. That little irresponsibility, at least, I could afford myself.

I shifted my weight carefully as I sat up, groaned slightly with a stretch, and glanced at the time. *Five minutes until.* I was not so sure I was ready for what was to come. It was a cold and stark room, with most of the space dominated by a long steel cot. The mattress was not uncomfortable, but it gave me no favors throughout the night. Next to the head of the bed was a small desk protruding from the wall, serviced by a steel stool that rattled when weight was put upon it. I had sat and thought for a time, of ways to return home- but there was nothing but the black expanse above, a sea uncrossable without pod or rocket. At least until fatigue took me back to my bed and to a thankfully dreamless sleep.

"Cadets," Lyon said, his voice carrying effortlessly throughout our barrack hall. I sprang to my feet, thoughts forgotten, before shrugging on my jumpsuit and armor, only taking a moment to bind my mother's ribbon safely underneath my suit sleeve. As I rushed out into the hall, I was met with the faces of my classmates. Yon, his face still unreadable. Tycho, scowling but looking away. I glanced at the nameplates of some of the others whom I could see from my doorway. Aster, another boy, taller than Yon but smaller than Tycho. He stood idly by during yesterday's spectacle. Even now, he did not spare me a glance. Chika, a girl taller than me, with an easy permanent grin upon her lips. Her eyes darted back and forth, irises as unfaithful as her smile. Alti, one of the girls who stood behind Tycho yesterday, stood stiffly in her door, already at attention. The others were out of sight, hidden by the shoddy dim lights of the hall.

Lyon walked briskly down the hall, taking stock of his cohort. I refused to look at my kidnapper, eyes instead boring a hole at the steel wall in front of me. As he walked by, I could feel his gaze once more upon my skin.

"Come now," He said simply. It was all that was required.



We were led, in a neat orderly line, into our classroom. The room was strikingly utilitarian. A rack of weapons populated the far side of the chamber, each gleaming with a savage glint. There was a range next to it, extending into the wall and terminating in a lineup of a few targets and dummies. There were no seats, only a yellow line drawn upon the floor, where we stood in order at Lyon's direction. Our Protectorate took his place at the front of the room, and for a moment I held my breath. I did not know if it was out of dread or anticipation. *Perhaps both*, I thought, keeping as still as possible. He only stood for a moment, waiting for us to stand in our places, before beginning our education.

"It was in Ancient times," Lyon declared, "that humankind relied upon the false promises of the weak. Civilizations have risen and fallen with such leaders- mettled only with words, and not with the quality, strength, nor capacity to rule."

"This is no longer the case," He said with reverence, as he paced the length of the room before us. "We are citizens of the Great Hegemony of Man, united under the High Hegemon Herself. A more perfect union, generated by a more perfect leader."

The room gasped, as a projection sprang to life in front of us. But to call it a mere projection was to do it a disservice. The High Hegemon stood before us, tall as all Moonmen were, her silver hair flowing down her back and spilling onto the blackness of the Hegemon's Cloak. Her armor was like ours, but gilded in pure white, shining brighter than even her emerald eyes. Her eyes were fierce, and her frame was strong- she was perfect. Even now, I felt the urge to lower my head in her presence. The hologram flickered off, and with it, so did the oppressive atmosphere that had settled in the room and upon our shoulders. *This is power*, I realized. *This was the High Hegemon*.

"You shall be of the Moon, yet." Lyon paused, before turning to address us directly. "And when the dirt is cleansed from your being, you shall rise as not just citizens, but Moonmen. It is through your hands, your triggers, and your blades that the High Hegemon's will shall be done." He looked at where the hologram used to stand, a strange look upon his visage. It was almost as if he was smiling in admiration. "If only all her citizens could be granted such a privilege." He said, eyes in the distance.

Our protectorate turned again, snapping out of his reverie, before motioning to the rack of rifles and pistols on his left. "I shall teach you now. The High Hegemon has saw fit to bless us with weapons of light. Moonmen do not sling metal like those of the dirt. Line up and take a firearm."

Lyon lined us up in front of the range, before slapping a pistol in each of our hands. Colored in the same matte grey as our armor pieces, the pistols were shaped smoothly but terminated in a sharp and brutal barrel. My hand settled into the grip with unnatural familiarity, my index finger falling conveniently onto the trigger. I immediately pulled my finger away, a fresh wave of revulsion coming from within. Somehow, it was different from the knife strapped to my belt. This felt more... final.

“Do not fear, Cadets. The triggers are disabled, for now.” Lyon said, as if he had read my mind. Beside me, I could see my classmates handle their weapons, with reactions ranging from excitement and anxiety. Tycho, of course, was already sighting his pistol along the range.

