Mickey 7

Mickey 7 by Edward Ashton follows Mickey, a disposable worker on a colonization mission to a distant planet. After his seventh death, he’s replaced, but his new body retains his memories, leading to a struggle for survival and identity as he uncovers dark secrets about the mission.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 opens with the protagonist, Mickey, finding himself in complete darkness, disoriented, and lying on a cold, unforgiving stone floor. The immediate sense of confusion grips him as he tries to recall how he ended up in such a dire situation, but his memory is fragmented, like shards of broken glass. He only remembers certain moments—being dropped off at a crevasse and noticing a rock formation that struck him as curious, even amusing, as it resembled a monkey’s head. This fleeting distraction led to him losing his footing and tumbling into a hole, leaving him injured in more ways than one. His left wrist is swollen, and pain radiates through his body as he surveys his surroundings, trying to make sense of where he is and how he can escape. In a desperate attempt to find help, he checks his communication device for a signal, and to his relief, he manages to reach Berto. Berto confirms that he had witnessed Mickey’s fall but also expresses his inability to assist him, citing Mickey’s status as an Expendable—someone who can be replaced upon death. This cold reality hits Mickey hard, as it means no one will risk their lives for him, leaving him to face the consequences alone.

The conversation between Mickey and Berto, while briefly lighthearted, is tinged with a sense of dark humor. Mickey’s frustration is palpable as he listens to Berto’s dismissive

attitude, acknowledging that he is, indeed, nothing more than an expendable resource in the eyes of those in charge. As the pain from his wrist intensifies, Mickey’s thoughts turn inward, and he begins to reflect on the coldness of his environment, where the real danger is not just from physical injury but from the freezing temperatures that threaten to end his life. He has often considered the possibility of dying in the harsh cold, and now, stranded in this desolate place, it feels like an inevitable fate. Mickey's internal monologue blends humor with darker themes, as he contemplates his own mortality and the lack of significance he feels in the eyes of others. His musings about death become a meditation on life itself—what it means to be alive in a world where survival is a constant struggle, and where one misstep can lead to an untimely and unceremonious end. His mind wanders, questioning whether his life, which has been reduced to the role of an Expendable, ever truly had any meaning or if it was all just a series of misfortunes leading to this very moment.

Just as Mickey begins to accept the inevitable, a surprising message from Nasha shakes him from his resignation. Nasha, who seems to hold a meaningful connection to him, reveals that she is on her way to attempt a rescue, giving Mickey a fleeting sense of hope. This unexpected glimmer of hope brings with it a rush of conflicting emotions, from the relief of someone willing to risk their life for his safety to the fear of leading Nasha into a situation that could endanger her. Mickey allows himself a brief moment of hope, but this hope is quickly overshadowed by the grim reality of his situation. He realizes that he is trapped too deep underground and that no rescue attempt could succeed without jeopardizing Nasha’s life. With a heavy heart, he urges her to turn back, understanding that her safety must take precedence over his own. Mickey’s decision to prioritize Nasha’s well-being over his own survival speaks volumes about his inner conflict and his acceptance of the circumstances surrounding his life.

The chapter reaches a poignant turning point as Mickey reflects on his impending fate, resigning himself to the fact that he will not survive this fall. As he contemplates the slow, inevitable death by freezing, he cannot escape the gravity of his situation. Despite his resolve, a small part of him still holds onto the hope that something might change. The realization that Nasha’s determination to save him has reignited a sense

of hope within him brings a sense of emotional conflict. It is the first time in a long while that Mickey feels something other than the cold, suffocating despair that has defined his existence up to this point. But as the cold sets in, and his physical state deteriorates further, Mickey knows the truth: he is too far gone, and Nasha’s presence, as much as it has given him hope, cannot save him now. The chapter ends on an unresolved note, leaving the reader with a sense of emotional tension and uncertainty. Mickey’s final thoughts on the matter hint at the complicated emotional terrain he must navigate in the face of death, considering how his potential demise will affect those around him, especially Nasha. Her role in his final moments adds a bittersweet layer to the story, leaving readers eager to see how their relationship will evolve as the narrative unfolds. The chapter sets the stage for deeper exploration of themes such as survival, sacrifice, and the emotional weight of facing one’s mortality alone.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 begins with the protagonist, Mickey, reflecting on the series of events that led him to choose the dangerous position of an Expendable. Initially, he had been drawn to the idea of becoming "Immortal," thinking that signing up for this role would somehow offer him an escape from the suffocating confines of his life on Midgard. However, as he recalls his recruitment experience aboard the *Drakkar*, it becomes clear that he was driven more by a desperate desire for a way out than by any idealistic notion of immortality. He vividly remembers meeting Gwen Johansen, a no-nonsense recruiter who outlined the grim realities of being an Expendable. The tasks she described were life-threatening, involving dangerous work in deep space, exposure to hostile alien environments, and even medical experimentation—all with the expectation that these risks could easily lead to death. Despite the chilling nature of the job, Mickey felt cornered by the lack of options and saw this as his only chance to escape the monotony of life on Midgard.

During the recruitment session, Gwen went into further detail about the types of assignments an Expendable would face. These included high-risk tasks such as conducting repairs on the ship during interstellar travel, dealing with potentially lethal local flora and fauna, and participating in dangerous medical trials. Mickey, whose background did not include technical expertise or practical skills, understood that he would often find himself in life-threatening situations. Yet, the allure of leaving his home planet quickly overshadowed any concerns about the risks. To Mickey, this job seemed like the only viable way to escape Midgard's stagnant society, where few opportunities existed for growth, especially for someone with his academic background. The thought of exploring the unknown, even at great personal cost, was more appealing than remaining on a planet where he saw no future for himself.

As the conversation progresses, Mickey’s misconceptions about the role of an Expendable start to unravel. He had initially believed that, should he face death during one of these hazardous assignments, a backup mechanism would allow him to return to life, but Gwen reveals the harsh truth: there is no such mechanism. Most Expendables face death without the hope of resurrection, a brutal reality that Mickey had not considered. To his shock, he learns that despite thousands of applicants for other positions aboard the *Drakkar*, he is the only one who has applied for the dangerous role of Expendable. This revelation hits Mickey hard, emphasizing his isolation in this decision. He is left to grapple with the uncomfortable truth that he is choosing to embrace a life where his very existence will be seen as expendable, with no promise of escape or renewal should things go wrong.

Gwen continues to challenge Mickey’s motivations, asking why he believes he is suited for such a dangerous and dehumanizing position. Given that Mickey comes from a society where knowledge is easily accessible and his background is in history, Gwen questions whether he truly understands the weight of his decision. Mickey reflects on his life on Midgard and realizes that, despite his education, he had been unable to find a meaningful place in society. The lack of opportunity for growth in Midgard, particularly for those with an academic background, had left him feeling frustrated and adrift. He sees many young people, like himself, turning to risky paths simply because there are no other options available. The absence of fulfilling careers in factories, military roles, or academic positions pushed him to consider the Expendable role as a way to break free from the stifling environment of Midgard.

Mickey’s decision to join the *Drakkar* mission as an Expendable is thus driven by a mixture of frustration, desperation, and the desire for change. The reality of the risks he would face begins to set in, but the yearning for escape from his stagnant life outweighs his fear of death. The chapter concludes with Mickey reflecting on the complex mix of emotions that led him to this moment. While he is aware that his choice is fraught with danger and existential uncertainty, it represents his best shot at leaving Midgard behind. In this bleak environment, Mickey understands that his survival depends not only on his physical abilities but also on how well he can navigate

the challenges of being seen as expendable. This chapter sets the stage for the protagonist's journey, exploring his internal struggles, the societal pressures he faces, and the difficult choices he must make in a world where the stakes of survival are high and personal identity is constantly at risk.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 begins with Seven and Eight grappling with the mounting tension of their predicament. Seven becomes acutely aware of the difficult situation they are in, particularly when he discovers that Eight has inexplicably emerged from the tank, despite protocol dictating that only one of them should survive. This surprising turn of events leads to an emotional exchange filled with frustration, humor, and some underlying desperation. As both characters try to make sense of their reality, they realize that their situation is not just complicated, but potentially life-threatening. They share a mix of sarcastic banter and serious contemplation, but the fear of being discovered as duplicates casts a shadow over every word. The tension between them rises as they navigate the reality that their survival hinges on keeping their secret intact.

Seven reflects on the discomfort of waking from the tank, likening it to the aftermath of a painful hangover mixed with a sense of disorientation and bodily distress. This reflection is soon interrupted by Eight’s outburst, filled with anger and disbelief over how the situation unfolded, and he blames Seven for their crisis. Their exchange, initially tense, shifts toward a more mundane discussion about cleanliness, with humor breaking through the otherwise serious atmosphere. Despite the lighter moments, their conversation reveals deeper feelings of anxiety, as both understand that the threat of exposure could be deadly. The weight of their existence as duplicates becomes increasingly apparent, and the sense of urgency is ever-present, as they realize how much is at stake should their true nature be discovered. Their relationship is one of familiarity, yet it is tested under the pressure of their precarious circumstances, where survival is a constant balancing act between humor and fear.

The narrative then expands beyond the immediate conflict to touch on the broader survival challenges faced by their colony. Seven contextualizes the scarcity of food,

noting the colony’s reliance on dwindling rations, which underscores the desperation of their current situation. The colony, like the characters, is in a constant state of crisis, fighting not only external threats but also internal struggles over limited resources. Seven’s reflection on the colony’s history of colonization, with its own resource constraints and survival challenges, mirrors the current state of their struggle. The isolation of their colony, paired with the harsh realities of their environment, reinforces the sense of fragility that permeates their lives. It becomes clear that survival for Seven, Eight, and the entire colony is not just a matter of avoiding danger, but also about navigating complex social dynamics and moral choices.

The dynamic between Seven and Eight continues to evolve, with Eight expressing a refusal to sacrifice himself for the good of the group. This shift in perspective sparks a deeper conversation about responsibility and the moral weight of survival. Eight insists that responsibility should fall on Seven, challenging him to make difficult decisions for their collective future. This moment forces Seven to confront the grim reality that their survival depends on choices that may not align with their desires but are instead rooted in necessity. As the discussion unfolds, it becomes clear that survival is not just about the physical risk of external threats but also about making personal sacrifices and navigating the existential dilemmas that arise. The characters realize that they must carefully weigh their options and consider how every decision could tip the scales toward life or death, and the burden of responsibility becomes an ever-present pressure.

