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## Aurora Slicer

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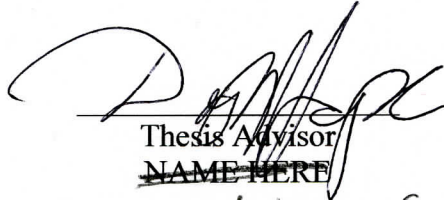
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## **Aurora Slicer**

### **1**

It was a typical Wednesday morning in Clineston. Joel sluggishly got out of his bed, went to his bathroom, and meticulously rubbed a large glob of gel into his hair. He had to mold it into the perfect shape, making it stick out over the top of his head, forming the perfect pompadour. He alternated between using his fingers and a large hairbrush. Joel, having done this ritual every morning for a few years, was an expert in treating his hair. He made the tip of it come together in an almost pointy way, setting it apart from other pompadours.

Once he was finished fixing that, he quickly ate two bowls of an off-brand cereal and strode out the door. This all would have been completely normal had it not been for what he saw in the sky. Overhead was something that appeared to be getting closer. Joel found himself completely mesmerized by the sight of the strange object. It was as if a switch inside him was turned on, making him focus on it almost scientifically. Joel noticed that there were very few other people walking about, something that struck him as odd because it was a weekday and normally people would be heading off for school or work. Suddenly, all of the streetlights went off. The area went pitch black. Immediately following this was complete silence and a momentary flash that blinded Joel. He was then sent flying backwards about four feet.

Now, lighting up the vicinity with a mix of greenish hues was what appeared to be a black meteorite. No bigger than a standard sized car, it gave off an odd pulsating noise

that one might associate with something glowing. Joel felt a light tugging sensation in his head and noticed that his hair was being pulled, almost magnetically, towards the meteorite. The closer he got to it, the stronger the sensation got until he actually fell over. He blacked out.

The next thing he knew, he was lying on his back next to the rock from space. The sun had risen, and the streets were now more populated like they usually were. Strangely enough, no one else seemed to be affected by what had just happened. Checking his watch, Joel realized that he was late for school, so he quickly got up and started running, leaving the dark rock behind.

Ten minutes passed and Joel should have gotten to school by then, but he could not even see it yet. He felt like he was running in circles. That's when he heard it. Behind him, a deep voice began to speak:

“So, have you finally realized what's going on?”

Joel, now at the end of a sidewalk that led across the street, turned around as soon as the voice began to speak, but he could not locate its source. It came from behind him, but there was nothing there. Then, as if in response to the seemingly disembodied voice, Joel began to feel in his head the same sensation he had experienced around the meteorite. Except this time, it was much more intense. Without warning, Joel's entire body was sent flying, headfirst, in the direction of the voice. He found himself facedown on a small patch of grass surrounded by concrete. In the middle of the patch was a young dogwood tree. This tree was not what surprised him, though.

A large, transparent blue figure came into view right before it collided with Joel's head. The closer it got to him, the less transparent it became. By now, Joel could make

out two yellow eyes, a long tail, and blue, scaly skin. It towered over Joel's five feet and three inches of height. He guessed it had to be at least three times as tall as he was. The creature appeared upright but was floating mere inches off of the ground and had no legs. It did, however, have two intimidatingly muscular hammer-like arms, at the ends of which were large hands balled up into fists. Eventually, it began to speak, revealing itself to be the owner of the voice Joel had heard before.

“I don't know what that thing's doing in your head, but since it's there, I've gotta help you out. Look, kid. Something's happened. For now, come with me.”

Joel looked at the figure apprehensively, but decided to go with it for the time being since he could not ignore the strange chain of events.

About ten minutes passed and Joel became accustomed to the wisplike tail trailing behind the strange being he was following. Joel wanted to ask it where they were going, what this thing was, why he had to come with it, but his vocal chords were unable to formulate the noises required to speak. Every time he attempted to articulate his thoughts into words all that came out of his mouth were unintelligible sounds. He felt several drops of sweat trickle down his forehead as he saw a large hole in the ground up ahead. Long-abandoned construction materials surrounded it. *What was this hole?* Without saying anything, the blue phantom went down the hole that appeared to be too small for it to fit into. *Is this thing one of those spirits Mom is always talking about? What does it want with me?* Joel had no choice but to follow it, since he could still feel the magnetic force pulling on his hair.

Descending down the dark hole, Joel could feel the humidity rising. He continued to follow and as he got deeper, he noticed that it gradually turned into a more natural

looking, dimly lit cave. There were dilapidated lamps with blue flames hanging from the limestone walls. The blue figure finally stopped when it reached the furthest wall from the entrance. It turned around and looked directly into Joel's eyes. Joel noticed it had no pupils. Gazing into its eyes was looking at two miniature suns. The piercing yellow gaze would have scared off most people, but Joel realized that running away would be both impossible and stupid. Once again, Joel tried to formulate words. This time, his throat allowed the words to escape.

“Why have you led me here?”

Joel spoke with confidence in his voice. Showing fear would not be a good idea.

“You aren't gonna piss yourself? Good. I don't have a mop or anything. I thought I would have to pretend to be a human to calm you down, but you seem fine. I'm crap when it comes to pretending to be a human. Have you seen one of us before?”

The question it posed kindled flames of curiosity in Joel's gray eyes.

“One of you? There are more like you? What exactly are you?”

After a brief moment of silence, it spoke once more:

“The name's Erebus. And I'm not a bad guy. I know it sounds suspicious, but you gotta believe me.”

Joel did not feel like this Erebus character was sinister even if it looked the way it did.

“Erebus, where did you come from? I've never seen anything like you before.”

“Where? I'm from here just like you. I've been here for centuries.”

A look of agitation mixed with confusion spread across Joel's face.

“Come on, get real. If you were from here, I think someone would have found one of you and brought it to the public by now.”

“I’m totally serious. Remember that meteorite? The impact from when it crashed released a shockwave that made us visible to certain hypersensitive human eyes.”

“I probably would not have believed you, but you’re here right now. You’re real, even if you seem like some ridiculous comic book character.”

Joel was beginning to get used to the blue spectacle he was speaking with.

“I’ll take that as a compliment. We’re called auroras. Been around for ages. There are way more of us than your kind. The thing is, though, we usually only reveal ourselves in crazy situations like this.”

“I always thought humans were the only intelligent life here. This is incredible...! My name is Joel. I live around here, too.”

“I won’t waste any more time, Joel. I led you here because you were the one that was affected by the meteorite. I saw how you were pulled towards it. Basically, when it crashed and there was a flash, something happened inside you. Maybe you’ve noticed it by now, but you’ve become heavier.”

Joel shrugged it off before, but his head *did* feel a little heavier than usual. If what he was saying was true, then...

“My pomp!”

Joel’s face transformed into one of panic and he worriedly ran his hands over his hair. When his hands touched it, they were greeted with the texture of cold steel. Joel looked at Erebus, demanding an explanation.

“Your hair? I’ve seen this happen to arms, legs, and even shoulders, but I’ve never seen a meteorite cause a human’s hair to turn into metal. And one of such an odd shape, too.”

“Hey, just because my pomp turned into this...*thing*, does not mean it’s okay to call it weird! Don’t dis the ‘do!’”

As he said this, his hand slipped and touched the tip of his pompadour. Blood began to leak from his left palm.

“Oh, wow. That thing is *sharp*. And dangerous. But it might be perfect, just what we need.”

Erebus hovered closer to Joel as he spoke.

“*We?*” He raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

“For centuries, there have been bad auroras that have been making the certain parts of the planet—Clineston included— more magnetic. Really magnetic. That’s why the meteorite crashed here today. If it continues, this town’s gonna go kaput. We tried to make them stop, realize what they were doing was wrong, but they wouldn’t listen. There would have been a war, but our kind can only be destroyed by something that has been metallized. Something like your pompadour.”

“So what you’re saying is that you want me to help you? What if I want to get rid of this this thing and move out of town, living a normal, quiet life?”

“Something about you tells me that you have too much pride to cut your hair off. And even if you did, now that it’s metallized, it would just grow back right away. But it would look really bad. Give it some thought. That hair of yours could be used as a blade to cut down the auroras that are trying to trash your home. I’m not forcing you, of course, but it would be great if you could help us out, kid. I’ll give you some time to think it over. Meet me here in three days at sunset with your answer.”

And with that, Erebus lifted an arm and a green portal appeared overhead. Erebus rose up and into the portal that closed before Joel could look inside.

## 2

Joel approached his bedroom door at precisely 4:44 PM on a foggy Saturday afternoon. A few years ago, he replaced the doorknob with a large, obviously fake diamond that had the logo of his favorite comic book series, *Invincible Diamond*, engraved in it. He found it funny that the pompadour that he begged his mother to help him fix three years ago because of his love for this comic book hero had become what could potentially be used as a weapon. Maybe he was actually going through with this because it reminded him of the exciting adventures of *Invincible Diamond*, as crazy as that sounded. Ever since his hair spontaneously turned into metal, he had successfully covered it up with a ridiculous, floppy hat. Joel usually kept to himself, sitting in the back of the classrooms he went to, and since he was short in stature, none of the teachers really noticed that he was wearing a hat. As he made his way down the stairs, he heard the clacking of shoes coming from the hallway. His mother Claire, a woman in her early forties, casually appeared at the bottom of the staircase, wearing an un-tucked white button-down shirt adorned with little green aliens. Joel froze in his steps. It wasn't because he was nervous about her not believing what happened. Rather, he knew she'd become obsessed with the situation.

