Justice Qazi

Prologue - Text Message (received within the last hour)
Age: 42

> TEXT FROM MOTHER: Justice, they say you have to shut down the hydroponic systems there and disable the ship if you can. There are soldiers here, with guns, and they say they will kill me if you do not agree to do this. I may be an old woman, but they do not know I fought in the Army to protect you and your sisters since you were a baby. They do not know that I have prepared for their coming. Go. Do not do what these thugs want. I will not let them scare me. And I have a surprise for them. Do not mourn for me; we will find a way to each other in another life.

End of Prologue

Scene 1 - Justice Finds a Way
Age: 42

You know what hard work is: the difference between life and death. Your mother and your sisters knew this, too. Your father, who is dead, did not. You are alive; you worked very hard to be so. Your mother did the most out of all of you; she is old now, and living in the home you and your sisters' extra work have provided her.

You remember your mother and father arguing when you were young. "It's too hard," he told her, "we may as well stay and hope for the best." Your mother, putting on her uniform, loading her sidearms, replied, "If you are too lazy, if you are too afraid, we will cross the border and the mountains without you and leave you behind! We have children! This famine-stricken land cannot support us!" And when your father said, "If we had fewer children, there would be more food," your mother did no more than shut the door and leave with you and your sisters.

You walked through and over the mountain lands, into valleys that were hardly more than scrublands. Still, things could be made to grow in those valleys, with great, daily effort. You learned how to draw food out of racks and vats, moistened by the connected pipes of liquids from filtered waste and sewage, turned to bits of edibles growing in the sun; this was your first education. From scavenged bits of garbage, and fighting others for the contents of latrines, your family harvested your first garden together, in the tightest of spaces to feed your number - a half-broken, discarded shipping container. When you had pride, your mother stamped it down. "We will all live," she said, "there is nothing too low for us, if it helps us to survive." And slowly, as you all learned that lesson, you lived. As the eldest, they scrambled to find the money and the books needed for school for you. They failed, but you managed to steal a net-sat unit instead, and learned your lessons from searching there.

It was in your middle age, all of you still alive, that your family got its great boon and fortune. A charity had established a technical program, which taught the machines and means for planting and growing. Your net-sat, and a few kilometers of pre-dawn walking, got you in. Meals were provided, which were bounties that could be saved up for your trip back.

You learned quickly - new ways to grow and harvest food, and better techniques to improve what you already knew. With your stolen net-sat, you learned that the founder of the charity, a Very Important Person, would be coming to review its progress. Sneaking your way between the cleaners and the others rearranging the school for viewing, you ran into Rowan, the spouse of **Morgan Lee**, from one of the wealthiest families on the planet. You didn't have long to impress Rowan Lee - school officials trying to curry Rowan's favor wanted to push you out of the way. They were very dismissive of you, a stranger, a foreigner, in tattered and salvaged clothing. Rowan Lee insisted otherwise, and arranged for you to meet after the VIP tour. Rowan was impressed by your ideas and experience, and asked if you would be interested in working with the Cosmic Lee company.

Of course you were. It was a chance to make some real money, to buy real food, and to help your sisters get the education they deserved. Your mother deserved a chance to not have to struggle every day. The tests were surprisingly easy, verifying your abilities as well as your quickness with instructions and manuals.

They were impressed enough to have you travel into space, up to *Alexandria*, in orbit around the Earth. (The money they paid you was more than you'd ever seen in a year, or three.) *Alexandria* was one of the most important projects of the Cosmic Lee company. It even had a complete, fake person who lived in

and ran things from his or her computer in the walls of the ship somewhere. This was a ship of space, one that was intended to go to other stars, to create new Earth ecosystems on other planets in case the tremendous damage to the Earth's ecology could not be repaired. *Alexandria* was even capable of creating other people; a true wonder, undoubtedly blasphemous to many. It is strange that a family as wealthy as the Lees were involved in such a project, where personal gain seemed far from immediate.

The systems were complex, and space was a difficult place. Like many, you had a hard time adjusting to weightlessness. Fortunately, the hydroponics garden, one of the largest open areas on the relatively small ship, was in the rotating part of the ship. That meant that it felt like there was gravity, and things that should be down stayed down.

After two weeks, you had a rough idea how everything worked. The systems were very advanced, and the ***Alexandria*** person could bring up schematics, descriptions, and measurements to answer your questions. The ***Alexandria*** person was very patient, even when you swore in Hindi, cursing the people who created this technological monster that recycled everything it could. There was no margin for error; *Alexandria* was designed to travel for years, for decades, all without adding anything new to the system. It had to recycle everything if the crew was to survive.

That's when the alarms on *Alexandria* blared. You strapped yourself in, as suggested. Before long, the ship was underway, somewhere. There was a long time when it felt like there was an elephant in your lap, if there were any elephants left, and if, somehow, one got into space. The voice of the ***Alexandria*** person warned that they were being chased by nuclear missiles - who would do such a thing to a simple spaceship months away from a real flight? After a while, the pressure eased, and you could remove the straps and move awkwardly about. And there, on the bridge, where the people aboard the *Alexandria* had gathered, perhaps to talk and shout at one another, you saw near death, something which you were very familiar with.

Morgan Lee, you could see, would die from wounds inflicted by unknowns - bullet wounds. And Morgan and Rowan's child, **Aria**, was crying. If they were sending nuclear missiles at Morgan, what were they doing to Rowan? You had just seen the message from your own mother, blurry on the screen because of the elephant's weight. You would think of that, specifically, at a more private time and place.

But here, you could do more than think - and think of what your mother had given you so many times, to keep you alive, to keep something in your belly, to keep you moving, to keep you learning, to keep you through all those impossible times. Think of how young **Aria** - seven? nine? - would need someone who could guide them to adulthood. You had never had children of your own flesh (and likely never would). Perhaps. Perhaps you owed **Morgan** and Rowan that much, even if **Aria** would not accept this quickly - at least until you got back to Earth.

End of Scene 1