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Abyssus

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Mackenzie Cox

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Thesis Committee:

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University of California, Riverside

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Thanks to my support group during the program: Mom, Dad and all the friends I made. Somewhere along the way, we became family.

DEDICATION

For my late grandfather, 'Papa,' for buying me books and school and loving everything I ever wrote, no matter how terrible it was.

And for my professor, Dr. Stephen Graham Jones, for telling me that it was terrible and I needed to start over. I could not have asked for a better, or more patient mentor.

Prologue

*Once upon a time three witches condemned our world to save their own.
They didn't know that though, of course.*

The Girl

Everything shook. Her little glass princesses crashed to the floor. Bright light forced itself into her room, followed by heat that shattered her window. The girl tried to peek at the window but it hurt too much and left bits of light inside her eyes even when she closed them tight.

Sweat bloomed in beads across her body. Her blonde hair clung to her neck, thin and sticky. She wanted to run from the room but she didn't know where she was. Her father's barracks were strange to her. She had only visited twice before. He normally just came home for his furloughs.

Where was he?

She screamed for him. The air was so thick, catching in her throat, like having water go down the wrong way. Smells of cooking meat and burning chemicals reached up her nose and stayed there.

The shaking turned into a low growl. Something guttural that was supposed to come from the monsters that lived under her bed. It was growing louder and louder, filling up her ears until she was screaming just to drown out the noise, even though the air *hurt*.

Outside, the light began to fade into grey clouds. She chanced a look out the window again. There was smoke, coiling around itself. It twisted and churned, gobbling up the air, blocking out the stars. Balls of light with long, strange tails fell from the sky.

Out of the clouds came a face. A face with sharp, white teeth, a hole for a nose and blue slits for eyes. An arm formed out of the writhing smoke. Across the sky, it extended a gnarled, grey hand towards her.

The face gave her a desperate, hungry smile.

A blast of light and heat.

Her left arm began to burn.

She instinctively clapped her other hand on top. Instead of stifling the burning, it spread. Pink bumps filled with liquid swelled on her skin. She had touched a hot pan once on accident. These were the same kind of bubbles.

In horror, she realized where the smell of cooking meat was coming from.

Then her door burst open with a crash. Her father stood huffing in the doorway.

“Daddy!” she reached out for him, Bunny clutched tight in one hand. He didn’t speak. Just grabbed her. He was a mountain of a man with a crew cut and a five o’clock shadow. His fatigues were the same ones he had been in yesterday, a navy T-shirt tucked into his navy camouflage pants. She gripped his neck and realized he was sweating like her. Her arm was on fire. Something was eating away at her skin.

Chewing it.

They ran from the room. She heard his boots crunched the glass from the window and from her princesses. The small, brightly colored pieces mixed with the shards from the shattered windows.

“Hold onto me, sweetie. We’re leaving.” She thought he meant the building.

*

She didn’t see the blood until it was dripping from her arm, staining his shirt. If her father noticed, he didn’t stop. He pushed through other uniformed men and women. The hallways were crowded with sweaty bodies. Almost all of them were on cell phones. One boy sat outside a room looking dazed and far away. Her father was yelling. Yelling at everyone. He was telling them they were all dead unless they got to the boats. He used that word. That scary word: nuclear. She squeezed tighter.

“Hold your breath, honey.” She felt her father’s chest expand with his own breath. They burst through the barrack doors to the outside. The air should have been cooler. It was night. It was fall. But not with that light. The light wasn’t as bright as it had been, but now faded to low reds and purples and oranges. It cast eerie shadows across the training yards, tinting everything a sick color. She couldn’t hold her breath any longer. She breathed out, and sucked in the sticky air with all her might. Something caught in her throat. Dry, dusty. She coughed, opened her eyes. Flaky bits of paper were drifting to the ground around them. They flurried in her father’s wake.

The ground started vibrating all over again, going through her father and into her. But it wasn’t like before. Now it wasn’t just smoke covering the sky, but planes. Thousands and thousands of planes. They were all the same kind, flying towards the

clouds. The smoke danced away from them, allowing for bits of the night sky to peer through.

Behind her and her father, people were running. Doing what her father had told them to do. Head for the boats. But they weren't as fast.

What's going to happen to them?

The thought gripped her heart and made her belly feel gross.

But now she was going where she was never allowed to go. She should have been able to smell the ocean, taste it, hear it. But everything had been drowned out. Everything was robbed from her senses except for the paper, the light and the shaking. They were at the docks, across the docks, next to one of the giant submarines she had only ever stared at from afar, wondering how her father could drive something like *that*.

Her father was taking the steps up to the top three at a time, holding her in one arm, gripping the handlebar of the stairway in the other. They were high up. So high up. She closed her eyes. There was a hiss, an opening. She had never been allowed here before. No matter how hard she begged. And then they were through the hatch and it was just as she had always pictured it: metal and heavy with a wheel on its underbelly. The hatch closed after them. Her dad climbed them safely down the ladder, and then collapsed. They coughed and wheezed until someone was over them, putting a clear oxygen mask to their faces, telling them to breathe.

She tried but the air was too cold. There was too much. She fought and coughed and struggled. Her head ached from the buzzing in her ears and brain.

It hurts. Tears rolled down her face, glistening on her flushed cheeks. Black spots exploded behind her eyelids. Then she felt her lungs open a little, expanding, a balloon in her chest slowly being blown into. The stinging subsided and her body relaxed.

A little more.

A little more.

Air.

“Good girl. Just breathe.” A lady. She knew that voice. Her fathers’ friend. A lady. A medic. She opened her eyes.

“Hi,” she said weakly through her mask. Her words cast a puff of steam onto the clear plastic.

“Hey yourself,” Lopez said. Her father clutched his own mask, breathing deeply. He took it off for a second.

“You okay, kiddo?” He rolled over onto his stomach, holding the mask. He reached out his other hand and touched her cheek. His touch was comfortingly warm. Not like outside, where there was too much heat. He brushed her tears away with a thumb. She melted, smiling.

Her dad reached over to hold her. She brought her arms up, one sticky with sweat, the other one bubbling and bleeding.

“Lopez, her arm!”

“I saw it. I have ice and cling film in the infirmary.”

“What happened?”

He peeled away the cloth of her pajamas exposing her red, heated skin. She bit her lip to keep from screaming.

“What is that? It looks like some kind of...carving.” He moved his fingers around her wound trying to clear the blood.

“Jesus,” he whispered.

“I’ve got her, Captain,” Lopez said. “You’re needed on deck.”

“Who made it to the ship? Who listened?”

“It’s Borelli, Jeremiah, Shane and O’Malley. A couple recruits. I don’t remember their names.”

“That’s it?”

“Captain!” A voice down the hall shouted. She couldn’t see the owner. But he sounded familiar. Borelli! His name was Borelli. First mate. He made quarters come out of her ears once. Her dad gave her forehead one last kiss and then left, running down the narrow, metal hallway.

Lopez picked her up and carried her away. The infirmary was a couple of rooms down. The hallways were cramped but the metal flooring was cool on her feet. The infirmary was clean and simple: three cots and another, separate room for quarantine. Lopez helped her sit down on the clean white sheets before turning on the intercom.

“So we can hear your dad and he can hear us,” Lopez explained.

“Sir! We’re not cleared for descent!” came Borelli’s voice

“We wont be,” her father said. “How long until we reach deep water?”

“Four minutes, Sir.” A moment of silence. “Captain, what’s happening?” asked Borelli.

The girl held her breath. What *had* happened? That face in the clouds. What was it? Another jolt. The lights died, then hummed back on.

“It started last night.”

“Who’s at war with who?” A voice she didn’t know. It was a little high for a man’s voice. A little mechanical.

“I don’t know. We’re going to the bottom of the ocean until we find a place that isn’t being destroyed.”

“Captain, beginning our descent in three...two...”

A blast rocked the ship, knocking everyone to the ground. The girl and Lopez lurched forward, falling heavily. The oxygen tank bounced off the floor with a metallic clang, ripping the mask away from her face.

“Captain? Are we hit?” Lopez yelled from the floor.

“...one...”

Down they went. But something was wrong. The regular, yellow lights were flickering, red ones taking their place. The air vents forced cold air into the infirmary.

“Not so fast, damnit!”

“Captain, I can’t help it. Something’s pulling us,” said Borelli’s voice.

And then the girl’s arm lit up in a blinding blue light. It burst from the fresh carvings on her arm. The shock of it sent her scurrying to the other end of the room, trying to hide, but the burning, the cooking meat, it followed her. She squeezed between a

supply cabinet and the bed, pushing her feet against the floor, trying to get away, to hide, anything.

“Help!” she sobbed, dripping blood, blisters popping. Only red emergency lights now. The red blurred together with her blue, creating purple. Lopez was on her, pressing a cloth to her arm, holding pressure. Saying something. Trying to calm her.

And then they were falling. The submarine was falling. The light from her arm burst through the cloth, igniting it with blue flames. Lopez sprang across the infirmary, yelling into the intercom. The cloth curled into itself, sending up a line of black smoke. A fire alarm sounded, water spilled onto the submarine’s occupants. The ship groaned, attempting to hold off the weight of the ocean.

Then there was that feeling of being on the Tea Cups at Disneyland.

The submarine was spinning.

“Captain, it’s got us. We can’t get out!” Borelli.

“Pull up! Pull up!” Her father’s voice.

“Captain! Your daughter!” Lopez.

Another jolt.

Seconds.

Minutes.

Black.

Chapter One

Five years later in Los Angeles.

Tanaka

“I’ll go,” Tanaka said. The lady standing in his way made a dismissive noise while cocking her Winchester. They were in a subway tunnel. Past the entrance, past the switchbacks, deep in the belly of the beast. Once there had been working subway cars. Once the walls had been illuminated with lights from oncoming trains full of people headed for wherever. Now there was just dirt and grime and dark. And poison. Can’t forget the poison in everything. The air, the water, the snow. Smelled like rotting apples, sitting in chemicals. Sweet, yet vile.

“Oh, honey, you can’t possibly be over fifteen. I’ll not send a kid out there.” She was old enough to have deep crows feet by her eyes but young enough to wield her heavy gun. Her community was somewhere deeper in the tunnel. Where it was dry and probably a little warmer. She had her age creases and permanent tearstains but her eyes were protective. Everything about her, from her swept back hair to her black shawl, was somehow regal in this dying world.

“I’m eighteen,” he lied. She raised an eyebrow.

Tanaka nervously repositioned the strap on his shoulder that sheathed a Mossberg 500 across his back.

“I am. I’m just really short.” Now she raised both eyebrows. “Okay, I’m really, really short. My mom was Asian. Look, my group and I could really use the shelter. Please. It’s getting cold out there and my brother is really young. We need a safe place to sleep.”

“And it’s just you kids? No mom or dad that’s gonna come and lynch me for letting a couple of kids go out and do our dirty work?”

No. No fucking parents. He didn’t get that fucking lucky.

“No ma’am,” Tanaka answered. She sized him up again before reaching out her hand to shake. As a general rule of thumb, Tanaka tried to never touch new people. Her hand was old and dirty but, on the plus side, it was boil free. Puss free. Her face seemed plague free as well. Tanaka pulled his glove off with his teeth. He shook hands, skin to skin, smiling around the glove. She reached into her pants pocket and produced a scrap of paper. He took it but didn’t look at it. Just pocketed it right away in the brown leather jacket he had lifted from a frozen Hell’s Angel.

“Come back with everything on this list and you can stay for three days. Hot water and four beds.”

“And food.”

“Let’s see what you come back with. I’m quite fair, you’ll get what you deserve.”

“We’ve been told that before only to discover we were the dinner.”

