

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black sleeveless dress, stands with her back to the camera on a checkered floor. She is looking out at a large, glowing blue planet with a bright light source behind it. The background is a dark space with blue and purple nebulae and stars. The text 'LISA JADE' is at the top and 'THE LAUNCH OF EDEN' is at the bottom.

LISA JADE

THE LAUNCH OF  
EDEN

## *Quell*

The sun is high in the sky, beating down on the dirty, faded streets of Q7. Along the walls people stand, some trying hopelessly to sell or trade whatever worthless items they were able to scavenge, others simply staring into space. The day is hot and the air seems to shimmer around them; but it's not a bright day. Instead the sky is green, the same murky, filthy colour it always is.

All that breaks the silence is the sound of our footsteps, and our hushed breathing.

I sidle up to a wall and press myself against it, leaning forward and peeking out and into the street. In the distance I can see them, two figures pulling a large cart filled with boxes. The figures hold guns, but I've never seen them use them. I glance behind me and grin.

"Right on time, girls. They're almost outside."

Both of my companions have very different reactions; one beams, flipping her hair back and growling in excitement. The other takes a pointed step back, reaching up and leaning against the wall for support.

"Hey, Alis," I whisper, "is she doing okay?"

Alis glances back at the younger girl, then shrugs.

"I don't know. She usually gets like this, though, just before a heist."

I wave one hand, getting her attention.

“Eva? Eva, come on. We need your focus right now.”

She shuffles a little, her large, dark eyes shining. Her fear is apparent, but there’s nothing I can do. She knows the rules; if she wants to run away, she can. We won’t hold it against her. I look away, leaning against the wall, and take a deep breath.

I take a moment to check myself before looking out. I grasp my long hair and tie it into a loose knot behind my head - I know better than to let it hang. People have been caught out by it in the past. Reaching up, I remove my shrug, instead wrapping the linen around my waist so that I can move freely. I motion to the others and we all crouch, slowly leaning forward to watch the progress of the cart.

As we sit in the scorching sun and wait for them to come closer, I try to focus on the boxes, and what’s inside them. Food, water, basic medicine. Clothing that is free of holes and stains. I focus on that, trying hard to think about anything other than the state we’re all in.

Just crouching this low is straining my body; I can feel muscles tensing in my legs, fighting to keep my body upright. I glance at my hand, unnerved by how it shivers. My thoughts turn to food and in a moment of silence, my stomach emits a loud, angry noise. I ignore it. Soon enough, it’ll all be worth it.

After a while, the cart and those pulling it come into sight. As they come closer my gaze travels up and down their bodies, and I let out an involuntary shudder. I may have lived here my whole life, and they may have been in control here long before that, but it never fails to unnerve me when I see them. The Thoughtless.

They’re human, as far as we can tell. They stride forward, in white plastic suits that cover everywhere but their faces. And where their faces should be are masks, luminous white, with what looks like a mass of silver wire sitting just behind it, right where their eyes should be. They don’t talk, at least not individually. We’ve been led to believe there’s a form of combined consciousness there, in the way they move and think and operate as one. I hate to admit it, but they’re a perfect fighting force.

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“Quell, now?” whispers Alis from behind me. I shake my head hard, forcing my feelings of discomfort further down.

“Just one more second... wait for it...”

The cart nears us, until it’s only a few feet away. As if on cue my body tenses, excitement prickling along my arms and up my spine. I can’t help but lick my lips as I prepare to pounce, the anticipation building inside me.

It’s go time.

The cart levels with us and I leap out, rushing forward and barging full force into one of the Thoughtless. Despite having done this before, I’m still taken aback by the total solidity of its body. It feels like rushing into a brick wall. But it’s enough. I slam it down to the ground, drawing the attention of both it and its companion. I’m thrown off immediately, but it takes a few seconds for the Thoughtless to right itself.

I try to stare at it, straight into its blank little face, but I can’t help seeing the others sneaking behind the cart. I stand up and pretend to fall again, clutching at my shoulder in faux pain.

“Ow! Oh goodness, I’m so sorry!”

They look at each other, clearly confused. Perhaps their hive mind is telling them that this is a trick, but they also can’t be completely sure. I raise my voice and shake my head.

