

## Canto 1: Capital “I” Issues

Even after sitting in our mail slot for hours, the envelope smelled faintly of antiseptic and latex. Medical summons were always printed on bright blue paper, making them easy to spot and just as easy to dump down the recycler.

OK, that last part was wishful thinking. My real plan was to do what I’d always done: request a deferment. As I traipsed up to our apartment, carefully balancing my grocery bags as I hopped over the final cracked step, I wrote out the petition in my mind. *As the sole guardian of my brother, regretfully, I cannot...*

I glanced at the letter again to ensure I’d be writing to the same medical center as last year, and caught what I’d missed earlier: it was addressed to both of us—Beatrice *and* Ansaf Gil.

I fought down my stirring panic. There was no need to discuss the summons the second I walked through the door, so I nestled the note among my groceries—a bounty of misshapen vegetables, hard, little potatoes, and a tiny bottle of real cream from the farm on Level 11—and tried to forget about it.

But Ansaf had noticed my return and was already grabbing the largest bag hanging from my left wrist. His eyes immediately landed on the sliver of blue poking out. Shit. “They must have an automated system indicating I turned eighteen,” he said, running one long finger over our names.

I shrugged, hoping my muted reaction would dissuade him from pursuing the topic. A gust of lukewarm air greeted me as I swung open our ancient refrigerator. A mundane, fixable problem. “The cooling mechanism is busted again. Can you fix it now, so the cream doesn’t spoil?”

Ansaf looked like he wanted to argue, but he couldn't let broken appliances remain so, and we both knew it. Multi-tool already in hand, he dutifully unlatched the refrigerator's bottom compartment, and fiddled with something within. Soon, a low, droning sound filled the tiny kitchen. One that would blend nicely with our neighborhood's usual symphony of back alley fights and mating cats.

"I'll need to replace the relay switch, but it should keep everything cool. Now, stop trying to distract me." I stifled a groan as he retrieved the wretched envelope from our kitchen table. "It's got my name on it this time. We can't ignore it."

We really could. I unloaded the rest of my hardwon haul slowly, pushing the cream all the way to the back, where it was coldest. "It's your first time. They'll let you defer." Plus, we'd both been sterilized already, so the government wasn't overly concerned with us. Yet.

"B, I want to get tested."

Ansaf's voice was soft, but his words punctured me like a hole in the colony's bubble, stealing my air just as soundly. He leaned against the glugging fridge, his limbs limned in the yellowish glow of our cheap synth-lights. This past year, he'd grown faster than algae in a vat, and now stood nearly a foot taller than me. But no matter how much he'd shot up, he was still my little brother, and I could see the anxiety written all over him. One large hand still clutched the summons, but his other instinctively went to chew his fingernails. I resisted the urge to push his hand down. Not because he'd stop me, but because his gaze was fixed with a look I'd never seen before—defiance.

My throat suddenly felt tight. "Or we could not."

"B..."

I floundered, worse than if my rope had been cut during a climb, and clung to the first idea that popped into my head. Ansaf's studies. "No, listen. You did well in your last round of exams, right? If you send them your transcript, they'll be motivated to keep you happy and thinking science-y things. Instead of, you know, about your possible demise. They'll let it go for another year, at least."

It wasn't even a lie. Our entire colony, the only successful settlement on Venus, lived on the edge of survival. The government couldn't afford to waste a good mind, even if it belonged to a teenager from the slums.

Ansaf shook his head, tight curls bouncing around him. "I don't *want* to let it go. I can't keep worrying if I'm going to wind up like Mom."

Dread curled in my belly, and the single tomato I'd managed to buy slipped from my grasp, splatting onto the floor. I dropped to my knees, hoping to salvage some of the fleshy pulp seeping out.

Ansaf knelt beside me, wiping the mess up with a bamboo cloth. "I know you hate when I bring her up..."

I tuned him out, hoping the horror wasn't showing on my face. Seeing the red spreading onto our grey floor had brought me back to a memory, the day I first got my period. I remember standing over our bathroom sink, frantically attempting to rub the stain out of my jumpsuit without hitting our water quota for the day. When our mother barged in, I thought she'd berate me for ruining the outfit. Instead, she turned pale, and whispered that I'd been tainted by the Venusians—the original inhabitants of the planet, dead some thousand years. That was the day I'd realized the disease—the corruption, as it was often called—had spread to her brain.

I straightened, and finished unpacking our groceries with shaking hands. Seeing the summons, hearing that Ansaf wanted to get tested, scratched the surface of all those bad memories. I guess I hadn't buried them deep enough.

Three years his elder, it had been my job to shield him from the reality of our mother's decline. But as his gaze bore into mine again, his eyes as green as the grass of the farm I'd just come from—the exact shade of our mother's—I wish I hadn't protected him quite so thoroughly.

“Maybe it won't be bad news,” he said, forcing me back into the present.

I scoffed at that. Each of us had a fifty percent chance of inheriting the corruption. Whether or not we'd die horribly determined by a coin flip.