“Joel, when are you going to take off that unsightly hat? You've been wearing it for a few days now. Wearing it for even one day is embarrassing enough.”



She twirled long brown strands of shoulder length hair as she looked up at him.

“Mom, you know how much I love this hat.”

“More than your pomp?”

His mother’s eyes, the same gray as Joel’s, gleamed through her plastic green glasses with playful triumph.

“You got me.”

Joel knew that if he continued to resist, he’d only be digging himself into a deeper hole. But he was greatly troubled about the metallic hair situation, as anyone would be. His mother began to ascend the stairs and before he knew it, she was at the step below him. A remarkably tall woman, Claire still stood over him even though he was a step above her. Joel tried to back away, but before he could, she grabbed his hat and tossed it down the stairs.

Joel’s mother’s eyes widened. He was unsure whether she was going to laugh, demand an explanation, or both.

“Joel, what in the world...?”

“I, uh, tried a new hair gel.”

He was visibly perspiring.

“As far as I know, no hair gel does *that* to people’s hair.”

She gestured at the chunk of metal that was now his hair.

“What the hell did you do?!” She did not seem angry, just concerned, to Joel’s relief and disbelief.

“Three days ago, a meteorite crashed. You must have seen it on the news.”

“Yes, I remember. But what does that have to do with you?”

“When it crashed, it...drew me in. And then I met this big blue transparent guy who called himself an aurora. He said his name was Erebus.”

“Aurora? Transparent? Could he be a spirit? I’ve been looking for those for at *least* fifteen years and have never seen one.”

That look of mania that Joel knew all too well surfaced and spread itself across her face. There was no keeping her out of it now.

“Well, that certainly explains why you were wearing that stupid hat. But it’s just bizarre. Your *pompadour*, your pride and joy, has become that...thing. *Invincible Diamond* didn’t even last a year. I thought that once the series ended, you’d give up the pompadour, but boy, was I wrong. You sure idolized that main character. I remember you used to complain to me that because you were short, people wouldn’t notice you, so when you took interest in that comic, I knew what you were going to ask.”

“Yeah, but I don’t even care about standing out anymore. I’m over that. But people think I’m going for a retro or greaser look. I’m not some nostalgic dude wishing he lived decades ago or a guy looking for a fight. They’re wrong. I wear this because it’s cool!”

“And it looks like it’s more than just cool now.”

Joel looked at his wristwatch. It was nearly 5 o’ clock. He told Erebus that he would come visit him when he had made up his decision at the end of the week, and wanted to do so before the sun set if possible.

“Listen, Mom, I gotta get going. I told that blue guy I was gonna meet him today and I want to be back for dinner. I don’t think he would appreciate it if I brought anyone along, so—”

“Okay, but if you’re not back before then, I’ll come looking for you.” That thought disturbed Joel, since he knew what happened whenever his mother went out in public looking for him. She turned the neighborhood inside out looking for him, acting like he had been gone for a month. She seemed almost jealous, something he tried not to think about as he headed out. He was glad she was not coming with him, though, because who knows what she would try once she saw Erebus? He was honestly surprised that she did not demand that he invite the bizarre being over for dinner.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back.” He went over to where his hat had been thrown but she once again stopped him.

“What, are you scared it’s going to rust?”

She pointed at his metal hair. Joel frowned.

“Kidding! I’m only *kidding*! You need to lighten up!”

How Joel’s mother maintained such a mood in these kinds of situations baffled him.

### 3

After Joel closed the door and was on his way, Claire went into her office. She touched the power button on the massive cylindrical console and rolled a chair up to the flat monitor on the desk. Once the screen lit up, she opened a web browser and in the search bar typed a string of two words: “Green Man.” She clicked the first page she was directed to.

The page looked like it had been made decades ago, but seemed to have been recently updated. At the top of the page in a bold green font, it said, “Who is Green

Man?” Claire was, of course, familiar with this so-called Green Man. Considering the alien memorabilia scattered across the room, it seemed obvious that she was searching the web for signs of extraterrestrial life or something, but this was not the case at all. She scrolled down, revealing detailed reports of sightings of a person in green cloak. In every picture, he was positioned so that his face could not be seen. Who could even say for sure that this Green Man was a man or even a person at all?

Claire sat at her computer for hours at a time every day, trying to learn more about this enigmatic figure. Who, or what, was he? Why did he always conceal his face? What was her connection to this person? In each picture, the Green Man appeared to be in a rush, as if he were chasing something, being chased, or both. Or perhaps he was trying to get somewhere before someone—or something else. Could he be after spirits, aliens and other such things like she was so fixated on? There was even the possibility that he was actually one of these things.

At the end of her browsing sessions, Claire always made sure to clear her history, erasing all traces of her search for the Green Man. She did not want Joel to know that she was trying to find this man. As far as she was concerned, he should not even find out that he existed. She was generally quite open about her interest in the occult, but she was incredibly cautious about preventing her son from learning about her search for this specific person.

#### 4

Joel made his way across town until he found the abandoned construction

materials and the hole he had followed Erebus into earlier that week. As he approached it, he noticed an orange figure that looked somewhat similar to Erebus hovering nearby. This creature, unlike the muscular Erebus, was significantly skinnier. It noticed him, unsheathed claw-like blades jutting out of its lanky arms, and began to close the distance between the two of them. It looked as though it had been waiting for him, perhaps to ambush him. Joel instinctively took what he remembered from *Invincible Diamond* as a battle stance, putting his left foot forward and turning it slightly. He had his new weapon, but he had no idea how to use it.

“That blue guy never taught me how to use the damn thing!”

Joel grumbled as he continued to size up his opponent. It let out a shrill cry as it lunged forward.

“Hey. Can’t you talk? Why are you doing this?”

*No answer. Perhaps it was incapable of speech.*

The orange fiend slashed right over his head, shredding Joel’s hat to pieces and revealing his unwieldy weapon. The claws continued past the hat and reached his hair, but were knocked back with recoil. Joel’s steel-hardened hair was too strong for the creature’s attack. Erebus wasn’t kidding when he said his hair had become a weapon. Thinking about this, Joel seized the opportunity to stand up and thrust his head outward in the direction of the enemy. The tip of his pompadour tore a gash through the creature’s shoulder, causing it to screech loudly. It took a lot of strength in his neck, but Joel continued with his attack until some sort of ectoplasm the same color as the creature began to leak out of the wound. It dripped to the ground, making a loud sound with each ripple as it accumulated into an amorphous puddle of orange goo. Behind them, Erebus

emerged from the hole and rushed forward. The orange entity, seeing the hulking figure, skittered away like a lizard.

“Yeah, that’s right. Get out of here, you carrot-looking ghoul!”

“Hey, not bad, kid.”

“You saw all that? Why the hell didn’t you help me? Do you think I had any idea what I was doing?”

Joel, while frustrated, was delighted to see a familiar face.

“I can’t teach you much. Look, I might be an aurora, but I’m just a normal guy, too. But seeing what you just did tells me all I need to know. I’m tired, but I’ll give you something cool if you come in here with me.” And with that, Erebus withdrew into the hole. Joel looked around for any signs of his orange adversary. All that was left was the puddle it left behind after being cut by Joel’s hair. He followed after Erebus, curious what he might have for him.

“Welcome to my home,” Erebus bent over in as much of a bow as he could without any legs. As he did this, the room lit up. In the center of it was a bright orb, the same color blue as he was.

“So you’re probably wondering, ‘What the hell could this blue guy possibly have for me?’” He sounded like he had not had company in ages.

“Yeah, that’s right. So, what is it?” Joel tried his best to conceal his growing anticipation. He took a seat on the ground, one knee up, the other one down, and looked at his host.

“If you’re gonna be fighting auroras, you can’t just do it as you currently are. You got lucky back there. If I had not been there, it probably would have really messed you up.

“Only because you never taught me how to *use* this thing,” Joel gestured up at his hair impatiently.

“That’s because, well, I don’t know how to use your new weapon, Joel. It’s up to you to figure that out.” Joel’s eyelids slightly lowered.

“But what I *can* do is give you these.” Erebus pointed to a wall where there were two blue gloves hanging from a hook.

“Gloves? Uh, why gloves?”

“I thought they looked really cool so I picked them up one day. My hands are too big, so you should take them.”

“Really? That’s the big reveal?”

“Hey, don’t complain. I’m jealous that they don’t fit on me. And besides, even if they did fit, we auroras can’t wear anything. They would just fall right through my hands.”

“Then how did you bring them here? You shouldn’t be able to pick them up, right?”

“I used my mind.”

“Don’t tell me telekinesis. Come on.”

“...Yeah. That’s how we move things.”

“Good grief. It’s like you came right out of some weird monster movie, man.” He put his hand on his forehead and sighed. Joel was now absolutely sure this guy was all

right. He might have been goofy, but there was no way it was a façade. He could usually tell when people were bullshitting him.