“Honestly, I didn’t mean to bump into you like that! You see, I’ve been trying to get fit so I’ve been doing a lot of running lately, but I guess I’m still lacking in the grace department...”

The lies pour from my mouth, as excellent and well-versed as possible. I must have spent hours practising my lines, making sure I know just what to say during every scam, every heist. From the corner of my eye I can see the others, Alis boosting Eva up and onto the back of the cart. She lifts one of the boxes and moves it, pulling it towards the edge.

“I’m sorry,” I whine, “please don’t be angry at me, I promise you it wasn’t intentional.”

Suddenly they shift, and I stumble back. I know that movement, that turn of the head, the way they lean toward me. Like they're getting a good look. They're looking me up and down and trying to find out who I am, where I'm from. Then, I spy a glint of recognition.

My stomach drops.

"But I guess it's not a problem," I say, stepping back. I take a deep breath and smile brightly - after a few seconds they exchange glances, then carry on walking. The moment they pass me by I dart backward, jogging back. Alis and Eva nod at me, then take off running down the road.

I stay low as the cart progresses, hiding behind it. Lifting one hand, I nudge the box towards me. It tilts, then falls. I catch it, whip around, and start running.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of Alis and Eva splitting up, each running in different directions. I turn back to the path I'm on and turn off it, rushing down a dirty alleyway. My feet smack the floor hard, and I propel myself forward. This is the dangerous bit; if I get caught now, that's it.

I run for about half an hour until my legs give out, and I find myself sprawling on the ground. I spring to my knees, coughing in the dust, and look around. I'm still near the town, on a nameless street not unlike the one we were on before. It's much the same here. Dusty concrete as far as the eye can see, and broken, tiny slums made of scrap metal lining the paths. I glance up; but I can't see beyond the green-grey smoke in the sky.

It seems safe enough, so I climb slowly to my feet, gather up the box and start walking. I'd be lying if I said I knew all the roads in the Sector, but my sense of direction is second to none. I turn around and head back down the road, clutching the box to my chest. As I walk, I catch glimpses of people along the sides of the road. Some are trying to sell odd scraps, but most are simply sitting there, staring blankly into the distance. Almost every woman clutches an infant to their chest, their eyes filled with a warmth that's unusual to see around here.

A couple of children chase each other, one stumbling and running into my leg.

"H-hey!"

They look up at me with wide, dark eyes, and I laugh.

"Don't look so scared, it's alright. Just be careful, okay? The Thoughtless won't be happy if you run into them, trust me."

They nod, and scamper off. I chuckle and roll my eyes. It's nice to see some life around here.

It takes me about an hour to find my way back - and once I get there, I find that Alis and Eva have beaten me. They're standing in the square, next to the old well, grinning from ear to ear.

"Thank heavens," smiles Alis, "you took so long, we were worried you'd been caught."

"You underestimate me," I tell her, "I just had to get out of range."

"I can't believe we did it."

We both pause, turning to watch Eva. Her eyes grow wide, and she stares at the box in my arms with a combination of pride and hunger. I pass it over to Alis and loop one arm around Eva's shoulder.

"Yeah, couldn't have done it without you, kid."

She grins, and I can tell she's proud. I can't blame her, either; it takes a fair bit of courage to agree to join a heist, and I know her parents would get mad if they found out. But like the rest of us, she's doing it not because she wants to, but because she must.

I squeeze her arm, then look at Alis. She's crouched on the floor, opening the box and rooting around inside it.

"Anything good?" I ask. She pauses, then shakes her head.

"No. Well, I mean yes, but there's not much of it here."

I plop down on the floor next to her and stick my hand into the box.

"Water bottle, that's good. Bread, a few tinned goods... wait, what's this?"

Something rustles under my fingers, and I pull it out. It's a strange item, flat and smooth, wrapped in silver foil. As I pull back the foil, a sweet smell hits me.

"Woah. Is this what I think it is?"

I hold up the sweet brown block to Alis, who smirks.

"Chocolate? Wow. Talk about a treat."

"I wonder why they brought this?" I wonder aloud, sniffing it deeply.

