GLACIER

Platform loaded. Straps secure. Only the safety chains that linked directly to the boat remaining to be set.

“Steady. You see my mark?”

“Yes,” said Lira. Kael heard the tone—and ignored it.

He raised his mallet, held the tip of the long, black spike with his right hand to his own mark. In his mind’s eye, Kael pictured the mallet’s trajectory, saw it hit the head and drive the spike deep into the ice. Fine aim here could be the difference between heading back now and spending the next hour searching for another suitable specimen.

“Now.”

They swung in unison, and Kael’s hand twitched. As Lira’s punctured the iceberg, silent and smooth like a pincushion, Kael’s spike jerked sideways. He banged the side of the iceberg with bare mallet. The string of curse words that followed would have sent Lira gleefully tattling to her mother a few years ago.

It hadn’t cracked, thankfully, and they’d managed to get the second chain spiked. The stunning iceberg, twice the size of Kael’s modest vessel, trailed in their wake. He could barely hear himself over the rush of wind, the roar of his boat, the breaking of ocean waves as they rode towards the harbor. Lira steered as Kael stood, braced against an outrigger pole while the boat bounced up and down, the still soft-skin of his nose and cheeks burning. Kael pulled up on his collar, down on his sleeves. He tried not to let too much of the scarring show, for Lira’s sake. The echo of his old infection lingered.

“I said let’s start today.” He was sure Lira’s young ears had heard him the first time. “You’ve got so much raw talent. I hate to see that wasted.”

“Mom said I could take a Portal later.”

“What?” The hum of the engine, the creaking and dinging and flapping of the boat muffled her response. Kael leaned into the wheelhouse.

“I’m Porting later,” Lira said louder.

“Where to?”

“Aoelo wants to go to Nexus.”

“I never imagined travelling to another planet when I was your age.” To span lightyears, see world’s beyond imagining with as little fanfare as walking to a corner market, all while still learning one’s own history; to have taken the space out of space travel. Who would Kael have been? “Let alone a different galaxy. What do you do on Nexus?”

“There’s a new VR playground. They lowered the age requirement.”

“Is that…fun?” Kael said.

Lira didn’t answer. He hadn’t meant it to sound so patronizing.

“There’s still so much beauty here on Glacier.” Kael’s chest rattled as he spoke. How could she go anywhere else—at a time like this? “Your uncle Cress says it’s getting worse. Fish hardly bite anymore when he comes out most mornings.”

“Maybe another ice sculpture of a bear will help.” Lira’s gaze swung upward. Kael was glad she hadn’t turned to look at him then.

The Gethynian Ice Shelf loomed above them, marking the entrance to the large bay where they would eventually dock. The frozen wall stretched far into the ocean, miles in length and nearly as high up into the sky. A jagged rictus, the shelf was older than modern civilization, at least on Glacier, which had been settled long before Kael had been born. The shelf’s snarled edge hung out over the lapping water like a tipsy castle turret.

“Hold on!” Lira called from her captain’s wheel. Kael looked around instinctively, though whales had become a rare sight in recent years as they migrated away from warming waters. He felt the boat tip and pull away from the shelf suddenly, spurred on with more torque than he normally allowed of Lira. Kael stumbled, and Lira reached back to let him cling to her.

“People need art.” Kael raised his voice to be heard. She’d understood this once, not long ago. Kael wasn’t sure if he believed it himself anymore.

An echoing crack sounded in their wake, and Kael leaned over the side to see the tip of the shelf fall in slow motion down to the waiting waters below, near where they’d been only moments before. The splash must have been huge, but with the horizon in the background, it hardly seemed to matter.

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The city center writhed with a mass of colorful coats and muffed ears, chattering tourists flooding every snow-covered alley and street, every warmly lit shop. It was a sight unimaginable twenty years ago. They played in the snow and built snowmen, posed for photos, cut ribbons with rented skates into a frozen pond—that had been installed only after Glacier had been integrated, become a place to visit. Underrated, no more. Kael squeezed through crowd, adding to the thousands of boot tracks that crisscrossed the courtyard. The cart he pushed slopped with carefully collected algae from days prior.