“Oh, wait. I forgot. I have something else for you, Joel. Look on the table. Take that rock.”

Joel walked over to the table and picked the rock up. It was smooth and black on one side and white crystals jutted from the other side. It was attached to a thin rope, so he assumed it was meant to be a necklace.

“What’s this?”

“That rock came from the same place as the meteorite that crashed earlier.”

“Which is?”

“A distant planet called Magnos. It’s got a special feature, though. Put it on.” Joel did as he was told and immediately lost his balance and almost fell over.

“I think I feel a lot lighter? Even lighter than before the incident with the meteorite.” Finally regaining his balance, Joel stood back up and looked at Erebus.”

“You’re right. It’s so you can wield that hair blade thing of yours without having to worry about falling because it’s so damn heavy.”

“And I can just take it? It’s okay?”

“It’s the least I can do after what happened to your hair. Consider it a gift. Now, are you gonna help me out with this stuff?”

“I still don’t understand what exactly it is you need me to do. I know only weapons like my hair can hurt your kind, but how many of them are there? Where can I find them? Or are they going to find me first?”

“Lucky for you, I’m a sensory type aurora.”



“You can detect them?”

“Yes.” As he said this, a single antenna rose from the top of his head.

“Are you sure you’re not a robot? I’ve never seen something like that.”

“I know technology’s amazing now but have you ever seen a robot that you could pass right through? One that’s transparent?”

“Fine. Aurora, whatever. Just do your thing.” The antenna started to glow the same color as Erebus and made a faint pinging noise.

“I’m picking up a strong signal directly east of here.”

“The beach?”

“Seems like it. Let’s go.”

“What, now? I still don’t know how to fight with this thing!”

“Joel, the only way you’ll learn how to use it is by getting into more tussles.”

“I don’t have a lot of time, but let’s get this over with.”

5

Joel was still out and Claire still had extra time before making dinner, so she opened her work laptop on the counter and once again began looking into the Green Man’s whereabouts. The most recent Green Man photos were taken in front of the big water tower in one of the neighborhoods nearby. This time, though, it was not as blurry as usual and she was able to make out part of his face. Most of his face was cut out of the picture, but on the edge of it she could see two decently sized scars on his left cheek. *Could it really be him?* Her eyebrows flicked up the moment she noticed the scars. This

seemed like irrefutable evidence. She would have to investigate the vicinity of the water tower tomorrow. Until then, she would just have to wait. At that moment, a pillar of blinding light beamed into the sky from what appeared to be the nearby beach. Because it was so close by, Claire grabbed a pair of sandals and started for the beach.

When she reached the point where the sky looked a certain way that it only looked at beaches, she felt a heavy crash up ahead. She kicked her sandals off and jogged up the sandy path, having to dart left and right occasionally to avoid people heading to the parking lot. When at last Claire reached the point where the beach opened up, she saw at the edge of the shore a stone monolith. There was a crowd of people surrounding it. She walked up to the crowd and tried to push her way to the front, but just then, in the corner of her eye, she saw him—the Green Man. When she turned around to chase after him, though, he was gone. Without any time to express her confusion or disappointment, she once again turned her attention to the monolith. A bloated-looking man was arguing with a guy who looked to be in his early twenties.

“You can’t just take that! We need to call the police before anyone touches anything!” The large bespectacled man took on an authoritative tone, but Claire was unsure whether or not he was actually the closest thing to the one in charge here. He seemed to just be trying to maintain order. In the younger man’s hand was a small rectangular slab that looked like it was made of the same material as the monolith they were all gathered around. Claire walked right up to him and, while staring directly into his eyes, grabbed it from his hand. He did not show any resistance, oddly enough.

“What is this thing?”

“Flip it over,” the man urged Claire. She obliged and turned it over, revealing weird symbols she had never seen before. It looked like it could be a language of some sort, but she had never seen anything that resembled the lines and shapes she saw on the slab. There was also a groove on the side of each short edge. The bigger man approached Claire as she inspected it, clearing his throat for attention.

“That tablet was on the ground when we arrived at the scene. We should all be relieved that no one was hurt. If this were during the day, there would have been a lot more people. Everyone that was here managed to get out of the way.”

“You seem to have a good idea what’s going on here. Who are you?” Claire hoped he could answer at least some of her questions.

“I’m Max, just a regular who happened to be here. I saw everything that happened. I called the police, so they should be on their way, but we need to keep shit together until then. Otherwise folks like this kid here will tarnish the scene of whatever the hell just happened.”

“Well, Max, do you have any idea where this thing came from?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Miss—“

“Call me Claire.”

“Right, Claire. Well, since you just got here, I’m assuming you saw the light shoot into the sky.”

“Yes. It came from the monolith, right?”

“Yeah, but the real weird thing is the thing itself. It just shot out from the sand. Out of nowhere.”

“Okay, so that’s what I felt in my chest.”

“Yeah. But why would there be something like this under the sand?”

Before Claire could answer this question, Max flung into the air. It looked like something had grabbed him, but no one could see anything. The few dozen people that were gathered screamed and dispersed. Claire just stood there, looking up at Max. He was swaying slightly in the air, but was still suspended.

“Get out of here!” Max shouted through exhausted breaths

“You’re telling the wrong lady to run. I need to know what is happening.”

Claire’s childlike curiosity took over, forgetting briefly about danger. She stepped closer and before he could utter a retort, he was smashed into the ground. Sand flew in all directions and this reminded her of the severity of the situation. Claire did not have any weapons with her and even if she did, she could not see whatever force it was that just slammed the man down.

“Max!” Claire wanted to run up to him, but she knew better.

“I’m okay, I only hit sand. I wasn’t up that high.” His glasses had snapped, though, since he had fallen face first. Claire realized that she had dropped the weird artifact when Max fell. When she picked it up, an enormous indigo beast appeared. Or rather, it finally became visible to her. The first thing she noticed was that it did not have a neck. It had two beady eyes on its body and massive shoulders.

“Woman. You...see me?” For such a large creature, it had a tiny mouth. But she was mostly surprised by its ability to speak, even if it seemed limited.

“What...?” Claire squeezed the tablet in her hand and backed away from the monster. It then stood up, revealing its clunky arms and legs. Each was the size of a large tree trunk.

The tablet in her hand glowed the same way the pillar of light from before had, and two blades revealed themselves, one jutting out of each groove on the short sides of the tablet.

“This is a weapon? Alright, this is getting interesting now!” With the new tool in her hand, Claire felt lighter than ever before.

“Stay away from rock!” The behemoth roared at her in warning, but she ignored it and, weapon in hand, charged forward. Her idea was to strike its legs to knock it down, but when she found herself in between its legs, a clubbed tail showed itself. The tail swung right at her, but she managed to dodge it. Then it swung once more. And again. Claire continued avoiding these strikes until she backed out of its radius.

“Why should I stay away from it? What is it? Why do you want us to stay away?”

“No answer!” Claire’s enemy was not going to spill any juicy information no matter how hard she tried to coax it out of him. While the colossus continued to sputter nonsensical strings of words, Claire subtly inched closer until she was within attacking range.

Gripping the newly weaponized tablet in her right hand, she swung, not sure what to expect. She closed her eyes in a wince as the blade made contact with the creature’s flesh, making a noise similar to wood being cut into. A second later, she opened her eyes to see that she had made a small but deep cut in its foot. She jumped over to the other foot while it cried out in pain and repeated the process, causing it to topple over loudly, shaking the ground slightly. *I didn’t expect to get in a fight, no less with a monster!*

Claire gave the weapon another squeeze and, sure enough, the blades retracted back into the tablet. With her new weapon in hand, she bounded over to Max.

“I’m surprised you’re conscious after that attack!”

“You and me both,” he laughed nervously.

“One thing, though...I don’t think it’s over just yet, Claire. It’s still alive.”

“Yeah, but at least I incapacitated it for now. Let’s get you out of here. Can you walk?”

“Yes. I should be okay on my own, really.”

“Be safe.”

By now, everyone was gone, including the man Max had been arguing with earlier. Between the monolith and the monster, everyone had been scared off.

It was only after a few minutes of walking through the sand that Claire came across her son of all people.

“What are *you* doing here, sweetie?! And that...behind you— Is that the guy you were telling me about earlier?”

“I was on my way home, but we saw some crazy light coming from here, so we came as soon as we could. But why can you see him?”

“I have many questions for you, Erebus, and I’m sure you have many questions for me, too, but we’ve got something urgent we need to take care of.” She pointed with her thumb back in the direction of the large creature, indicating that it was still a threat.

“Is that—”

“Yeah, Joel. That’s one of my kind. That’s an aurora for sure. Can’t say I’ve met that one, though.” Erebus floated ahead of the mother and son and led the way to the beach’s parking lot.

“Is it really okay to just leave that aurora like that? It was definitely not dead. It cou—” before Joel could finish the sentence, Claire spoke up:

“You’ve got a lot to fill me in on, and I’m a lot faster than that lumbering aurora, so I

suggest you start talking. Both of you.”

“First, I’ll answer you.” He turned to Joel as they continued to walk in the direction of their house. There’s no way that guy’s gonna chase us so fast. You saw that thing’s legs. There’s no way it could catch up to us. And besides, it’s not a sensory type like me. “Sensory type?” Claire raised an inquisitive eyebrow. In response, Erebus extended his antenna and pointed to it with both hands.

