

THE QUARRY

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Chapter One, From *Shattering*

Shattering is a young adult science fiction novel set in a far-flung future-city of August, where tensions between the Patron ruling class and anti-technology activists are building. At the centre of the controversy is the Imprint program, a new method of prolonging life using synthetic bodies and downloadable 'imprints' of the human mind. Mallory Li and her best friend, butler, and Imprint Bligh find themselves drawn into the mess when Mallory's inquisitiveness sets her down a complicated path.

For tonight's evening of never-ending torture, Mallory is stuffed into a pale-yellow dress that swishes and flounces and does nothing to keep her warm. It's the old-school kind, the type that doesn't know how to change colour or flash sparkling, star-bright lights. To complete the look the family's pseudo-Butler, Bligh, carefully pins her hair up; he's the best at not poking her scalp with the sharp hair clips, so she always shoves the box at him before Mum has a chance to grab them.

'Make sure you leave some strands out,' Mum instructs Bligh. 'It's becoming quite uncouth to have it all slicked and pinned back. Make it look a little more natural.'

‘Of course Ms Li,’ comes the butler’s response as he teases some of Mallory’s thick, black hair out of the bun, ‘is this better?’

‘Oh yes, dear, that’s lovely. Don’t you look *darling* Mallory?’

With the number of pins still sticking out of her hair where Bligh has yet to secure them, Mallory thinks she looks more like the bushes in the park during winter, all sticks and tufts of sad leaves rather than anything *darling*. Maybe she can sneak out to the park and hide in the bushes. Blend in and stay there until everyone’s either sick with worry or forget about her altogether. Whichever comes first. She can live in the park and jump out at passers-by, all wild and spiky, and be one of those human interest stories on the news.

‘Thanks Mum, it’s perfect.’

‘Call me Mother at the party, dear,’ her mother softly scolds her as she adjusts the dress straps. ‘And don’t go copying Laurel Sandifer’s weasel of a child and call me by name. They may think they’re setting a new trend, but I guarantee they just look like fools.’

‘Of course I won’t, Mother.’

Her mum pats her cheek and gives her a brief, pleased smile. ‘You are a good girl Mallory, you do your father and I proud.’

Where Did She Come From? Who Is She Really? Is There A Family Out There Missing Her? Find Out Next Week On ‘Wild-Park-Girl’.

Mallory spends most of the shuttle-ride to the party thinking about the rest of the opening credits. She’s curled up in one of the window seats, tucked against glass, while her parents sit in front speaking quietly to each other. They’re being hosted this week by Patron Ama, a biotech engineer who runs the biggest augmented reality company out there — S-A Industries. Mallory’s dad started out working under Ama, but he’d left the company a few years before Mallory was born. He doesn’t talk about it much, Jeremiah Li isn’t a man of many words — he always has too much work to do. But when he does he speaks fondly of his time at S-A, and with a great deal of professional respect for Ama in spite of Everything That Happened. That’s how her parents refer to it, capitalisation and all. Everything That Happened. From the professional disagreements, to the firing, to the law suits, to even more law suits, to her father’s own Patronage and Ama’s refusal to let the bestowing of the title go

unchallenged. Most of it had gone on when Mallory was still quite little so she doesn't remember much of anything, but she can hear just how bad it had been in the way her father describes it as 'a hard time' with a tired frown or her mother's description of Ama as a despicable woman.

None of that means they can skip the damn party when Ama hosts it though. Mallory has checked. If she hates the parties with their roundabout conversations, bright lights, and intense scrutiny, she feels an incandescent rage towards the parties at Ama's. The stares increase tenfold as people peer at her parents and Ama, waiting to see if someone cracks. They always talk to her as well, something about it looking worse if they didn't. At least Ama seems to despise the little act as much as they do. Mallory thinks she does at least; it's hard to get a read on her.

They have to travel through Mid-City to get to Ama's mansion so their shuttle is gliding through the high-rises and densely packed apartment buildings. It fills Mallory with a lingering claustrophobia, so different to the meandering estates and sprawling corporate headquarters that make up the Upper-Echelon. Concrete walls rush by as the shuttle speeds along; beads of light spilling out of windows, the only thing breaking the monotony. As the shuttle line traces the buildings and edges closer to ground level, Mallory begins to notice bursts of red writing spattered against the walls.

ELITISM KILLS

PATRONAGE = MURDER

WE ARE THE OPPRESSED

The walls of August turned a canvas for those that call themselves revolutionary.

'Pay them no mind, dear,' her mum calls back to her. 'All great societies must have their dissenters.'