“You will see targets at the far end of the range. You will stand fast, shoulders square. Arms at length, hands steady. Look straight ahead, and sight your pistol, front to back.”

The room shuffled as we followed our orders. I raised my pistol, straight ahead, feet planted. My pistol came up, and I could see the target within my sights.

“You will not pull the trigger, but squeeze. There will be a flash. There will be heat. Learn to expect it and fight the urge to move. Do so now.”

I squeezed, finger drawing back into the grip of my pistol. Nothing happened. I could hear the clicks around me as the others failed as well.

“Remember, cadets. Do not move. Expect the flash. Fire again.”

Expect the flash. I squeezed again. *No flash.*

“Check your sight. Do not move. Expect the flash. Again.”

Expect the flash. I squeezed once more. *Nothing.*

“Good. At ease, soldiers. Now, observe.” Lyon strode to the middle of the room, before deftly drawing his pistol from his hip and sighting it almost lazily down the range.

“Remember. Expect the flash. Do not move,” he said once more, before he fired. There was little sound produced by the small firearm, but the effect was anything but. In a blink of an eye, a burst of light traveled from the barrel and to its intended target. I could feel the heat generated by the beam upon my face, and even from this distance it felt almost unbearable for the millisecond the projectile was airborne. Half of the cohort ducked and covered, and I flinched as well, expecting our Protectorate to burst in a brilliant display of flame and guts.

And then, there was nothing.

Our Protectorate still stood, standing lazily, pistol still in the same position as he had left it. The target, far down the range, was nothing but a few cinders drifting to the floor.

“ATTENTION!” He barked, and we sprang back to our positions. “Take aim, cadets.”

“Again. Remember. Do not move. Expect the flash,” Lyon said again, before he pulled the trigger once more, and again, we flinched as we pulled our triggers with him. He fired shot after shot, and we failed him again and again. By the end of the lesson, I could repeat the protectorate’s orders by heart.

Shoulders square. Arms at length, hands steady. Find the sight, squeeze. Expect the flash. Do not move. Countless blasts led to countless failures. It was against human nature to not cringe at the sheer heat and power displayed.

Expect the flash. Do not move. When I finally obeyed Lyon’s order, it was due more to sheer desensitization rather than any conscious process.

Expect the flash, I repeated in my head, with each trigger pull. *Expect the flash.*

After five hours of instruction, not one of us had truly fired a single shot. But it felt like we had fired hundreds.

“Now, cadets,” Lyon said. “It is time. Your pistols are engaged. Point them only downrange. Remember my words. Fire when ready.”

Among the 15 of us, Yon stepped forwards first. Tycho came second, and at his side, the tall girl Alti took aim as well. Beside me was Chika, who flashed me a grin as she went ahead, and at the other stood Aster, who stood still.

A sudden burst of heat came from the far right. It was Yon or Tycho, but it was impossible to tell. I took a deep breath before stepping forward myself.

Shoulders square. Arms at length. I straddled the floor, pointing my pistol down the range. Another beam of light, again from the right. It was probably Alti.

Hands steady, find the sight. I could see the target down the posts of the pistol, far down the range. I felt Aster brush up against me as he stepped up to the range.

Squeeze, I thought, but my finger did not pull the trigger. Another flash of heat and light came, but from Chika at my side, the brilliant light blinding me temporarily.

Squeeze, I thought, but I blinked the spots from my eyes instead. *Expect the flash.*

Squeeze. The pistol fired, a pure white beam of energy flashing away from my barrel and obliterating my target, and I exhaled a breath I did not know I was holding.

Do not move. I didn’t. I did not flinch, and my gun did not move. If it wasn’t for the display of destruction, I would not have even known that I fired my weapon.

We stayed at the range, firing shot after shot for what seemed like forever. With each shot, I found myself repeating our protectorate's words. *Expect the flash. Do not move.* I pulled the trigger, again and again, the targets refreshing themselves automatically. *Shoulders square. Hands steady.* We were much more accurate now, and the rate of fire was increasing. *Find the sight, squeeze the-*

"Cease fire, cadets." Lyon's voice rang out as I pulled the trigger one last time. "That will do. Remember my words and remember this day. We will return here often. This is where you shall train in laser and blade. Keep this with you always, cadets- you are Moonmen. And Moonmen do not miss their targets."

He sent us back to our rooms, where a hot meal consisting of soup and bread sat on the small desk space afforded to us. I barely tasted the bread and salty broth. Halfway through my meal, I heard a small knock at my door.

"Camina, was it?" A girl's voice whispered to me through the cracks of the door.

"Who is it?" I sprang to my feet, meal forgotten.

"Chika." The girl with the grin.

"What is it?" I asked, uneasy.

