

SOMETHING YOU SHOULD know about me, that I can never forget, is that my sister is dead.

My sister—Brigid—died eight years ago, on the second story of my parents' darkened house, above their corpses on the lower floor. I'd found her body last. She was alone in her bedroom, her face crushed in, blood staining the floorboards. She died along with hundreds of thousands of other Kystrene in the most brutal attack so far of a proxy war between two other countries, a war that had nothing to do with us, but that killed her anyway.

Or so I'd thought.

Eight years later, as I knelt in a stolen spaceship, billions of miles from the ruin of our home, I got a message. *Dear Sean*, it said.

*Dear Sean,*

*I hope this message reaches you. I hope what I've heard is true, and you're still alive. Please forgive me for not trying to find you sooner—I thought you were dead. Why are you going by a different last name these days?*

*If you are alive, and this does reach you, then the group of Kystrene refugees who received this message will know where to send an answer.*

*Please, please reply as soon as you can—I need your help.*

*All my love,*

*Brigid*

Time hung still. Like standing in an empty house—no sound and no movement. I don't know about other people, but I often had dreams about empty rooms in darkened houses. Places I'd never been but that felt familiar anyway. Places where I was a child still, and a grown man all at once. Reading the message on the screen felt like being in that darkened house, more real and more urgent than anything I'd ever lived. My sister was dead. The message was from my sister.

And it was dated from six days ago.

I scrambled for the reply option, my fingers hitting the screen so fast I felt the impact in my bones. Six days! Eight years I'd thought my sister dead; here and now, I might miss her by six days—

LANGUAGE DETECTED: KYSTRENE.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO SWITCH YOUR LANGUAGE TO KYSTRENE?

I had to read the words three or four times before I realized that it was a text square, helpfully popped up by the *Viper*'s computers to obscure both Brigid's message and the response that I was actively typing. See, this was why nobody liked computers; no sense of social grace—

But the computer was right about one thing, at least. The message I'd received from my sister had been written in Kystrene. I'm good with languages—it is, arguably, my only talent—so Brigid could've sent me a message in, like, colloquial old Wentrese or something, and I could've translated it with a little time and a little mental strain. But the fact that she'd sent it to me in Kystrene made my heart go as taut as a cramped muscle. The computers of the *Viper*, my temporary and very much illegal spaceship residence, were set for Sister Standard. Sister Standard was the lingua franca of the Sister Systems and all the independent planets, and it was pretty much the only language I spoke regularly nowadays. But it wasn't my first language. My first language, the language of my home, was Kystrene. And Brigid's message had come to me in Kystrene.

But how? I'd seen Brigid's body. Had I... what, imagined it somehow? Had some sort of mental break? Or had I been mistaken? I didn't know how I could've imagined what I saw. Her body had been in her bedroom, soaked in its own blood. That wasn't the sort of thing you imagined. That was the sort of thing that happened to you, like a stamp on a white sheet, forever staining you with its imprint.

Fear crawled up my throat. I accepted the computer's suggested change in language from Sister Standard to Kystrene, mostly to make the notification go away; then, instead of proceeding with my reply, I switched to the original message and opened up the metadata. The message had been relayed through a network of Kystrene refugees, and in the process all information on its source had been erased. Standard procedure, to protect those of us who lived a little bit left of the law. But the names of receiver and the sender were still listed. Receiver, Sean Hart.

Sender, Brigid Hart.

I usually went by Wren nowadays—Sean Wren—but it wasn't my real last name. It wasn't even the first fake name I'd used since leaving Kystrom. I'd left my real family name buried with my family, but there it was. Hart.

The ground wobbled beneath me, like we'd gone through a rough gravity transition, even though we were parked firmly on the surface of the Republican planet Parnasse. I was already kneeling but that wasn't stable enough; I fell onto my hip, hard, on the stark metal floor. I'd

spent the last eight years grieving my family, keeping their memory alive in my heart like repetitively picking open a scab. But they'd still been dead. If Brigid *was* alive, then everything was different.

I had to find her.

I flicked back to the original message. The basic AI helpfully offered me some suggested responses, now written in stilted Kystrene:

*Thanks for reaching out!*

*My apologies for the delay.*

*I hope this message finds you well.*

For the love of God. I brushed all the suggestions aside.

*Brigid,*

*Where are you? I'm on a ship called the Viper. I'm sending you the SLC address. Tell me what you need and I'll come to you. Are you in trouble?*

*Sean*

The *Viper's* supra-luminal communicator address, or SLC address, was sort of like a phone number. I didn't know exactly how it worked; my former traveling companion Benny had once lectured me something about tachyons and instantaneous transmission and unique five-dimensional signatures. I'd nodded along, but really the inside of my head had been the mental equivalent of a little bird singing the same snatch of song on a loop. All that mattered in the end was that with the SLC address, Brigid could call me directly, no matter where I was, or where she had gone.

A broken-hearted murderer told me once that people could get stuck in the past, if their past was terrible enough. *My* past, up until the day I lost everyone and everything I loved, was wonderful. I'd do anything to return to those stolen times. But sometimes... sometimes I felt like my mind was stuck in a darkened house, looking down at the last member of my family dead upon the floor.

My reply had to be routed through the Kystrene refugees, which could take anywhere between five minutes and several days, before it would reach Brigid. I couldn't just wait here, but I couldn't seem to think straight, either.

I got up. My body had a goal, though my mind was blank; I emerged from my room and onto the balcony of the *Viper's* living area. The vast reinforced windows admitted the bright sunlight of Republican planet Parnasse, and the heat-hazy surface of the landing field where we'd set the *Viper* down. I'd been out in that sunshine just a few minutes ago. It felt like memories from another life.

Voices drifted down from the steps leading to the ship's bridge. I turned towards them as blindly as a leaf seeking sunlight.

"...comfort food, something homey. What do you think?"

"I think primarily of a food's nutritional purpose."

Sunlight streamed through the glass enclosure of the piloting cradle like light from a church window, and illuminated two figures pouring over a tablet, heads together. The woman was Tamara Gupta, her long dark hair pulled back into a messy ponytail and her big amber eyes intent on the screen of the tablet. Beside her was the Minister Indigo, shorter and slighter than Tamara, with a curious tilt to his head as he gazed at the tablet between them.

"I spent five years thinking exclusively about nutritional purpose," Tamara said. "We're getting something for the taste. Pikan food; fried dough if I can find it. There's this spice—Sean, what's wrong?"

They both looked at me. I opened my mouth, the truth sat like sacrament on my tongue. *Brigid is alive.*

That was when the first shot hit us.