“We are good, honest folk here, son. Lord have mercy on the other souls out there.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied, emphasizing the ma’am, even bowing his head a little. She gave a satisfied nod. Manners always worked with the older ones. They had that misconception that they deserved respect just for living so long. After five years of trudging through the poisoned, molested earth, he had run into communities with leaders of all shapes and sizes. This old lady was special. Someone interesting. Someone telling the truth. A decent leader. Maybe she had always been a leader and assumed the responsibility easily. Like putting on an old hat or however the phrase went.

He patted the list on his front pocket and gave her a two-fingered salute. She smiled, but continued to watch him.

Shit.

She was going to wait there.

Whatever.

He reached into his front pocket for the list. He opened it, read it, and grinned. He walked out of the subway tunnel, back to the platform, balancing on the tracks while thinking to himself. She had a Winchester. Looked old. But old could also be a testament to its trustiness. She could probably shoot. She didn’t seem like the kind of older gal who would stand there alone if she couldn’t shoot.

Fuck.

Julie, Ty and Josh were waiting where he had left them. Julie was lying on the platform floor, her legs kicked up so they rested on one of the cement pillars. Her short red hair added a splash of color to the otherwise dark world. Ty paced the length of the doorway, puffing on a cigarette. Josh sat next to Julie, dealing from a deck of cards he

had scavenged from somewhere. Like Tanaka, Josh had inherited their mother's slender eyes and black hair. He was a small kid and Tanaka consistently wished he had the ability to fatten him up. But he was alive. He had rags tied over his jacket on his left arm in an attempt to dim its orange glow.

"Let's rock and roll." Tanaka hefted himself up from the tracks to the platform.

"We get a deal?" Julie asked, rolling to face him.

"Yup." Tanaka checked behind him, making sure the lady wasn't following him.

He whispered to his group, "Gun run."

"No way." Julie sat up, intrigued. Ty came closer.

"So they have food?" Ty asked. "And water?"

"Probably. If the only things they need are guns..." The group slung backpacks over their shoulders and clicked the safety off their weapons.

Josh stood up and put the cards away in his backpack.

"Tanaka," he asked nervously, "do we have to?"

Tanaka turned around, shrugging his shoulders. "Sorry, kid. It's a brave new earth." Or however the phrase went.

"Tanaka, come on..."

"No."

"It's us or them," Ty said, scuffing out his cigarette with his boot. "You want to lead?" he asked Tanaka.

It was a loaded question. What he really meant was: *you want to cut down the person you just spoke with face to face?*

“Yeah. It’s fine. I got it.”

“Fine. Just asking. Don’t need the front man getting shaky.”

“I’ll be fine,” Tanaka assured him. “Josh, you got Bob?”

Josh motioned to his backpack.

“I put him in here.” He took him out so Tanaka could see the bright blue orb encased in a glass Mason jar. It looked like a baby’s skull but it wasn’t. Tanaka had seen it bend and twist. Its sockets were filled with a bright blue light and its mouth chomped on air. Tanaka tapped on the jar. Bob snapped at his fingers, his toothless mouth scraping against the glass.

“Will he be close enough to you in your backpack?” Tanaka asked.

Josh placed Bob back into the backpack, zipped it up.

“He was in there last time,” Josh answered.

“Was he? Oh.” Tanaka shrugged and waved Ty and Julie onward.

The group jumped down onto the tracks, keeping their steps light and weapons close.

The old woman turned around, saw the kids charging, and fired her weapon. It ricocheted off of Josh’s orange force field. As they passed her, Tanaka fired his Mossberg, blowing a hole through her stomach.

Annika

She could still smell the burning hair. Safe in her bunk aboard the submarine, she could still smell it, and it had been almost three years.

She knew this much.

The submarine was from Port Hueneme. That was north of a major city named Los Angeles that they frequently flew over, searching for supplies and survivors. The submarine returned to Abyssus every night to dock. In the morning, they would go back up through the portal, back to their world, off the coast of Los Angeles. Sometimes they found survivors. Not always.

Annika sympathized with the ship. She too felt caught between two worlds. She belonged to Abyssus. The submarine's crew had found Annika alone and almost dead in the desert, underneath the portal that swirled sky and water around until it turned into a whirlpool of blue.

Now she lived among the crew and helped them rescue survivors from their broken, grey world. They were strange to her. Their matching uniforms and salutes. She'd chosen long ago to keep her light brown, homemade shirt and pants. She had never seen uniforms before and the thought of looking like everyone else was revolting to her.

The crew was kind enough to never ask about her scars. Kind enough to never ask about the black dots that were tattooed around her eyes, down the bridge of her nose.

Kind enough to never ask why she'd been in the desert, alone.

She hadn't told them why she was there. She hadn't told them why she couldn't stand the smell of burning hair.

It was because, three years ago the smell had stuck to her nose, inside her throat, burned at her eyes.

Even now, safe in her bunk, far away from that place, she could still smell it.

It wasn't the older witches' screams that stuck with her. It was Azalea's. The remaining witch, the weaker and youngest of the three (if, at 500 years old you could still be considered 'young') that fought at her ropes, wailing, yelling, pleading. The other two, Belladonna and Narcissus were stoic. A calm pool compared to the thrashing ocean that was their little sister.

The witches looked beautiful even before death. Even on the gallows. Their long black hair hung down to their waists, blowing across their hourglass bodies in the warm desert wind. Green, tearless eyes stared ahead, past the crowd.

Their arms were encased in heavy, metal gloves, preventing them from using their magic directly. Bright light poured out of the crevasses of the gloves in small, colorful waterfalls.

Behind her, Robert bent down, whispered to her.

"They won't really do it," Robert told her. "They're just makin' sure we get the hint is all."

Kaldron had personally assured her that the witches would live. They would just be exiled. This was just a ploy. A farce. Annika just had to get through it. People would look to her, after all. She was the People's Champion. They would look for her in the crowd, see her, and take note. If she was calm, then nothing was going to happen, right?

She'd have to just get through this and pretend she wasn't uncomfortable without a weapon in her hands. Pretend like she wasn't uncomfortable with Kaldron's new priest.

The priest in the black robe stood behind the king, whispering in his ear, white lips barely moving, his voice inaudible to the audience.

Kaldron nodded, lifted his hand.

It wasn't happening. It couldn't be. The witches were their healers. Their protectors. Hundreds of years before, they'd sealed Alaric in another world. Had everyone forgotten? Wasn't anyone grateful?

"Three witches are too powerful." Kalron raised a hand. "We only need one."

Azalea was pulled back while the other two sisters were pushed forward towards the gallows.

Their eyes, though.

Azalea threw herself towards her sisters with such force that the guards holding her fell, scrambling to regain their grip on her ropes.

Above them, a storm started. A growl of thunder above and then a flash of lightning.

Belladonna and Narcissus felt for each other's hands, intertwining their fingers, gripping hard.

Azalea pulled at her ropes, screaming their names. Screaming, "Don't do this!"

That was what made all the hairs stand up on Annika's neck. Azalea wasn't talking to the King or to the people.

She was talking to her sisters.

What were they about to do? The older sisters were focused on a cloud. The single cloud settled over the crowd, blocking out the double suns. Neither sister blinked. Together, they spoke.

“Non omnis moriar.”

Not all of me shall die.

A clap of thunder and rain began to pour down in buckets, drenching their clothes, making Robert’s hat droop.

“Non omnis moriar.”

Annika grabbed Robert’s elbow just as lightning struck from the sky, scattering the crowd, igniting both sisters in brilliant, yellow flames.

Azalea collapsed on the floor, howling into the rain. She curled into a ball, her long, beautiful hair sticking to her face, light running out of her gloves and onto the scaffold.

The burning witches held tightly to each other’s hands, their eyes staring at that cloud as it flashed lightning into them again and again and again.

They were choosing to go their own way. It filled the air with the smell of charred wood and burning hair. They never made a sound. They were the last good thing the Bellum had. Without the witches, they lost their healers. They lost their soothsayers. They lost their midwives.

It was a crime. It was unfair. It’s what Bellum was becoming and Annika felt she was a part of that. Her and all of her fighting. Making the city rich. Making the King a ruler of something other than sand and rock.

That she could end.

Annika didn't realize she was running.

She raced forward, knocking people out of her way. Robert was yelling at her but she didn't care. There was a pounding in her head and red behind her eyes. She leapt on top of one of the human guards, her feet planting onto his chest, knocking him over. She grabbed the spear from his hands and jumped.

She sailed through the air, spear overhead, wind pressed against her face, the tip of the spear aiming directly for the King's heart. She didn't care what happened after she killed him. She just wanted to see blood leave his body. She wanted the stain on her hands and his heart in her mouth.

A blast knocked her back, slammed her down on the wood of the gallows. Sharp splinters in her bare shoulders. She rolled over, catching her breath. The spear was still in her hands but she couldn't raise it. She was being held. Paralyzed. She couldn't struggle.

"The great Annika! The People's Champion. You know! I didn't think I would have the pleasure of killing you myself." All she could do was lie there and watch as the King approached her, spear raised above his head. Instinctively, she closed her eyes.

"No! Don't!"

She felt Robert's heavy body on hers. Covering her.

"You can't hurt her! Not here!" Robert was shaking but his voice was calm.

"Can't?" the King asked in a deep, threatening voice.

“She’s the champion,” Robert fired back, ignoring the question. “She’s the People’s Champion, like you said. If you kill her here, you’ll have an uprising. She’s the one thing everyone agrees on. Don’t ask me why.”

“Robert, get off of me, I’ll...” he pressed her face against the wood, muffling her words.

“Wouldn’t it be, so much better...” Robert paused. He was thinking. She could tell because that’s the only time he was ever silent.

“Wouldn’t it be so much *grander* if you killed her in the arena?”

It’s all my fault.

She closed her eyes, trying to steady herself in the dark.

A knock at her door.

That’s right. She was on the submarine. Annika pressed a hand to her head. She was shaking. She should stay away from those memories. She was here now. She was safe. She wiped the sweat from her face, blinking in the darkness.

“Annika?” The captain’s daughter was outside. Annika took a couple of stabling breaths, trying to calm herself before she answered the door.

Molly stood outside in the small hallway, cradling her *lux*. She was wearing a large Navy T-shirt for sleeping. Her eyes were wide and her curly blonde hair was tousled.

“I’m sorry to get you, Annika, but, well. I didn’t mean to. It happened while I was sleeping. I had a bad dream and all of a sudden. Well.” She looked pointedly down at her blue glowing arm.

Annika rubbed her eyes. She wanted to sleep.

“Well, what?”

“I lit my bed on fire.”

“Is it out?”

“Yeah, I had water by my bed so I just poured that over the fire. It’s out now but my room is all smoky.” Molly cringed in embarrassment, staring at the floor. A bolt of lightning shot out of her fingertips, hitting one of the long fluorescent light bulbs on the ceiling. It fell to the ground, shattering. The bolt had singed a bit of Molly’s hair. Annika reached out to the girl’s head, squished the hair around in her fingers to put out the burning.

The hallway now smelled like it. Like burning hair.

Steady.

She took Molly’s hand in her own, squeezing it.

“I want you to take big, long breaths and try to clear your mind.”

“I tried that.”

“Perhaps you did not try hard enough.”

“Annika, look. I know you said you would teach me when I turned fourteen. But, that’s like, six months away and I think I’m ready now. Please?”

Molly’s hand was still so small in her own. When Annika had first come aboard the ship, when they first found her out in the desert, alone and dying, Molly had curled up in the corner of the infirmary like a cat, waiting for the stranger to wake up. When

Annika did, it was because there was a little hand in hers, willing her to wake. Assuring her she would be loved.