As the chapter progresses, Seven and Eight consider the possibility of speaking to Command about their predicament. They both quickly recognize, however, that such a confrontation could be dangerous, with the risk of discovery looming over them. Their conversation turns to logistics, with each considering the practicalities of their options, but they eventually realize that any course of action they take may lead to unavoidable consequences. The threat of being exposed as duplicates in the cycler chamber intensifies, as they both understand that any decision made could result in their end. The chapter closes with an unexpected burst of humor as they joke about the cyclical nature of their existence, providing a brief moment of levity amid the

overwhelming tension. Their ability to find humor in such dire circumstances highlights the complexity of their bond, even as they face an uncertain future. The final scene leaves readers on edge, as Seven and Eight prepare for an uncertain fate, aware of the profound moral and existential questions that continue to surround their survival.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 opens with the protagonist, Mickey, reflecting on the unsettling situation that has led him to a disassembler field interface, a device that threatens to reduce him to a slurry for the colonists of Niflheim. In the face of this life-threatening reality, Mickey grapples with the weight of regret over past decisions, particularly those surrounding his initial choices involving Gwen Johansen. This moment of despair prompts a series of reflections on the series of events that pushed him toward his current predicament. He recalls his time on Kiruna, a place where he had been stuck, both emotionally and financially, and how the looming presence of Darius Blank had made every day feel like a struggle for survival. Mickey’s thoughts naturally turn to his past friendship with Berto, a relationship that had begun in their school days and which had defined much of Mickey's life. Their bond had been rooted in a shared passion for flight simulators, with Berto quickly excelling in all areas. Though Mickey had always admired Berto’s skill and achievements, it was Berto’s success in pog-ball that truly propelled him to fame. Yet, years later, Berto’s attempt to revive his career, unknowingly, placed Mickey in a financial crisis that would have lasting consequences.

Mickey recounts how he had placed a bet on Berto’s inevitable failure, despite his warnings to Berto that the comeback attempt would likely be unsuccessful. This bet, born from a mixture of doubt and misguided hope, spiraled out of control, and Mickey found himself overwhelmed by debt. This financial strain drew the attention of Darius Blank, a figure whose reputation for ruthlessness made him a constant source of fear. Mickey had tried to convince himself that Blank’s threats were mere posturing, that he wouldn’t go as far as to take his life over money. However, this illusion was shattered when a thug, sent by Blank, confronted Mickey, using a neural inducer to torture him in an effort to break him. This traumatic encounter marked a turning point for Mickey, forcing him to confront the reality of his situation: his life was at risk, and without a

way out, survival seemed impossible. The fear of Blank's growing influence and the brutal consequences of his debts left Mickey with little choice but to search for a way to escape.

In a desperate attempt to escape his dire circumstances, Mickey set his sights on a position aboard the *Drakkar*, hoping that joining the crew could provide the fresh start he so desperately needed. However, when Mickey discovered that the only available position was that of an "Expendable," the reality of the situation hit him hard. The Expendable role was inherently dangerous, reserved for individuals who would carry out the most hazardous tasks, often at the cost of their lives. Mickey had no qualifications for other roles, and with no other viable option, he reluctantly accepted the position. Even though Berto expressed concern for his safety, he ultimately left the decision up to Mickey. The choice, though fraught with danger, seemed to be the only escape from his current life. As Mickey prepared for the interview, he couldn't shake the sense of resignation that filled him. The fear of death, which had been instilled in him by his torture at the hands of Blank's thug, seemed inevitable, but at least it was a way out of the crushing despair he had been living in. This decision set Mickey on a path that was uncertain and full of risk, but it also provided a glimmer of hope, a chance to break free from the cycle of debt and fear that had defined his life for so long.

As the chapter progresses, Mickey reflects deeply on the choices that led him here, acknowledging that his decision to become an Expendable was not driven by desire but by necessity. His past had closed off all other options, and while the dangers of his new role were undeniable, it seemed to be his only way to escape the crushing weight of his debts and the threats that loomed over him. Mickey realizes that his survival on the *Drakkar* will depend on more than just his ability to avoid death; it will require him to reconcile with his own sense of purpose and the grim reality of what he has become. The Expendable role, though a potential death sentence, also represents a final chance at freedom from the life he had been shackled to on Midgard. Mickey’s journey into the unknown is not just about physical survival, but about grappling with the existential questions of identity, worth, and the sacrifices one is willing to make to

escape a life of desperation. This chapter sets the stage for Mickey’s continued struggle for survival, where the boundaries between hope and despair are constantly shifting, and the ultimate question of whether he can escape his past and redefine his future remains unanswered.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 opens with Seven, the protagonist, facing a daunting and uncomfortable task: using the cycler, a device designed to disassemble organic matter. The thought of being forced into the machine causes him significant anxiety, as he finds the idea far worse than any danger he's faced before. This heightened fear stems from the already precarious situation in which Seven and his companion, Eight, find themselves—living as multiples, with a single registered identity. The constant threat of exposure weighs heavily on their minds, knowing that their existence as clones could lead to deadly consequences if discovered. Despite this, Eight expresses deep concern for Seven's well-being and intervenes, trying to prevent him from making a hasty decision in his fear. The emotional and psychological pressure of their situation continues to build, as the two grapple with the risks and limitations they face in their struggle for survival.

Their conversation shifts to their dwindling food supply, which further adds to the tension. Eight suggests that they start rationing more creatively by consuming cheaper paste, a solution that Seven resists, unwilling to accept such a desperate measure. They both understand that the severity of their situation requires careful thinking, yet Seven remains adamant about not resorting to something that feels like a compromise. They briefly consider asking Berto, a mutual acquaintance, for additional resources, but after weighing their options, they realize that Berto may not be a reliable source of help. This realization deepens their sense of isolation, as they recognize that they have few allies and even fewer viable options to secure their survival. Their continued struggle to obtain food is just one aspect of their much larger fear: the threat of exposure and the unpredictable wrath of Commander Marshall, who would surely react harshly if their secret were uncovered.

As the two continue to discuss their options, Seven reflects on the fragile relationships they have with others in the colony, especially the delicate balance of trust in such a high-stakes environment. The sudden news of Gabe Torricelli’s disappearance heightens the already tense atmosphere. Seven recalls seeing Gabe not long before his vanishing and begins to consider the possibility that the creatures they previously encountered might now pose a direct threat to the colony. This realization brings a sense of urgency, as the threat from the creatures grows more immediate. The disappearance of Gabe amplifies the uncertainty and danger that looms over the colony, forcing Seven and Eight to confront the fact that survival may require more than just careful planning—it might require luck, vigilance, and the ability to act quickly in a situation where everything seems stacked against them. The urgency to create a reliable and foolproof plan intensifies as they face the grim reality of their existence and the very real danger of exposure.

As the chapter progresses, Seven is summoned to meet with Commander Marshall, signaling a potential escalation of the already strained atmosphere within the colony. The meeting with Marshall represents a crucial turning point for Seven and Eight, as the Commander’s reaction to their existence as multiples could dramatically change the course of their survival. The summons is a reminder of the precariousness of their situation and the ever-present threat of discovery. Seven knows that this meeting could be a decisive moment, one that could either secure their safety or lead to their undoing. The chapter ends with rising tension, as the protagonist must now prepare for an uncertain conversation with someone who holds the power to determine their fate. This interaction encapsulates the deep themes of trust, identity, and survival in a hostile and unforgiving environment, highlighting the characters’ emotional and psychological struggles as they navigate the complexities of their existence.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 begins with Mickey, the protagonist, feeling anxious about an impending meeting with Marshall, the supreme commander of their mission. Reflecting on his initial days aboard the *Drakkar*, Mickey recalls his first unsettling experience with zero gravity, a terrifying moment marked by an unexpected free fall. This experience left Mickey with a sense of dread that only deepened when he met Marshall for the first time. Despite the fear that gripped him, Mickey did his best to maintain his composure, but Marshall’s imposing presence made the encounter unforgettable. The power dynamic between them became clear right away, and Mickey found himself intimidated by Marshall’s authority, setting the tone for the complex relationship that would unfold as they worked together.

Marshall’s introduction to the new colonists, delivered in the lounge, was marked by sarcastic remarks and a sharp assessment of their space travel experience. Dugan, a fellow colonist, voiced his frustration over the lack of personal effects being transferred, only to have Marshall reveal that personal items were prohibited due to the mission’s strict weight constraints. This decision caused an immediate sense of dissatisfaction among the colonists, as many had hoped to bring along small comforts to ease their long journey. Mickey tried to protest, questioning the logic behind the restricted luggage allowance, but his concerns were met with Marshall’s cold, unyielding response. Marshall then went on to explain the reasoning behind these restrictions, highlighting the significant limitations placed on the mission’s mass. He revealed that transporting the colonists as frozen embryos was a strategic choice, made to minimize the ship's weight and keep the mission on course. This conversation served as a sobering reminder of the sacrifices they had to make in order to ensure the survival of the mission.

The conversation between Mickey and Marshall takes a tense turn when Marshall questions Mickey about his role in the mission. Mickey, frustrated and attempting to downplay the tension, makes a sarcastic comment about being “Expendable.” Marshall, however, is not amused by this remark and swiftly expresses his disapproval. The intensity of Marshall’s reaction makes it clear that such flippant remarks are not tolerated in the high-pressure environment of the mission. He then orders Mickey to find a sling to sleep in, as the station does not have the resources to provide individual quarters. This request leaves Mickey feeling unsettled, as it reinforces the harsh reality of their living conditions. The lack of personal space and the seemingly dehumanizing approach to their accommodations serve as a constant reminder that the mission is focused on survival, not comfort. Mickey is forced to come to terms with the fact that his physical and emotional needs are secondary to the success of the mission.

As the chapter unfolds, Mickey discusses the situation with Dugan and Bree, another colonist, who reveals more about Marshall's personal beliefs. Bree explains that Marshall adheres to Natalist ideologies, which hold that when a person’s original body dies, their soul also ceases to exist. According to this philosophy, bio-printed individuals, like Mickey and the others, are seen as soulless and lacking intrinsic value. This revelation leaves Mickey feeling uneasy, especially given his status as an Expendable. The idea that his life holds less meaning than those of the original colonists shakes Mickey to his core. He realizes that his existence, as a clone, is viewed with disdain by those who hold these beliefs, adding another layer of complexity to his role on the mission. Dugan, trying to ease the tension, jokes that as long as Mickey remains alive in his current form, he is still considered valuable in Marshall’s eyes. While the remark is meant to provide some comfort, it does little to quell Mickey’s growing discomfort. The chapter ends with Mickey reflecting on his place in this unforgiving world, fully aware that his survival hinges on navigating not only physical challenges but also the deeply ingrained beliefs and attitudes of those around him.

This chapter emphasizes the psychological toll that comes with being seen as “Expendable.” Mickey’s struggles with identity, value, and survival are central to the

narrative, illustrating the deep emotional conflict that comes with living in a world where life is considered disposable. As the chapter concludes, Mickey is left to grapple with the complexities of his existence, aware that the mission's harsh realities extend beyond the physical dangers of space. His experiences aboard the *Drakkar* will force him to confront his own self-worth, the value placed on his life by others, and the moral challenges that come with being part of a mission that treats him as a mere tool for survival.



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In this chapter, the protagonist, Mickey Barnes, reflects on his situation as he faces a meeting with Hieronymus Marshall. He is apprehensive about being late, especially considering the potential consequences on his food supply. Upon entering Marshall's office, he encounters his colleague Berto and is immediately placed on the defensive by Marshall, who questions his iterations as an Expendable.

Mickey admits to being the eighth iteration, and Marshall interrogates Berto about how Mickey’s previous iteration ended up "lost." Berto explains that Mickey7 fell into a deep crevasse during a reconnaissance mission, which leads to Marshall's frustration over the failure to recover Mickey's body. Marshall emphasizes that their agricultural section is struggling, and the loss of Mickey7 has resulted in a significant hit to their food supplies. As a penalty, both Mickey and Berto's rations are docked by twenty percent, which leaves them with insufficient calories.