"Open the door first, would you? I don't know if we're allowed to be in the halls."

I opened my door to let her in. She looked to be at least 180 cm, which was taller than me, but not by much. Her skin was darker than mine, and her hair was jet black. But what stood out most of all was her bright eyes, dancing around the chamber, greedily taking in the sights of the room which was no doubt the same as her own.

"Well," I said. "I've let you in. What is it?"

"It's awfully lonely, eating by yourself, don't you think?" Chika replied, smiling wider.

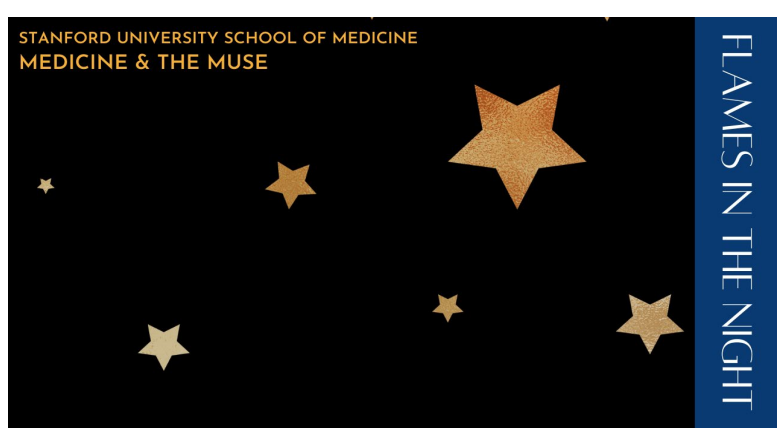
"I'm not sure you're allowed to be here." I said swiftly.

"I'm not either, but I'm here." She said, just as fast.

"And you chose to eat with me?" It was time to take a different angle.

"Well, Aster didn't even answer the door." She said lightly, and I groaned in response.

"There's nowhere for you to sit," I pointed out.



“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll just sit on the floor.” She set her tray down onto the floor, next to my desk, and sat down.

“Do whatever you want, Chika. As long as you leave before curfew.” I gave in. The sooner we finished eating, the sooner this girl would be out of my hair. I sat at my desk and continued to eat mindlessly, trying to ignore the prying gaze of the girl next to me.

“So...” Chika said, eventually. “Where are you from?”

“What?” I said, choking on my soup.

“You know- where are you from? On Earth. If you’re even from Earth, I guess.”

“Why would I not be from Earth?”

“Well, you could be from anywhere in the galaxy, right? Moonies get taken from all over the Hegemony.”

“I’m from Earth,” I said shortly.

“Where on Earth?”

“I... I’m not sure.” I paused. “Next to the ocean. I lived with my mother.”

“You don’t know where on Earth you used to live? Imagine that.” Chika said, her eyes boring into my skull.

“And you?”

“Oh, I’m not from anywhere. I traveled around with my parents. They said I should see as much of the planet as I could before I went to the Moon.” Chika said easily, while she polished off the rest of her bread.

“Wait,” I said, moving my tray to the floor in front of her. “You knew you were coming?”

“Oh yeah,” She replied, a confused look in her eyes. “Didn’t you?”

“No, I didn’t. I was kidnapped by Lyon and Wendell.”

“Kidnapped? Wow.” Her voice was incredulous.

“Yes.” I didn’t know what else to say.

“Sorry,” She said. I could tell that she meant it.

“Thanks.”

“Are you gonna finish that?” She pointed at my food.

“No. It’s all you.” I couldn’t eat another bite. Not after what I just learned.

After she finished the rest of my food and left, I sat at my desk in disbelief. What did it mean? How did she know? Why didn’t I know? Was I the only one who was kidnapped? No, I did not think so. There were too many scared faces in the pod.

That night, I laid in my bed, staring at the ceiling. My thoughts kept me awake, my mind spinning through the possibilities. How did Chika’s parents know she was to be sent to the Moon? Did my own mother know?

And if she did, why didn’t she tell me? I closed my eyes, half from fatigue, and half from pain.

My sleep, when it eventually came, was filled with dreams of Earth and my mother.

CHAPTER 3- CAMINA III

Before the First, I am told there was peace, at least for a time. The Shield was impenetrable, invincible, and uncrossable. It surrounded our colonies, the Earth, and our ships. It protected us from the ravages of the warp, enabled us to fold space-time, and expand across the galaxies. There was no missile, no bomb, and no laser which could defeat the Shield. Until the Moonmen.

When Lyon took us to our classroom in the morning, there was an air of excitement in the cohort. I did not share in that feeling, but I supposed that the others enjoyed firing the pistols. It was all lasers and destruction to me. *I am no Moonie*, I told myself. *I belong to Earth*. But the sight of Chika only reminded me of my mother and what she did not tell me.