Burning hair, burning hair from lightning.

She squeezed Molly's hand. "Fourteen. Not a day earlier, child." *If ever*. "Now, let us go have something warm to drink. That always calms the nerves and I could use a cup myself."

Tanaka

Hours later Tanaka, Julie, Josh and Ty spread out around their campfire fire in the almost collapsed subway tunnel. Julie, Tanaka and Josh all ate from cans of peaches and beans. Ty had shed his jacket and was reliving the adrenaline rush. He jumped and danced in front of the fire shooting an imaginary weapon.

"And then *Bam!*" They all jumped a little when Ty's fist met his palm for effect. "I thought I was done for but then the way you went at him! Fucking genius the way you just..."

Ate his ear off his head? Tanaka gave a polite smile.

"...the way you just attacked." Ty's dark skin glistened against the fire, his sweat spilling off, his pupils wide from the rush. "It was insane. I mean, I've seen you cut ears off of dead bodies but *dude*. This was the first time you like, ate it off, alive and all."

Tanaka fingered his belt. Instead of scalps, he had ears. Ears of every color humans came in. Some had piercings. Some had missing lobes. But they were all *his*. And he had a new one.

He licked the insides of his mouth. It still tasted like iron and flesh. He slurped at his teeth, checking for bits of blood. Julie recoiled from him with a shudder.

“Fucking gross. If we had just stayed in formation, Tanaka wouldn’t have had to eat an ear.”

“I don’t mind, really...”

“Fuck your formation.” Ty stuck an accusatory finger at her.

“You almost got us killed,” she retaliated. “You should have stayed behind the force field.” That was how they continued to succeed after all. It wasn’t their aim, their teenage angst or starving bellies. It was Josh. In the front of the tunnel, after Tanaka put a bullet in the old lady’s brain, he had knelt down and unwrapped the cloth from Josh’s arm. One layer, two layer, three layers and it was out. His arm always glowed that dim orange, but since they found Bob, Josh had some serious power. He could make it glow. He could turn it into a weapon. A shield. He was still learning, of course. He wasn’t all-powerful. Sometimes it sputtered. Sometimes it just cracked straight down the middle. But most of the time it fucking rocked.

Josh had stepped in front of them, clapped his hands together. The light stuck to both hands like silly putty, stringy and goopy. Then he pushed his hands out. The light filled up the subway tunnel, top to bottom, in a thin layer of impenetrable orange light. Impenetrable from the outside. Behind Josh, his friends and brother were free to fire their weapons without fear of being shot. About a dozen dirty men and women came at them from the gloom.

Ty laughed and fired, laughed and fired, edging Tanaka to the back, his white smile gleaming in the dark. Ty and Julie led the way on either side of Josh, firing simple 1911s. Tanaka kept one hand ready to grab his brother, another on his Mossberg.

One of the remaining men from the community ran at them with a hunting bow in one hand, a quiver full of arrows on his back. He fired at them; the arrow hit with a pathetic *tink*.

“I’ve got the shot,” Julie called. Then Ty broke formation. He leapt onto the man, screaming a war cry that echoed across the walls. The man fumbled in his pocket and brought out something round and dull in hue.

“Down!” Tanaka yelled. Julie screamed, seeing the grenade. She pulled Josh to her. They hit the ground to the side of the subway tracks. Surprised and scared, Josh lost concentration of the force field, leaving himself and Julie unprotected. Tanaka and Ty both tackled the man to the ground. Ty clamped his hands around the grenade. The man howled in rage, attempting to throw the teenagers off of him. They wrestled in a smelly mess of unwashed clothes, foul breath and poisoned skin.

“I’ve got it!” Ty shouted, but the man kicked him off. Ty landed on the ground with a crunch, gasping for air.

Tanaka gained the upper position, shoved his knees into the man’s shoulders, held his head and bit his ear. The man’s body bucked at him, writhing and twisting from the pain. The ear pulled free of the man’s head and Tanaka tasted blood. Instead of surrendering, the man released the pin.

“It’s out!” Ty yelled. Tanaka let go of the man and raced to Josh. Ty slid over.

“Force field! Force field!”

Josh clapped his hands together and it was up. They huddled together. The orange light cocooned around them, snug and almost warm.

“We should have gone on the fucking run!” Tanaka shouted, spitting out the ear.

The grenade went off.

Now, thanks to Ty, they sat amidst rock, debris and dead bodies. Nothing from the community was salvageable except for a couple stray cans of food. Tanaka had gone around checking for survivors, delivering mercy shots. Generally, when they barged into a community, guns blazing, the majority of the people ran. Josh’s force field was strange to behold, to say the least, and they never really had a problem with an overflow of people ready to approach the alien orange glow. Most of the time, they only had to kill guards and the leader.

Not this time.

“But we *took* it!” Ty curled his fingers together making a fist.

“You should have just let me shoot him.” Julie leaned her head back against the wall in frustration.

“I didn’t like it.” They all looked at Josh. “I liked doing runs. They were fun. I mean, monsters chased us, but it was better than this. Couldn’t we go back to doing runs? We have Bob. I could probably fight monsters the way I fight people.”

“Buzz kill, buddy,” Ty whined.

They were silent for a while. Ty sat down next to Julie in a huff. Bits of brains slid down the walls landing in a sticky pile between Julie and Tanaka. How could he tell

his friends he felt the same as Josh? Maybe they didn't have to kill. Julie coughed next to him. Painful, loud hacks.

They were dying. From exposure. From the radiation that infiltrated their lungs. Why spend their last few months, weeks, days, killing people? On the other hand, why speed it up by fighting monsters?

Inside the backpack Bob rattled against the glass jar. Sooner or later, whatever held Bob in that jar would break. Whatever Bob was, would get out. Tanaka thought about leaving Bob somewhere. And then his body would get raked with a coughing fit. He would cough so hard bits of blood and lung would come out.

Really, how long did they have left?

This way of surviving was immediate satisfaction. And that, unfortunately, was all he had to work with. A future wasn't realistic.

Plus, there was also that dark side.

That cold voice, winding itself around his heart until it froze. That voice told him the truth. He could hide behind the guise of doing what needed to be done. Living how he needed to live. But the truth was: if he was going to die he wanted to die with a belt full of ears and the taste of blood in his mouth.

None of them saw the man in the shadows, waiting.

Graham

He didn't feel like a good doctor.

Was it possible to feel like a good anything anymore? Probably not. Most likely not. Granted, he wasn't a doctor yet. But he'd never get that. That final ceremony. That final anointment.

No. Months away from graduating. Months away from getting everything he'd been working towards for how long? Just shy of ten years? Not including high school honors biology and calculus junior and senior year.

At least here he could do something. At least here he could try. He'd never been like most of the other students he'd been at school with. He never wanted his own private practice. Never really been in it for the money. Not that he would have turned it down. Just wasn't his primary concern.

No.

He'd wanted a busy ER. A packed hospital where he could help. Where he could publish lengthy research, live off of vending machine snacks and instant coffee.

Be careful what you wish for.

He sat in what once had been a bathroom of the subway tunnel. The walls were crumbling white tile, exposing coarse grey cement beneath.

When the world ended, the community that took up residence had used it, and then found that they needed a different way of disposing of their literal, shit. Now it served as Graham's office. (It was clean now, obviously.) He could shut the door, shut the stall door, sit in the corner staring at the toilet and close his eyes or think or whatever

he needed to do. It was quiet. That was something he missed the most. He could be busy, he could work for days without more than a few scattered hours of sleep. But if he didn't get a brain break, darkness every now and then, he'd get a pounding migraine. To continue to do, well, whatever he was doing. Helping? Existing? Prolonging life that was only going to be met with an almost certain death anyway. More still-births. More deaths from what he assumed was radiation. It sure acted like it but not everyone had it. That was the peculiar thing. Something he would never say out loud. Death was somehow selective. That plus every single disease that existed around bad water.

With the grey snow and the orange sky, he was fairly certain nothing was safe. Boiling the snow to make water was erroneous. It was still in the atmosphere.

Keep it to yourself.

He kept most thoughts like that to himself.

Graham peeled back the packaging of a five-year-old bag of Oreos.

He closed his eyes, chewing. Churning the bits of sugary cookie around in his mouth. Savoring it. Not that they were in terribly short supply. He just knew that eventually, one day, they'd all be gone. Not just the cookies, but them. People. There was no way.

Underneath its wrapping, his arm itched. He stuck another cookie into his mouth, unwrapped his arm, allowing it to breathe. The carvings glowed a bright, stoplight red. He'd seen many people with similar afflictions. They ranged in color. He'd treated several infected ones. A couple of amateur amputations done with... whatever they could find.

He saw it on his own flesh and then others. Women, men, children. The strangest thing though, the carvings never really matched. They were always different. Written in different handwriting he could only compare to some ancient language like Greek or Roman or Egyptian. Not alien, though. Just ancient.

He'd formed a hypothesis. How could he not? He was a doctor after all. He couldn't un-train his brain.

The glowing. The sometimes jagged sometimes elaborate carvings.

More than radiation. Older than physics. There was only one logical explanation. He laughed to himself, it echoed off the cold, white, tilted walls.

Logical was the wrong word. Irrational. Impossible.

Goddamn Strange.

He curled his right hand—his glowing hand—into a fist. When he opened it, a small flame curled around his fingers, licked at his arm. He closed his hand, extinguishing it. He did it again. Same thing. A tiny flame, only as big as his middle finger. But still.

There it was. Twisting and dancing, happy to be free.

Pyro kinetic. He could make fire. No, not make. Produce.

Magic. It had to be. He felt ridiculous, admitting that that was his answer. A man of science and that's what he had figured out. His big conclusion.

Magic.

It got stronger around the *things* that crawled out there now. The monsters that hunted them. They took particular interest in the ones with these glowing arms, a crow

honing in on a shiny object. It had to be a defense mechanism—evolution taking the reins of natural selection, mushing onward.

A knock on the door.

“Doctor? I’m sorry, but we need you out here,” Celeste called.

“What’s wrong?”

“Something happened in the blue line. Injured are arriving.” Graham extinguished his flame by curling his fingers, calming his heart. He popped the last Oreo in his mouth, chewed while rewrapping his arm.

“Coming,” he answered. Graham stood up, unlocked the stall and walked purposefully towards the door.

Why? When we’re all going to die anyway?

He didn’t let himself sit on that thought. Too dangerous. Thoughts like that would keep him in his ‘office’ eating Oreos and playing with fire. He pushed the thought aside, pushed it down deep. His hand rested on the cool handle of the door leading to the outside. He took a breath and pushed it open.

Chapter Two

Molly

Molly sat next to Borelli in the command center, her feet up on the dashboard, both their faces bathed in colors and light. Borelli munched on five-year-old Corn Nuts, every now and then extending them out to Molly. Borelli was the closest thing she had to a friend. He had lost a younger sister at the end of the world. She had auburn hair and deep brown eyes. Molly knew that because Borelli let her look at the picture sometimes. He kept it in his pocket along with a picture of his parents and a dog with shaggy black fur and bright yellow eyes.

Molly, looking nothing like Borelli's sister, fell into the roll perfectly. He shared food with her, snuck her trinkets from the outside and never thought she was just a silly girl. He was never jealous of her either. Some of the crew had been jealous. Still *were* jealous. They had had children at home they couldn't save. Family they couldn't get to in time. Some tried. They never came back. It was all because her dad was a commanding officer. He had the privilege of knowing about the end of the world twenty-four hours in advance. Molly wished she could tell some of the crew, the ones that gave her *that* look:

I would have liked to have children around too. I'm so bored.