“Is that for tracking?” She was surprised because she thought Erebus would have probably been more of a fighter, considering his body frame.

“Yes. I didn’t sense an antenna coming from anywhere in that guy’s body, so once we’re out of here, we’ll be alright.”

“Well, that’s good. I don’t even know how to use this thing. I just squeezed it subconsciously and the blades appeared.” Claire held it out in her palm for the others to look at.

“My first question is what this thing is. Do you have any idea, Erebus?”

“W-where did you find that?!”

“Wait, let me guess. It’s from Magnos, right?” Joel, who had been given a pendant from the distant planet, had a hunch.

“Yeah. Magnos is where the necklace he’s wearing is from. That’s why she can see me.”

“What’s this ‘Magnos’ you’re talking about? It must be special if it’s why I can see your kind.”

By now, they were approaching their home’s driveway.

“Wait, Erebus, will you fit through the doorway?” Joel didn’t want him to break anything.

“That’s not a problem.” Erebus demonstrated by phasing right through a thick tree.

“Okay, now I’m even more curious about you auroras. Are you from this ‘Magnos’ place? I’ve never seen anything or anyone able to do what you just did.” Claire stopped walking and looked into Erebus’s eyes expectantly.

“Magnos? No, I’m from Earth, Claire.” He sounded almost flattered.

“Alright, but what *is* Magnos?”

Joel, confident with his listening skills, stepped in.

“Long story short, Mom, there are bad auroras and they’re trying to crash Magnos, a faraway planet, into Earth. Specifically Clineston. That’s where the meteorite came from and it’s also probably got something to do with that monolith that showed up at the beach tonight.” He crossed his arms, satisfied with his explanation. “Well, Erebus? Did I leave anything out?”

“Nah, that’s about it. There’s more to it, but not even I know everything. After all, I’m just some normal guy like you.”

“So I’m guessing there are a lot of you auroras?” Claire could hardly contain her excitement.

“We outnumber humans. We just don’t show up a lot because a lot of us live underground.”

“And even if you auroras were more common on the surface, people would need special abilities or tools to see you, right?”

“Right. I only came to the surface because of the impact that meteorite from Magnos made. I knew it would give someone a gift.”

“Gift? This damn thing?” Joel still had not gotten used to his burdensome new weapon,



even though the pendant he had been given greatly reduced the stress it put on his body.

“Why couldn’t I have just gotten something like that thing she’s holding?”

“Guess you’ve got bad luck, kid. But hey, if you ask me, what you’ve got is a lot cooler. I mean, who runs around cutting shit down with their hair? And in that shape, no less.”

“Well, if you put it that way, I guess it *is* pretty cool. Let’s go inside.” Joel took a key out of his pocket and entered the house. A gentle rainfall began to descend on the land.

Before he followed, Erebus made sure no one was following. *I know you’re out there...*

## 6

“I didn’t think anything crazy like that would happen tonight, so I thought I had time to make dinner. We’re just going to have to order a pizza or something. Erebus, what do auroras eat?”

“Oh, don’t worry about me. We just absorb stuff from rocks and the ground. I’ll be fine for now.”

“Can I at least get you a seat? Or maybe a bowl of dirt?”

“I’m fine floating like this, really, but some dirt sounds...pretty tasty right now. As long as it’s not that orange clay crap. That stuff’s the worst.”

“I’ll order a pie. In the meantime, Joel, could you go outside and get some food for our guest?”

Joel and Erebus took the back door into the yard. The rain continued to fall, becoming increasingly heavy.

“I hope you like mud, because nothing’s gonna be dry.”

“That’s fine. I get more out of it if it’s got water, too.”

“Man, you guys are weird. I’d say I’m jealous, but I do have my favorite foods, as I’m sure you do.” Joel, now holding a full bowl of mud, went back inside, Erebus beside him. This time, Erebus went through the wall instead of taking the doorway.

“There’s something I’m curious about. How do you touch things like dirt and mud if you can go through things like that?”

“I’m guessing he can selectively solidify briefly when coming into contact with things. Is that it?” It looked like Claire already had the whole thing figured out.

“Yes. I’m glad we have someone like you here, because I suck at explaining things.”

“Well, I don’t study the paranormal for nothing. With just one look at someone like you, I can figure out *at least* that much. But my guess is it’s tricky when fighting. One wrong movement and something could get stuck inside of you or you could get hurt instead of completely evading an attack.”

“Damn, your mom’s smart.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” Joel let out an exasperated sigh.

“Erebus, would you like to stay with us until we get this whole crazy situation sorted out? We’ve got a guest room if you need one.”

“That would be great. I was getting pretty lonely in that cave all by myself.”

“How long have you been there?” Joel remembered the cave near the construction site. It looked like someone had been living there for a pretty long time.

“About... Two-hundred years?”

“I’d lose my goddamn mind if I had to live in a cave for two centuries!” Claire said this as though she didn’t like caves, but she was actually fascinated by it and really wanted to

check out his private dwelling if presented with an opportunity. “So, Mr. Blue, why don’t you show us how you eat? As someone who specializes in the supernatural for a career, I’d love to get some more material to write about.”

Erebus’s right arm solidified, losing its transparency. He took the bowl in his hand, and put the other hand over it. *Shlurrrp*. The mud slowly sucked into the left hand, up the arm, and into Erebus’ body’s core, where it dissolved completely. This took no longer than two minutes.

“Holy shit,” the mother and son said simultaneously. She was so surprised with how quickly he ate the entire bowl of mud that she almost dropped the tool that allowed her to see Erebus, which reminded her of a question she forgot about.

“Erebus, is there any way I could see you without holding this thing?”

“As long as it’s close to your body, you should be able to see me. But putting it in your pocket sounds like a bad idea.”

“Right. I don’t want to sit on it and stab my ass or anything. So what about a necklace like Joel’s? Would that work?”

“I don’t see why not. But how would you attach it?”

“Could we drill a hole in it?”

“I guess you could try, but be careful with that thing.” Erebus stroked his chin. “But you can’t just get another if it breaks. Wait. I think I know someone who might be able to help you.”

“An aurora?” Joel asked.

“Yeah. There’s an old warehouse on the west side of Clineston. We should be able to find my friend there.”

After about 30 minutes, the food arrived.

“I don’t eat human food, but I gotta say, this looks...really good.”

“If auroras can’t eat pizza, then I would never want to be one.” Joel said between bites.

“We can, but it’s a waste if we can just suck up some dirt and get more out of that. We only have four senses, and the one we don’t have is taste.”

“So doesn’t that mean you could eat anything?”

“I think I get it, Joel. Erebus is saying that because he has no sense of taste, it is best to just consume something that can be found almost anywhere: dirt.”

“Rocks would work too, but that takes more time to eat.”

“What about sand?”

“Come on, Joel, don’t you remember? Sand is just tiny pieces of rocks.” It had been a few years since he had studied that kind of thing in school.

“So why did you say the pizza looks really good if you can’t taste things?”

“I meant it looked really nice. You know, like a painting or something.”

Joel checked his watch. It was already almost midnight.

“Anyway, tomorrow’s Sunday. I have school on Monday. If we’re gonna check that warehouse out, tomorrow would be best. What do you say, Mom? Erebus?” They both nodded in agreement.

The trio was ready and out the door before 10 AM. This time, though, they took Claire’s car, a tiny bright green two-seater. Erebus, obviously too large to fit inside, said

he would meet them there and that he would get there eventually.

“It sucks that he can’t ride with us, but that’s to be expected.”

“Well, he could’ve listened to me and just strapped himself to the top of the car, but he simply wouldn’t have it.”

“Uh, Mom, he’s not just some luggage.”

“You’re right. But how much later will he get there than us?”

The roads were relatively empty here on Sunday mornings, so they got to their destination within about twenty minutes. When they stepped out of the car, the first thing that Claire heard was a crash. It sounded a lot like the noise that accompanied the monolith at the beach, but this was a completely different location. What was so special about an abandoned warehouse? That’s when Joel spoke up.

“Mom, I think the auroras tend to show up in empty areas. Think about it. I fought one at the old construction site no one goes to anymore. You fought one at the beach at night when there were very few people. And there’s supposed to be one here. We’re probably the only people here.”

“That’s right, kid, we don’t like places with a lot of people, so this warehouse is perfect for an aurora to hang out at. Claire, you’ve raised a smart one here.” Erebus arrived before she could answer her son’s observations. “Well, let’s go inside. I let him know we’d be coming, so he should be inside waiting for us.”

“You got here a lot faster than I thought!” Claire adjusted her large glasses and looked at their blue companion.

“Cut me some slack, I’m not as big as that other aurora you met.”

“You’re still pretty big, man,” Joel interjected.

“Alright boys, let’s just go inside. I’m eager to meet this aurora.”

“I should warn you guys. He’s...quirky.” This just made Claire quicken her pace. Once she stepped foot inside the building, she gasped. At the far side of the room was a large wall with a pattern that looked a lot like the one engraved into the device she acquired at the beach a day earlier. The patterns were not identical, but if the symbols were some sort of language, they were definitely written in the same one. The other walls were covered in chipped paint, but this wall was the same color as the tablet Claire held in her hand.

