

Sunbird

On December 21st, Morgan Delano Belzer burned like the sun and then died in a tangle of slush and wires. He'd grabbed a string of Christmas lights at the moment the bullet had caught him, a perfect one-shot execution into the back of his head, and he'd come to rest in the center of the alley, wrapped like a present, facedown.

Detective Vasko stood over the body. He wrung his hands and no one noticed.

There was a messy trail of footprints that scattered through the alley, smashed up against brick walls, and tumbled into blots, a desperate struggle of inertia spelled out in the quickly browning snow. The air was thick despite the cold, and every breath felt heavy, and wet.

A crowd had gathered, at the end of the alley, around Office Truong. Truong had chased Belzer down, out of the Colony Admittance building and into the streets. She was young, and fast, and Vasko knew she was only a year out of the academy. Her face was flushed now, from the adrenaline and the attention, and she smiled too wide and her eyes were too bright. She had the hunger, Vasko could recognize it anywhere, and she would be promoted and rise and and rise until they moved her to the Station or she started a family, or both. Truong had been so close to Belzer that she'd almost caught the bullet. Her cheek was smeared with a thin line of red and she smiled deeply, like a crack in the Earth, and Vasko knew he'd almost struck her down, would have if he hadn't hesitated.

"What d'you think?"

Vasko looked up from the matted blonde head on the ground to Doug, the coroner, loping up from behind.

"I think he was shot," Vasko said, "In the head."

Doug breathed deeply, an audible in-and-out followed by a click, and then hooked his respiration mask fluidly to his belt. He showed his teeth, in a smile or a grimace Vasko didn't know, and pulled on a pair of black rubber gloves.

"Cause of death is my job," he said, and couched low over the body. His gloved hands hovered, suspended irreverently in the space before a breath, and then he started to work.

Vasko liked Doug, from the scuffs on his oversized dress shoes to his perfectly clipped afro, everything about him was classy and earnest and real. Doug had been born on Earth and he would die on Earth, just like Vasko, and it colored their professional interactions with familiarity.

Doug felt for a pulse, which Truong had done earlier when she'd tumbled to the ground with Belzer. He hooked his fingers beneath Belzer's chin and tilted the head, just barely, until he was rewarded with a thick ooze, black in the light and fresh enough to give the air a metallic tang.

"Did you do this one?" Doug asked. "I'm guessing it was you. This'll be your 4th this quarter. He's the last one, right?"

"Yeah," Vasko said, and he watched the drain of blood like molasses from the back of Morgan's blonde, blonde head. "It's done."

Doug continued to work, poking and moving things and then moving them back, in a dawdling, bored way. Vasko looked up, intermittently, at the crowd around Truong. None of them looked back at him.

Vasko had seen a lot of bodies. They were all similar, as long as you didn't look into their face. Morgan's face was smooth and beardless. His eyes, wide and downcast into the snow, were blue. He'd had a soft, deep voice that no one would ever hear again.

"Just let me go," Morgan had said, in a different alley on a different night. He hadn't been anything like Vasko had imagined. He'd imagined a lot in 5 years, about the Rebirth Faction, its players and leaders, but he'd never pictured the pale planes of Morgan Belzer's face in the red alley light, or the way his voice hitched at the end of each sentence, like a nervous tic. He hadn't thought that Morgan would lean close, close enough to feel his breath as he spoke, and say, "I'll tell you everything."

"You think she's going to get a promotion?" Doug asked, pointing a metal rod at Truong. It reflected the glow of the lights in the alley, throwing a glare around like a sunburst for just a second.

"Probably." Truong was turned away, a solid shadow facing the crowd, arms outstretched. Vasko wondered what she was thinking. He was having trouble with his own thoughts, maybe he was in shock. He didn't know.

He tried to concentrate on a poster for colony lofts, already covered in a sheen on grime, and he felt faint. He cupped his mask to his face and breathed. He wondered what colony air tasted like. Morgan had told him it was like chemicals, and paint.

He'd aimed high, and to the right, and Truong had been closing in fast when he'd pulled the trigger. There had been a wave of shouting and as soon as the bullet left the gun Vasko had deflated. With it, his strength travelled at 1700 miles per hour with duty and intent, and shattered Morgan Belzer on the city street. Everything sounded like it was underwater, and there was a sudden absence in his chest that made every step uneven. His stomach had dropped, and his hands had gone numb. Every nightmare that the city had rolled to a stop, convulsed, and died.

"They had this thing," Morgan had said that first night at the kitchen table. "They'd hassle the people who came up, lose their paperwork, make it hard for them to work. It was like an

artificial caste system."

"Who's doing it?" Vasko had asked, "What's the point?"

"The colony backers," Morgan said, "The architects and the lobbyists. The politicians and the government."

After 5 years of chasing Morgan Delano Belzer, it had taken 10 minutes in his own kitchen for Vasko to realize that he was just a rich kid with a lot of ideas. He felt cheated, and relieved.

"So you've been killing those people," he said, "to make them stop?"

"I haven't killed anyone," Morgan said, and he'd chewed on his fingernails and looked far too young, "I didn't kill any of those people."