It's what she longed for. Even moments like this, when she and Borelli would stare out at Abyssus together, like watching TV, she would wish for another kid. She wished for another kid on every single shooting star (which was all of the stars in Abyssus) every single birthday candle and every time she closed her eyes.

Just someone to play with. Read books with. Talk with. She could look *at* them. Not look *up* at them. Although that was ending fast. She was getting tall and gangly. Still nowhere near big enough to wear any of the clothes on board, though. Or reach *anything* without climbing. Even though the crew had renamed their submarine *The Jolly Roger*, it was not made for children.

Another bright light flashed.

“So cool,” Borelli whispered. “Almost like watching fireworks.”

“I like it when they intertwine,” Molly said, munching on a last Corn Nut. The makeshift window in front of them was huge and wonderful—a true feat. Five years ago, once the crew realized the submarine was going to remain airborne, everyone agreed that flying by periscope was not okay.

A window was needed. A big window. Right in front of the helm. For a week or more they’d scavenged windows from the Old World. Once they had a few decent sheets, they landed, (or, hovered since the ship never really landed) in Abyssus. The crew brought out welding tools, the Jaws of Life, crowbars and other tools she didn’t stick around to identify because she had been allowed to run in the alien sand. It was only a few days of sunburn before she turned brown as a berry, almost happy and almost sated. The crew, on the other hand, wanted to get back in the air. Quickly. It took a couple tries, but before long the ship had a windshield that was insanely cool. With the press of a button a metal shield would cover the glass, allowing the submarine to be underwater for a brief amount of time. They didn’t need long, considering they were almost never in the

water anymore. They went from the sky of one world, up through the ocean and then straight into the sky of another.

Jeremiah was an engineer and he claimed that this was not possible and it went against every scientific theory he had. One day he had gone around the submarine loudly proclaiming, “Pixie dust! That’s my grand explanation! We, my friends, are running on pixie dust.”

She’d never seen a pixie or its dust but it seemed just as realistic as all the other scientific jargon he’d been spewing. Why wasn’t *magic* a good enough answer for him?

“You ever want to go out there to like, stay?” Molly asked Borelli.

“Nope. I like being in a long metal tube surrounded by dudes.”

“Not only dudes. There’s Lopez, Annika, and me.” Molly reminded him.

“You guys are dudes to me.” A pause. “You want to talk about you going all extra-terrestrial the other day?” He meant her arm. Her *lux* as Annika called it.

“You saw?” she shifted uncomfortably.

“I heard through the door and you also torched a light. You notice if you leave your room and there’s just this smashed up light with a hole in the ceiling on your doorstep.”

Molly wriggled in her seat. She didn’t want the crew to think she couldn’t handle it. Didn’t want them to think she was dangerous or anything.

“Sorry,” she said to Borelli.

When she was little, only a couple of months on the ship, she'd had a tantrum. She had never been a tantrum kind of kid but after her mother's death, the end of the world and really, really understanding that there wasn't going to be another Christmas, regular birthday, dance recital, or TV she couldn't keep it in anymore.

She screamed. She threw things. She spat.

She wanted out. Off. Now. Please.

It wasn't for lack of effort. She had run the length of the ship. She had improved her reading and could sound out most of the medical terms in Lopez's books. She had made a tutu out of old fatigues. She had wailed on her father's Everlast punching bag.

While wearing the tutu because she was *tough*.

But she hadn't been able to keep it in. She threw a massive fit. The crew called it cabin fever. Her father yelled until she cried. Then locked her in her room, embarrassed. Hours later, well after dinner, it was Borelli who came into her room, gathered her in his arms for a hug, then took her to the bottom of the ship. There, her father and Lopez waited by a large, steel door.

"Molly," her father started, "I am so sorry. I can't imagine how you're feeling. I just want you to know that I love you. I can't give you a lot of the things you're missing but what I can do is give you your own space."

The three adults pulled the door open and Molly's jaw dropped.

It was a giant room with bars and ladders and tubes. It was larger than her dance studio, school's playground and soccer field rolled into one.

The entire bottom of the submarine was hers.

Molly's father knelt down next to her.

"This is your new play room. We don't need it now that we're..."

"Flying on pixie dust," Borelli had finished.

Conner rolled his eyes. "This room is yours. Jump. Run. Fly. Play however you want. Just promise me one thing." Molly nodded eagerly.

"Anything."

"You will never go through that door." He pointed to a grey steel door across the room. The top was labeled "Voyager."

Molly knew what was behind that door. She'd seen it in the blue prints she'd studied because she did get *that* bored.

There was a Pod behind that door: a tiny submarine with a seat and a window and a small engine.

"I promise, Daddy."

"Good girl." He kissed her forehead. For days after, she swung on the pipes. She ran across the tubes. Everyday she challenged herself to go faster because what else did she have to do but read voluminous medical and nautical books?

And she danced. Of course she danced. To her own, flat voice until Jeremiah started singing. At first it was only in the mess hall, by himself at night. Then he would turn on the intercom, and she could hear him. The whole ship would hear him. His voice echoed pleasantly through the otherwise dreary halls. And she'd dance the pretty ballet she had been learning before the lights of the world turned off and her arm turned on.

*Mary, Mary, quite contrary.
We're so bored until we're buried.*

*Just like dust, we settle in this town.
On this broken merry go 'round.
Merry go 'round.*

Somehow. Thanks to her father and his friends, she had managed something like a protected and carefree childhood.

But there was more.

So much more out there. Like lights, monsters, other kids.

The memory sparked an idea. She turned to Borelli.

“I love you, bro.”

“Hey. You too, kiddo.”

She and Borelli smiled at each other before looking back out through the window. Out *there* was a vast desert. Above them, around them, was a spinning whirlwind of clouds and water. It was the portal home. The portal to the Old World.

The rip in time.

The hole at the bottom of one world’s ocean, the top of another world’s sky.

The *Jolly Roger’s* anchor rested comfortably against the white sand of Abyssus. The suns had long since set and through the sky soared comets of every shape size and color. The tornado of water swirled around the submarine, making the lights linger a little longer, traveling through every ripple, magnified and beautiful.

Molly had once watched Fourth of July fireworks from her pool. When she looked up through the surface, she could see the fireworks. They blurred together through the water. She only came up for air, determined to watch the whole show beneath the surface. This was almost like that. Just way, way bigger.

“Stationary stars were so over rated,” Borelli marveled. “Even though I guess technically they weren’t stationary.” Molly brushed crumbs from her hands onto her pants.

“I gotta pee,” Molly said, climbing out of her chair.

“See you for dinner,” Borelli called after her.

Molly ran down to her playroom but not without making a quick stop in the infirmary. She grabbed an anatomy book, a box of Band-Aids and some scissors. They wouldn’t be missed. Not so late at night. She’d have to return them before sunrise but that would be easy.

She wasn’t planning on going anywhere yet.

First she had to train, and if *Annika* wouldn’t help her she was just going to have to do it herself.

Once in her playroom she cut the tape from the Band-Aids and hung ripped out pictures from the anatomy books on pipes, tubes and walls. After about thirty minutes of work she had a decent target range set up. Next, she went over to the door she was never supposed to go through. Before she practiced she had to make sure it would still work. Make sure it would fit. What did her father say? ‘Attainable goal.’

The door wasn’t locked because, again, the people who built the submarine never assumed they would have curious children on board. The door opened with a hiss of pressurized air. In front of her rested the *Voyager*. It was a small pod with a large window and a single, small seat with a little helm. Just like she’d pictured it.

Finally.

Something on this ship that would be just her size.

Graham

A teenager stood in the subway tunnel holding a child against him. A group from Graham's community had formed, blocking the children from moving forward.

Graham placed the teenager at maybe fifteen. And that was giving him credit. He wasn't particularly tall, but he was lanky in the way that teenage boys get. No facial hair. No way to estimate the other child's age. He was too concealed, too hugged.

There was a backpack slung over the older boys' shoulder. Something about that backpack that was not quite right. Graham looked down to see that his arm was glowing. Glowing bright. He curled his fingers into his palm, making a tight fist.

The backpack was rattling, swinging back and forth on its own accord. Not long sweeping motions or anything. Just enough to be strange. Noticeable. Like a ghost was behind the teenagers, fiddling with the bag.

Something about the backpack.

His arm was glowing brighter than it ever had before.

It had to do with that backpack. He knew it the way he knew how to blink, when to breathe.

Mick met the children in the tunnel. He approached them, all six foot something of him. His beard had probably been long before the end of the world. Now it reached down to his belly, almost covering up the M16 assault rifle. The only light aside from Graham's arm came from tap lights that lined the tunnel because while generators were

few and far between, batteries were everywhere. A dim orange glow was also coming from the children. Coming from the smallest one.

“It was them!” shouted a lady from the other community.

“Please,” the older one begged. “Please, I heard there was a doctor here?”

Graham moved forward, past the other community members, towards Mick.

He could see the kids’ faces, young and dirty. They weren’t there to attack them. They needed help.

“Please? Please help us?”

And then two other kids came running at the group with rifles. Mick roared out for them to “Stop where you are!” Graham hit the deck, slipping slightly on the subway rails, breaking his fall with one open palm, the other stayed closed, containing his fire. The metal against bone made his teeth hurt.

He pushed himself back up, trying to get a good look at the other two teenagers. One was a girl with tight leggings, short red hair, pale skin and a bowler cap. The other one was a dark skinned boy with a nice coat, fingerless gloves and hair that had been shaved close to the scalp. They were dirty but they seemed to have acquired decent attire. And they had energy. From stolen food probably.

The two stopped in their tracks, called to the older boy that had a peculiar name. Tan-something.

“Let’s go, they don’t want us here. Come on! You’re going to get us killed.”

“Fuck off! Josh needs help!”

Mick fired a warning shot into the cement above their heads. Bits of mortar fell to the ground from the tunnel's ceiling.

Graham hated guns, he protected his head with his arms, moved closer to the teenager with the hurt child.

“Shut up!” Mick yelled out. His gruff voice echoed off the walls. “Agree to be searched and you two—“ he signaled to the two boys with the barrel of his gun. “—can go with our doctor.” All eyes inadvertently looked towards Graham.

“No way! You’ll take our shit,” called the girl.

The older boy was peeking through the crowd. When he saw Graham, his eyes dipped down briefly, looking at the stethoscope Graham always wore around his neck.

“You’re the doctor?” he asked Graham.

“That’s me,” Graham answered, trying not to make any sudden movements because he did *not* want to get shot.

The boy rushed forward, broken child in his arms. His friends yelled at him to “Stay back!” and Graham felt his own group get closer to him, heard safeties being clicked off.

The child’s arm was soaked in blood that dripped from his fingertips onto the subway rails. Graham could see perspiration on the child’s forehead. His eyes were closed.

“I totally agree to your terms, whatever you need, just help my brother.” Tan-something dumped the child into Graham’s outstretched arms. The small boy was dirty and shaking, and so, so light. Graham eased a finger to the child’s neck to get a pulse,

watched his breathing. Slow, too slow. A pulse that was maybe 60 BPM. Half of what it needed to be.

Too much blood. He'll need a transfusion.

Graham gripped the child's right shoulder, holding pressure.

How much blood have you lost, kid?

He didn't have any blood on hand. Maybe the brother would be a match. That was going to be his best bet, hook the older one up to the younger one. If that didn't work he could always use himself. He tried to not do that, though. Should something go wrong and he was in the middle of a transfusion he would be weak, hazy minded. Yes, the older boy would be his best shot. He didn't realize he was hugging the child to him, enclosing him, protecting him. He looked up, found Celeste in the crowd and nodded meaningfully to her. Time to go.