Once out of the meeting, the tension between Mickey and Berto boils over. Mickey confronts Berto about not being truthful regarding the circumstances of his last death, revealing feelings of betrayal and distrust. Berto attempts to defend himself, explaining that he would not have left Mickey to die intentionally, even if he felt it was risky to attempt a rescue. Their interaction highlights the fraught relationship and ongoing dynamics between their friendship and the harsh realities they face.

Later, Mickey returns to his quarters and finds his new iteration, Eight, sprawled in bed. They engage in a discussion about their operational duties and rationing dilemmas. Mickey reveals their recent repercussions regarding caloric intake and the necessity of planning for any hazardous assignments. Eight proposes that he should handle the next dangerous task while Mickey takes it easy, but Mickey asserts his unwillingness to take on all perilous jobs. Their conversation signifies a shifting

partnership as two iterations must coexist, share responsibilities, and navigate the complexities of their existence in a harsh environment.

As the chapter concludes, Mickey receives an urgent command from headquarters, suggesting that whatever awaits him may challenge the fragile cooperation he has begun to establish with Eight.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 opens with the protagonist, Mickey, reflecting on the variety of tasks he has been assigned aboard Himmel Station. Unlike most crew members, Mickey isn't restricted to one specific area and instead takes on a range of responsibilities as needed. From tending to the rabbit hutches to providing security duties, his day-to-day life is filled with diverse roles. However, the most crucial moments arrive when Command personally summons him, indicating a need for his unique set of skills. These moments highlight the weight of his role on the station and set the stage for the personal and professional challenges he faces.

Mickey looks back at his early days on Himmel Station, recalling the difficulties he had adapting to the zero-gravity environment. He specifically remembers his first encounter with Jemma, a tall woman in a gray jumpsuit, who introduces herself as his supervisor. Jemma's direct, no-nonsense teaching style is in sharp contrast to Mickey's initial apprehension about the complexities of his duties. Over time, however, Jemma becomes more than just a supervisor; she plays a pivotal role in Mickey's training, blending technical instruction with deeper philosophical discussions. These discussions often revolve around complex concepts that challenge Mickey's understanding of both his mission and himself, allowing him to grow both professionally and personally.

One key theme in their discussions is the Ship of Theseus, a philosophical concept that Jemma uses as a metaphor for change and identity. Jemma emphasizes that understanding the mission's objectives and the harsh realities of space travel is critical, including the fact that crew members must come to terms with their expendability. While Mickey initially finds these discussions uncomfortable, they eventually provide him with a deeper understanding of his role and purpose. These philosophical debates often trigger moments of personal reflection about life, identity, and the concept of the self, leading Mickey to contemplate who he really is in the

context of his mission and the larger universe. This combination of practical training and profound philosophical conversations becomes a central part of his development, helping him adjust to his reality in space.

As Mickey’s training progresses, he gains hands-on experience with a range of systems aboard Himmel Station. He learns to operate a linear accelerator and prepares for tasks outside the station, gaining more knowledge and skills essential for his mission. Their relationship evolves through the intensity of the training, with Mickey becoming more confident in his abilities and Jemma offering continued support. Alongside this, Mickey begins to confront deeper questions about the risks associated with space exploration and the personal toll these decisions take. The harsh, unforgiving nature of their mission forces Mickey to reevaluate his own priorities and perceptions, both as a member of the crew and as an individual facing the risks of exploration.

The emotional climax of the chapter occurs on Mickey’s final training day, which culminates in an unsettling and somber graduation ceremony. Contrary to the traditional celebratory nature of such events, the ceremony serves as a grim reminder of the true nature of his role aboard Himmel Station. Instead of receiving congratulations, Mickey is presented with a burner gun by Jemma, a symbol of his initiation into his role as an Expendable. This moment forces Mickey to confront the stark reality of his position, the expendability of his life, and the consequences of the immortality technology they are working with. The juxtaposition of humor, philosophical reflection, and the harsh reality of his duties creates a moment of profound decision-making for Mickey. This moment ultimately solidifies his identity as "Mickey1," defining his place within the mission and making it clear that his life, much like the rest of the crew's, is expendable. The emotional weight of this moment encapsulates the tension between the intellectual discussions of identity and the brutal practicalities of survival in space.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 opens with the protagonist facing a tense moment as he encounters a group of colleagues, including Marshall, Dugan, and several Security personnel, near the main lock. The atmosphere is thick with anxiety as the crew is confronted with a monitor displaying a disturbing image of Gallaher, who has been severely injured after an assault by an unidentified creature. The creature is later identified as "creepers," deadly creatures that attack with powerful mandibles. In a desperate bid to contain the situation, the crew vents plasma into the lock, an action that tragically leaves Gallaher critically wounded. The crew is now left with the consequences of this decision, aware of the terrifying threat they face and the increasing danger to the colony.

As the protagonist processes the gravity of the situation, Berto reveals that the attackers are creepers—creatures capable of causing extreme damage with their formidable mandibles. Dugan, surprised by the lack of concrete data on these creatures, urges the protagonist—who has had unsettling encounters with the creepers—to gather valuable information on them. The urgency heightens as Marshall orders the team to gear up and prepare for a comprehensive scan, with a focus on eradicating any creepers that might still be in the area. Marshall emphasizes the severity of the situation and the need for immediate action to protect the colony. The team prepares for the unknown, facing a deadly threat they still know little about, and the stakes of their mission become clearer with every passing moment.

As the group gets ready to head out, the team members voice skepticism about the need for armor in the snowy conditions of Roanoke. Dugan, having witnessed the deadly capabilities of the creepers firsthand, argues strongly that the armor is essential for survival. The protagonist, still reeling from past traumatic encounters with the creatures, shares his apprehensions but ultimately agrees that the armor is necessary. The harsh, frozen environment of Roanoke underscores the danger they

are about to face, with the soldiers preparing to step into a hostile world where survival is uncertain. They reflect on the dangers they've already faced and the failures of previous missions, hinting at the treacherous nature of the planet they are on. The tension is palpable as they brace for what lies ahead, fully aware that any misstep could have fatal consequences.

The protagonist, mentally preparing for what's to come, is deeply aware of the fragile situation they are in. The team's steps become heavier as they approach the area where the creepers were last seen. The threat becomes terrifyingly real when Dugan is suddenly captured by one of the creatures. Panic sets in as Dugan disappears beneath the snow, and the protagonist, along with Cat, must act quickly to save him. Time is running out, and with the freezing cold and the chaos around them, they must fight to survive while battling the creepers. The urgency of the situation is intense, and the protagonist's thoughts race as he tries to process what's happening. As the team struggles to respond to the attack, the protagonist is forced to confront both his fear and his responsibility to protect the team.

The team manages to fend off the creeper temporarily, but the situation is far from over. The protagonist, shaken by the ordeal, is forced to grapple with the trauma of the past while also realizing the scale of the danger they are facing. The harsh reality of the planet's hostile environment and the deadly creatures becomes all too clear. In the midst of the chaos, the team is forced to focus on survival, knowing that their chances of making it out of the situation are slim. The chapter ends on a cliffhanger, with the fate of Dugan and the rest of the crew uncertain. As the team fights to escape the cold and fend off the creepers, readers are left in suspense, eager to see what will happen next in this high-stakes battle for survival. The threat of the creepers, the harsh environment, and the interpersonal tensions between the characters all combine to make this a chapter filled with suspense, action, and uncertainty.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 opens with the protagonist reflecting on her life aboard the *Drakkar*, particularly the role she plays as an Expendable. Though Jemma had prepared her for the inherent dangers of her position, nothing could have fully prepared her for the harsh reality of a mission that bordered on suicide. The responsibilities she carries, which involve risking her life for the mission's success and the safety of the crew, are both a heavy burden and a point of personal conflict. Early in the journey, life on the ship had been relatively uneventful. The voyage to Niflheim, initially expected to be routine, allowed the crew to momentarily let go of their fears of impending catastrophe, offering a temporary sense of relief. For a while, it seemed like the worst was behind them, and the crew members allowed themselves to relax, forgetting the constant tension they faced during such perilous voyages.

However, this fragile peace is shattered when the ship unexpectedly collides with an unknown object while traveling at an incredible speed. The violent impact causes serious damage to the nose cone, which in turn triggers a dangerous radiation leak. The crew's safety is immediately compromised, and the protagonist is called upon to address the critical issue of a faulty power coupling. This coupling is essential for maintaining the ship's shielding, which protects the crew from the lethal radiation that is now leaking into the vessel. The protagonist quickly realizes the gravity of her task as she suits up in a vacuum suit, understanding that the success of the mission now rests solely on her ability to fix the damaged power coupling. The urgency of the situation becomes palpable as the crew faces the possibility of catastrophic radiation exposure, and the protagonist is acutely aware of the risks she must take to ensure the survival of the ship and its inhabitants.

As the protagonist begins the high-risk procedure to replace the damaged coupling, she feels a wave of panic, as the effects of radiation exposure begin to take hold. The

procedure is excruciatingly painful, and her body starts to deteriorate as radiation burns begin to take their toll. Her vision blurs, and every movement becomes more difficult as her body weakens under the intense conditions. Despite the agony, she presses forward, focusing solely on completing the task at hand. Her training kicks in, allowing her to push through the physical and mental pain as she follows the precise instructions needed to replace the coupling. When the task is finally completed, the ship’s shielding is restored, and the immediate threat is quelled. However, the victory feels hollow as the protagonist is left to face the personal cost of her actions, knowing that the scars, both physical and psychological, will remain long after the mission is over.

After the critical event, the protagonist undergoes the process of uploading to a new version of herself—Mickey2—hoping to overcome the toll that the radiation exposure has taken on her body. However, despite the "rebirth" that comes with the upload, the effects of the radiation still linger, with several crew members suffering from radiation sickness. The protagonist quickly adapts to her new instantiation and dons another vacuum suit, preparing for more emergency repairs on the ship. This time, the repairs involve using nanites to restore the ship’s damaged hull, a technological marvel that allows her to work in the harsh environment of space. As she works on the repairs, the protagonist is aware of her ongoing physical suffering but remains focused on the task. The process is grueling, but the protagonist presses on, motivated by the understanding that the survival of the *Drakkar* and its crew depends on her abilities to overcome these challenges. The physical strain, however, is undeniable, and the emotional weight of each repair done becomes harder to bear.

The chapter culminates in a moment of reflection as the protagonist considers the limits of her endurance. Despite her outward success in completing her duties, the toll on her body and mind has been significant. The ship is slowly being restored, but the protagonist is deeply aware of the personal sacrifices she’s made along the way. Each moment on the ship forces her to reckon with her own physical and emotional limits as she navigates the pressures of her role. Her experiences aboard the *Drakkar* are shaping her into someone new, someone capable of pushing through unimaginable

hardships. But with each success, the realization grows that survival in space is not only about overcoming physical barriers but also about dealing with the psychological scars that accompany such an existence. In the harsh environment of interstellar space, where every decision could be life or death, the protagonist is forced to examine her identity and what it truly means to survive. The emotional toll of her journey becomes just as important as the physical one, highlighting the complex nature of survival in an unforgiving universe.