Alis shrugs, and I pass it back to her before standing up.

"Well, come on then girls, time to distribute this."

We spend the rest of the afternoon wandering around the slums, handing out what we can. Every crumb is eagerly received, but far from filling me with joy it makes me fearful, and sad that we couldn't have gotten more. Small children spot us walking by and reach out a hand, pleading with us. The adults are more subdued; most take their share and pass it straight to the closest child, encouraging them to eat and drink.

We hand over the last piece of bread to an elderly woman at the bottom of the street, and she touches Alis' hand gently.

"Bless you, child."

She smiles softly, and again my chest aches. I peer up the street; there's far more life here than there was before, but it's still not a pleasant mood. How I wish we could do more than this - we do it because we want to help, but it just doesn't seem to make a difference in the grand scheme of things.

"So, what now?" asks Eva, shoving her hands in her pockets.

"Want to go to the lake?"

We reach the lake just as the sun is starting to lower. Of course we can't see it, but the green smog overhead has started to darken. I look out over the water and a smile breaks out on my face; despite the state of everything else, the lake has always been somehow separate from it all. The smog is thinner here, and at night you can even

glimpse something that might be a star overhead. The lake itself is cleaner than any other, as well - perhaps not drinkable, but clear enough to glisten with every bit of light that hits it.

We sit down on some rocks by the water and stare out. I pull my knees up to my chest and sigh. I love the lake, and the feelings I get from being here, but doing a heist always leaves me feeling a little deflated.

"Oi, cheer up," says Alis, twisting her hair in one finger. I feel a pang of envy whenever she does that - her hair is long and fair and in far nicer condition than anyone else's around here. But then my eyes trail to the two long braids hanging by her neck, and I look away.

"I'm fine."

"You're not. And I get it. You wish we could do more. I do, too. But there are limits, Quell. We're doing all we can."

"I know that."

"If we tried to do any more, we'd be putting ourselves at risk. If we get caught, who'll do it then?"

I lean back and sigh heavily.

"Someone will always take up the role. That's the great thing about this place."

She doesn't respond, but I know she agrees. Any time someone has tried to fight back, or stand up for us, they've had followers. And the moment that person falls, the followers step up. Despite the poverty we all live in, it's comforting to know that the people here are so much more chaste than most.

"Hey guys," Eva chirps, "I've got something for you."

She sits down next to us and pulls something from her pocket. It's flat and smooth, encased in foil...

"You took this? Why?"

"Chocolate has no health benefits. It's a treat. And considering that we're the ones who risked our asses to get it, I think it's fair that we get one bit of it."

“Technically, it was Quell who risked her ass, not us. But, I see your point.”

She breaks it into pieces and hands me one. I take it gingerly, eying it up and down. I feel guilty, like I should be heading back into town and giving it to someone there. But then my stomach grumbles, and I take a small, nervous bite. It’s delicious.

“Okay, okay. This is good,” I smile, “really good.”

“I did consider keeping it to give to Haya tomorrow,” says Eva, “but I reckon he’d be mad if he knew where it came from.”

“Oh yeah, it’s his 15th, isn’t it? Wow, I can’t believe that your brother’s that old already! He always seems so young every time I see him.”

She laughs.

“I know, right? It makes me feel so old to see all of these coming of age ceremonies going on!”

“I remember mine,” Alis pipes up, “it was great. Getting my own supplies, being able to be independent. I loved it. Can’t say I loved visiting the Seer, but it could have been worse.”

We chuckle, but the mere mention of the Seer sets my teeth on edge. Every sector has one. They’re a resident, usually an older woman, who seems to just... know things. Here, it’s Mama Jay. Lots of people think that she’s got some kind of magical sight, but I think she’s just excellent at reading people. When we come of age, we visit her, and she inevitably tells us of our future, and the one we’re destined to meet. Two years ago I went to see her, but it didn’t turn out so well for me.

I shake my head and plaster a smile onto my face.

“I wonder what Haya’s going to be told?”

Suddenly Eva’s expression softens, and she looks out across the lake.

“I know what I want to hear. That he’ll have a long life, and be happy. And that he’ll have someone. At this point, I don’t even care who it is. As long as he doesn’t end up sad, bitter and alone.”