A concoction of fish and seal leather dye, baked goods, brines and oils fought the subtle tinge akin to battery acid that permeated the valley air—Lira swore she no idea what he meant by that. But she’d grown up with them. The sizzling, translucent magenta Portals were lined up like venue turnstiles, one of three localized arrays opening Glacier to the entirety of the known universe. The heat they emitted had revealed a rare patch of bare earth, and the pipes that fed them were conspicuous by the trails of fresh powder leading to remote city generators. Lira would be somewhere in line already.

“Would you take a photo of us?”

Kael paused. Above him, a native wooly elephant reared on hind legs and raised its thick trumpet nose to the sky. Its body was frozen, and a shaggy fur coat of fine icicles glinted in the distant, gray noontime sun. Four thick, blue tusks curled out of its mouth, and Kael was confident that touching the tip of one would still draw blood years later. It was one of his earliest public pieces. Massive in size and ambition. His love letter to the tiny ice planet.

Kael nodded. A handsome young couple on a holiday. All beaming smiles and wandering hands, even over their thick jackets.

“Sorry to bother you,” the taller one said. His breath steamed through picket fence teeth.

They placed a square device on the ground and ran to pose under the tusks Kael had tenderly smoothed for hours, had personally sourced and carved from sea ice. Sea ice was salty ocean water, rather than the glacial, freshwater icebergs used in traditional Glacier ice sculpting. It had proved challenging, mercurial, and beautiful.

“I saw that they’re endangered now,” the shorter man said, pointing upwards.

“No.” His partner pressed his palm to his chest. “What happened?”

“Climate change. Humans never learn.” He was backlit by a gentle, magenta haze.

A menu of hard light was projected before him, and Kael tapped the air, saving a few images the way Lira had shown him. Through the inset viewfinder, Kael watched one of them stand on his toes and pretend to stick his tongue to the toes of the wooly elephant.

Kael hesitated, then saved the image. The two giggled, their love infectious.

“These are perfect, thank you,” the tall man said. He was flushed with chill. “Where’s the best place to get urchin pudding? I heard we’d be stupid not to try it while we’re here.”

“Well, I don’t know, to be honest. Urchin pudding isn’t something we actually eat.”

“You’re joking,” he said. “Our friends came back from Glacier raving about it.” The live voice translator he wore gave the impression that he was speaking from the lip of a long tunnel.

“If you want something authentic, go up the main strip and take a left at the hospital. Look for a house with red shutters. Ask for Cress’ catch of the day.”

“Wow.” The man’s eyes lingered on the scar that ran across Kael’s lower lip and up his cheek, its only tendril he couldn’t hide. “Thank you. That’s so nice of you.”

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Kael balanced on the same tall ladder from which he had carved the elephant as a much younger man. He’d lopped off a few good-sized chunks from the iceberg with sweeps of his chainsaw. He needed to whittle away at the overall shape first, see a first impression of what would eventually manifest. With a material like ice, with no light or shadow to play with, the silhouette had to be perfect.

He etched at it now with a pick, marking lines and drawing notes for himself to come back to later with his full arsenal of power tools, chisels, saws, even a torch. But his lines were wobbly and unsure. His hands were stiff and restrained by the thick scars, his fingers even stiffer from prolonged disuse.

Negligibly rare, scientists projected. Unlikely, doctors had predicted. Few currents were warm enough to sustain the bacteria in large numbers. Kael had lost his balance chaining an iceberg two years ago, and a small, unhealed cut was all it had taken. He was the only known case on this side of Glacier. A superfluous cautionary tale.

Kael needed this last piece, yearned for the closure. Let him end it on his terms. He really needed Lira for this work, but how could he make a girl with the universe at her fingertips see the beauty in her roots again? Why did he sculpt now for an audience who would never understand why he made art of and for this land? What would it all have been for when the Gethynian Shelf fell and the Portals hummed on?

“What are you making?” A small voice from far below.

Kael startled, brushed his ice pick with his elbow off the rung it had been resting on. He looked down past his boots to the feet of the ladder. A small boy gaped up at him, didn’t flinch when the pick slid blade first into the snow only a foot away from him.