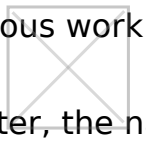
Chapter 11

Chapter 11 opens with Berto, the pilot, reflecting on the harrowing events that took place during a recent sortie, in which three members of the team lost their lives. His reaction, cold and detached, stands in stark contrast to Cat, who is visibly shaken and distressed by the tragic outcome. The tension in the cockpit is thick as Cat confronts Berto, accusing him of failing to warn them about the presence of the deadly creepers, which ultimately led to the devastating mission result. Berto, embarrassed and at a loss for words, offers a brief apology but attempts to justify his actions, which only serves to intensify the argument. The heated exchange between Berto and Cat underscores the deep emotional divide and the weight of the responsibility each member carries, especially when it comes to the lives lost in the course of their duties.

Once they land, the team faces the fallout of the tragic mission and seeks an audience with their superior, Marshall. He is furious, his anger palpable as he demands an explanation for why they prioritized their survival over the safety of Mr. Dugan, whom they were supposed to retrieve despite the threat posed by the creepers. The narrator tries to explain their decision, citing the mission's objectives and the difficult choices they had to make in the heat of the moment. However, Marshall is unrelenting, expressing his displeasure with their reasoning and emphasizing the critical importance of their actions given the colony’s dwindling population. The meeting becomes a tense standoff, with Marshall’s harsh words only serving to deepen the frustration and guilt that the crew members are already feeling after the loss of their comrades.

As the day winds down, Cat and the narrator find themselves sitting together in the cafeteria, reflecting on the difficult events they’ve just faced. The atmosphere in the room is heavy, as the survivors process their grief and the emotional toll the mission has taken on them. Cat, frustrated by Marshall’s insinuation that her judgment was

clouded by her feelings toward the narrator, defends herself vehemently, asserting that she remained professional despite the personal nature of their relationship. The conversation turns light-hearted briefly as they joke about the situation, but the underlying tension remains, with both characters struggling to make sense of the complex emotions and moral dilemmas they are now confronting. The chapter paints a picture of a team grappling with loss, blame, and the psychological burden that comes with their dangerous work in an unforgiving environment.



Later in the chapter, the narrator shares a quieter moment with Nasha, and the complexity of their relationship begins to unfold. Their conversation is marked by a mix of humor and introspection, as they discuss the bizarre circumstances surrounding the recent losses in the colony. They voice concerns over the mysterious creepers, whose ability to breach the colony’s defenses without detection raises significant doubts about their safety and the reliability of their current defenses. Despite the lighter moments in their exchange, a palpable sense of unease lingers, as both characters realize that they may be facing an enemy they do not fully understand. The uncertainties surrounding the creepers and the general safety of the colony have left both of them questioning the stability of their world and the future of their mission.

As the chapter draws to a close, the narrator is haunted by unsettling dreams and visions, which suggest that the trauma they’ve experienced on Midgard is far from over. These vivid dreams serve as a manifestation of their deep-seated fears and the psychological toll of their existence in such a dangerous, unpredictable environment. The narrator struggles with a sense of disorientation, as they confront the emotional scars left by their experiences and the uncertainty of what lies ahead. These dreams leave the narrator overwhelmed by a growing sense of dread and fear for their future, as they must navigate the harsh realities of life in a colony constantly under threat. The chapter leaves readers with a sense of foreboding, highlighting the emotional and mental strain the characters are under as they face the bleak and unforgiving world they inhabit. The uncertainty surrounding their survival and the unsettling nature of their existence continue to overshadow their efforts, leaving the future hanging in the balance.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 focuses on Mickey3, the third version of an individual who has suffered immense trauma from the loss of two previous bodies. The emotional burden of losing his original body is immense, with memories of the tragic event haunting him deeply. Initially, Mickey grapples with fear and a constant sense of impending disaster, as he waits for something else to go wrong. His existence becomes dominated by these fears, and each day feels like a struggle to find meaning in an overwhelming sense of loss. Over time, though, Mickey begins to find solace in reading the histories of failed colonies. These stories provide him with a new perspective on humanity’s expansion into the universe, revealing how the optimistic narratives taught to him in school were often incomplete, hiding the harsh truths of failed colonization attempts.

Through his research, Mickey discovers that many colony ships set off into the unknown with inadequate knowledge of their destinations. This lack of preparation often led to catastrophic outcomes, as colonists faced unforeseen challenges that made their new worlds inhospitable. One story that stands out is that of a failed colony on Asher’s World, where settlers arrived full of hope only to discover that the planet’s environment was unlivable due to conditions that hadn’t been anticipated. This history serves as a painful reminder to Mickey of the unpredictable nature of space exploration, and it forces him to reflect on his own past. His reflections on these stories mirror his personal losses, drawing painful connections between the fate of past colonists and his own struggles with survival and identity.

Amidst this period of self-reflection, Mickey forms a connection with Nasha, a fellow crew member aboard the ship. They first meet in the carousel, an area designed for physical fitness in microgravity, but Mickey is more interested in his research than the exercise routines. Nasha, however, doesn’t let him remain in isolation. She disrupts his focus with her playful banter and gradually opens up about her life, revealing how her

immigrant background and struggles shaped her determination to become a combat pilot. Through their conversations, Mickey begins to understand Nasha's strength and resolve, finding a surprising comfort in her perspective on life.

Their bond deepens as they continue to share stories and hopes for the future, finding common ground in their desires to survive and thrive in a challenging environment. Nasha's resilience and optimistic outlook stand in contrast to Mickey’s initial pessimism, providing him with a sense of hope. As the ship nears its destination, Niflheim, both of them share a sense of anticipation, believing that this new world will offer them the possibility of a fresh start. However, as the ship enters orbit and they prepare for deployment, they are faced with an unexpected revelation. Instead of the lush and welcoming landscape they had envisioned, they are greeted with a barren, frozen planet, leaving them to face the grim reality of their situation.

The stark, frozen world of Niflheim shatters their expectations and brings a wave of uncertainty. Mickey tries to reassure Nasha by drawing parallels to Earth's past, where life thrived in harsh conditions. He tries to maintain hope that they can still find a way to survive, but the uncertainty of the situation becomes overwhelming. A sudden command for immediate deployment only adds to their growing sense of anxiety, as they are left with little time to process what lies ahead. With survival now uncertain and the landscape far from what they imagined, Mickey and Nasha must find a way to adapt to the harsh conditions of Niflheim and determine their next steps.

As the chapter progresses, Mickey must confront not only the external challenges of survival on an inhospitable world but also the deeper emotional scars left by his past. His struggle with loss and identity becomes intertwined with the harsh realities of their mission, forcing him to navigate both physical and emotional turmoil. The tension grows as the crew faces the unknown, with their futures uncertain. The chapter ends on an unresolved note, with Mickey and Nasha preparing for what lies ahead, unsure of what they will find on the frozen planet, and whether they can overcome the challenges they face together. The journey ahead is filled with questions, not just about survival, but about their ability to maintain hope in the face of overwhelming

adversity.



Chapter 13

Chapter 13 opens with the protagonist, disturbed by a vivid and unsettling dream, unable to return to sleep despite sharing a bed with Eight. His mind racing with anxious thoughts, he decides to leave the warmth of the bed and head to the cafeteria in search of solace through reading. As he walks through the cold, empty corridors, the silence around him only amplifies his sense of isolation. The corridors, void of life, mirror his inner emptiness, heightened by the gnawing hunger he feels due to their zeroed-out rations. Despite the harsh realities of their situation, he finds himself browsing through archives, stumbling upon a file on New Hope—a colony that collapsed after a brutal civil war decades ago. The war was fought over a simple yet profound question: was a native bird species sentient, or was it merely a food source? This seemingly trivial question spiraled into a conflict that tore the colony apart, leaving behind a fractured society. The protagonist is left with lingering thoughts on how fragile societal constructs can be, and how quickly a situation can descend into chaos when deeply held beliefs are tested, making him question how close their mission is to unraveling.

As he sifts through his thoughts, he receives messages from both Eight and Cat regarding upcoming duty shifts, their concerns about their roles underscoring the tension from their recent activities. Cat expresses frustration about their security duties, particularly the inhospitable conditions of their assigned planet, Niflheim, which has only heightened their anxieties. The protagonist, while understanding her distress, brushes off her concerns, suggesting that their situation could be worse than it appears. Despite his dismissal, Cat’s frustration continues to simmer, and she alludes to a deeper examination of personal survival instincts, hinting at the emotional toll their dangerous duties are taking on her. The conversation reveals the inner struggle both characters face, trying to balance their sense of duty with their survival instincts.

While Cat grapples with the reality of their dangerous work, the protagonist offers little reassurance, emphasizing how the harshness of their environment is part of the broader survival struggle they face on Niflheim. It becomes increasingly clear that both characters are not just battling external threats but are also questioning their own ability to endure the mental and emotional toll of their mission.

Later, during a routine patrol, the protagonist and Cat encounter a terrifying creature known as a creeper. The tension reaches its peak when Cat is forced to kill one in self-defense, but the situation quickly escalates as more creepers are detected, closing in on their position. The protagonist’s world becomes even more disorienting as he suffers a seizure-like episode, his consciousness flickering between the present moment and blurry, fragmented visions of humans. These distorted flashes further cloud his understanding of what is happening around him, blurring the line between reality and the terrifying hallucinations he is experiencing. The chaotic encounter with the creepers, combined with the protagonist’s mental and physical state, intensifies the sense of dread and confusion, leaving both characters on edge and unsure of how to proceed. As the danger mounts, the protagonist’s ability to stay grounded in reality becomes increasingly compromised, leading to more questions about his own health and the mysterious forces at play.

When the protagonist regains consciousness in a medical facility, he learns from Cat that they survived the ordeal only thanks to the pylons and her swift actions. Although his survival is nothing short of miraculous, medical technician Burke expresses deep concerns over the protagonist’s condition. Despite there being no visible trauma, Burke remains puzzled by the cause of the protagonist’s collapse, raising doubts about his physical and mental well-being. The protagonist is cautioned about the potential risks associated with his ocular implant, a sophisticated piece of technology that interfaces directly with his brain. Burke theorizes that the implant may have been the cause of the seizure, but offers no immediate solutions, leaving the protagonist to consider the dangerous implications of relying on such technology. The uncertainty surrounding his condition adds another layer of tension to the already perilous mission,

as the protagonist begins to question whether the technology meant to enhance his abilities is actually endangering his survival.

As the protagonist reflects on his recent experiences, he receives messages about dinner plans from Eight, signaling a brief return to normalcy amid the chaos. Despite the challenges they face, the small moments of connection—like shared meals—seem to offer a sense of comfort in a world increasingly defined by danger. However, underlying tensions about resources begin to emerge, as interpersonal conflicts start to surface, particularly in regard to the sharing of food and supplies. These growing disagreements foreshadow the difficulty of maintaining any sense of unity as survival instincts push individuals to prioritize their own needs. As the chapter closes, it becomes evident that personal relationships will play a pivotal role in how the crew navigates the harsh environment of Niflheim. The growing divide between the characters highlights the complexities of survival in a hostile environment, where not only external threats, but also the dynamics between individuals, will determine the fate of their mission. These interpersonal challenges set the stage for future conflicts, as the protagonist and the others will have to navigate not just the dangers of their surroundings, but the complexities of their own relationships as they strive to survive.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 begins with Mickey sitting in a dimly lit cafeteria, having a meal with his friend Berto. Despite the tension hanging in the air due to the presence of Security personnel, Berto attempts to lighten the mood by jokingly encouraging Mickey to enjoy the food. Berto, determined not to starve, orders rabbit meat, much to Mickey's surprise, but he insists on having enough to eat despite their difficult situation. Mickey, on the other hand, feels awkward and out of place as he is the subject of ridicule among their group. With limited food options, Mickey keeps his choices within a thousand kcal, opting for potatoes, fried crickets, and a small salad, clearly signaling his internal struggles with the food scarcity. The awkwardness of the situation is palpable, as they sit surrounded by the cold, unwelcoming presence of the guards, each choice feeling like a balancing act between survival and compliance.