“You can come out now.” Erebus lowered himself to the ground and moved to the far left corner of the room.

“Ah, there you are.” Emerging from a pile of old tiles was another aurora. But unlike all of the auroras Joel and Claire had met so far, this one was small. He couldn’t have been taller than three feet. His body was an eye-piercingly bright yellow. It was so bright that it made its white eyes seem dull in contrast. As for its shape, this aurora’s body was covered with a slightly darker yellow exoskeleton that resembled the horseshoe crabs and other crustaceans that could often be found on the nearby beach.

“I didn’t think the one who you spoke of would be this young, Erebus! You’d better make sure you help him out. He’s going to need it.” His voice was surprisingly deep for someone this tiny.

“I got that covered. Already gave him the Magnos pendant. But that’s not why we’re here, Eithos.” Erebus shifted his gaze to Claire, who stepped forward and introduced herself. Eithos jumped up with its froglike hind legs and suspended himself in the air in order to make appropriate eye contact with Claire without having to look up. He hated

looking up at people. Or rather, he hated it when people looked down to see him. He drifted closer to Claire so he could see what she had in her hand.

“Ah, yes. The Magnosian slab you spoke of. You wish to be able to wear it, yes, Claire?”

“If you could do that for me, I would be very grateful,” Claire clasped her hands together as she spoke, “but how long would this take? I want to help stop the renegade auroras, but we don’t just have infinite time. And after all, Joel’s a student. It would be best if he did not have to cut school for this, so I’m glad I was given this opportunity.”

“No need to worry. I can definitely do this very quickly. All I ask of you is one thing.”

“I’ll do anything to help my son!”

“There’s someone I need you to find for me. His name is—“

“Jade.” Even though the name came from her mouth, a grim look spread across Claire’s face.

Erebus and Joel had no idea about any of this, but Eithos obviously knew something important. Claire needed to find him. She needed to find Jade.

“I intended to keep this to myself, but it looks like I have to come clean. I’ve been looking for Jade for years. Lately, I’ve made quite a few breakthroughs, but he still manages to elude me every time.

“Hold up, Mom. Who is this Jade guy? Why did you want to keep this all a secret from everyone?”

“He’s,” she put her hand on her forehead and closed her eyes, letting out a soft sigh,

“your father.”

Joel stepped back. His legs began to shake. “You said he was dead! Was that all a lie?”

“Thirteen years ago, a meteorite just like the one you encountered crashed here. You were just a toddler at the time, so I don’t expect you to remember it, but your father went out to investigate. He never returned. And for three years, I never saw or heard from him at all. But just the other day, I looking through some photos I found online and in one of them, I saw someone who looked just like him walking by. It had to be him. He even had the scars on his cheek that your father had.”

“This...is a lot to take in...”

“I know. I’m sorry for keeping it from you. It’s just...I didn’t think I should tell you about it when you were so young, and I got so caught up in trying to find him, that I eventually convinced myself that I shouldn’t tell anyone about him. But you’re my son, and you’re almost an adult. It’s time I acknowledge you as my equal. I’m so sorry, Joel.”

Eithos spoke up. “I’m certainly surprised that you know of Jade, and have such a strong link to him, but I guess that saves me the trouble of introducing him. Now on to the reason why I need you to find him. To put it bluntly, I’m pretty sure he’s working against your efforts.”

“What, you mean my dad’s trying to destroy Clineston? Why?”

“That’s not something I have an answer to, Joel, but I do have a theory.”

“So? What have you been speculating, Eithos?” Claire was speaking in a much lower voice now.

“He disappeared when he went to investigate a meteorite, right? Just like Joel here did. Except Joel didn’t disappear. What I think might have happened is that he met one of the auroras who is behind this whole scheme.”



“Is this someone you might know?” Erebus almost lowered his gaze to look at Eithos but before he could, Eithos met his eyes mid-air.

“Considering how many of us auroras there are, it’s unlikely that either of us would know them, but there’s always a tiny possibility, I guess. Do you know of any other auroras that live in the general area?”

“No, I don’t. But I could maybe try searching.” The antenna extended from his head. “There are some more of us here, but I can’t tell how many. I’m thinking three to five, tops.”

“What makes you say that?” Asked Claire.

“I’m picking up mixed signals. It’s concentrated in three areas, but this could mean more than one thing.”

“Do you mean there could be multiple auroras in the same place? Is this a thing?” Joel remembered that all of the auroras he and his mother had encountered so far were by themselves.

“We do come together occasionally like Erebus and I are right now, but we usually spend most of our time alone. There would have to be a specific reason for such a gathering. And taking into account the situation at hand, there are probably more than just two or three auroras gathered. Where are these locations, Erebus?” Eithos seemed to have most of the scenario’s basics figured out.

“The biggest signal is coming from that direction.” Erebus pointed a huge arm north.

“Northern Clineston is a mostly a residential area,” Claire explained. “But there also might be a good chance that Jade is hiding out there. Listen, I’ve been following a website that has been documenting a ‘strange green-hooded man’s’ appearances. He

showed up recently near the water tower.”

“The water tower? Why would dad be there?”

“I’m sorry, Joel. I never told you much about him, did I? Jade—your father—was one of the people that helped design that thing. Its unique double-orb shape was his idea. Maybe because of this, I’ve been grasping, hoping that somewhere, there is a part of his old self left. We need to find out. I had been meaning to go there, so this is the perfect chance. But now that I’m not alone, I feel like a new woman. I feel like I can confront him.” She looked at her son with a sad but warm smile. “But first and foremost, I will protect you, Joel. I was protecting you from the wrong things all this time. I kept the truth from you, hoping it would just go away.

“And if you are going to protect him, you will need my help,” Eithos interjected as he floated between the two humans. A small click could be heard and his left hand twisted a couple of times, speeding up gradually until it was so fast, all that could be seen was a blur.

“Claire, dear, could you please hold out that artifact you brought?” She thrust it out with both hands to keep it steady and Eithos’ hand spit out a gooey substance neither human had seen before.

“Good job so far. Now just keep it steady and it’ll be done soon.” With this, his other hand started to move similarly, but this one gave off heat. The heat helped the substance dry off quickly, but before it could completely dry, Erebus handed Eithos a long loop of nylon which he dipped into it.

“This reminds me of the orthodontist. I’m glad you never had to go to one, Joel.”

“Is it in place? Try tugging on the cord, Claire.” Claire did as Eithos said and gave it a

tug, but no matter how hard she pulled, it would not be separated from the nylon.

“Incredible!”

“Think nothing of it. Now you should be able to wear it on you at all times.”

“Well, not always. Seems weird to shower with it.”

“Shut up, Erebus.”

“I guess he does have a point. But is this really going to be all I need to fight auroras with?”

“You’d be surprised with that thing’s versatility. It came from Magnos, after all.” Eithos seemed to know something, so Claire looked at him expectantly.

“Magnos is not a barren planet, as you might guess. Of course, I’ve never been there, since it’s too far away for me to travel, but on Magnos exists a civilization far more advanced than any on Earth. In fact, the relic you found is probably from antiquity and that’s why it looks so archaic.”

“You call *this* archaic?!” Joel accidentally raised his voice out of surprise and stroked the back of his neck in embarrassment, apologizing silently. Eithos lowered himself to the floor and moved to the center of the room.

“Take a look at *this*.” He got down on all fours and applied force to a certain section of the floor and it glowed bright blue. The entire floor began to pulse, sending out radials of blue as three-faced pyramid emerged from the ground. It looked like it was metal, but it was pure white and gave off a strong glare from the lights above. Erebus floated backwards.

“You never told me about this—what is this?!”

“It’s still quite damaged, Erebus, but I’ve been working on it for about thirteen years

now. It's a spacecraft. From Magnos."

"Wait, back up, did you say thirteen years?" Joel put two and two together.

"Does this have something to do with Jade?"

"That's what I believe. Whoever was in this thing might have found your father, Joel.

And they are likely the one behind his disappearance. But why would they do this? That's what we need to find out."

"It seems pretty likely. This thing could not have come from Earth. There's no way. And like you said, it far outclasses what I have in terms of technology. Tomorrow, I need to go to the water tower and try to find him. It's been over a decade. He left us behind and I think we're entitled to some answers." She turned to her son, who nodded and spoke up.

"And I don't want our town to be destroyed. I mean, it's good that it's not some stereotypical plot to destroy the world that we have to stop, but a town is still a big deal. Why Clineston though? Is there something special about it?"

"I was beginning to wonder when one of you would raise this question. Deep in the valley at the center of this locale lies a magnetic core. That core, as you probably heard from Erebus, is having its magnetism increased by the auroras we are working against."

"But how are they doing this? Could you guys do that, too?" Joel knew there was a clear difference between good and bad auroras based on the behaviors he had seen so far, but he still had many unanswered queries.

"Right, I was going to get to that. If an aurora focuses all of its energy into something, it can make it metallic. In this aspect, we're pretty similar to the meteorite from Magnos that imbued your hair with its metallic coat."

“Erebus told me you auroras have been on Earth longer than us humans. But here, it makes it sound like you guys are from Magnos. What’s going on with this?” Before Eithos could answer, Claire voiced her own answer.