A moment's silence falls over us, then they both turn to look at me. Eva bites back a yelp.

"I'm sorry, Quell! I didn't mean it like that!"

I give a dismissive wave of the hand and roll my eyes.

"Hey, don't worry about it. So I'm a spinster, so what? Doesn't mean I can't be useful."

"You're right. Even if Haze doesn't have someone, he can still be happy."

I nod, and the conversation simply trails off. Soon enough we're sitting in silence, watching out over the lake, occasionally passing the chocolate between us.

As quiet falls over Sector Q7, I find myself gazing up into the sky. It makes me feel so small, so insignificant to think about how much is above us. Like the moon, and the stars, and an infinite, silent space. When I was little and Dad would bring me to the lake, I'd pretend I was in space. I'd plunge beneath the surface and float around, imagining that I was in zero gravity. But then I grew up, and I grew hard. I learned that people like us don't go to space. We don't take off in our rockets and leave it all behind, and we certainly don't go on adventures.

Our lives are small and uneventful, a spark that lasts only a moment before it shrivels up and fades. However much I may want to change that, it's not down to me.

That doesn't mean that nobody goes to space. There are those, beyond the Sectors, who can. I've never seen them myself, but they're there. Clouders.

Perfect people, with flawless genetics. They live in skyscrapers, high, high in the heavens, and they're free. To them, space travel is not just possible, but real, something they can do at a moment's whim. They have their space cruises, their luxuries, their Thoughtless servants and their freedom.

It sounds wonderful.

I shuffle a little, getting comfortable on the dirty rock, and close my eyes. Once, I dreamed about being a Clouder, and living out my childhood dream. But it doesn't do any good to dwell on it. Genetics is the name of the game, and no matter what, I'll never see that shining paradise.

## *Chance*

I lean onto the balcony and sigh. The sky is darkening overhead, and behind me I can see the surface of the skyscraper starting to glow. They light up at night, an eerie but practical addition. In the distance I can see the stars, twinkling and dimming in inky blackness. A smile plays on my lips as I gaze up and into the night; it won't be long now. Not long at all. Soon, I'll be there, in space. Just like I always wanted.

"Sir?"

I turn; a young woman stands near, clutching a tablet to her chest. She seems nervous. I smile, trying to set her at ease, but if anything she looks more frightened. I lift a hand and call her over - she obeys immediately.

"T-thank you, Sir."

"How can I help?"

My voice is low and smooth, and almost immediately she melts. A blush creeps across her face and she stammers, trying to avoid my eyes.

"W-well, Sir... I, um..."

"You don't need to call me Sir," I tell her, "just Chance is fine."

"O-Oh no, I couldn't."

I chuckle and she clears her throat.

“Well. I-I came to you from the Academy.”

My chest tightens at the sound of the word - I’ve been eagerly waiting to hear something, anything from the Academy for weeks. Since my final exam is due any day now, I’ve been nervously awaiting news.

“Your final exam, Sir. We have a date for you.”

“That’s great. When is it?”

She pauses, fiddling with her tablet. She swipes the screen a few times, and then I hear a sharp intake of breath.

“Oh, dear. This can’t be right.”

“What’s wrong?”

She blushes again, swipes the screen a few more times, then looks up at me.

“Sir, it appears that your final exam is tomorrow.”

I gasp so loud that she jumps away.

“No way. Tomorrow?! Are you serious?”

She shuffles uncomfortably on the spot.

“Yes Sir. I’m terribly sorry about this, I really am. Usually we attempt to tell students of their exam weeks, if not months beforehand. I can only imagine this is a mistake.”

I smack my palm into my forehead.

“Oh no, what do I do? I’m not prepared for this!”

“I’m... I’m sorry...”

I glance at her; her blue eyes have filled with tears, and she lowers her head. Instinctively, my hand reaches out for her shoulder and I pull her into a rough half-embrace.

“It’s alright, not your fault...”

I glance down at her Academy name tag.

“...Cora. Not your fault.”

She blushes madly and pulls away, but I just laugh.

“S-Sir!”