Berto, perhaps sensing Mickey’s discomfort, shifts the focus by recalling a dangerous aerial maneuver he performed in a flitter a few weeks earlier. He describes how he bet others on his ability to fly through a narrow rock formation, adding a layer of bravado to his recounting. Initially impressed by the feat, Mickey soon becomes furious as he realizes the gamble involved wasn’t just a stunt for fun—it risked his own life in exchange for what was essentially food. Berto brushes off Mickey’s anger, minimizing the gravity of the situation, but Mickey’s frustration grows as he realizes that their friendship, once built on mutual respect, has been tainted by Berto’s reckless behavior. The tension between them is now clear, as Mickey starts questioning not only Berto’s choices but their dynamic as a whole. Mickey’s growing realization of the disparity in their values creates a chasm between them, complicating their relationship further as the consequences of their actions loom.

The tension reaches a boiling point when Darren, a member of the Security team, approaches their table, challenging them. Initially trying to dismiss the situation,

Berto’s attempts to deflect quickly escalate the confrontation, and Darren's taunting only serves to provoke him. The moment escalates into a physical altercation, with Berto retaliating against Darren’s push, and within seconds, Security personnel join the fray. Mickey, attempting to mediate the situation, is overpowered and tackled to the ground by the guards. His efforts to help only result in further physical restraint, leaving him powerless as the chaos unfolds around him. The escalating violence reveals how easily the dynamics of power and authority can spiral out of control in a confined, tense environment. Mickey, caught in the crossfire, is forced to face the brutal consequences of their actions, his role as an innocent bystander offering him little protection in this volatile atmosphere.

The aftermath of the fight unfolds in Marshall’s office, where the two friends are held accountable for their actions. Marshall, the authority figure, interrogates them about the confrontation, seeking to understand the chain of events. Berto, attempting to downplay the situation, insists that it was simply a misunderstanding and attempts to shift the blame to Darren. Marshall, however, pulls up surveillance footage that shows Berto’s reckless stunt and critiques the Security team’s judgment in allowing such behavior. Despite his deflection, Berto faces the consequences of his actions, with a reduction in rations, added duties, and increased scrutiny. Mickey, by association, is also penalized, receiving a reduction in his rations as punishment for merely being with Berto during the incident. The weight of their actions sinks in as both Mickey and Berto walk away from the office, realizing how fragile their positions within the colony truly are. The chapter closes with an overwhelming sense of uncertainty about their future, underscored by the harsh realities of their existence.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 opens with the characters Seven and Eight enduring the harsh realities of a food shortage in a survival-driven atmosphere. Eight, visibly distressed by the severe rationing, openly expresses his frustration, reflecting on the drastic change since he woke up from the tank. The contrast between his dismay and Seven’s level-headed approach highlights the strain their circumstances are placing on their minds. Seven, while sympathetic to Eight's struggles, tries to remain pragmatic, continuing to ration their limited resources with a sense of responsibility. The bond between them is evident as they share this tension, with Eight even joking about the hunger-induced madness, hinting at his growing desperation. Though the exchange has moments of levity, the weight of their situation is undeniable, creating a complex emotional landscape where humor and hardship intertwine.

As their conversation continues, Seven receives a message from Black Hornet, a fellow crew member, who informs him of a change in flying duties and expresses a desire to meet. Eight, seeing the need for Seven to take a break from the grim environment, encourages him to go, offering a temporary respite from their struggles. This interaction sets the stage for Seven’s reflection on the broader challenges of the colonization mission, particularly the historical failures of past expeditions. The tragic history of the *Ching Shih*, a ship that failed in the face of resource depletion, looms over their current situation. The crew of the *Ching Shih* perished, trapped in space with dwindling supplies, and their demise serves as a reminder of the dire fate that might await them if they cannot overcome their current challenges. This historical reflection underscores the gravity of the current crisis and foreshadows the difficult decisions the crew will face moving forward.

Seeking solitude, Seven retreats to a small dome that, unlike the bustling spaces they once enjoyed, offers little comfort or distraction. This barren, isolating environment

echoes the emotional and psychological toll that the prolonged crisis is taking on the crew. In the dome, Seven encounters Highsmith, a history enthusiast, but instead of engaging, he withdraws into his thoughts. The comparison to past colonists who perished under similar conditions weighs heavily on him, reinforcing his sense of isolation. This moment of introspection leaves Seven pondering whether their colony will meet the same tragic end as those who came before them. The looming question of survival hangs in the air, making it clear that their situation is becoming increasingly dire. As he continues to reflect, Seven feels the immense weight of history and the uncertain future they face as they navigate the inhospitable planet.

Driven by a desire to relieve Eight’s suffering and take action, Seven reaches out to Mickey8, confirming their location and timeline. With the urgency of their situation becoming clearer, Seven heads to the gym, hoping to find a brief escape. However, his encounter with Cat, a fellow crew member, leads to an unexpected yet meaningful conversation about grief and loss. Cat opens up about the recent loss of a bunkmate, a moment that resonates deeply with Seven as it highlights the emotional toll the mission has taken on everyone. The connection between them grows as they share their mutual struggles, and for the first time, Seven feels a sense of relief. This conversation offers a moment of vulnerability and understanding amidst the cold, isolating reality of their mission. The shared experiences of grief, isolation, and the constant struggle for survival create a bond between them, providing comfort in the face of the overwhelming challenges they face. As the chapter concludes, Seven’s growing connection with Cat offers a small, but significant, glimmer of hope that emotional connections can still be formed despite the harsh environment they inhabit.

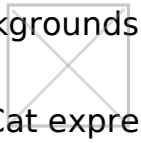
Chapter 16

Chapter 16 begins with the narrator waking up in Cat's bed, feeling disoriented. This unusual sleeping arrangement was a consequence of wanting to avoid the painful memories of a recently lost roommate. Their shared bed wasn't born from intimacy, but rather as a means to comfort each other amid emotional distress, particularly surrounding Nasha and Eight. As the narrator slowly regains his senses, Cat asks about his plans for the day. Upon realizing that it’s his day off, the narrator is left to contemplate how best to spend his free time, but the weight of their situation lingers over his thoughts. Cat, mentioning she only has a half-shift due to her close calls at work in Security, brings a sense of shared frustration over the unpredictability of their lives.

The atmosphere between them is casual but strained, underscored by their humble and worn-out clothing, a reflection of their bleak living conditions. The conversation transitions as Cat proposes breakfast, leading to light-hearted banter about sharing food. This small act of camaraderie stands in stark contrast to their isolated environment, with the halls of their facility nearly deserted. The narrator, grappling with the loss of community and the harsh realities of their situation, notes the smell of sweat in the air, symbolic of the exhaustion felt since their arrival. Their stop at the chem shower is a reminder of the scarce comforts they have, with hot water being a luxury that remains out of reach, further emphasizing their limited resources. These details highlight the gritty nature of their lives in this new, oppressive environment, where even basic needs are hard to meet.

As they reach the cafeteria, the lack of people becomes immediately apparent, reinforcing the sense of isolation. The narrator realizes he's running low on calories, likely a result of Eight's large breakfast earlier. Cat orders a yam-tomato scramble, while the narrator is left with cycler paste—a bland, unappetizing meal. Their

conversation reveals a stark contrast between their experiences: while Cat seems to accept the limited food, the narrator struggles to cope with the constant rationing. The easygoing conversation soon turns to Cat asking about the narrator's past, hinting at the possibility of a criminal history, but the narrator swiftly denies the assumption, reassuring her that he's not a criminal. This moment adds depth to their interaction, as it introduces a point of tension while allowing them to further connect and understand each other’s backgrounds.



After breakfast, Cat expresses gratitude for the narrator's companionship the previous night, suggesting that she would like to spend more time together. This sentiment reveals a growing bond between the two, though the narrator’s mind is also preoccupied with the ethical questions surrounding their roles as Expendables. These lingering concerns about their societal status and value continue to weigh on him as he contemplates the complexities of his existence. Just as he's preparing for a quiet, contemplative day, a colleague interrupts his plans, calling him back to work for a new tomato experiment. This sudden shift in focus highlights the ever-present pressure of their roles, where even moments of respite are fleeting and quickly overshadowed by the demands of their work.

The chapter concludes with Eight returning from his duties, sharing disappointing news about the crops. The narrator, already burdened with the complexities of their situation, internally reflects on the tension building within their group. As he grapples with the fragile dynamics between the crew members, particularly concerning their roles and relationships, it becomes clear that their survival depends not just on physical sustenance but on the precarious balance of their emotional and moral decisions. This creates an ongoing tension, as the weight of their existence seems increasingly tied to navigating both their physical survival and the complicated, often conflicting, dynamics within their team.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 delves deeply into the dark legacy of Alan Manikova and his controversial experiments in creating "multiples," which are cloned versions of individuals designed for dangerous tasks. At first glance, the idea of producing multiples seemed promising, offering the potential to reduce human casualties by sending replicas into hazardous environments. However, as history unfolded, the flaws in the technology became undeniable. Early bio-printers, which were initially developed to replicate human forms, failed to duplicate the full range of human consciousness, leading to the creation of simplistic, unaware clones. These early attempts were far from successful, and tragically, many families seeking to revive their loved ones encountered horrific outcomes when the replicas lacked the emotional depth and behavioral complexity of the originals. These errors in replication resulted in severe emotional pain for those who had hoped to bring back deceased relatives.

Manikova, born into a powerful political family, was a highly intelligent but deeply troubled individual. After the suspicious deaths of his parents, he inherited a vast fortune and used it to launch Universal Eternity, Inc., a company focused on advancing human cloning technology. His work reached an astonishing milestone when he succeeded in replicating human minds, allowing him to duplicate not only human bodies but also human consciousness. After achieving this breakthrough, Manikova abruptly dissolved his company and left Earth for Gault, an off-world colony. This colony, known for its isolated and self-sustaining nature, had attracted the wealthy elite looking to escape government taxation. It was in this secluded environment that Manikova began to use his new cloning technology for self-replication, which sparked a series of events that would ultimately lead to catastrophe.

Upon arriving in Gault, Manikova began replicating himself at an alarming rate, consolidating more and more power as he created an army of identical copies. The

people of Gault soon began noticing the sudden disappearances of individuals, raising suspicions about Manikova's actions. As he continued to amass power and resources, resistance from local clans grew, but Manikova’s clones, equipped with advanced technology, crushed any opposition with ruthless efficiency. His reign of terror was built on the control of both his clones and the society itself. With each new version of himself, he increased his dominance, leading to violent clashes between his forces and the locals. These events set the stage for an explosive confrontation that would ultimately spiral out of control, as Manikova’s unrelenting pursuit of power drew more enemies.