I threw myself onto our lumpy, grey couch. Ansaf perched a cushion away, folding his long arms behind his head to create a hammock for his neck. Now that he'd revealed his plan to answer the summons, it seemed the bulk of his anxiety had evaporated.

From the corner, one of his gaming consoles chirped merrily with a new request, but Ansaf made no move to answer it. If he had the corruption, his hand-eye coordination would be the first thing to go.

Which made me slump even harder. “What's the point of knowing? So we can both get little certificates stating ‘Dead slumkid walking’?”

“I think they call us ‘imperiled youths’ now.” He smiled weakly. “There's a chance we both test negative, you know. If that happens, we never have to think about it again.”

I frowned, although, of course I'd thought about that outcome before. Dreamed about it. I hadn't told him, but after our mother died, I'd started saving up for him to take advanced classes. Such an advantage would give him a real shot at an engineering career, one that could elevate him to the mid-levels.

I shook my head. Planning for a corruption-free future was too delicate, too precious, like a minibot you cherished so much, you refused to remove it from the box. No, better to keep the package shut and assume the toy inside was fine.

“There’s also a chance I’m sick and you’re not,” I said. “In which case, I’ll leave all my money to you, sneak onto Level 72, piss in every trillionaire’s garden, then throw myself off some asshole’s balcony.” That image brought a real smile to my face.

“Or it could be the other way around.”

“No,” the word sprung from me. A heavy weight settled on my chest, oppressive as the planet’s atmosphere. “There’s no world where you die and I live.”

Ansaf squeezed his hands together. I could tell he was biting back his next words. After a moment, he said, “What if there’s a medical advancement? A cure developed in our lifetime?”

“That’s not going to happen!” I would have slammed my fist on our coffee table if it could handle the onslaught.

“You never know.” There was something in his voice—calm, resolute—that made my stomach flip. He wasn’t afraid enough, which meant I’d never convince him to drop this.

I fiddled with the tattered blanket on the sofa, running my hands along the frayed ribbon’s edge. It had been Ansaf’s, when he was small. “You really want to get tested?”

He picked his head up. “Yes.”

I let out a breath. I couldn’t let him face this alone, so I forced my next words out. “I don’t know if I want to get tested, but I’ll go with you, at least.”

Ansaf lunged, pulling me into a fierce hug. It was still weird for me to think of him as an adult, but as he wrapped those long, spindly arms around me, there was no denying he’d grown

up. Grown up and decided he wanted to do things differently than me. “Thanks, B,” he whispered.

We broke apart. I thought we might both dissolve into tears, right there on the couch. Instead, I cleared my throat. “Can we talk about something a little less life or death?”

Ansaf gave me a bleak smile, then started disassembling one of his minibots, an old, nervous habit of his. “Are you going to watch *The Inferno* next week? My friends online were saying a few celebrities are joining the contest.”

Insides still squirming, I settled into the crack between cushions on our couch. “I said no life or death talk!”

He toggled to the clock function on his comm. “Fine, you have an easy gig tonight?”

I glanced at the device on my own wrist. My day job had ended two hours ago, but I moonlighted as a small-time thief for the Ma’at Gang at night. Well, Earth’s version of night. Venus’s atmosphere was too thick to actually see the darkened sky, but even after all this time, we tried to keep the circadian rhythm of our ancestral planet. Meaning even down in the lower levels, most decent people stayed in at night.

But I’m not decent.

I sighed. “Pretty much. No actual theft required. I just have to climb up to Level 7 to check on a politician’s mistress. Make sure she’s not in bed with anyone else.”

Ansaf’s brows crinkled, but I could tell he was relieved as I was to return to our usual banter. “So basically, you’re getting paid to ensure she’s not doing to him the same thing he’s doing to his wife?”

I snapped my fingers. “Exactly.”

“Why do half your gigs involve mistresses?”

“No idea.” I stretched out my arms, hoping to limber them up. I’d need them soon enough for the climb. “I think looking after one person is more than enough.”

It was a gentle ribbing, but Ansaf’s expression grew grave again. “We’ll be OK, B. Even if we get bad news, we’ll get through it.”

I didn’t believe that, not for a second, but I smiled for my brother anyway.

“Very good,” Thorn says from their perch. “Continue detailing the events leading up to your entrance into The Inferno, in this exact manner.”

They hadn’t written down anything I’d just said, but perhaps it was species-ist of me to expect them to have written language. The creature, Thorn, looked human, and indeed, had played their part well enough so as not to raise suspicion, but the weight of their unblinking gaze unnerved me. Maybe Thorn could read minds and was currently rifling through my memories like paper pages in an ancient book, trying to gauge the truth of my words. Maybe if I lied, they’d incinerate me right where I stood. So, as I’d begun my story, I hadn’t lied. Not once.

“Once I tell you everything, you’ll save him, right?” Thorn had already promised as much, but forcing them to say it again wouldn’t hurt.

“Yes, I shall heal him, and allow you both to leave this place,” they reiterate, their tone perfectly even from word to word.

My stomach flips, but I nod anyway, hoping against hope that he’s OK. That while I stand here, in this icy fortress, he won’t bleed out where I left him behind.