"Search me," the older boy was saying to Mick. "Just take care of him. I've got a Mossberg on my back, a K-bar in my boot, another strapped to my arm underneath my coat." The boy began removing his weapons as he spoke. "I've got a Swiss army knife in my right pocket, a Butterfly in my left, a Leatherman on my belt, a Colt on my belt, there's a monster in a jar in my backpack that glows and eats shit. My brother is unarmed except for a small hatchet, a 1911..."

"What's his name?" Graham asked over his shoulder.

"That's Josh. I'm Tanaka."

Josh's eyes were rolling into the back of his head.

“Tanaka, I need you to come with me right now,” he said, keeping his voice calm. “Oh. And bring your monster.” Because that was interesting. The science nerd in him couldn’t wait to see a monster in a jar. Child first, though.

Graham turned slowly, still holding pressure on Josh, walking quickly but with purpose.

He heard Tanaka grab the backpack and follow at a run. The older boys’ breathing was labored. Graham made a mental note to check Tanaka after they got Josh taken care of. The rest of the community crowded around Ty and Julie.

Graham had turned the other bathroom, the woman’s bathroom, into a trauma room. It was sterile, jam-packed with abandoned hospital supplies. Everything he could ever want aside from running water and electricity and a team of other more capable doctors that actually had finished med school. Oh, and a fridge.

He had Celeste, though. She’d been a Paramedic before the end of the world. She was great at getting lines in, great at CPR, great at staying calm.

She was already in the makeshift trauma room, placing a clean sheet onto a raised gurney they had pulled from Santa Monica Med.

“Need me?” she asked.

“Yeah, I need a line of acetomenaphin and amoxicillin for Josh. Let’s try a pedal line. Another from Tanaka here to Josh. Both radial, please.”

“What in the blue fuck does that mean?” Tanaka was staring at Graham wide eyed.

Graham answered him. “We’re going to dump some of your blood into the kid. Let’s move quickly please.” Graham lowered Josh onto the gurney, then he squirted his hands and arms with hand sanitizer, rubbing it between his fingers, under his nails and all the way to his elbows. Gloves next.

Tanaka was already rolling up his sleeve, exposing a scarred arm.

“Do you know for sure if you and your brother are a match? You remember your parents talking about that ever?”

“B positive,” he answered without hesitation. “My aunt needed blood, once. My mom went into a lecture about how we should all donate. I mean, except for Josh, he was too young but she didn’t say anything about him being any different.”

Graham nodded. That sounded like something he could trust. Graham untied the makeshift tourniquets of cloth the kids had used on Josh’s arm, attempting to soak up the blood flow. Too much material, not enough pressure. Dirty rags. Still, they had tried. He tossed the strips of cloth fall to the floor with a squelch of blood. Next Graham picked up a pair of scissors and methodically cut away Josh’s shirtsleeve exposing the wound and the boy’s glowing orange arm. A thin, deadly cut ran along Josh’s arm, near the crook of his elbow. A bit of white bone glinted back at him. He’d need the other sutures for a cut that went bone deep. Needed the dissolvable ones. The slice was just above the carvings. Just above the joint. Nicked the brachial artery but only just. The shoulder was also out of place. Poor kid. Lucky kid. Graham held a sterile pad to the wound, pressed down.

“How is it?” Celeste asked.

“This isn’t that bad,” Graham responded. “He’s just lost a lot of blood.”

“Not that bad?” Color rose to Tanaka’s face. “That *fucker* appeared out of nowhere and tried to slice Josh’s fucking arm off. That cock-sucking mother OW!”

“Got a line,” Celeste said.

Graham worked the stitches through Josh’s skin quickly, making the small, delicate patterns his resident doctor had taught him. “I’m just about closed up here,” he said to Celeste after a few minutes. He was getting amazingly fast at stitches.

Stiches, antibiotics and pronouncing people Dead. Seems like that’s all he did these days.

He’d have to remember to teach these kids how to do a proper tourniquet. Josh didn’t need to have lost that much blood. His little body took in small, labored breaths. He was about to tell Celeste to go ahead with the lines but his words died on his tongue.

Tanaka was coughing.

It rattled like there was a huge hunk of something lodged in his throat. The boy was doubled over, an arm over his abdomen, wheezing, hacking until he spat out a bright red lump of meat.

He was far along. Very far along.

Celeste’s eyes went wide with fear.

“You can go,” Graham said to her. She gave Graham the lines. He noticed that she was holding her breath. She skirted around Tanaka and was out the door. That was ridiculous. As far as he could tell, what Tanaka had wasn’t contagious. It was something you just got from living in whatever this polluted air had turned in to. But people were scared and he respected that. Plus, he didn’t exactly have any proof. Just theories.

Tanaka wouldn't last through a transfusion though. He was going to have to use himself. Crap.

Graham rolled up his own sleeve, slipped the needle underneath his own skin at his elbow, the median cephalic vein, to Josh's brachial artery.

Almost instantly Josh's heart began pumping the blood from Graham. Tanaka looked up, wiped his bloodied mouth. Graham's red, glowing arm made Tanaka's bloody mouth look much, much worse than it already was.

"I thought you wanted me to do that?"

"I'm O-neg," Graham explained. "I'm a universal donor. I don't think hooking a line up to you would be wise. I don't want to drain you if your cough is that bad. Here, let's pop that shoulder back in place while he's out." Graham felt around Josh's shoulder.

"Come here," he said to Tanaka. "Once a shoulder pops out, it's likely to keep happening. I'll teach you how to put it back, just in case."

Tanaka didn't say anything, just watched as Graham moved the boy's shoulder up, out, down, pressure with the heel of his hand and click.

Josh winced slightly but stayed unconscious.

Good. Better that way.

Graham slipped down onto the cool bathroom floor. He leaned his head back against the wall, listened to his heart pump Josh new blood.

"Tanaka," he licked his lips, already feeling a little lightheaded. "Get me something to drink? Whatever you can get."

"Sure, where do I go?"

“Head down the subway—opposite the way you came—to the platform. We have a kind of market there. Tell them I sent you.”

“What’s your name?”

“It’s Doctor Ryan Graham,” Graham answered. “But just Graham is fine.”

“You’re like me.”

“Pardon?”

“You use your last name. It’s cooler, huh?”

Tanaka opened the door, allowing a shaft of pale light to come in. He paused before leaving.

“Hey, Graham?”

“Yeah?”

“How do you know we won’t just rob you guys blind?”

“I guess I don’t,” Graham said. “I sincerely hope you won’t, though.”

“Well, we won’t. Just so you know. That would be pretty fucked up of us.”

“I appreciate that.”

The door closed with a *click*, leaving Graham and Josh alone, bathed in red and orange light. Graham relaxed and for the first time in a long time, allowed himself to feel like a good doctor.

Tanaka

This was the second time Josh had almost died. Tanaka played with the bottle of Gatorade nervously outside of the bathrooms Graham had converted into his own small ER. He knocked on the Womens' door.

“Hey, Doc?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve got your drink. I got a Gatorade? That okay? Can I come in?”

“I’ll come out. I need some air.”

Tanaka sank down the side of the door, his face buried in his hands trying not to cough because people always freaked whenever he coughed.

He and Julie and Ty and Josh had all been sitting on the rails having an easy time when that guy fucking jumped them Ninja style. The guy must have had that knife (just a kitchen knife) already out and ready. He’d jumped out of the dark, jumped Josh, threw him on the ground and sliced.

Tanaka didn’t know he was screaming.

He remembered barreling the man down, kind of like the football players his father used to watch on TV. The man landed on his back, far from Josh. Tanaka straddled him; hit him in the face with something he needed two hands to lift. A cinder block, a piece of the subway rail? Whatever it was it felt heavy and cool in his hands when he brought it down onto the man’s face again and again and again.

The man's nose exploded. He waved the knife around, trying to stab Tanaka. Tanaka dropped whatever he'd been pounding the man's face with, grabbed the man's wrist and bit down deep.

The man screamed and bucked. Tanaka spat blood from his mouth into the man's face.

If he approved of cannibalism he would have started eating him then and there. Just to really fuck with his mind. Ty was yelling at him, goading him on.

"Fuck him up, T! Fuck him up!"

Instead of eating him, Tanaka pulled the Kbar from his boot.

"I'm a good brother," he said, holding the Kbar in front of the man's face. "Don't fuck with me!" He was about to remove an ear when Julie yelled at him.

"Tanaka, it's Josh!"

"Don't let him leave," Tanaka snarled. Ty replaced Tanaka on the man's chest, aiming a 1911 directly into the man's right eye.

"Don't make any sudden movements, bitch." The distinctive sound of skin smacking against skin. Ty had probably slapped him. That was his thing.

Tanaka scrambled over to Josh. Julie was taking off her scarf, wrapping it around Josh's arm but even with the tourniquet, the blood continued to flow.

"Tanaka..." Josh's voice was weak, pained.

"It's like, pouring out of him, Tanaka, I don't know what to do, fuck! Josh! Fuck!"

“It’s going to be okay,” Tanaka said. He stood up, walked over to the man. “It’s going to be okay.”

He aimed a foot in between the man’s legs, kicked him hard in the balls. Ty continued straddling the man, keeping him on the ground with his own weight. The man cried out, tried to turn himself into the fetal position, tears pouring down his face.

“Where’s your medical shit?” Tanaka demanded.

“You blew it all up!” the man gasped.

“Hey!” Ty shoved the barrel against the man’s forehead. “That was your man. We don’t have grenades.”

“That boy isn’t human.” The man pointed a shaky finger in Josh’s direction.

“That boy is straight from Satan!”

“Medical shit! Now! Or I’ll kick your nuts into your throat!”

“Go to hell!” he cried.

“You want to join my friends?”

Tanaka unzipped his jacket exposing his ear belt (which was too big to be a belt so he kept it slung across one shoulder and over his chest, making it a bandolier.)

He had almost fifty.

The man screamed, tried to back up but Ty was still sitting on him.

Tanaka moved closer to him, the man’s eyes going wide with fear, his lower lip shaking.

“I just added a new one. I bit it off.” He stroked the ear for effect, playing with the cold lobe. He could still taste the salt from the blood.

“There’s a doctor,” the man stammered. “Down the green line. I’ve never met him, it’s just what I’ve heard.”

A doctor?

The green line intersection wasn’t far. Less than a mile.

Tanaka looked at his friends. Ty nodded his approval.

“Yeah, go! We’ll catch up.” Tanaka grabbed his brother in one scoop. Julie helped Tanaka into Josh’s backpack that still held Bob inside. He ran down the subway rails, skirting around and over debris, leaving the man for whatever Ty and Julie wanted to do with him. He didn’t care that there was a shot.

Shouldn’t have wasted a bullet on that fucker, but whatever.

Because only one thing mattered, he’d thought, looking down at his brother.

The only thing that *ever* mattered.

The door opened, the squeak of the hinges bringing Tanaka out of his daydream. He wiped his eyes, unaware he had tears leaking down his face. Graham sat down heavily next to him.

He held out his hand for the drink, Tanaka gave it to him.

“Yes. This is what I wanted. Red Gatorade.” Graham took a long draw from the bottle.

“I like the blue, personally.” Tanaka said.

“The light one, right?”

“That’s the shit.”

“Indeed, it is.”

“What was its name? Freeze something?”

“Glacier Freeze.”

They were silent while Graham gulped the liquid.

“How’s Josh?” Tanaka asked.

“Resting. He’s doing well. Out of the woods for sure, thanks to you.”

“Yeah, right. He always seems to be getting hurt with me.” Tanaka ran a hand through his hair.

Graham nodded, considering. Really listening it seemed, anyway.