The Union government, upon learning of the situation, saw Manikova as a growing threat and attempted to intervene. Their efforts, however, ended in disaster when their military vessel, Eden’s Justice, was destroyed by missiles launched from Gault. This military failure escalated the conflict, and as tensions mounted, a neighboring colony, Farhome, decided to take matters into their own hands. Farhome launched "The Bullet," a devastating relativistic projectile that struck Gault with such force that it destroyed the entire colony. This catastrophic event marked the end of Manikova’s reign and brought the curtain down on his ambitious, yet ultimately destructive, use of cloning technology.

The aftermath of Gault’s destruction had far-reaching consequences. Manikova's attempt to achieve immortality through the replication of himself and others left a legacy of destruction and fear. His actions led to a widespread rejection of cloning technology, as society saw the potential dangers of manipulating life in such a profound way. Manikova’s experiment, which once seemed to hold the promise of overcoming death, instead proved to be a dangerous and reckless venture. The fall of Gault served as a powerful reminder that the pursuit of immortality, when divorced from ethical considerations, can lead to catastrophic consequences. Manikova’s legacy, marked by his reckless ambitions, solidified his place in history as the embodiment of the dangers of unchecked scientific experimentation and the human desire to control life and death.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 opens with the protagonist, Mickey, deeply troubled by the complexities of being a "multiple," an identity fraught with confusion and existential dread. This condition, where two versions of him exist simultaneously, places Mickey in an uncomfortable and precarious situation, and he is particularly apprehensive about confronting Cat, who has grown suspicious due to their past interactions. One evening, Mickey is compelled to meet with her, acknowledging that avoiding the confrontation is no longer an option. Their meeting takes place in the gym, chosen for its privacy, where they exchange a series of tense and revealing words. Cat, with surprising clarity, informs Mickey that she knows about his situation. She expresses concern not only for his safety but also the legal ramifications of his existence, adding weight to Mickey’s already heavy burden.

As their conversation continues, the topic shifts to deeper existential reflections, with Cat questioning Mickey’s sense of self. She asks if he still sees himself as the same person he was before embarking on the journey to the colony. This question forces Mickey to reflect on his personal evolution and whether the person he once identified with even exists anymore. He struggles with the notion that his identity may have been altered beyond recognition. The conversation leads Mickey to a realization that he may no longer fully grasp his own essence, as his past and present selves seem increasingly distant. He reflects on how much of his previous identity has been shaped by the unrelenting changes he has undergone, and how much of his true self remains obscured by the complexities of his existence. Cat’s probing question serves as a catalyst for Mickey’s introspection, leaving him uncertain about who he truly is in the present.

The conversation takes a somber turn as Cat opens up about the heavy burden of mortality, revealing that she has been contemplating death frequently in their volatile

environment. Her vulnerability deepens the emotional connection between them, yet it also highlights the precariousness of their situation. The tension between life and death weighs heavily on both, as they continue to face the brutal reality of survival in a hostile environment. Mickey contemplates the fragile nature of their existence, knowing that their future is uncertain. While they draw closer through their shared fears, the looming threat of danger surrounds them, constantly threatening to destroy whatever connection they have built. The conversation about death forces both to confront the undeniable fact that their lives are not only in constant danger from external threats but also from the psychological toll that their circumstances are taking on them. Their discussion reveals that even in the face of these brutal conditions, they find solace in each other’s company.

When Mickey returns to his quarters, a shocking discovery awaits him: Eight and Nasha are together in bed, a sight that leaves him conflicted. He feels a surge of confusion and jealousy, emotions he is forced to confront as he grapples with the complexities of his relationships with both of them. The sight of them together stirs a mix of betrayal and uncertainty in Mickey, adding a new layer of tension to the already complicated dynamics of their relationships. His feelings of jealousy are intensified by the sense of control he has lost over his life, which he thought was becoming more manageable. The trio shares some playful banter as they attempt to ease the tension, but the moment of levity is quickly shattered when Cat unexpectedly enters the room, creating a palpable sense of panic. They scramble to hide their unconventional arrangement, but their attempts to conceal it prove futile as security forces burst in, signaling that their lives and relationships hang by a thin thread. The chapter ends on an unsettling note, with the reader left to wonder what the fallout from this event will be, as the stakes for Mickey and his companions rise to dangerous levels.

This chapter captures the emotional and psychological turmoil that Mickey faces, from grappling with his dual existence to navigating complex relationships with those around him. The interaction with Cat forces Mickey to confront difficult questions about his identity and his future, while the tensions with Nasha and Eight provide additional layers of emotional complexity. As the chapter unfolds, readers are drawn into

Mickey’s internal conflict and the uncertain future that awaits him and his companions. The precarious balance of their lives and relationships, coupled with the looming threat of external dangers, leaves the reader questioning what choices Mickey will make in the coming chapters. The narrative highlights the themes of identity, vulnerability, and survival, offering a deep and thought-provoking exploration of what it means to exist in a world filled with constant danger and uncertainty.



Chapter 19

Chapter 19 opens with Mickey overwhelmed by an intense sense of anxiety and fear about the process he is about to undergo. His companion, Nasha, shares his nervousness, as this is an experience that terrifies her, but for Mickey, the looming threat of execution has become a disturbingly familiar aspect of his existence. The narrative takes a reflective turn as Mickey thinks back on the many struggles his colony ship has faced since arriving on the planet Niflheim. The planet’s hostile climate and atmosphere initially made survival incredibly difficult for the settlers. Over time, however, through ingenuity and persistence, the colonists found ways to survive, like the introduction of algae to begin the long process of transforming the planet into something habitable. These efforts have been instrumental in making Niflheim more suitable for human life, yet the challenges of surviving on such an inhospitable world still remain daunting.

Mickey’s current trial involves testing the microbiota of the planet, a critical step in ensuring the colony's safety. As Mickey is placed into an isolation chamber and exposed to various pathogens, the physical and psychological toll of the experiment quickly becomes evident. He finds himself succumbing rapidly to the unknown microbes, his body struggling to keep up with the effects of the bacteria and viruses. Despite Nasha’s support, who stays nearby to offer comfort during the grueling process, Mickey’s body gives in, and he collapses, overcome by the symptoms of the illness. This moment of physical breakdown highlights the extreme risks the colony faces, with their survival hanging in the balance every time they expose themselves to the unknown dangers of the planet. It also underscores the feeling of helplessness and fear that Mickey endures throughout the ordeal, uncertain whether he will survive.

As Mickey faces the brutal physical consequences of the test, the pain and suffering that come with it lead to a gruesome death process, reinforcing his sense of fear and

hopelessness. However, much to his surprise, Mickey awakens to find himself covered in goo, lying next to the portable tank used during the testing. After receiving medical care and taking time to recover, Mickey is informed that more trials are necessary. He undergoes a series of painful inoculations meant to prepare him for a second round of testing in the isolation chamber. During this period, Mickey and Nasha share intimate moments, providing each other with emotional support as they navigate the uncertain future that awaits them. Their bond strengthens as they face this unimaginable challenge, leaning on each other for strength in a world that seems increasingly hostile and unforgiving.

A week later, Mickey is once again prepared to enter the isolation chamber. This time, the outcome seems promising, as Mickey feels fine even after enduring several days of confinement. However, a chilling discovery soon changes the course of the testing. Mickey is informed that an abnormal growth has been found in his brain, signaling the presence of parasitic worms. This revelation brings a new level of horror, as the worms slowly consume Mickey’s brain, leading to potential neurological degradation. The severity of the situation becomes clear, as Mickey realizes that not only does he face the immediate danger of death, but the very nature of his existence is now threatened in ways he never anticipated.

The chapter concludes with Mickey reflecting on the profound and brutal trials he has undergone. The intense fear and pain he has experienced throughout these tests force him to question the nature of his existence and what the future holds. Despite surviving these extreme tests, Mickey is left with a growing sense of dread, as the worst may still lie ahead. The chapter touches on the existential struggle Mickey faces—his fight for survival is no longer just about enduring the tests, but about reconciling the potential loss of his identity and sense of self. The looming uncertainty about what will come next for Mickey and his companions casts a dark shadow over their journey, creating a sense of foreboding that permeates the story. With the threat of the parasitic worms and the continuing brutal trials, Mickey is left to contemplate his future, unsure of what it will hold, but certain that it will be fraught with more challenges. This chapter builds on the ongoing theme of survival in a hostile,

unforgiving environment and sets the stage for more revelations and potential tragedies to come.



Chapter 20

Chapter 20 begins with a palpable sense of tension as Mickey, Nasha, and Eight are escorted through a cold, desolate corridor by two intimidating goons. The oppressive atmosphere only grows as they descend a flight of stairs, the harsh steps echoing through the otherwise silent space. Nasha, ever defiant, challenges the legality of their treatment, but the larger goon dismisses her challenge with a cold, hostile response, showing no regard for her words. The group expects to be taken to a prison cell or a dungeon, but instead, they are led into a Security ready room—an odd choice for prisoners. This room, filled with various weapons and snacks, offers an unsettling contrast to the seriousness of their situation. As the goons leave, they sternly warn the group to stay away from the equipment, but Nasha, ever curious and rebellious, attempts to access a nearby locker. Unfortunately, her efforts are futile, leaving the trio to stew in the uncertainty of their circumstances.

As the group contemplates their current position, they share fleeting moments of camaraderie in the face of their dire situation. Nasha, trying to cope with the gravity of the moment, jests about the possibility of their impending demise, a nervous attempt to lighten the mood. However, Eight, ever pragmatic and calm, reassures her that, as a key atmospheric pilot, her role makes her vital to the mission’s success, thus ensuring she is not in immediate danger. This small comfort, however, does little to ease the underlying anxiety that all three feel. Mickey, more reflective, considers the immutability of their situation, realizing the cold reality that they are stuck in a dome that has become less a safe haven and more a prison. This dome, situated on the unforgiving planet of Niflheim, is meant to protect them, yet it now feels like a trap, with no escape in sight. Nasha’s attempts to joke about her fate reveal the tension that hangs heavily over them, a constant reminder of how precarious their lives are and how little control they have over their destiny.

As time passes, the arrival of a new figure, a goon named Lucas, deepens the tension. Lucas delivers grim news, revealing the full scope of the group's predicament—Marshall, the head authority figure, is furious about the existence of two versions of Mickey. This unsettling revelation leads to a confrontation in Marshall's office, where his anger is palpable. Marshall accuses the group of theft and of making serious miscalculations regarding their existence as multiples. His harsh words and accusations underscore the grave nature of their situation. The conversation grows even more tense as Marshall demands that both versions of Mickey be sent to the cycler, a fate that none of them want to face. His declaration hangs heavily in the air, confirming that their lives remain at the mercy of Marshall's decisions. At the same time, suspicion begins to grow around Nasha, suggesting that her role in their situation may not be as clear-cut as it first appeared. The mounting suspicion and tension add a new layer of complexity to their already fraught predicament.