Mallory hears her dad mutter, 'Though why ours must be so pointlessly annoying,' before her mum frowns him into silence.

When the revolutionaries first started becoming more active a few years back it had sent a frisson of excitement through the Upper-Echelons. It had sounded daring and brave and like their world was expanding into some great Epic. They did small things at first; graffiti and hacking jobs, a few labs got broken into. Nothing too

disruptive. But then there'd been an attack in the Factories, one of the largest computerised production lines was put out of business for a week and the Patrons had sent in the Guard. There hasn't been any revolutionary activity outside of Mid-City for over a year.

Secretly, Mallory has been a little disappointed at the lack of excitement.

As their shuttle pulls up outside Patron Ama's house, Mallory's stomach tightens. Ama's house is almost a palace. It's gargantuan. Pillars of marble and gold rise from the ground and line the entrance drive, like path markers to a temple they exclaim 'I am here, I am grand, and you *will* worship me'. The house itself is a testament to technological and architectural wonders, but built in the old-time style everyone knows Ama favours. It looks like it's made out of golden sandstone, edged in the same marble as the pillars, and decorated in elaborate gold-leaf and swirling carved patterns. But each brick is actually made of durable poly-synthetic-plastic and contains a computer processor linked back to a central server. Mallory loves it as much as she hates it. She loves the complication, the sheer brilliance of having a house built out of a computer, but she hates the arrogance it exudes. It screams power and status, a snarling beast that demands respect from all who pass through. Mallory has wondered in the past how hard it would be to hack; she's considered getting Bligh to reprogram it to display childish images and insulting words. But actions like that would be enough to have her thrown in jail, no matter her parents' status, so she leaves her plans as a fantasy.

Mallory imagines the house covered in sparkling butterflies and love hearts as they walk up to it just so she looks less impressed.

'Why are you smirking? Stop it,' her mum murmurs. 'You have to stay in control, dear.'

'Yes Mother, of course Mother,' Mallory intones, pulling her face back to neutral. It's possible, Mallory thinks, that Mum will only be pleased when Mallory successfully learns to replace her face with a blank piece of paper. Then whatever emotion she's expected to have can just be drawn on.

Her mother gives her a cautionary look as they walk up the grand staircase and into Patron Ama's party; Mother, Father, and Daughter — picture perfect family.

The ballroom is lit like gold. Opulence spills out of every corner of the ballroom, delicate flowers hang from baskets (the real thing!) while little bots flutter and flit like iridescent butterflies over their heads. But all Mallory can focus on is her shoe pinching her left heel; rubbing in a sharp, stinging way that heralds a blister. She tries to shift her weight to her right to relieve the pressure, but the movement only causes another stab of pain and a wince that she doesn't manage to conceal. Her mum squeezes her elbow, though the conversation she's holding with Patron Ama doesn't falter. Mallory can tell that she's going to get another lecture on poise and propriety when they're back at home. The reprimand makes her palms itch. She grits her teeth to keep the frustrated words down inside of her where they coil in her stomach like electric wires; sharp and shocking.

She's never enjoyed the Patron Parties, endless parades of only the most powerful, the most influential. Her parents force her to attend because they think it will instil a greater understanding of August City's politics. But the parties are boring in a way that goes beyond a lack of something to do. It's people either ignoring her or talking down to her. We think of you as a mere speck if we think of you at all, their eyes tell Mallory as they look at her with disdain.

Mallory is not allowed to speak. Her parents are too afraid she'll say the wrong thing to the wrong person. She's just here for her parents to show her off while she studies the delicate balance of civility and cut-throat politics that keeps August running. She'd been fascinated by it when she was younger, the way the Patrons would circle each other with their words, talking round and round about everything except what they really wanted to say. Yet somehow they still understood each other. Her mum says it's all about listening to the things they don't say, the gaps in the conversation, and learning to leave those spaces in your own sentences. It had seemed kind of mystical up until her parents decided she needed to learn to do it herself.

Now it just seems stupid.

Twice a week she has to sit down with her mum and Bligh and work on her Politicking. She hates it. But Mum insists it's what she needs to know to manage the world.

'This is important Mallory,' she says whenever questioned. 'This is your future.'

Even Bligh thinks it's important that she learns, which is saying something. Normally he agrees with her when she complains about all the dumb little things that constitute life in the Upper-Echelons. So she goes to the lessons and she tries to remember it all. She can't help it if her inner-monologue, the one Mum is always telling her to rely on, is more interested in just screaming than in passive-aggressive implying insults.

'Let them point out their own flaws themselves, if you can. Ask them if they're going for a vintage style if their clothes are out of season. Wonder where their partner is if you know they called it quits,' her mum recites. Mallory imagines punching them in the face instead.