“Has this happened before?”

“Don’t feel sorry for me.”

“I…”

“Never feel fucking sorry for me.” And then he started coughing. Graham placed a hand on Tanaka’s back. Tanaka tried to jerk away but the coughing just got louder. Like something was trying to get out of his throat. He squeezed his eyes shut, covering his mouth, trying to still the coughs. It subsided.

The hand was still on his shoulder.

Tanaka looked at Graham. The doctor’s eyes looked kind but not soft. More like he was watching. Thinking.

“How long you think I got, doc?” he asked quietly. Graham shrugged.

“Have you thought about staying?”

“In what? A community?”

“Sure.”

“We’ve been in two. Julie, Josh and I were all in the first one together. They uh...they all died.”

From a disease that made them grab their heads and moan, ask for water until they couldn’t even do that anymore.

“And then the second one we found Ty and well...food ran out and uh...we got out.”

Barely.

How much did the doctor know? How much did he know about what was going on, deep beneath the city? Did he need to know?

“I’ve been here for almost the whole five years. It’s okay. Mick is all right. Rough around the edges. But fair.”

A doctor. And a good leader.

Would this be a good place? For him to, well...die and leave his brother? Josh needed somewhere. He needed someone.

“Thank you,” Tanaka said. “For taking care of my brother. I don’t know what I can do, to repay you.” Graham took another swig of his Gatorade.

“Ah, don’t worry about it, kid. I find that as long as you’re trying to do good, good things happen.” He recapped his drink, turned to Tanaka.

“Actually. There is something I want. You said you have a monster in a jar?”

“Bob.”

Graham started laughing until tears leaked down his eyes. Tanaka frowned, feeling like he was being mocked.

“It’s not that funny,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” Graham wheezed, wiping tears from his eyes. “Forgive me, I’m still a little woozy. I’m not laughing at you. I just, I never thought I would meet a monster named Bob.”

“It’s from *Fight Club*. The guy? ‘His name was Robert Paulsen’ but everyone calls him Bob? Don’t know why but it seemed like a good name.”

“You remember *Fight Club*?”

“Hey man, the first rule about *Fight Club* is…” Graham spoke along with Tanaka, “You don’t talk about *Fight Club*.” Graham shook his head, Tanaka smiled.

“Well, could I see Bob?”

“Oh, for sure, Doc. Here. Just, don’t let him out. We never have, but when we found him he was surrounded by really, really weird looking bodies. Like they’d been exploded or something.” Tanaka reached into his backpack, brought out Bob. Graham’s arm immediately began to glow.

“Incredible,” Graham breathed, his breath fogging the Mason jar.

Bob snapped wildly at the container, his teeth gnashing the sides, his eyes glowing blue.

“Hey, I think he likes you, Doc.”

“What is it?”

“Dunno. We keep him on Josh because when you guys with the glowing arms are close to a monster you’re like, fifteen times more powerful.”

“That’s how you raid?”

“Yep. But it also makes him like, happy. Like, I think he likes it. Sometimes I can hear him laughing. He wiggles in the backpack. I think he likes going along on the trips. Like, a soldier who does his job because he likes it. What’s the name?”

“A Mercenary.”

“Yeah, totally. A Mercenary.”

Chapter Three

Graham

On the first day after meeting Bob, Graham remembered the monster as ‘Bob.’ It’s what the kids called him, after all. He thought about the monster, but only in passing. Tanaka came to check on Josh, dropped off the backpack in case his kid brother needed it.

How sweet.

It wiggled like it was happy to see Graham and, in truth, he was happy to see it, no—not it—*him*, too.

On the second day he started referring to the monster as the Mercenary. It’s what he was. It seemed appropriate.

There was an attraction to it. He wanted to know where it was all the time. He didn’t want to let the backpack out of his sight. He knew how strange this was. He understood. He was a man of science, after all.

The third day his fingers started twitching, wanting to touch the glass, grip the lid and twist.

One the fourth day he had dreams about unlocking things. Safes. Cellars. Diaries. Things with secrets behind them.

On the fifth day he decided Josh was well enough to be in Tanaka’s care. Normally he would have wanted to keep the child a full week but something was distracting him. Graham was more and more frequently finding himself sitting, staring at

cracks on the ceiling, thinking he was just passing some time, but then he would look at his Swiss Quartz watch his parents had given him when he'd been accepted to med school and realize it had been hours. He was behind on multiple medications and bandage changes. Maybe he needed more sleep. Maybe he was suffering from a mild form of exhaustion and wasn't aware. Regardless, with these peculiar moments happening he shouldn't have a child to be looking after.

It was a strange, fleeting thought.

Tanaka didn't ask any questions.

The kids had made their own camp far enough away from the community to not really be a part of it, but everyone knew where they were. Just down the tunnel a quarter of a mile. The refugees from the kid's raid a few days ago had insisted that the children stay far away and remain unarmed.

Ty and Tanaka agreed after Julie had already hidden their guns in a vent across from where they slept.

It seemed to help the refugees also, to know that the main reason why the teenagers were able to cause so much damage was due to Josh who was currently sheet-white and supported by Tanaka everywhere they went.

For those first few days, Tanaka had followed Graham around asking questions about food, runs, the over all character of the community. He was, without really asking, asking if Josh could stay, if Josh would be taken care of after Tanaka finally choked to death on the poison inhabiting his lungs.

Of course Graham had assured Tanaka that he would personally take an interest in Josh's well being. That seemed to calm Tanaka for a little while but of course the teenager was back the next day, asking about plague and cannibalism and the like.

And he'd brought Josh, who had his backpack on.

It wiggled, not like he was saying hello, but more like inside the backpack the Mercenary was telling Graham that he had missed him.

Graham didn't want the Mercenary to miss him. That was a sad thought. It wasn't like he could hear the Mercenary, per se. No, it was more like a thought that slithered its way into Graham's mind. It didn't come from the place his thoughts normally came from.

The Mercenary wanted to be out. He'd be good. He'd told Graham that he would be so, so good. He'd been in that jar so long.

He said he'd been locked away for hundreds of years.

Graham could sympathize. Wasn't he, to an extent, locked up as well?

They had so many things in common.

So on the sixth day, he'd grabbed the backpack, unzipped it, rescued the Mercenary from the depths, and shoved the boys outside. They'd yelled at him. The younger one with the orange light was still too weak to hurt Graham, especially when Graham and the Mercenary were together. Together they were strong. By himself Graham used to be able to produce a small flame. A plaything, really. Now the flame crawled up his arm to his shoulder, hot and deadly and *alive*.

Tanaka grabbed his brother, shouting at Graham that he was a 'fucking thieving psycho,' then left the room.

Which was so, so hot these days. Sweat dripped down Graham's paled skin, made his dirty clothes stick to him. The door slammed shut, leaving Graham alone with the glowing Mason jar. His arm started to glow brighter, being so close to a monster. Being so close to The Mercenary.

It wasn't stealing. He was releasing.

The boys didn't know exactly what 'Bob' was. Only the effect Bob had on Josh.

Which wasn't much; it just made Josh's arm glow. Just spiked that instinct to defend. Little more than a flight or fight response because Josh didn't really know how to use his powers yet.

Graham liked the way his office—normally bathed in red because of the light from his arm—was now a calming purple because of the bright blue the Mercenary added. Together they created something and that was a kind of intimacy Graham hadn't allowed himself to think in this world of *destruction*.

Could you build in this brave new world? Was 'creating' still possible?

Magic was. Why not creation? How strange was this world and what, really, did you need to do to survive?

The Mercenary stared at him, its eyeless sockets reflecting Graham's own empty feeling.

Sure, the Mercenary wanted to come out, but it was his choice. Graham's choice.

He had the power.

On the seventh day, he sat with him all night, feeling that power. He could do it. Not just fix something. All he'd been really doing as a doctor was *fixing*. In this world, where magic was possible, he wanted to create. Now, wasn't that a romantic thought?

He and the Mercenary. Together.

So, really, it was his choice to wipe the sweat from his hands onto his dirty pant leg, grip the sides of the Mason jar's lid and give it a twist.

Inside, the Mercenary was shivering, radiating excitement. The jar squeaked each time Graham rotated the lid. His choice. Another turn. *Screech. He wanted this.*

He wanted to know what would happen. Another turn. *Screech.*

He wanted to know, all in the name of science, of course.

Release me.

Tanaka

He was dreaming about cellars and doors and windows being unlocked, a long shriveled black arm reaching out towards him a *screech* and then the hand shot out towards him, fingernails pressing into his neck, slippery and gross and gnarled, bones poking at his neck, a flash of red.

Tanaka woke up with a start on the concrete with one arm protectively over his sleeping brother. Their slab of cold cement had proved to be a decent place to crash. They could see around them in the subway tunnel well enough. Plus it was off the ground. The ground was always wet these days. Wet with sick snow.

“Whoa,” Ty said. “What were you dreaming about?”

It had been seven days. Seven whole days where Tanaka had felt like maybe, maybe he had found a decent community for his brother to grow up in.

That fucking doctor had to ruin it all. He seemed so nice. He had seemed so...well. It didn't fucking matter anymore, did it?

Josh was still asleep on his belly, his face pressed into his backpack, using it as a pillow. Julie lay on her back, lightly touching Tanaka with an elbow. Her hat rested over her eyes, legs crossed at the ankles. Her snores were small and ladylike. Ty was awake, rubbing the morning from his eyes. He'd kept the last watch. It was a habit they were in and, considering their previous experiences with communities, felt like a watch was still necessary.

"How was the watch?" Tanaka asked.

"Fine. Uneventful. Gonna get a fire going if you want to pick a can for breakfast."

Ty reached into his pack for a lighter but was suddenly racked by a coughing fit. He gasped for air in sharp inhales. He held his chest with one hand, bracing himself with the other.

"Okay, dude?" Tanaka asked.

Ty nodded. With a final hack he spat out a large piece of meat that sat at the edge of their concrete slab, steaming in the cold air. They both stared at it.

"It's coming, man," Ty said. "On a fucking black horse. It's coming."

"Yeah," Tanaka answered. "Me too."

"Fuck," Ty muttered. Tanaka just nodded. He didn't know what to say. Death was regular yet still an uncomfortable thought. Especially if it was your own.

“Day by day, right?” It was all he could think to say.

“Yeah,” Ty agreed. He searched his pack a moment longer before turning to Tanaka. “Do you have the light? I can’t find it.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Tanaka took the backpack slowly out from under his brother, laying him back on the cement without waking him. He unzipped the pack, dove his hand in and searched. It felt empty without Bob.

“Not in here. Maybe Julie had it...”

Before he could finish a blast knocked the group apart.

Tanaka’s hands fumbled in the air for his brother. He slammed down onto the rocky wet ground, the air forced from his lungs. The noise from the explosion burrowed its way into Tanaka’s ears, leaving zero room for anything else.

He covered his ears but the ringing persisted.

He screamed in frustration, trying to drown out the sound with his own voice but all that did was send him into a coughing fit.

More blasts.

Again.

Again.

Someone was lobbing grenades. That had to be it. They would make the whole fucking tunnel collapse.

Something struck his head. He curled into a ball, his arms covering his head, knees tucked tightly to him like a kitten being carried.

Somewhere Josh was yelling. Tanaka tried calling out to his brother but there was blood running down his neck and in his mouth and what the fuck was happening?

It stopped. Still laying on the ground, he reached up to his head. His fingers found a gnarly gash a couple fingers wide. It was sticky and warm. He could smell iron. He tried not to freak out when he saw blood on his hands.

Heads always bled like a stuck pig, he told himself. He reached up again, inspected the cut.

Wasn't deep. Just a shitty headache later. Find some Neosporin.