“You auroras might bear similar appearances to certain animals, but you guys really do seem otherworldly. If I had to guess, I’d say your kind came here from Magnos eons ago, and you’re the descendants of those auroras.” Erebus was blown away by the conclusion she had come to.

“As an aurora, not even I could explain it that well!”

“It’s like she’s the aurora and you’re the human,” Joel said.

Eithos now turned his back to the group and floated to the top of the pyramid-shaped spacecraft.

“Speaking of cores, what I need to finally finish repairing this craft is an energy core. Now, there’s just one problem. The core can only come from something that’s been turned into metal.”

“So couldn’t we cut off part of my hair? It’ll grow back, anyway, even if it is metal now.”

“That’s true, but what we need is deep inside of it, and if we cut out that part, you’d, well, die.”

“You’re *not* cutting his hair,” Claire stepped in front of her son protectively.

“Of course, I never would have even considered it.” Eithos was a levelheaded aurora, after all. Erebus, who had tensed up, relaxed once more.

“What about you auroras? You said something can be turned into metal if you focus all of your energy on it, right?”

“Basically, what would happen to us is the same thing as what would happen to you if the

core were cut out of your hair. We'd die, too. If an aurora was dying, though, it might make sense to do this. The same would apply to a human with a metallized body part, I suppose, although I've never seen either situation before."

"So does this mean that the auroras trying to increase the magnetism of Earth's core have death wishes?" Claire seemed somewhat concerned for them, even if they were her enemies.

"Not necessarily. They're just sacrificing themselves for what they believe to be a greater cause."

"And that cause is?" Joel asked.

"They want to unite Earth and Magnos." Erebus answered this time.

"But why, Erebus?" Joel turned to his blue companion.

"Some auroras believe that it is the destiny of the auroras to return to Magnos, but because it is so far from Earth, travelling there would be impossible. After all, this is just one spacecraft and it's not even fully functional at the moment. And they don't even know about it. If your father's working with anyone, it's definitely an aurora committed to this cause. They're probably the leader, actually."

"The leader?" Do you know them?"

"I've never met them, but I do know there's a leader. If you can take out this aurora, there's a chance the other auroras will cease their struggle. Auroras would survive an impact created by Magnos colliding with Earth, but there's no way humans—or any other terrestrial life. Magnos isn't big enough to do anything like destroy Earth, but it's enough to completely wipe out Clineston."

"So here's the rundown: find your dad, find and stop the aurora in charge of this

stupid shit, and everything's golden. If you can't do this, you can say goodbye to your home, I guess." Erebus's casual tone strongly contrasted with his small friend's much more refined one.

"We're not just going to back off and leave this place behind. We've both spent our entire lives here."

"I like your answer. And I'm assuming you feel the same, Joel?" Eithos turned his smile to the boy.

"Yeah, of course. This is a lot of stuff to process, but it's do or die, since I don't plan on leaving town."

"Very well. You should head to the water tower now. If you're lucky, you'll find who you're looking for."

8

Once again, Claire and Joel got into the car and set out. Erebus followed behind at his own pace. Eithos stayed behind, though, because someone had to watch over the spacecraft from Magnos. While in the car, Joel asked his mother a question:

"Mom, are you sure you're ready for this? I didn't really know Dad, but you spent a lot of time with him."

"If I said I wasn't prepared, what would we do? We need to set those kinds of feelings aside if we want to protect this place. I'm sorry, Joel. I know that makes me sound heartless, but it's the truth."

"Yeah, you're right. Just remember you don't have to bear this alone."

When they got there, Erebus was already waiting for them. They exited the small car and immediately it started to rain. They looked up only to be greeted with about a dozen green winged creatures—more auroras. Each had four wings, six legs, and long, sharp mandibles.

“They’re even tinier than Eithos. Alright, I’ve got this.” Joel rolled his neck and cracked his knuckles. He waited for the first one to dive down at him and when it did, he feinted out of its attack. As it turned around, he swung his head horizontally, completely destroying the enemy. Joel continued in this manner while Claire, who had removed her weapon from around her neck and held it in her hand, started doing similar maneuvers with it.

“You guys have some *real* chemistry in battle, I gotta say!” Erebus was shocked with the combat prowess Claire was exhibiting. She gave off the aura of a seasoned fighter despite only just having become acquainted with her weapon.

“This is our family we’re dealing with. We need to pull ourselves together. Now where could he be? Erebus, could you please—“

“Already on it. I think he’s above us. Probably at the top of the tower. Wipe out the rest of these and let’s go find him.”

By now, there were only a few of the aurora bugs left. One of them, likely the leader, made a loud buzzing noise. The buzzing was even louder than the rainfall that had increased in noise over the course of the battle. It was so strong that they had to cover their ears. While they did this, more flew into the scene and they huddled together.

“They’re interlocking legs and pincers!” Joel lunged forward in an attempt to stop them, but a whip made of bugs shot out from the mass and smacked him out of the way. Erebus



rushed over to him and luckily he was in a close enough range to use his power to ease the fall.

“Don’t be so rash, Joel!” Claire shouted from the other side of the enemies.

The whip retracted back into the mass of insect like auroras. No sooner had two thick leg like appendages emerged from the bottom of it.

“Erebus, what’s going on?!”

“They must have been told to stop us from entering the tower. They’re using strength in numbers to force us away. You’re going to have to stop it before it fully forms. At that point, it’ll be almost unstoppable.”

On the left, an arm started to form. Claire, noticing that Joel was hacking away at the legs, took this opportunity to slash at its upper body. Fortunately it was not yet taller than her. Each time she cut into the swarm of bugs, the buzzing increased whenever some of the auroras were defeated, they disintegrated, but more quickly replaced them.

“It’s not working! They just keep coming!” Joel shouted over at Claire.

*He’s right. We’re not getting anywhere. We need a new strategy.* Claire then noticed that Erebus’ antenna had reemerged.

“We need to take out the hive!” It’s in that tree over there!” He pointed a few yards away at a tall sycamore tree that was way too tall for either human to reach.

“Joel, I have a plan. Hold them off until I’m done. Erebus, try to distract them, too.”

“You know I’m not a fighter!”

“Figure something out, then! Please!” And with that, she ran over to the tree, leaving her son and the blue aurora to manage the scene in front of the water tower. *If my prediction is right...*

She clasped both hands around the weapon from Magnos and squeezed it tighter than ever before. Sure enough, the blade extended even further. *Thanks to that pendant, Joel should be light enough to walk across this if I angle it diagonally up against the tree.*

Claire tightened her grip around the Magnosian tablet, extending the blade long enough to make the foothold for her son to walk across. She grabbed it so hard, her knuckles whitened.

“Joel! Get over here! Hold them off, Erebus!”

“Will you be alright without me?”

“I’ve got it; it’ll be fine if you’re quick enough. Go, Joel!” *I never thought I’d end up having to use this, but oh well. Here goes.*

His already huge arms bulked up even more and he raised them up. Veins bulged out as he concentrated all of his strength into his arms. They were no longer transparent at all. They became completely solid, in fact. With them, he grabbed ahold of the enemies, spun the conglomeration of auroras around a few times, and launched them miles away.

“Damn...” Joel exclaimed as he made his way over to Claire.

“Great! Now you should be able to take out the hive before they return! And then we’ll be able to take it out without it regenerating. Go, Joel! You’re light enough!”

Joel carefully walked, one foot in front of the other, up the narrow blade held by his mother until he finally reached the hive from which the auroras were coming. It had the same grooves in it that beehives do, but it was black and a lot larger. He gave it two strong slices, making an X-shaped cut in the front. It started to leak out more auroras, but he continued cutting it open, ignoring the cuts they were making on his face. Eventually, it completely fell apart. With one last cut, he destroyed its remains and the majority of its

remaining occupants. He ran about two thirds back down the Magnos blade and jumped to the ground, relieving Claire of the grip she was maintaining all this time.

“You did it!”

“Yeah. Let’s take care of the rest so we can find Dad already. We deserve some answers.” They made their way back over to where Erebus was so they could relieve him, too, of his burdensome task.

“I’m glad you’re done. I can’t hold out much longer. I’m shrinking them back, guys.” His arms regained their transparency and lost their excessive bulkiness over time.

“Alright, Joel, aim for the legs and once it falls, I’ll go around and strike from the back,” Claire took command, sounding more confident than ever.

Joel did as ordered and chopped his hair right into the middle of the formation’s left leg, which dug about halfway into it. *I’m gonna need to put even more pressure on it.* He tensed up his neck muscles and tens of auroras were destroyed as he cut even deeper. When he finally tore through the last few ligaments of auroras, it completely collapsed, giving Claire the chance she needed. She nimbly circled it until she was behind it, unleashing the power of Magnosian technology on the auroras with a determined squeeze of her right hand. She pierced right through the center of its body, making its body deteriorate even more. In one final attack, Joel and Claire, not even needing to speak to know what to do, thrust their weapons into each side of its torso, finally vanquishing the amalgamation of auroras. With a few final buzzes, the last few auroras perished.

“It hurts seeing my kind go through this, but there’s no other way.” Erebus looked over at his allies, then up at the water tower.