Whatever. She swallows the thoughts down and watches old *Street Fighters* repeats on her QScreen in her room after every lesson. Her parents don't like her watching 'those kinds of shows', the ones that are meant for the unsophisticated and uncivilised masses of Mid-City and the Factories, in no way for the daughter of a Patron. But Bligh is the only one who ever comes into her room anyway and he doesn't care.

That's not the complete truth. He does care, just not about what she watches. He just knows she only likes watching the fights when she's feeling particularly angry. He even stood up for her and asked her parents if she should learn self-defence (they completely dismissed the idea, but she loves him for trying). That's how it goes with Bligh, he just seems to get her. Ever since Dad brought him home from the lab it's felt a little bit like it's her and Bligh against the world. Sometimes she imagines they're in one of the ancient cop shows Aunt Emmy studies, all well-timed jokes and a complete understanding of one-another's psychology. Mallory and Bligh. Bligh and Mallory. They'd have pithy nicknames for each other like Robo-cop or Terrier and Mallory would always turn up late to crime scenes with a grin and two coffees while Bligh cracked jokes about crime waiting for no one.

She went through a phase when she was fourteen of asking Bligh, 'what've we got,' every time she saw him.

Breakfast Scene. Enter Mallory. Eyes crusted with sleep, dressing gown falling off one shoulder. Bligh stands at the counter, apron covering his blue button-down, a plate of eggs in one hand and a piece of toast in the other.

Mallory: What've we got. (*It's a statement and not a question*). *Serious voice.*

Bligh blinks.

Bligh: 'Breakfast?'

Yeah, it always worked better in the old shows. Bligh's not as witty as she sometimes likes to think he is anyway.

Her shoe is still hurting. Damn thing. Bligh had told her to make sure to wear them in before the party tonight but she hadn't listened. Well, she had listened; she'd just decided she had better things to do. Now her heels are burning, practically on fire, and all Mallory wants to do is take them off and sit down in a corner somewhere and douse her feet in ice.

'And how are you doing in school, Mallory?' Ama turns to speak to her just as Mallory is gearing up for another pain-relieving shuffle.

Mallory nearly falls over. It probably just comes across as a slight waver, a rocking movement as though Ama's words have lashed out like a punch and tried to knock her over. Ama doesn't speak to Mallory. No one speaks to Mallory. It's an established fact of the world. Like gravity. Or that Bligh can always tell when Mallory is lying.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Her mother's eyes are drilling into her. *Do not disappoint!* Telepathy is not needed for Mallory to know what her mum is thinking.

'It's going well.' More detail, don't freeze up. 'We've begun studying the Theory of Synthetic Intelligence.' Something else, something else. Oh. 'Carrie might have mentioned it?'

Perfect. Ama's niece is Mallory's age, but is absolutely hopeless at biotech. She works in the class below Mallory for Tech Lab.

'No, I don't think Carrie's class has begun that unit yet,' Ama says pleasantly enough, but the way Mallory can see her mother smile in her peripheral vision means Ama is at least a little put off.

'Oh, well it's a very interesting topic.' Neutral, keep your face neutral, she thinks. Show no fear.

Mallory thinks it's working. She's about to give Ama a politely snide smile, lift one corner of her mouth and duck her chin just like she's practiced —

The ballroom is suddenly filled with darkness as the lights go out. Everything goes quiet as conversations grind to sudden halt. The lights at a Patron Party don't just go out.

Mallory freezes in shock like everyone else. She wants to reach for her mum's hand but doesn't dare move because *what is happening?* Harsh breaths and trembling fingers. Is the room really filled with darkness or is it just empty of light? she thinks, somewhat hysterically.

Quiet voices begin to fill the void of dark silence that surrounds them.

'What's going on?'

'Did Ama plan this?'

'Why did the lights go out?'

The lights come back on as suddenly as they went out and nothing has changed. Except. No one is moving, wide-eyed as they look about the room trying to determine if this is something they need to be concerned about. No one wants to be the first one to panic.

'Nothing to worry about!' Patron Ama shouts suddenly to the crowd, 'I told maintenance they had to wait till tomorrow for the tests, but clearly I need new employees.'

There's a titter from the crowd as they pretend to relax, but Mallory can see the Guardsmen on duty racing out of the room as Ama glances around with a tight expression. A flash of red from above catches Mallory's eye. Instead of the soft gold from before, the bots are twinkling blood red.

'Oh dear,' her mum says from beside her as she too looks at the ceiling. 'We'd better go find your father.'