“Listen, I’ve got this,” I tell her, trying to sound nonchalant, “You think I haven’t been training every chance I’ve got? I’ve been ready for

weeks. It's been sprung on me a bit last minute, but hey, so what? This is me we're talking about."

The words come out sounding clear and confident, and they seem to put Cora at ease. Perhaps some would think I sound cocky, or overconfident, but those people don't know me. She smiles a little, flips back her dark hair and laughs.

"Yes, Sir. I suppose you're right. This is you we're talking about. The son of the legendary Captain Cartwright. The youngest man to ever join the Academy. Yes. You're absolutely right. Nobody could be more ready than you. I suppose your Father must have known that, too."

"My Father?"

"Yes, Sir - he's the one who sent me over here. Said it was time for you to be told, Sir, so I came right over."

There's a moment of silence, during which I stare at the ground, deep in thought - then laugh and wave her away.

"Sounds about right! Anyway, sweet Cora, I suppose I had best get going now. Lots to do before tomorrow."

"Yes," she squeaks, turning away. As she reaches the door to the balcony, though, she pauses.

"And might I just say, Sir? I admire you greatly. You're an inspiration to many... good luck."

With that she leaves, heading back inside the skyscraper. I spend a few minutes staring at the place she was just standing, then go back to looking out into the night. I reach into my pocket, absent mindedly pulling out a small, silver watch and fastening it around my wrist. It almost fits now, only a little too large for me. I glance at the underside, trying to read the delicate engraving, but it's too dark out here.

Of course. Of course I should have known that my Father, that bastard, would be the one to screw me over. He probably thinks he's pretty funny, leaving it until the last minute to tell me what's going on. That guy's always tried his best to make things harder for me, like he thinks I'm undeserving of it. To him, it doesn't matter that I'm the youngest person in the Academy, or that I'm the best in generations.

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All he cares about is proving that I'm not as good as he was. And he'll do anything to trip me up, anything to make me look a fool. I reach down and take off the watch.

I sigh, stuffing it into my pocket. Cocky bastard.

I listen hard, and in the distance I can hear the steady thump of music. It sounds like a fun party tonight - although I suppose it's no different from the fun parties that happen every night up here in Cloud. I should probably head back inside and try to get some sleep. I turn away from the edge of the balcony and place a hand on the handle into the skyscraper - but suddenly, I'm overwhelmed with a sense of rebellion.

After a few seconds, I open my fingers, pulling my hand away from the handle. No. I don't feel like doing that tonight. And why should I? Just to be even better tomorrow, when I know I'm going to pass regardless. That guy probably wants this, for me to be separate from the others, some smug idiot like him. But as I stand there, the choices in front of me, I turn away. I take a short run to the edge of the balcony, put my hands on the railing and jump off.

For a few seconds I'm airborne, then my feet hit the platform twenty feet below. I hit it hard and stumble, catching myself at the last second. The platform begins to shift, and although my balance isn't quite right I can feel it tilting to catch me. It levels out and I'm off, the moving platform taking me along to the next skyscraper. As it moves I find myself looking down and into the clouds.

"Huh," I mutter, my eyes gliding across their fluffy surface. Supposedly, there's a load of people under there. People who aren't like us, whose genetics are inferior. But I can't imagine living beneath the cloud layer. On some days the clouds are thin, and I can see nothing but green down below. I don't know what it is; grass, or forest. I've seen photos of the Earth before, all green and blue. I close my eyes for a moment, trying to imagine living amongst trees, walking on earth rather than glass, and looking up to see a ceiling of cloud and sky. I can't help but prefer it up here in Cloud.

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I stand in place as the platform carries me through Cloud. Underneath me is nothing but glass, and I can see clear down to the earth. Around me are botanical gardens, the scents of wild herbs all around me. I inhale deeply, enjoying the smell of fresh mint.

After a while, the scenery begins to change, and I can hear the steady thumping get louder. The bass is accompanied by more music, and as I get closer I can also hear the sound of the party. Drunken chatter, laughter and the occasional screech. I round a corner and the Raze comes into view.