“I hope if we find Jade, he can lead us to the cause of all of this. I don’t want any needless fighting.” Claire, no longer blocked by the enemies, started for the spiral staircase that wrapped around the tower. Joel followed and Erebus made their way over, too. After they climbed the first few steps, the rain intensified. The higher they went, the more soaked they got.

“You’re lucky the rain just falls right through you, man.” Joel looked back at Erebus as they climbed the stairs.

“Hey, just be grateful you don’t have to worry about your hair getting messed up anymore.”

“It’s already been messed up *plenty*, dude.”

“Fair enough.”

Lightning ripped through the sky as they reached the apex of the water tower. At the top, there was a man wearing a green cloak. The same cloak in the photos on that website. Sensing company, his posture tensed up, but he did not turn around. Claire was the first one to act.

“I’ll save us the trouble and just get it out of the way. I know it’s you, Jade. And we’re not afraid to fight for answers.” Joel could see the sorrow in her eyes and put his hand on her shoulder.

“Mom, don’t forget I’m here. I’m gonna help.”

Finally, the Green Man turned around, revealing his face. Sure enough, he had the two scars on his cheek that made Claire absolutely sure he was Jade.

“Could he be...?”

“Yeah. Our son.”

“She’s been looking for you for *years*. You’d better have a damn good answer as to why because I’m not afraid to kick my own dad’s ass.”

“He’s serious. You’d better be careful.”

“An aurora? Then that thing on your head...”

“Alright, you’re definitely on my shit list now. Don’t dis the ‘do.’”

“Joel, he’s talking about the fact that it’s metal now.”

“Right, but he’s still on my shit list.” He turned his gaze back to Jade. “Do you have any idea how much hell she’s been through because of you? She could never move on because she didn’t have the closure she needed. You just disappeared with no explanation at all. And then she finds out you’re still around? I’m embarrassed to call myself your son!”

“Joel...”

“I’ll explain what I can, but the rest is up to whether or not you qualify.”

“Qualify? I don’t get understand.”

“The night I disappeared, I went to investigate a meteorite. Based on your hair, this should sound familiar to you.”

“Then you—“ Before Joel could finish his sentence, Jade tore off his cloak. What Joel saw effectively silenced him. His entire right arm, and probably more, was metal. His elbow and shoulder in particular ended with jagged triangular protrusions. The sleeve of the sweater he wore was cut off to accommodate for the metallic arm. The digits on his hand looked a lot more like claws than fingers. He loosely formed it into a fist and it

sounded like knives scraping up against a sheet of steel. Everything on his body that was turned into metal was a dark, almost black gray.

“So we’re the same, you see.”

“I’m surprised, but why did you not come back home? After it happened to me, I did.”

Jade put his normal arm in the pocket of his baggy pants, sighed, and looked at the ground.

“I guess I can’t dodge that question any longer, can I? When my arm first became like this, I met an aurora, just like you probably did.” He gestured towards Erebus.

“You mean—“ Erebus flinched with shock.

“I met the one who started this whole plan to unite Magnos and Earth. As you probably know, the place where it is most magnetic on Earth is right under where we live. This place will be destroyed. This aurora, she also told me about the cores that exist within my arm and your hair.” He raised one long, sharp finger and pointed it at his son’s head.

“I knew that eventually, someone else would obtain the same ability as me, but to think it would be our son... What a cruel twist of fate this turned out to be, Claire.”

“The only cruel thing about this situation is that you left us! We would have accepted you!”

“You never *did* know how to drop things, Claire. But if you had given up, Joel here probably never would have found me. So I guess I should thank you.” A weak, forced smile appeared on his face.

“What are you getting at?”

“I know how to stop her. You met an aurora that found a spacecraft, right? He made it seem like he was the only one who knew about it, but she knows of it, too. And she told

me that if I could find a way to repair it and steal it for her, she would call off the plan because she could go to Magnos. That's all she wants."

"So we'd be saving our home, but one of us would need to die, is that it? There's got to be another way. You suck, but I don't want to *kill* you, Dad!

"That's what I've been doing all these years. I've been trying to find out another way to get my hands on a core, but it hasn't been going well. I had no choice but to search alone; I couldn't drag my family into it. You should've just stayed out of this. But now that you're here, there really are no further options. There's no time to search for another way." Jade raised his metallic arm and beckoned his son.

"You made it this far, so you must have become strong. It pains me to fight my own flesh and blood to the death, but this is one life versus all of Clineston. One of us will perish here.

Hot, frustrated tears welled up in Joel's eyes.

"Just when I came to terms with these powers, I find out I need to kill my dad in front of my mom?!"

"I'm sorry, Joel, I really am. But it's inevitable. Now," he raised his arm once more.

"Now let's start!" Joel charged head first, shouting at the top of his lungs. Behind him, Claire stood, her legs shaking, her face distorted by anguish. Joel threw jerked his head towards his father but each time he did this, Jade caught the hair with his claw. After this happened several times, Jade finally threw him to the ground.

"You need to slow down! You're not going to get anywhere rushing like that!" Jade put his normal arm in his pocket and let his shoulders relax.

"How the hell are you so calm about this, Dad?!" Joel snarled through gritted teeth.

“Perhaps you’ll understand when you’re older. That is, *if* you win.” Without warning, Jade lurched forward, arm ready to slash through whatever it met. Joel braced himself for the impact of his father’s claw, but just when he was about to strike him, Jade backed away, turned around, and jabbed his sharp elbow backward. Sparks ignited as the two steel surfaces clashed. Joel, however, overpowered Jade when he focused all of his strength into his neck muscles. The sparks ceased and the protrusion coming from Jade’s elbow broke off, but not before leaving a decently sized scratch on the surface of Joel’s steel imbued hair. The chipped off piece of Jade’s weapon flew off, making a clanging noise when it fell to the ground. Not used to being without the extra weight of his weaponized elbow, he lost his balance and fell to one knee.

“Not bad. I didn’t think you’d see through my feint, Joel.” Joel was surprised, but he didn’t want to show this side of him to his father. Jade reached for where the part of his weapon broke off. “Now I’ve just got my elbow and hand. At least I didn’t feel anything when that came off. I didn’t know what to expect.” A dark purple liquid oozed from his wound. It was a lot more viscous than blood, though. “So I guess this replaces blood, huh?” The bone in his elbow stuck out a little, but it was black.

Joel looked back to see if Claire and Erebus were okay, but Claire was gone. He quickly turned back to Jade and there she was, with the piece of his chipped off elbow to his throat.

“There’s one thing you didn’t consider, Jade. Joel’s not the only one who came here ready to fight.” Jade tried to raise his shoulder to pry her off, but Claire took her Magnosian tablet hanging from her neck and activated the blade, disarming his shoulder. “Now, Joel!”



Seconds later, Joel made a beeline for his father's arm. Aiming for the elbow joint, he struck it with such force that the part beneath it was completely severed. Black bones and dark purple revealed themselves, the sight of which made Joel fall to the ground and gag, eyes wide open. The dark blood slowly spilled from both ends of the arm.

"Well done. I wasn't sure which of us would emerge victorious, but what really matters is that someone gets a core to her. To Corona..."

"How? How do we get the core?" Joel asked through breaths.

"My inner elbow. Cut it out from there. You'll know it when you see it."

Claire showed the tablet to her estranged partner.

"This was able to cut your shoulder because it came from Magnos. Joel, you shouldn't have to see this. Look away." Claire was no longer shaking, but Joel looked into her eye that he could see and could feel the despair emanating from her. It was as though she was surrounded with an impenetrably thick aura of sadness. By now, Jade had lain down on his back and Claire knelt beside him. Joel felt like he shouldn't be there, like if he weren't there, they could have had some moment of reconnection, but he knew he should be there as a pillar of support for his mother. And deep down, he wanted to witness his father's final moments.

"Claire, I know you'll never stop pursuing irregularities in this world, but please promise me you'll take care of yourself." His voice was beginning to sound weak. He was losing a lot of blood. He turned to his son.

"Joel, I know I wasn't there for you when you needed me, but I did what I thought was right. I was fighting for the entire town. I—"

“Ah, shut up already. I’ve figured it out already. I get it. I can’t say I forgive you, but I know you meant well.” Joel had a difficult time maintaining eye contact with his dying father.

“Listen, both of you. And you, too, over there.” He raised his remaining arm and pointed to Erebus. “When you take my core, you need to take it to the aurora with the ship. I was going to steal it, but since you know him, he should help you out if you explain the situation.”

“Okay, we promise.”

“We’ll do it, Dad.”

“One last thing. Take this.” From his pocket, he produced a device that looked somewhat like Claire’s weapon, but it was round and much more compact. “This, too, is from Magnos. You’ll need this adaptor to fit the core into the machine. Now, take the core. Do it.”

Claire winced, but she knew it was time. There was no more room for delays. And she wasn’t going to let her son take his life instead. She raised the weapon above Jade’s open wound and dug in. Joel had to turn around to avoid seeing the visceral details, but just the thought of what was going on made him sick, so he decided to watch after all.

“Don’t worry about me. It doesn’t hurt at all. I feel nothing.” Jade might have meant this, but he still winced from the thought of his arm being excavated in search of something that never should have even been there in the first place. At last, after about three minutes, Claire’s tool hit something round. It was a dark orb, a swirl of black and purple, slightly transparent like the auroras, and no larger than a golf ball.