He was seven, maybe. And alone. Only a single black-trunked tree stood tall between the city center and the boy. A few anonymous lights twinkled through its dark branches. Kael began a slow descent, careful hand under careful hand. The child waited patiently for him at the bottom, like he’d come for the sculptor intentionally.

With feet on the ground, he crouched to the boy’s level. His hair was Lira’s blonde, always in contrast to Kael’s own colorless black, and his eyes were the Glacier gray.

“Where are your parents?”

The boy shrugged, not bothered. “What is it?”

“I’m honestly not sure yet,” said Kael. “I haven’t been very inspired lately. I keep just kind of hacking away at it, hoping something comes to mind.”

“Why?

“I need it to be good, as it could very well be my last.”

The boy nodded sympathetically. “Can I try?”

Kael fished the ice pick out of the snow, wiped it down, and put it in the boy’s mitten.

“My name is Kael.”

“I’m Evran,” the boy said.

Evran took off his mitten and scraped the pick across the surface of the iceberg, first in little dashes, then in long, swooping lines. He was brash and confident, with absolutely no idea what he was doing. A natural talent.

“And so, what is it?” Kael asked.

“It’s Glacier,” said Evran. Kael squinted at the nonsensical scrapes and scratches and swirls of Evran’s work. Mountains, trees, and winding glaciers emerged from the icy canvas. “My home.”

Just a child’s shallow etching on ice. And yet it was art. Kael’s chest felt heavy. He stared at it for what could have been minutes. Evran squirmed.

“What’s that?” Evran pointed at the cart of algae. It was pungent in the chill air.

“Those are bioluminescent algae.” Kael rubbed his face and pushed himself up. “It makes ice light up at night.”

“How?”

“Well, I heat them,” Kael said. “Which makes them angry. Then I paint them onto the ice, and if I can cover them with this special, protective goo fast enough, they’ll keep glowing for a long, long time.” Kael grabbed his blowtorch out of a nearby toolbox, then a cup for fishing algae from the vat. “Here, I’ll show you.”

“Ouch!”

Kael whipped around, decades of paternal instincts engaging too late. He’d forgotten the inevitable result of turning your back on a child. Blood seeped down Evran’s thumb and wrist, and the ice pick lay in the snow, speckled red. Kael spent a moment panicking, then quickly sawed a small piece of ice from the lower portion of the iceberg, which was slightly discolored from where it had been submerged out in the ocean, not quite dry. He pressed the piece to Evran’s hand.

“It hurts,” Evran bawled now. He scrunched his face and wiped his face with the remaining mitten. Kael held the ice to Evran’s hand, which dribbled pink as the blood mixed with melting ice water. But at least the flow was easing. Evran buried his face into Kael’s stomach, heaving little sobs.

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The crowd had been gathered from morning until late into the afternoon, as they did every day. Tourists had been stuck on Glacier for weeks. They were restless and homesick and irate. Extreme precautions had been taken to keep tourists away out of the bay and away from the ocean. Whispers circulated of the boy who had fallen ill from bacterial infection, the reason they were all stuck here. His grieving parents swore he’d been nowhere near the ocean.

The Portals flickered on every morning still, magenta eyes watching Glacier like judgmental gods peaking in. Only authorized personnel could come and go, but that didn’t stop people from going every morning in the hopes to be the first ones let off this “frigid, backwater asteroid.” Lira herself hoped to Port to Nexus soon. Aoelo was staying with his brother there.

The statue had appeared only that morning. She hadn’t seen her grandfather much lately, but he was the city’s only ice sculptor. It was Glacier, the full globe, on stand and axis and slightly askew. It was highly detailed, if rough—grand mountains, carpets of trees, and flowing glaciers all made of jagged edges, which worked as a view from space. It was pretty, of course, as much as any other. It was strange placement, too close to the Portals and the heat they emanated. Lira had touched it and felt a layer of water already.

When the Portals shut off for the night, the crowd let out a collective groan. It had almost become a tradition of camaraderie for locals and tourists alike. Gasps bubbled up from the crowd, and Lira followed their points and cries to Kael’s statue. Instead of darkness, their faces tonight were illumined in a wash of electric blue. Bioluminescence twined and coiled in a funhouse lattice pattern across the globe.

They were Kael’s scars, marking Glacier itself.

Her home.