"Sound off!" he coughed.

"M'okay." Julie. Muffled.

"What the shit was that?" Ty. Clearing his throat, spitting out something.

"Tanaka? Tanaka, I landed on my arm." Josh. Crying.

"Stay where you are. I'll find you." There was something in his hands. Josh's backpack, still unzipped and empty. A flash of blue. A laugh. And shadows. There were screams coming from the community. He could hear footsteps closing in on him and his group.

He sat up so fast he saw stars.

The gash in his head seeped a little more blood.

Oh fuck. That fucking psycho of a doctor. He fucking let Bob out.

Bob was out.

Oh god oh god oh god.

And then there was yelling. Screaming. It was close. Ty was in front of him, had him by the shoulders, shaking him.

“Tanaka? Move! Can you hear me? Let’s go!” Tanaka struggled into a standing position. Where was Bob? When they found him he had been trapped inside a wrecked car.

Surrounded by bodies.

A break in the window and Bob had slipped out into the Mason jar. Screwed the lid on and bam. Monster-to-go. Tanaka knew Bob would get out one day. But he didn’t know that Bob had the ability to change someone. Wasn’t that the only explanation for the doctor’s recent odd behavior? Graham had become snappy, surly, and unhelpful. So strange considering the first day he’d given Josh blood from his own fucking body. So weird. What had happened?

Somehow, something had happened and he’d fucking opened that goddamn jar and let the beast out of its cage.

Fuck.

Ty was pulling him.

Tanaka grunted his agreement before reaching for his Mossberg.

Not there. Because the community took their weapons.

God damn it.

Julie appeared before them in a cloud of dust. She had two 1911’s out. She didn’t bother explaining, just shouted, “I hid them in a vent because this weird shit *always* happens to us.”

“What’s going on?” Tanaka yelled.

The redhead climbed nimbly to the top of a debris pile.

“You’re brother is over there,” Julie said, nodding her head in the direction of the south end of the tunnel. “I can see his light.”

“Gimme a gun!” Ty was saying. She did. The pair of them defended their corner while Tanaka searched the rubble for Josh. He found him curled up, wedged between piles of cement, metal and cables. They hugged briefly.

“Can you run?” Tanaka shouted above the din of gunfire and shouts. Josh nodded and held out his good hand. Tanaka reached for it but Josh’s eyes had gone wide.

Julie was screaming. Ty was yelling. People were running away from the community, towards them, towards the south end.

A man Tanaka recognized as Mick, the leader of the community, ran past the boys, jumped over debris.

Following him was a bright, blue light.

Bob was just a face with a streak of blue following him the way fire follows a comet. In a heartbeat, Bob had careened over to the bearded man, forced his mouth open and stuffed himself into the man’s screaming, gargling throat. Mick choked, twitching and turning until he was on his hands and knees grabbing at his neck, clawing to get at the insides.

And then Bob burst through. Pieces of Mick splattered against the ruined tunnel. In place of him, was Bob. A little more full. A little more of *something*. Now he wasn’t

just light. Now he had the shadow of a skeleton. He threw his head back and *howled*. He stank of rain and fresh earth and everything Tanaka thought he missed until now.

Bob looked around, saw his next target, bee-lined toward a woman. He leapt into her mouth. She fired her gun, slashed with a knife. Her face was wide and tortured and blue light was shining out of her eyes, ears, and mouth. She knelt to the ground in what only could have been searing pain before she, too, exploded, giving Bob even more frame.

Tanaka screamed, high and shrill.

Bob smiled, a toothy, clever smile before lunging towards Tanaka, his mouth wide. Something was shooting him and screaming and yelling and all Tanaka could do was back up against his brother. And then an orange glow surrounded them. The familiar warmth. The bubble. The curtain. Power coursed through it in whites and reds. Josh was behind him, his bad arm glowing and outstretched, creating his force field. He was panting. He wasn't strong enough yet but he also wasn't stopping. His eyes were narrowed and dangerous and so fucking intense. He stepped forward, blasting Bob with a surge of energy. Bob snarled, flashed his sharp, pointed teeth, flew up in the air and dove. Josh fired his shield up, a batter hitting a baseball. The force threw Bob against the opposite tunnel wall. He slipped down the wall and was out of sight.

Josh collapsed.

There was screaming. Someone was screaming and he couldn't get the noise out of his head until he realized it was his own voice. He was the one patting his brother's face, screaming at him to *get up, wake up, move*.

He tried. He had tried to find a home for him so shit like this wouldn't happen.

He had his little brother in his arms, shaking him, but Julie and Ty grabbed his coat at the shoulders and were pulling him and Josh with them.

He'd tried.

Julie took point, her 1911 raised and ready. Her body was covered in pieces of someone else's. Ty was in the back, a hand on Tanaka's shoulder.

For some reason, for whatever reason, Tanaka looked behind them. Instead of Bob coming out of the rubble, it was Graham, the doctor. He was clambering on his hands and knees, struggling to get over the debris. Then his body arched, his arms so far behind him it looked alien. Tanaka winced, sure that he was about to see the doctor fly apart in a thousand pieces.

But he didn't.

Bob left Graham's mouth in a stream of blue light. And Graham stayed whole. He stayed together. Bob left Graham there in a collapsed pile.

Like they were one fucking being. Surviving off each other.

A streak of blue. Bob was in the air above them, saw them and licked his lips.

Had he been looking for them?

Ty began shooting at Bob.

"Ty, don't!"

Bob *smiled*. An almost pleasant, satisfied smile.

He knows us. He knows we locked him in that fucking jar.

And that thought was enough to make Tanaka just about shit himself.

Bob was on Ty. His lithe, transparent glowing body stuffed itself down into the teenager. Julie and Tanaka backed away, clinging to each other, yelling at Ty, begging Bob.

There was a moment where Ty looked at them and Tanaka knew that Ty was holding on, just a little bit, for them.

“Run.” Tanaka hefted Josh onto his shoulder, grabbed Julie’s arm and ran. They slid through holes, climbed over cement slabs, slipped between large chunks of ceiling, darted through the crowd of unwashed, smelly people, through the mouth of the tunnel, up the platform over the switchbacks and through the chain-link fence they had cut just to get into this fucking hellhole. Somewhere behind them, Ty’s body blew into a thousand tiny pieces.

No longer underground, they were met by the glow of the burnt orange sun, the sick, yellow clouds, the permanent, grey hue of the snow.

Tanaka and Julie stopped in the middle of the road, gasping for breath.

Julie collapsed, sobbing. Tanaka lay Josh down on the ground, his hands fluttering nervously over his brother’s body.

“Josh, wake up!” he yelled. Because that would fucking do it.

But it did.

Josh’s eyes fluttered open. Josh looked at Julie, then Tanaka.

“Ty’s dead?” he asked. Tanaka nodded.

“He asked for my gun! I never should have given him my gun...” Julie trailed off. The rest were high-pitched girly noises Tanaka had never heard come out of her. It

tugged at him. He wanted to hug her. Tell her it was going to be okay even though it wasn't. He turned his attention back to his brother because only one thing ever mattered.

Tanaka checked the dressing on his brother's shoulder wound. It was oozing a clear, reddish liquid from use and stress. Blood mixed in with something else. The stitches looked all right though. The bits of black still dove and twisted through Josh's skin. Nothing was torn. Tanaka wrapped some fresh dressings from their backpack around the wound, helped his brother back into his jacket before packing dirty snow around it.

"Just lay there a moment. Let it go numb. Good job, bud." He stalked off. Anger fumed inside of him. Burning. It came up in fitful bubbles until he retched.

Or maybe he'd whacked his head that bad. He'd done it before. Hit his head so bad that he'd puked for days, Ty and Julie and Josh taking turns, waking him up because they'd heard something about concussions from someone somewhere.

He was disappointed that he was only dry-heaving.

He never saw any proof that they were trying their best.

For all the communities they raided, nothing was ever in their bellies. Really *in* their bellies. Hadn't he once sat on a couch in only his boxers eating pizza until he was so stuffed and in pain that his mother made him drink that nasty pink shit?

Hungry now. Always hungry.

"Fucking Bob!" Tanaka kicked the dirty snow, scattering it to the wind. "Fucking psycho doctor. Fuck!"

Now they were vulnerable. Now they were without food and weapons except for one shitty 1911. Without Bob in a jar it would be a million times harder to get through

this godforsaken shit hole of a world. No way now to get into a community by force. In a supernatural world, you needed a supernatural weapon at your disposal.

And they were a man down.

In the old world, you had to be eighteen to be a 'man.' Ty was fifteen. No, Tanaka corrected himself. He *had* been fifteen.

Tanaka hung his head. Feeling sorry for Ty, for himself, for his brother, for Julie for *everything*. Even Bob. Caged up the way he had been. Even the psycho doctor who'd been so kind. What the hell had just happened?

Something about the backpack.

Something about the way Graham had stared at it.

He couldn't put his finger on it.

The wind blew grey snow around him in a flurry. The cold stuck to his bones and made his teeth clatter and froze his tears. His lungs ached, reminding him that he was a couple coughing fits away from being six feet under.

He still had his balls, though. Small favors.

He heard sometimes that your balls fell off from radiation poisoning and that, at least, was not him. Bright side. If this was even radiation poisoning. The doctor said it looked like it but he couldn't explain why some people got it and others didn't. Radiation poisoning wasn't selective.

A hand on his shoulder.

Julie. She looped her arms around him, hugging him tightly. He hugged her back, his face buried in her dirty coat. She smoothed the back of his black hair with a gloved

hand. Josh lifted himself up, walked over to them. Julie and Tanaka let him in to their circle and they all hugged in a tight huddle, shivering. Then they picked a direction and started walking.

Molly

She inspected the newspaper. The damage was decent, a nicely burned, charred hole. Well sized. Maybe five inches wide. Same for length. Her whole fist could fit through it.

She ran her fingers around the frayed edges. It was still hot. Still burning. Bits of newspaper dropped to the floor, landing by her bare feet.

She was getting better. She hit all of her targets now. No. She didn't hit her targets. She pulverized them. She incinerated. Her heart filled her chest. Was it bad to be this proud? She was very, very proud. She had done it by herself. She had found and hung all of the papers from books Lopez wouldn't miss. She had hung clothes with frayed parts not worth mending. For a finishing touch, she had drawn targets on them with fat red markers Borelli got her on a run.

None of her targets had a center any more. She had blown right through them.

The power was wonderful. Something new. She had been the 'kid,' the submarine's resident little girl for too long. Now, now she had *something*. She could almost tell the crew. She could almost have a place. Be one of them. If only they could see the way she had concentrated, for hours sometimes, on *this*. Her heart beat. The backs

of her eyelids. The skin beneath her left arm. Had any little girl sat as long as she had? The power had always been there, of course. She'd just had to figure out how to use it.

She felt it running through her. She had always felt it running through her. The first day after the submarine dove through the water only to come out of the sky in Abyssus, she was in the infirmary. Washed and cleaned, her carvings glowed through her bandages. The strange markings on her meant something. They knew something. They whispered and if she listened hard enough, long enough, she could almost get it.

But then she would get distracted and the whispers would fade, becoming general background noise: a buzzing in her head, a song that wouldn't go away.

Now she listened.

Her first session was a disaster. She shook her arm, wiggled it in the air like a glow stick.

Of course that didn't work, but it was worth a shot.

Next, she did flips on pipes and ran the length of her room, (the length of a football field) hoping her heart rate would somehow turn her arm 'on.' Sometimes it would pulse in time to her heart so if her heart was going really fast then shouldn't her arm? No. Of course it didn't work like that, either. It stayed the same, dull blue. Never really going away, never getting brighter or stronger or anything. Definitely *not* listening to her.