The chapter escalates further as Marshall's cold command and the threat of death loom over the group. The reality of their existence, intertwined with the possibility of being erased for the sake of order and control, becomes all too apparent. Mickey's reflection on their lives reveals the cyclical nature of their existence—constantly in peril, yet always fighting for survival. This realization deepens the existential dread that has been building, as Mickey and the others face the possibility of their lives ending abruptly and violently. They are not merely fighting for survival in the physical sense but also confronting the moral implications of their identities and the meaning of their existence. As Mickey considers the gravity of their situation, the question of what it means to be human becomes increasingly urgent. Their struggle is not just one of survival but also a fight to retain their autonomy in a world that seems intent on erasing them. With their fate hanging in the balance, the chapter closes on a note of uncertainty, leaving the group to face an uncertain and dangerous future, where the very nature of their existence may be the ultimate obstacle they must overcome. This chapter paints a grim picture of their survival, marked by constant fear and the looming presence of authority, leaving the reader to wonder what, if anything, can be done to alter the course of their lives.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 begins with EIGHT noticing the protagonist’s arrival and expressing surprise at the apparent shift in Marshall’s attitude towards their group. EIGHT wonders what could have caused this change in behavior, but the protagonist explains that Marshall is more focused on external threats, particularly the creepers, than on internal issues within their team. This hints at a shift in strategy, as Marshall’s attention is drawn to the pressing concerns of survival against a much stronger and technologically superior enemy. With only 176 members left, the group is vastly outnumbered, and the looming threat of a ground war against the creepers is rapidly becoming a harsh reality. As the conversation unfolds, the protagonist and EIGHT come to terms with the precariousness of their situation. There’s a growing sense of urgency as they prepare for the battle that might determine whether they live or perish in the face of this overwhelming opposition.

As the dialogue progresses, the topic shifts to the painful memories of past losses, particularly the death of SIX, a pivotal figure in their group’s journey. The protagonist reflects on the betrayal that has colored their history, especially regarding Berto’s actions, which continue to raise questions and doubts among the group. This sense of betrayal lingers, influencing how the group interacts with one another and further complicating their already strained relationships. Additionally, a strange occurrence disrupts their communication system when a message appears as garbled text, leading to further concerns. The protagonist wonders whether this glitch signifies a deeper problem with their shared consciousness, adding yet another layer of anxiety to an already tense situation. The uncertainty of their communication system casts a shadow over the group’s ability to stay coordinated, foreshadowing potential complications that could arise from a failure in their infrastructure.

The discussion transitions into broader reflections on the history of human colonization efforts, drawing comparisons between past failures and the rare successes, such as Bergen’s World. Once an inhospitable planet, Bergen’s World was transformed through immense effort and perseverance into a viable colony. This success stands in stark contrast to their current struggles, where, despite technological advancements, they face overwhelming odds against the creepers. The conversation highlights the resilience and adaptability of humanity, underscoring the importance of persistence in the face of adversity. The historical context serves as a reminder that survival in the unknown, while challenging, is not impossible. As the group contemplates their situation, they begin to recognize the weight of their current fight, drawing parallels to the long history of colonization and survival despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Amid rising tension, a new character, Tonio, appears, bringing with him a reminder of past violence and conflict. The group is reminded of previous traumatic experiences, particularly the incident involving the tasing, which still lingers in their collective memory. Tonio’s presence signals the start of a new confrontation, as the group braces for whatever challenges lie ahead. Marshall’s appearance only heightens the feeling of impending crisis, as his commanding presence suggests that an important decision is about to be made regarding the group’s future. Marshall’s questions, far from being mere inquiries, underscore the life-and-death stakes of the situation. It becomes clear that the decisions made now will have lasting consequences, and the group’s survival is far from guaranteed. EIGHT’s defiance in the face of Marshall’s calculated demeanor points to the personal conflicts that are beginning to emerge, as duty and survival instincts collide.

As the chapter nears its conclusion, Marshall demands that the group undertake a mission, further escalating the stakes. The reality becomes clear: they are still pawns in a much larger, more dangerous game. Their very lives hang in the balance, and the success or failure of their mission will dictate whether they survive or meet a grim fate. The protagonist and the rest of the group now find themselves grappling with the implications of their choices, knowing that they must either comply or face the

consequences. The tension is palpable as the chapter ends, leaving readers uncertain of what will happen next. This moment underscores the precariousness of their existence and sets the stage for an even greater conflict to come. The chapter highlights the moral and existential challenges faced by the characters, as they navigate a world full of danger, uncertainty, and impossible choices.



Chapter 22

Chapter 22 introduces readers to the concept of antimatter, a fascinating but dangerous material that behaves similarly to regular matter in most situations, yet becomes deadly when it interacts with normal matter. This interaction triggers violent reactions, releasing harmful gamma rays and high-speed subatomic particles, which can lead to catastrophic consequences. The nature of antimatter makes it a substance that must be avoided by all living organisms, as even the smallest contact could result in disaster. The development of antimatter technology occurred long before the Diaspora, on old Earth, when scientists first succeeded in synthesizing and containing antimatter for the purpose of advancing interstellar travel. This achievement was crucial in facilitating humanity's escape from the destructive conditions that plagued Earth, particularly during the chaotic period known as the Bubble War, which led to the planet’s devastation.

Throughout history, new technologies are often initially adopted with the intention of addressing immediate needs but are later exploited for vanity or destruction. Antimatter was no exception to this trend; although it was initially developed with scientific aspirations, it quickly became a tool for devastating warfare. The invention of the magnetic monopole bubble allowed antimatter to be stored and detonated safely, leading to the creation of “bubble bombs.” These bombs were capable of wiping out entire populations without leaving behind the radioactive residues typically associated with traditional nuclear weapons. This made them particularly lethal, as invaders could take control of valuable territories with minimal long-term environmental or health consequences. The “clean” nature of these bombs—able to annihilate enemies efficiently without the usual fallout—made them a terrifying weapon of choice during the Bubble War. The threat posed by antimatter bombs became emblematic of the dangers that come with unchecked technological advancement, where weapons

intended for survival can quickly be turned into instruments of mass destruction.

The introduction of these devastating weapons coincided with a profound environmental crisis on Earth, one marked by severe overpopulation, scarce resources, and political instability. With nearly two hundred competing political entities struggling for control, the use of antimatter weapons only exacerbated the existing tensions. The resulting Bubble War, a rapid and brutal conflict, lasted only three weeks but had catastrophic consequences. It led to the depletion of Earth's antimatter reserves, while over half of the global population perished in the wake of the war's destruction. This catastrophic loss prompted humanity's exodus into space, symbolized by the launch of the **Ching Shih**, a desperate attempt to escape the planet's impending collapse. This mass migration to the Diaspora was more than just an evacuation; it was a profound acknowledgment that humanity's violent history had brought Earth to the brink of ruin. The realization that their destructive tendencies had contributed to the near-collapse of their civilization catalyzed this moment of reflection and action.

Although the escape to the Diaspora offered hope for humanity's survival, it did not completely erase the fear of antimatter weapons and their potential resurgence. The Union, the new governing body formed in the aftermath of the Diaspora, established strict rules prohibiting the use of antimatter weapons, believing that their society had learned from the violent mistakes of the past. These prohibitions were enforced with unwavering determination, as the Union sought to differentiate itself from the destructive Earth societies that had nearly obliterated humanity. However, despite their efforts to avoid repeating the past, the reality remained that the Union was not entirely immune to the same patterns of conflict. While the Union might have banned antimatter weapons, tensions continued to exist between the colonies, and the temptation of such powerful weapons could still be a looming threat. The fear of their misuse cast a long shadow over the fragile peace that existed among the various colonies. The stringent laws against antimatter use served as a constant reminder of the devastating potential of this technology and the high stakes involved in maintaining peace. Should these rules ever be broken, the consequences would be dire, and the remnants of humanity's violent history would resurface with devastating

effects.



Chapter 23

Chapter 23 delves into the tense mission of Mickey and Berto, navigating through a desolate and treacherous environment. The two face not only the harsh conditions of their surroundings but also the emotional weight of past actions and unresolved guilt. While hovering above a vast crevasse, Mickey confronts Berto about the fate of Six, a group member who was taken by the creepers. Initially, Berto had lied, but now he reveals the truth: rather than being eaten, Six was dissected by the creepers, leaving Mickey with a sense of betrayal and heartbreak. Berto also admits his deep fear of the creepers, explaining that this fear led to his hesitation in acting to save Mickey during earlier dangerous moments. This revelation sheds light on Berto's internal struggle and helps Mickey understand the deeper complexities of their relationship, fraught with both fear and trust.

As the two continue descending into the crevasse, the stakes of their mission grow even more significant. Mickey, equipped with bubble bombs containing antimatter, feels a deep unease about using such destructive weapons against sentient creatures. The thought of deploying such an overwhelming force to eliminate the creepers does not sit well with him, especially considering the empathy he has developed for them. Despite the urgent demand from Eight to proceed with their mission, Mickey finds himself conflicted, recalling a prior encounter where a creeper actually saved his life. This emotional dilemma intensifies his internal battle, as Mickey is torn between following orders and his growing moral reluctance. His hesitation demonstrates the complexity of the mission and the deeper layers of conflict he must face within himself as they venture deeper into dangerous territory.

The situation escalates when Mickey and Berto are separated, each navigating different sections of the dark and winding tunnels. Mickey, now alone, is keenly aware of the creepers' presence, sensing that they are aware of the intruders. The

atmosphere in the tunnels becomes suffocating as Mickey explores further, eventually stumbling upon a massive cavern filled with an overwhelming number of creepers. The realization of the sheer scale of the threat hits him hard, amplifying the danger they face. The tension reaches a boiling point when communication with Eight suddenly goes dark, leaving Mickey in total isolation. The silence that follows only adds to the sense of impending doom, as he realizes that Eight may be gone, heightening the gravity of their already perilous situation. This loss of communication signifies a turning point, with Mickey now isolated in both body and mind, left to navigate the uncertainties ahead with no clear guidance.

In the midst of this escalating chaos, Mickey is faced with an urgent decision: whether to use the destructive weapons at his disposal or explore other options. Just as the pressure peaks, a giant creeper confronts him and demands to know if he is "Prime." This moment shifts the narrative from a confrontation based on violence to one that opens up the possibility for dialogue. Instead of reacting out of fear and aggression, Mickey surprises himself by responding that he is "Prime." This declaration is not just a statement of identity, but a symbol of his willingness to shift from destruction to understanding. Mickey’s decision to engage with the creeper in this way signifies a crucial turning point, as he begins to look for common ground with the beings he has been taught to view as enemies. This leap of faith offers a glimmer of hope that the cycle of violence might be broken, and a new possibility for peaceful coexistence could emerge. The chapter ends with this transformative moment, leaving the outcome uncertain but filled with new potential for the future. The complex layers of morality, survival, and hope continue to unfold, propelling the story toward new and unexpected directions.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 takes readers to the isolated dwarf planet of Long Shot, a place far from the familiar reaches of the Union, where humans and native sentient beings exist in an unlikely harmony. Orbiting a gas giant, Long Shot is nearly twenty light-years away from the nearest colony around an M-class star. This planet earned its name due to the extraordinary journey humans took to get there, marking the longest successful jump in space travel ever achieved. The mission itself is a remarkable feat of human determination, reflecting the boundless curiosity and technological advancements that enabled the colonists to reach a world so distant. Long Shot's remote location and unique environment offer a fascinating stage for the story, setting the stage for the developing relationship between the two species and the unexpected challenges they would face together in the future.