“Thank you, Claire. I knew you’d find me. You always did, after all, no matter how long it took. But this was the longest yet. I’m sorry for putting you through this. Claire, Joel, look after each other.” His body went limp and it was over. Jade was no more. Claire rose to her feet and gave the core and adaptor to Joel, speaking only with her eyes.

10

The rain subsided for a moment and a taunting voice echoed in everyone’s heads: “So the man from thirteen years ago is dead? You must be the next one to acquire powers from Magnos.”

“Who are you?” Joel looked all around, but could not find the speaker.

“I’m sure he already told you who I am, child.”

“Corona...Queen Corona.” Erebus was the one to answer her.

“Queen?”

“Well, she’s not really royalty or anything, but she calls herself leader of us earthbound auroras, or at least that’s what I’ve heard.”

“I am the queen of auroras, but that’s not enough.”

“What are you going on about?” Joel was pretty agitated now, and not having someone to glare at was not helping.

“Earth and Magnos. They will become one. And I will take my place as the ruler of the new world!”

“Show yourself, you coward!”

The aurora queen Corona materialized over Jade's corpse, looking down at him, then at Joel. She was a few feet shorter than Erebus, but gave off a much more intimidating vibe. The center of her body and her eyes were pure red, but everything else on her body was covered with swirling molten tones of gold, yellow, and orange. She stood on two lean but muscular legs and her arms were about the same. Unlike all of the other auroras they had met thus far, this one had hair on her head, although it was more like long fibers made up of flames than anything else. There was one thing that set her apart from the other auroras Joel and Claire had met thus far, though: Corona was not transparent. They had to assume she would be able to directly touch them, and that made her all the more dangerous.

"There's something you should know. That bit about me returning to Magnos was a lie I told to that man just so I could eliminate one of you without having to get involved.

"You...!"

"You mean Jade died for nothing?"

"Well, I would not say his death was entirely pointless. It meant I did not have to dirty my hands until now. But I suppose it was only a matter of time before I had to do something."

"You conniving coward!" Joel snarled.

"Joel, even if what she says is true, she's just trying to taunt you. Keep your cool!"

"Yeah. You're right, Mom. This is it. I'm going to end this. Dad wasn't able to take her out, but I'm not going to repeat his mistakes. Mom, run. I don't know what'll happen when we clash, but it's not gonna be safe."

Claire turned her head to the stairs but a huge fiery red rock appeared out of

nothingness, blocking the way.

“That should prevent your escape. You’re going to die here. All three of you.”

“She’s right. We’re too high up to use my tool to climb down and the only exit is blocked off.”

“Erebus, you could escape. Just float away!” Joel said.

“Hey, we’re in this as a team. I’m not going anywhere, man. I need to see this through just as much as you do.”

“Erebus…”

“Stop wasting time! She’s not gonna wait forever!”

Corona raised an arm and extended a single finger towards the group. A thin red beam extended from out of the tip of the finger, nicking Joel’s earlobe as he narrowly dodged it. Blood gushed from the cut, but he had no time to nurse it. In retaliation, he tried to sidestep and make his way around Corona in order to cut her down from behind, but as he approached her side, she crossed her other arm and cut him again with another finger.

Claire, noticing that Corona’s fingers worked in a manner similar to her own weapon, extended her blade straight into Corona’s abdomen. It cut into her, but only halfway—Two more arms emerged from her shoulders and the hands yanked the blade right out. Claire clung tightly to the Magnosian weapon, which made the blade continue to grow, cutting up Corona’s hands in the process.

“Who said you could get involved? Stay out of this!” With a single pull, Corona raised the weapon over her head, throwing it and its user behind her, smashing her into a fence. Erebus didn’t have the leisure of going over to check to see if she was okay, but his

antenna indicated she was still breathing. She was thrown head-first into the fence and was unable to open one eye, but she still managed to get back up.

“Don’t give me that look, boys. I don’t back down so easily.” There was no sign of weakness in her voice, although blood was covering much of the right side of her face.

“Don’t scare us like that!”

“Joel, is your Mom really human?” Claire laughed in response.

“Yeah, she’s just too stubborn to die. Just like me.”

Queen Corona, now with four arms, warped right in front of Joel. She reached out with one of her original arms and grabbed him by the throat, pulling him in close. The hands were so hot that they burned the skin around his neck. Without even reflexively gasping for air, Joel jabbed his pompadour right into Corona’s upper body. She loosened her grip on his neck, allowing Claire to stagger behind her and touch her backside with her weapon. Once it touched her, she let out the blade, cutting straight through Corona’s body. Joel, predicting his mother would do something this rash, pried himself out of Corona’s grip and crouched to the ground, just avoiding Claire’s attack.

“You fools. A close-range weapon like that and a weapon that’s not even bound to your body will never take me down!” Corona’s laughter rivaled the thunder roaring across the turbulent sky. The storm only continued to increase in intensity. The rain rapidly fell in cartoonish, large drops. Claire’s brown hair darkened and plastered to her head and shoulders. The rain just fell through Erebus and Corona, though, and it bounced right off of Joel’s pompadour.

Once more, Corona pulled the blade out of her body. Almost immediately, the wound closed up.

*High-speed regeneration! What is she! I know she's strong, but this is ridiculous!*

*Joel, we need a new plan. This isn't gonna work.*

*Erebus? How are you talking to me? This is in my head!*

*I'm a sensory aurora. Remember? I forgot to tell you about this ability. Corona's not a sensory type, so she can't get in the way.*

*Can you patch in my mom?*

*It's limited to 2 people, sorry.*

*Okay, so what do we do?*

*You need to get her in the air.*

*What?*

*Her regenerative abilities go down the drain when she's not on the ground. Look at her feet!*

Joel looked at Corona's feet without moving his head. Tiny red fibers came from the heels and toes, weaving themselves through the material of the water tower.

*We need to cut those. That's where your Mom comes in. I just got done telling her about it. You just need to distract Corona.*

“Hey! Queen Morona! You boast about my weapon not being able to take you down, but you're not fighting me directly. Face me on equal footing!”

“You want me to fight you on equal footing? Fine. But you'll regret it.” Corona extended the finger of one of her new arms.

“You're just doing the same thing as before, Morona.”

“Think again.” She ripped the arm off, twisting it apart. She molded the bonelike frame that was inside the arm into a spear, took it in her dominant hand, and swung at Joel. Joel

managed to block it with his hair, but was soon sent flying. While the two collided, Claire crept up behind Corona and severed the fibers on Corona's feet with her Magnosian weapon. The usual *shnk* noise that could be heard whenever she released the blade couldn't even be heard over the deafening downpour. Corona, who was leaning towards Joel, barreled over and when she fell to the ground, he rammed his pompadour right into her gut. Claire darted over to them and, with the launch provided by her device, sent Corona high into the air.

Joel, without even being told to do so, ran up the blade, since it had by now propped up against the strong fence, and jumped into the air when he was beneath her. He raised his head skyward and at that exact moment, lightning tore through the heavens, aiming right for his metallic hair.

"He's using his hair as a lightning rod!" He withdrew his head swiftly, causing the electricity to flow through Corona's body instead of his own.

"You... YOU... YOU!!!" Her voice was an amalgamation of confusion, fury, and pain. Her limbs went limp as her whole body darkened, then turned bright red. She began to swell up, becoming filled with hot gas, and, before Joel could do anything to stop her, she flew into the sky with such speed that within seconds, she was no longer even in Earth's atmosphere.

"Damn, that's bright. I don't know how far away she went, but it's amazing we can still see her, even in this storm." Erebus said.

"Wait, something's happening!" Joel pointed at the glowing mass they saw in the sky.

Corona's body then exploded in what looked almost like a supernova. As if in reaction to this, the red rock she blocked the stairway with crumbled.



“Corona’s finally dead. That’s proof. When we auroras die, anything we might have summoned like that either disappear or fall apart.” The storm also subsided, revealing the usual blue sky. Claire stood over by Jade’s body once more. Joel walked up to her, knelt down, and looked at his father’s lifeless face.

*I did it, Dad. You can finally rest.*

11

Later that day, the group returned to the warehouse where Eithos was waiting.

“That was one wild storm! But now that it’s over, that must mean...”

“Yeah. We did it. She’s gone. The magnetism should stop now. And we...got the core.”

“If you have the core, then that means your father’s gone, too, right? I’m sorry for your loss, both of you.”

“Eithos, I want you to take this core. I have no use for it.”

“If I take this, I can finally go to Magnos. Honestly, though, I don’t even know if the atmosphere there is suitable for humans. But Erebus, you’re welcome to come with me.”

“I never thought I’d curse my own humanity but here I am wishing I were an aurora.”

Claire half-jokingly said.

“Thanks, but I’m staying here. Space travel is scary stuff!”

“Are you sure? I don’t know if I’ll be back, so this could be your last chance.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. I like it here. And after working to save Clineston, I feel really attached to it.”

“I guess this is goodbye, then.” Joel said.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done. Especially you. We couldn’t have come this far without you, Joel.”

“You should thank the pomp, not me.” He gestured at the metallic hair jutting out from the top of his head.