The Raze has always been the party central up here in Cloud. A vast, glass building full of various platforms, the whole place seems to pulse with excitement. Every few seconds the lights change colour, so as I near it feels like I'm heading into a rainbow. Even from a distance I can see people inside, stumbling about, jumping from one platform to the next. Almost instinctively my fingers flex and I feel my wrists for my gravity bands. Leaping is fun alright, but it's happened before. Some poor idiot has forgotten their bands, taken a drunken leap off a building, and ended up plummeting through the cloud layer and down to earth. It's not a common thing to happen, but it's worth being cautious.

As the platform nears I jump off - but the floor of the Raze is a little too low and I stumble, rolling to a halt.

"Whoa!"

The moment I climb to my feet someone hooks their arm around me, grinning.

"That was cool, man. You should try leapin' off the sky light!"

I push him away, but he continues to grin.

"Hey, wait a sec... I know you!"

I remain silent, and simply walk away. I'm not here to party, not like everyone else. I have someone here I want to see. Someone I want to talk to.

I stride through the ground floor, surrounded by people. They yell and scream, grinning at one another and waving drinks above their heads. A Peacekeeper stands in each corner, glowing - their

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white suits and silver faces shining in the bright light. I near one of them, lifting a drink from a table and taking a gulp. It's sour and unpleasant, nothing more than distilled rainwater with a splash of flavouring and as much alcohol that they could force into it. Nobody really likes it, but we drink it anyway. It helps us. Helps us forget, helps us remember, and most of all, it helps us to let go.

The moment the liquid hits my stomach, I feel a buzz. My eyes glide across the room and everyone moves just that little bit slower, their actions flowing, the image of their limbs hovering for a split second after they shift. I feel nothing beneath my feet, not my shoes or the cold glass underfoot. As I walk, there's a bounce in my step that wasn't there before, that seems to grow as I reach the stairs and start running.

The Raze is about thirty stories tall, but with the help of my Buzz I make it to the top in what feels like seconds. As I reach the top, the dancing seems to stop. Those around me no longer care for the music and its steady thumping. All they want now is a thrill, something to jerk them awake and make them feel alive. They stand at the edges, each of them leaning over and looking down into the clouds. Then, one by one they jump, each plummeting from the heights at full speed. I watch as they raise their arms, and their gravity bands kick in, pulling them up and floating them down onto the base level. I watch for a few minutes, hands in my pockets, enjoying the show.

"Chance."

I turn around and wave.

"Hey, Logan. How's it going?"

He walks up beside me, brushing a hand through his long, wild hair.

"Alright. It's going good in party central."

"I don't think I've ever seen you outside of Raze."

He shrugs.

"What's the point? Nothing's more fun than just jumping for a while."

I watch him for a moment; his wide eyes, his pale complexion. The way his fingers shake against his head. It's not unusual - a lot of people are a little too obsessed with the party. We call them 'Razers'. A lot of people think they're just lazy, people who can't be bothered to do anything productive. I guess I can see that. But what they don't understand is that some Razers have a little extra something that makes them different. Like Logan.

"Anyway, it's not like you to come up here," he says, knocking back another Buzz, "what's up?"

"It's hard to explain," I tell him, "I just felt like I needed to get away for a bit."

He chuckles loudly, then loops an arm around me.

"Let me guess, it's your Dad again?"

"You could say that. Bastard's gone ahead and kept the date of my final exam from me. Turns out it's tomorrow, and I hadn't been told."

Logan pauses, thinking deeply.

"Can you still pass it?"

I give a throaty laugh.

"Please. This is me we're talking about."

The words seem to stick in my throat, and I wonder why I've been saying it so much lately. It's not a lie - this is me. I'm always prepared, always ready, always happy to take on the weight of the world at a moment's notice. It's no secret that I'm excellent. But somehow it sounds cocky, arrogant. I'm not saying anything that isn't true, but it doesn't sit right.

Logan grabs a glass of Buzz and passes it to me.

"You're right. Always be prepared, right? Isn't that what they teach you at the Academy?"

"E-exactly. I know what I'm doing, they're not going to catch me out so easily."

"Then what's the issue?"