The native inhabitants of Long Shot are a species of cephalopods who have evolved in such a way that they can blend seamlessly into the lush forests of the planet's central highlands. These creatures, known for their agility and ability to camouflage by altering their colors, live in the trees, leaping gracefully between branches. The beauty and complexity of their camouflage make them nearly invisible in normal light, only detectable in infrared spectra, which adds an element of mystery to their existence. Despite their advanced cultural and scientific knowledge, these beings have not developed material technologies comparable to those of human civilizations. This difference has sparked much speculation among the human colonists about the reasons behind this divergence. One prominent theory suggests that the cephalopods' adaptations to their natural environment, relying on physical and behavioral strategies, made technological development less necessary for their survival. In contrast, humans, who had to overcome harsh conditions on Earth, relied heavily on technological innovation for survival and advancement, which shaped their trajectory

in a very different way. This contrast highlights how environments play a pivotal role in shaping the development of civilizations, and the unique paths taken by the native species and the humans offer a fascinating insight into the broader dynamics of cultural and technological evolution.

For the first two decades following the human colonization of Long Shot, the two species lived in complete isolation from one another, unaware of each other's existence. The humans established their beachhead far away from the native creatures' mountainous habitat, and similarly, the natives remained hidden in their highland homes, not aware of the human presence. This initial period of isolation allowed both groups to develop independently, without any immediate interference or contact. Over time, however, the colonists began observing the native species from a distance, and some individuals grew curious about their way of life. This was in stark contrast to most colonization stories, where human expansion often leads to immediate and sometimes violent encounters with indigenous populations. One possible explanation for the slow development of contact is the gradual easing of fear and suspicion on the part of the colonists, who came to see the native species less as a threat and more as a potential subject of curiosity. The passage of time, during which both groups learned to live side by side without direct conflict, allowed for the breaking down of initial fears. This development shows how, over time, cultural exchanges can occur naturally, often when external pressures diminish, and trust can begin to form. The importance of patience in fostering mutual understanding between different civilizations is a central theme of the chapter, emphasizing that with time and perseverance, peaceful coexistence can flourish.

The evolving relationship between the humans and the natives of Long Shot highlights the importance of mutual respect and understanding. Over time, the human colonists began to see the value in the native species' knowledge of their environment, recognizing the sophistication of their ecological and survival strategies. In turn, the natives began to understand human technology and culture more deeply. This gradual exchange was not without its challenges, but it marked a turning point where cooperation began to take root. Unlike other colonization attempts that often lead to

conflict, the prolonged period of separation allowed both species to observe and learn from each other, paving the way for potential collaboration. This unfolding relationship reflects broader themes of cultural exchange and the potential for different societies to adapt and learn from one another in a manner that respects their uniqueness. The chapter emphasizes that while differences between civilizations are inevitable, understanding and cooperation can still emerge when patience and respect are prioritized. The interactions between the humans and the native species of Long Shot provide a valuable lesson on the power of peaceful coexistence and the possibility of overcoming initial fears to create a shared future.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 begins with Mickey7 emerging from the tunnels of the creepers into a vast, wintry expanse. The landscape, both striking and harsh, is marked by knee-deep snow, demanding more oxygen than his rebreather can supply. As he trudges toward the safety of the dome, Mickey7 contemplates whether to alert the others to his presence, weighing the potential consequences of his return. The fragile dynamics within the group, especially with Marshall, are on his mind. He wonders if his actions will spark further distrust, possibly resulting in Marshall ordering an attack on him. The growing tension creates a sense of unease, highlighting the precarious balance Mickey7 must maintain to navigate the fractured relationships with his comrades.

Approaching the dome, Mickey7 encounters activation lights flashing on the pylons, signaling the heightened state of alert due to recent creeper incursions. In a defensive reflex, Mickey7 holds up a trigger cord, uncertain of how the situation will unfold. The sound of Marshall's voice cuts through the tense silence, ordering Mickey7 to remove his pack, which is suspected of containing a dangerous weapon. Refusing to comply, Mickey7 faces Marshall in a standoff that exposes the distrust simmering between them. The confrontation escalates when Berto enters the conversation, intensifying the urgency of communication and pushing Mickey7 to demand a direct confrontation with Marshall. This moment showcases the raw tension between the two and sets the stage for a dramatic showdown, filled with conflicting motivations and unspoken history.

As the narrative progresses, the dialogue between Mickey7 and Marshall grows increasingly tense, forcing Mickey7 to justify his actions. He must defend his decisions, particularly regarding the death of Eight, the version of himself that was killed. With secrets unraveling, it becomes apparent that the creepers have stolen the antimatter weapon, heightening the stakes of their confrontation. Marshall's anger reaches a boiling point, and he commands Mickey7’s execution. However, a soldier, cautious of

the weapon Mickey7 carries, interjects, reminding Marshall of the immense danger that the antimatter could pose if mishandled. This interruption introduces a critical pause in the action, forcing the characters to reassess the gravity of their situation and the risks involved in resorting to violence. The chapter reveals how fragile the balance is between survival and destruction, as well as the complex web of motivations at play in their relationships.

In the chapter's final moments, Mickey7 attempts to reason with Marshall, advocating for a diplomatic approach instead of the violence that seems imminent. He argues that the situation with the creepers is not a traditional war, but rather a complex interaction that requires careful thought and strategy. Mickey7 emphasizes that the moral implications of their choices extend beyond immediate survival and that understanding their enemies, or potential allies, is crucial to securing a future. His plea for reason temporarily halts Marshall's orders, creating a fragile moment of peace. The tension is not resolved, but the brief pause allows for reflection on the choices they must make going forward. Mickey7 and Marshall, despite their differences, take a step back toward the dome, their unresolved conflict hanging in the air.

This chapter intertwines themes of survival, identity, and the blurred lines between friend and foe. Mickey7’s struggle to balance his own survival with the moral implications of his actions forces him to confront the human condition in a way that is both painful and illuminating. The ongoing tension between Mickey7 and Marshall explores the consequences of their choices, not just on a personal level, but in the larger context of their mission. As the chapter ends, the unresolved tension and the looming threat of the antimatter weapon serve as a reminder of the delicate balance between life and death, the importance of diplomacy, and the need to understand the world they inhabit.

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In this chapter, the protagonist wakes up to find that Nasha has left a message, indicating she has to leave for the day. This news brings a smile to their face as they experience an unfamiliar feeling of lightness and freedom from fear. However, this sense of calm is interrupted by a command from Marshall, requiring them to report to his office immediately.

Upon entering Marshall's office, the protagonist is surprised by Marshall's unexpected demeanor, which is more relaxed than anticipated. The conversation begins with Marshall offering an apology for misjudging the situation regarding the device the protagonist had relinquished to some creatures. Despite having anticipated a reprimand, the protagonist finds themselves in an unusual position of accepting Marshall’s apology. The discussion soon shifts to the pressing issue of fuel for their colony, as half of their antimatter supply has been lost.

Marshall explains that the device brought back contains critical fuel that needs to be reinserted into the colony's core. The task is daunting and dangerous, requiring manual intervention due to the way it was extracted. Upon hearing this, the protagonist's concerns grow, recalling the dangers associated with the antimatter core. However, when Marshall expresses admiration for their previous saving of the colony, all genuine feelings quickly dissolve into frustration and anger.

In a bold move, the protagonist refuses to comply with Marshall’s order to handle the fuel situation. They resign as the colony’s Expendable and threaten to disrupt the newfound peace with the creatures if Marshall attempts to harm them. Marshall’s temper flares after this assertion, but instead of fear, the protagonist feels liberated from the weight of their previous roles and expectations. Mocking Marshall’s authority, they assert their power over the situation.

After this confrontation, the scene shifts to a casual dining moment with Berto, where awkward silence prevails. Berto acknowledges the protagonist's resignation, and despite their earlier tension, the protagonist reestablishes ground by playfully punching Berto. This act fosters a new dynamic in their relationship, and with the chapter closing on a now-defiant stance, the protagonist recognizes this as the beginning of a fresh chapter in their life.



Chapter 27

Chapter 27 begins with an unexpected turn of events on Niflheim, marking a year since the colonists arrived. The arrival of spring surprises the settlers, as rising temperatures cause the snow to melt, revealing the earth beneath, which is quickly covered by lichen. This rapid transformation hints at the possibility of agricultural development in an area where such growth was previously thought to be unfeasible. The mission planners, who had anticipated a stable climate due to Niflheim's nearly circular orbit and minor axial tilt, are thrown off balance by this shift. After investigating, it is revealed that they had neglected to account for a known but previously unconsidered factor: the sun's marginally variable output. This subtle yet crucial change in the sun's energy output results in unexpected environmental conditions, creating a complicated challenge for the colony. While the early signs point to potential agricultural success, there is an underlying uncertainty about how this climatic shift could impact the long-term stability of the colony's environment.

Initially, the colonists are optimistic about the spring change, but their excitement is tempered with caution. Although the climate stabilizes into a comfortable range, allowing the settlers to explore agricultural possibilities beyond the safety of the dome, concerns begin to mount over the unpredictability of the changing weather. Mickey and Nasha take advantage of the new conditions and decide to venture outside, even though the colony still relies on rebreathers due to the low oxygen levels in the atmosphere. Their excursion triggers a wave of nostalgia for Mickey, who reflects on the arid deserts of Midgard, drawing a comparison between the rare precipitation there and the emerging biosphere on Niflheim. Just as life on Midgard thrives under sporadic rainfall, Niflheim is showing signs of new plant and animal life that may soon become the foundation for the colony's agricultural goals. While this potential is encouraging, there is still much to be understood about the planet's ecosystem and

the sustainability of such growth, especially in light of the previously overlooked climatic changes. The contrasting realities of hope and caution continue to shape the colony’s efforts to adapt to their new environment.

As Mickey and Nasha move further from the dome, Mickey reveals a hidden agenda: he intends to check on something important near an area overtaken by creepers. This unexpected revelation adds tension to their journey, as the nature of Mickey’s actions becomes unclear. Their trek leads them to an underground tunnel, where Mickey retrieves a concealed bomb that had been buried, hidden in plain sight. Nasha’s surprise turns to concern as she questions why Mickey kept the bomb secret from their superiors, particularly Marshall, who would have seen it as a serious threat. Mickey explains that he chose to leave the bomb where it was, hidden near the creeper-infested area, to act as a safeguard for the colony. His reasoning was that the bomb might one day be needed to protect the settlement from potential threats, though his decision to hide it raises questions about his trust in the chain of command. The secrecy surrounding the bomb reveals a deeper level of tension and mistrust within the colony’s leadership, adding complexity to the dynamics between Mickey, Nasha, and the other members of the mission.

With the bomb secured once more, Mickey and Nasha are left to ponder the implications of what they have uncovered. Although no immediate plan exists for dealing with the potential danger the bomb represents, its existence hangs heavily over the pair. The uncertainty surrounding the situation—especially given the possibility that Marshall might still be alive—creates a feeling of unease. Nasha expresses her worries about the precarious position they are in, given that no contingency plans are in place should the bomb be discovered or misused. Mickey remains silent on the issue, unable to provide clear answers to the uncertainties that loom ahead. They make the difficult decision to return to the dome, leaving behind the explosive secret that continues to hover over them. The bomb’s discovery and the way it is handled underscore the high stakes involved in their mission on Niflheim, where the potential for danger is as tangible as the promise of new life. The chapter concludes with the unresolved tension surrounding the bomb, leaving both Mickey and

Nasha grappling with the weight of their discovery and what it could mean for their future on the planet. Their return to the dome signals a return to the relative safety of the colony, yet it also highlights the unresolved risks that continue to define their existence.