The Rebirth Faction had grown, expanded, and thrived in the 5 years of Vasko's brass tacks life. It had been just a footnote in the APBs, little meaningless curtains of violence that Vasko had ignored in favor of larger fish. He'd been hungry then, and bright eyed, and he'd chased the tails he was told to and he was so much younger then, not in years but in his bones, and it made him ache to think of it now. When the first blood had been shed, a colony architect who'd worked on commercial buildings, Vasko had just moved into homicide and he gobbled up the case files like late night television. She'd been found in a pool of blood, mouth and eyes open and naked. Face down, like Morgan, and as still as Vasko's frozen heartbeat in the skip between pulling the trigger and hitting the target. That one had stung, she'd been pretty, and her photos showed kind eyes, but that only drove him in his monochromatic search for justice. He could still see her, tongue fallen loosely onto the cool white floor of her kitchen and it had been a waste and a shame, as death always is, but magnified so many times by the lenses of beauty and potential.

"Then why do I keep hearing you're the leader?" Vasko had asked, and he had thought of

offering Morgan a glass of water, or something to eat, but that felt so ridiculous. "They say you're behind all of this, I hear your name on all of the blotters."

"They needed a name, that's why," Morgan had sat at Vasko's small kitchen table, just a folding table with 2 used chairs he'd found by the garbage. He was never home, anyway, and never entertained guests. "I got involved through some people I met in college, they were anti-colony and wanted to get back Earthside to do....they said it was like missionary work."

"Missionary work." Looking into Morgan's face, Vasko felt a wave of disappointment, but it was mostly aimed at himself. He'd had a goal, from the moment he'd touched down in the city, and he thought he was made of leather and nails, and when his car had exploded and the shrapnel had cut him deep, deep into his flesh and his face and he'd lost his eye and his aim, he went in to work with a jaw of false steel and tried to root out the faceless people who had been so clearly wrong. He was more like glass than ice, every day when he made an arrest or pulled a trigger, but no one knew it but him. The young, guileless man in front of him now, picking the chipped rubber at the edge of his folding table, didn't have blood on his hands. Vasko felt empty, picked apart.

"They needed a name to hide behind," Morgan said and he licked his lips. "I'm no one."

Vasko had stared at him.

"I've gotta move the body," Doug said, crouched at waist height. He looked comfortable, clinical, and that stilled the hummingbird panic that was rising in Vasko's chest. He felt like the deep ache in his chest was ready to pop and ooze, ooze onto the concrete and the snow like Morgan's black, slow dripping blood. His eyes were still faced to the ground but Vasko knew they were the color of the sky in old movies.

"I think I'll be dead, by the end of the week" Morgan had said. "End of the month, at

most."

That had felt dramatic at the time, in Vasko's whitewashed bedroom against the backdrop hum of sodium lights. In the weeks since they'd met, Vasko had come to know the sincere, dramatic way that Morgan viewed the world. Every assentation a barely believable notion made tangible by the honest way he said it.

"I don't even know what their next move is going to be," he said, and he'd been still and solid next to Vasko. He'd smelled clean, like soap, and had a lazy grace that spoke of richness, and private schools. Vasko never felt as graceful as Morgan looked.

The second one had been terrible, not what Vasko had expected, and so he hadn't been prepared to open a door on a 16-year-old with her head, crushed by blunt force trauma. The daughter of a pro-colony politician, active on social media, behind her father in every respect, had been dragged through a meat packing warehouse and beaten into the floor with bats. The blood splatter was everywhere, glinting at Vasko from every angle, gleeful and tragic. He'd run his fingers over the wall where her fingernails had broken off in jagged parts and tried to imagine the hand that had done this. There had been years of bloodshed after that, but he always remembered the young ones, the beautiful ones, and it bit into him like the edge of a knife. He was enraptured.

"I wish it was over," Morgan had said, warm and alive and next to him in the too small hotel bed. "I'm running out of exit strategies."

There'd been a call to arms, when they'd sighted the perp in the Colony Admittance building and they'd said he had a gun when he didn't and they said he had a bomb but there wasn't one. It had been a breathing mask, dangling from his belt, but Vasko had been first on the scene because he didn't sleep anymore, not really. He'd been eating noodles at some place called

Ganesh that was open all night. Picking at the bones in his soup.

"So run," Vasko had told him, sitting for the thousandth time across from Earth's Most Wanted, smoking a cigarette that tasted like plastic. "Just get the fuck out of here."

Ten blocks from the building, Officer Elisa Truong had caught up to the perp and she'd had her gun out and her claws, and Vasko had aimed, aimed right at her head, and he wasn't the shot he used to be, couldn't see out of one eye the way he had out of two, and he'd pulled the trigger and fell to the ground.

"It's a good shot," Doug said, looking up in an ill-humored smirk that didn't look quite right on his wide, honest face. There was venom in the way he said it and Vasko wondered just how much he knew.

"I don't want to go," Morgan had said, young and dumb, with more passion than Vasko had felt in his entire life. "I have you, now. You can help me."

Vasko wrung his hands. No one noticed.

He looked down at Morgan Delano Belzer, looked over the cornflower blue of his eyes and the slack red mouth that had called him by his name in the hazy winter night when no one else could hear. He looked at the circular punch in his matted blonde hair, and the exit wound in his high, white forehead.

It had been a perfect shot.