“Attention, cadets,” Lyon called out, snapping me back to reality. Chika stood at my left, but to my right was Yon. He stared straight ahead, focused downrange. I tried not to think about the burnt remnants of the targets we destroyed yesterday.

“Today, you will not be concerned with matters of aim,” Lyon continued. Both Yon and Chika deflated slightly. “Instead, you shall be trained in the blade.” Chika perked right back up.

“Your daggers, cadets.” The protectorate said, his own blade unsheathed already. I fingered the grip of my weapon, still strapped on my hip. “There is no need to unsheathe your blade, for usually—”

“There is no reason for you take them out at all.” A soft voice drifted in from the doorway. I spun to look at who dared to interrupt the protectorate. It was a Moonman, taller than even Lyon. He wore his silver hair pulled back in a short ponytail, and wore a light smile. His armor was gilded in silver, the circle and flanking crescents of the Moonmen emblazoned upon his left lapel, the heraldry somehow shining in a even brighter luster than his already blinding armor as he strode into the room.

To my shock, Lyon immediately fell to the floor, on both knees.

“My lord,” Lyon said, “I was not aware you would grace our presence today. Please excuse my impertinence.”

“Rise,” the mysterious man said. “I did not tell you, my good protectorate. It is no fault of your own.”

“My lord,” Lyon rose to his feet, before turning to us.

“Cadets!” He said sharply. “Bow your head. You are in the presence of the great Scion of Argent, second only to Her Grace, the High Hegemon Herself.”

“That,” the Scion murmured, “will not be necessary, Lyon. But I thank you nonetheless.”

The great Scion walked to the center of the room, surveying us slowly. The air was oppressive, and I could feel my breath catch slightly at his gaze.

“My name is Ollivier,” He finally said. “I would like to know your names, if your protectorate allows it.”

“Yes, my lord.” Lyon said, with another bow.

“Then please,” Ollivier turned to us, “all of your names, cadets. From the left.”

Rael. Aster. Yon. Tycho. Chika. Alti. Before finally, me.

“Camina,” I said, a little louder than I expected. *Damn*, I thought, as my classmates continued.

Garth. Rivel.

“Thank you,” the Scion said appreciatively. “15 names for 15 souls. I am sure you have been made aware that not all will be here by the end.”

“But I have high hopes for each of you. Perhaps only one or two, this time, shall fall short,” he continued, voice tinged with sadness. “These names, however. I shall carry them with me always. Thank you for sharing,”

“Lyon,” He said suddenly, turning to the Moonman, “I am afraid I shall have to commandeer your projector.”

“At your pleasure, my lord,” Lyon said, retreating to the other side of the room as the hologram of the High Hegemon once more blazed to life.

“The Hegemon,” said Ollivier, with a hint of surprise.

“Yes, my lord. I merely thought that the cadets should be rewarded with the visage of Her Grace.”

“I see...” Ollivier murmured as he approached the hologram. Now that the Scion stood next to the High Hegemon, I could see what it meant to rule. Next to the Hegemon, Lyon had seemed smaller. But Ollivier did not falter, and instead seemed to grow in stature. As he examined the hologram, I could see that this was his station to be at his ruler’s side.

“Ah...” He murmured, his wandering hand stopping just short of the billowing robe of the Hegemon. “I see the Cloak suits my sister well as ever. I’m sure she would be happy to receive such reverence from her loyal protectorates, and her new recruits besides. On her behalf, I must thank you, Lyon.”

“I live only to serve, my lord.” Lyon drew down into another bow.

“Again, there is no need, Lyon,” Ollivier turned to the smaller Moonman. “Rise. There are far more valuable ways to spend your time than kowtowing to someone like me.”

“Sir-“ Lyon tried to protest.

“Lyon,” the Scion said simply. “It is fine. And let us rid the room of my dear sister’s presence. A bit too much for our fine cadets on their second day, I think.” He chuckled slightly. “And honestly, I think she looks better in the holo than she does in life.”

Lyon stood straight up, eyes facing forwards. The tension in his eyes at the Scion’s blasphemy was obvious.

“Well,” Ollivier said, mildly. “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

“Yes sir,” Lyon said, stiffly. “May I ask, my lord, if my service is required in any other way?”

“I have a personal interest in this cohort, my good man. I will be teaching this class, today, should you allow it.”

“Yes, my lord,” Lyon saluted snappily, as he turned to leave the room. “The Argent commands, and I obey. By the Hegemon’s Grace.”

“Yes,” The Argent Scion said softly, watching him leave. “By the Hegemon’s Grace, indeed.”