I grip the glass and stare deeply into the bottom of it. The contents are crystal clear and I can see right through, to the shadow of

my own two feet on the glass. They're big - much bigger than I'd ever have thought possible. When I was a kid, I'd watch my Father walking by and I'd want nothing more than to be like him. Tall and broad, with feet so massive I was scared I'd get trampled. Now though, I'm twenty three. I'm practically there myself, and I won't lie. Sometimes it scares me.

"I don't know, man. I just..."

I take a swig of Buzz, knocking the sour liquid back.

"...I'm just fed up of jumping through hoops. It makes me wonder if I really even want it."

"Are you kidding me?" he laughs, "don't be stupid. You've wanted this ever since you could walk. And why?"

"I don't know."

"Yeah, you do. You want to do it for her."

I pause, and as the Buzz kicked in I see everything in perfect clarity. Of course. Logan's right. I've always had a reason for it. I joined the Academy to make her happy, and everything I've done since, I've stuck to. Just to keep her smiling. As if on cue I see her face, her soft smile and warm touch.

"You want to do it to make your Mum proud, right?"

My chest swells, and suddenly I'm filled with pride.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. Nothing's going to make her prouder than me acing tomorrow's test."

"So, you know what you've got to do."

"What?"

He points at me, then down into the clouds.

"You've gotta down the rest of that Buzz, take a running jump off this building to clear your head. Then you've got to go back and whoop that test's ass."

I stare at him, and I can't help but grin. It's hard to feel down when you spend time with a Razer. I think that, sometimes, the fact that they stress so little and experience so much means they're a little wiser than most, even if people would rather look down on them for being lazy or entitled. The people I spend time with normally are so

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different, so high and mighty, so overtly confident in themselves for no real reason. In a way, I don't fit in amongst them. But I'm not exactly Razer material, either.

"Thanks for the advice," I tell him, turning away. But he reaches out and takes my arm in his hand.

"Hey. Is my advice good?"

"Sure."

"Then take it."

Again, he indicates the edge of the platform. I wince inwardly; I've never been one for jumping. It's not that I'm scared of heights, and I'm certainly not afraid of getting hurt. There's just something strange to me about jumping. It's like you're defying all those bits of your body that are trying to keep you alive. Like you're risking everything for a few seconds' thrill.

"Sorry," I mutter, "I'm not a jumper."

"You have to."

He pulls me close now, his face only a few inches from mine. His breath stinks of Buzz and he looks somewhat deranged; but when he speaks, he sounds calm.

"You're obviously stressed. Now look, some guys would say you have to get all touchy feely about it, and go visit a Therapist. Not me. Stress is an abstract concept, my friend, and it can be battled in any number of ways. Jumping off this building isn't gonna solve your problems. But it's not gonna make them worse, either. The only thing it might do is give you a rush, and make you feel better about the whole thing."

"Or it could kill me."

"Nah. That won't happen. This is you we're talking about, right?"

He stares at me, and suddenly I start to understand. He nods, and I find myself nodding along with him.

"Yeah. Yeah, okay. You're right."

I clutch my glass and knock back the rest of the glass, gasping as the chemical hits the back of my throat. The effect is instantaneous - my skin tingles, the air around me buzzes with electricity, and I find

myself staring around, excited by the new, bright colours all around me. It's thrilling, and after only a few minutes I realise that I want more. I'll never be addicted to Buzz, not like Logan and the Razers. But I can appreciate that it's damn good stress relief.

I toss back another one and stride towards the edge.

"Hold up," says Logan, and I can feel him checking my wrists, making sure my gravity bands are secure.

"You're good to go," he laughs, and claps me hard on the back.

Instantly I feel it. An electric buzz coursing through me, the desire to take a flying leap off the edge and not care if I come back up or not. Someone in front of me drops and I dart forward, waiting only a split second before taking a running jump off the edge of the platform.

I plummet towards Earth, spinning and twirling in zero gravity. I can barely catch my breath and the adrenaline rush is immense; I laugh loudly as I watch floor after floor whiz past me. Damn. This feels good.

A tiny voice in my head tells me that I'm going to regret this tomorrow - but I silence it. Tomorrow, I'll worry about my future. Tomorrow, I'll work my fingers to the bone to prove myself. Tomorrow, I'll be the prodigy everyone expects me to be.

But right now, I'm just a crazy fool jumping off buildings.