For weeks she tried commands. She shouted things like: 'Pow! Bang! On! Please! Shoot! Fire!' and even, in a moment of real frustration she had shouted out 'Fuck!' and then felt terrible. She still wasn't allowed to say that one. Even though this was her room,

her place, she still felt strange about breaking the rules. Practicing, working on her secret was one thing. Blatantly breaking the rules though, that left her stomach in knots and bile in the back of her throat.

It turned on and off on its own accord. Annika said it was all about thoughts. She wished Annika would train her. Help her. There was a way to control it, she knew.

But how?

She sat down in a huff, closed her eyes. She leaned against one of the large, familiar metal walls wondering what on earth she was doing. Maybe she was just a silly little girl, after all.

Discouraged and tired, the world began to slip away until all she could hear was her own heartbeat. She remembered dancing. Of everything lost and gone she missed dancing the most. Besides her mother, of course, but she didn't like to think about that.

She liked to remember her pink tutu and the feel of lights on her. A stage. People watching her, smiling at her.

That one time. That one, wonderful time she had danced on stage. She had been so little it wasn't a real show or anything. A stupid holiday performance. But it was all she had. Her father had laced up her ballet shoes, kissed her head and bunned her hair like a real ballerina. Told her to break a leg. That soft pink color, the warm lights, the feel of the wood underneath her slippers.

Belonging.

And then, there it was.

That whisper she had heard so long ago. Like pressing her ear to the ground and hearing footsteps from far away mingling with her own beating heart. She could feel the blood rushing to her arm. Pins and needles, relieved by sudden blood flow. She began to feel warm, connected, exhilarated.

She opened her eyes to a room of blue light.

Coming from her.

Her carvings were almost white in brightness but the rest of her arm was that wonderful, beautiful blue that wasn't a dark blue, no. It was the color of the sky at midday. The color of a cool pool in sunlight. She touched it with her other hand. She could *feel* the color. Molly wiggled her fingers in the light. Feeling the power. Like pushing her hand under water to un-plug the bathtub.

Yes!

And then it went away and she almost, almost said the F-word again.

But she knew how to find it.

So there was that, at least.

For a couple of long, long days, she had to hold that feeling before her arm would begin to glow. Now, she could turn it on and off. Like a light bulb. Sometimes at night she would lie in bed, practicing just that. On off on off on off.

Shooting had been equally difficult to master. She was the human equivalent of a baby rattlesnake: too much or too little venom. The first few times she used it, she either only had a small puff of light escape her palm or a beam of light so powerful she careened into the walls behind her. When her bruises had bruises she tied pillows around

herself, scavenged a scuba diver helmet from the exploration unit and wore it every time she practiced.

It was becoming normal for her to walk through the submarine with a hand on her back, groaning with every step.

Lately, her father and the crew had been busy. It hadn't been difficult to avoid them. They were always in the conference room, the mess hall. Her father, Annika, Lopez, Borelli and Jeremiah. Those five together, talking with heads bent, voices inaudible. She knew better than to sit with them. Sometimes one of them, normally Borelli, would move to sit with her but Molly was never allowed to sit with them.

She had accidentally stumbled upon her father and Annika, once. They were a little too close, their whispers a little too soft, their hands finding each other.

Her father was against a hallway wall, his arms crossed, Annika in front of him. They were whispering.

"...you said the witch can heal? Why couldn't she heal our world?"

"Conner," she touched his arm, "I don't even know if she can help. Your world, your *Earth*, it is dead. It's poisoned. I'm sorry."

Silence.

"I don't even know if she can help," Annika repeated.

"She's our only chance," Conner replied.

Their foreheads touched. Slowly, they kissed.

Molly took that as her cue to leave. She retreated, slinking away into the dark halls of the submarine.

That's where they had all gone, she supposed, to go and find the 'she.'

Plus, Borelli wasn't letting her into the command center. She was always allowed to go into the command center. Something was up.

She sighed.

Soon.

Soon she could add her name to that list. Surely, because of her arm, she would be one of them. She would get that *belonging* feeling again. It wouldn't just be a memory.

Her paper and cloth targets collected around her in small, burning piles. They floated down from every corner. Some fell apart and turned to ash before hitting the floor. Others crumbled, curled, extinguished. There were hundreds of them, each one with an identical hole where she had aimed and shot perfectly.

She had ash in her blonde hair, bits of paper on her too-big uniform. Her arm maintained its powerful glow. The space on her palm where she felt the power surge through had a callous forming. She curled her fingers around the newspaper she was holding. The burned hole was cool, falling apart.

Molly stood in her playroom amidst the glow of her arm and the dying flames.

Surely, she'd belong soon.

Surely.

A creak sounded above. Molly jumped from the sound, her arm flashing to life. She fired a crack of lightning to the falling pipe and when the door opened behind her, her senses were still so heightened, her arm still so bright and her reflexes so tuned in that

she didn't think before she fired. She turned, and fired a blue, glowing hole into her father's stomach.

Chapter Four

Tanaka

He hated churches. Churches were the first place people ran for help at the end of the world.

With the snow turning into hail that was turning into rain, the small group was soaked and in need of shelter. Tanaka, Julie and Josh all shivered violently from cold and anxiety, hunched over in hunger, their fists pressed into their bellies, trying to knead out the hunger pains.

They stood on the stoop of the church, looking through the windows for movement. Julie breathed on a window, rubbed at the grime.

“I can’t see shit.” She turned to Tanaka. “It’s your call.”

Tanaka took his hat off, ran a hand through his hair, reached up a gloved hand to hammer on the large oak doors. Behind the doors, his knocking echoed. No answer.

Tanaka knocked again.

Still nothing.

The only weapon they had was Julie’s 1911 and it was out of ammo. He still had his Kbar, his pocketknife, and a Leatherman but those were more for self-defense. A last resort.

His Mossberg was long gone. Josh was holding him back, though, because if they were in a fight Josh would need to be protected. He was pale, wavering on his feet. Plus

they didn't have Bob. Without Bob there wasn't really a way to control Josh's force-field.

It would only turn on around monsters.

They were vulnerable. Easy prey.

Easy meat.

For the past couple of days Josh had remained silent, his arm stuffed inside his jacket. Tanaka had zipped the coat halfway up to have a makeshift sling, but still.

Wasn't ideal.

Tanaka turned back to the door, gripped the metal handles and *heaved*. It opened with a low groan, casting a pale grey light on long, empty pews. Other than the debris of ash, trash and human waste, it wasn't that bad.

Josh stood next to him, cupped his left hand to his mouth.

"Hello!" he called.

It echoed. No response.

Tanaka exhaled the breath he had been holding, only to go into a coughing fit. Julie had her hands on his back but he shoed her off.

He was choking. Something, something in his chest he couldn't get out. Tanaka collapsed to his knees, his hands going to his throat and for a terrifying moment he thought Bob was about to burst through.

He spat out a lump of meat. Not Bob.

Phew.

He stayed on all fours, catching his breath, staring at the steaming piece of lung he had just coughed up. It wasn't very large. Maybe the size of a quarter. What had Ty said?

It's coming. On a black horse, it's coming. Julie's voice brought him back.

"Tanaka? Tanaka, are you okay?"

He could feel them. Josh on one side, Julie on the other.

"Yeah. I'm okay now. Let's see if there's food anywhere." He stood upright and took a couple of deep breaths. Well, deep for him. Something felt wrong. Missing. Opened. He wiped his mouth on the corner of his dirty, crusted sleeve. Blood. Too much to just come from what he'd coughed up. Something else was bleeding. Somewhere deep inside. He wiped it away on his jacket, hoping Josh and Julie hadn't seen it.

The group moved through the pews, checking under each one for stashed weapons, supplies, anything useful. Julie made her way up to the balcony level; Josh stood gazing at the crucifix.

"Tanaka!"

"What?"

"He's as skinny as we are! Did he have carvings on his arm?" Josh pointed a finger at the Jesus's left arm. Tanaka joined his brother. Indeed, carvings had been drawn on Jesus's left arm in black paint. It gave Tanaka a spooky feeling in his gut. Like something unseen was touching his shoulder, whispering in his ear. He shrugged off the feeling.

"Come on, let's check the kitchen," he said to Josh.

In the corner of the church there were stairs going down. The stairs led to an all white kitchen. White counter tops, white cupboards, white tile. Tanaka looked down at his brother's clothes, then his own. Against the white surfaces, the grime and dirt and dried liquids and ash on their clothes stood out. Giving voice to his brothers' thoughts, Josh muttered, "We really need a bath."

Tanaka walked over to the cupboards, flung the doors open. They'd been mostly cleared out. A couple things left. Tanaka hopped up onto the counter, started feeling around along the top, always apprehensive of mousetraps. Sometimes he found liquor, chocolate, pills, even pot a couple times on the tops of things where people had been in too much of a rush to remember or check. Josh crawled inside one of the cabinets, kicking out his findings behind him. Some noodles. Some cans filled with peaches or mangos, something with vitamin C.

No protein.

At least there was food, though.

"Nice job, kiddo." Tanaka jumped down to the floor, started going through the pasta.

Julie's scream cut through the air.

Tanaka ran out of the kitchen, up the stairs and through the pews. Julie was above, running from a room on the second floor, the door banging shut behind her.

"Do we run?" Tanaka croaked. His lungs ached from the sudden sprint.

"Get up here. Oh my god, it's so gross." Julie gripped the railing, her face white.

"Is anything going to eat us?"

“No, it’s just some fucking sick shit.”

“Dead or alive?”

“Oh. Dead. Very dead.”

Tanaka breathed a sigh of relief, slowing his pace down. Josh trotted up beside him.

“Hurry up, hurry up, hurry up,” Julie called.

Once upstairs, she led them to the rectory and there, in the middle of a blood stained floor was a massive pile of severed, glowing arms.

Josh ran out of the room to puke over the balcony. Tanaka stared at the pile of arms.

“I hate churches,” he muttered.

Josh retched again.

“What do you think? Monster? Human?” Julie asked, turning a little green herself.

Tanaka walked over to the pile of arms. It was a normal, psycho person kind of set up. Books. Candles. Bottles.

Along the walls, ground and ceiling someone had drawn pictures of Alarum, Invicta, Servium and some other monsters he had never seen. Tanaka scratched at the sketches. They came off under his fingernails. Paint. Probably the same person who had drawn the carvings on the crucifix. Blah Blah Blah psycho-bullshit Blah Blah Blah.

“Person. Definitely,” he answered.

“Creepy,” Julie said. She kicked at the pile. It squelched against her foot.

“It’s not that bad.” Tanaka opened the cabinet behind the pile of flickering arms, started searching through crumbled paper, wrappers and tools.

Average end-of-the-world-crap.

“Isn’t it weird that these arms are flickering?” Julie asked.

“What do you mean?” Tanaka said.

“Josh’s arm is flickering, so are these. Doesn’t that mean *something’s* around us?”
Following us? Or do arms just flicker, now?”

“No fucking clue, Jules.”

Bingo. Jackpot. A giant bottle of rum. Half gone but what*fucking*ever.

“Wow. Severed arms, and Yo Ho Ho, a bottle of Rum!” Tanaka held it aloft in victory.

“Regular party in here,” Julie said, turning away.

“Josh, get in here.”

“No.” Josh stayed outside the door, gripping the balcony railing, his knuckles white, his face a little yellow from throwing up.

“Does your shoulder hurt?” Tanaka asked.

“Yeah, why?”

Tanaka skirted around the arms to the doorway. He pushed the bottle of rum against his brother’s chest

“Here’s a pain killer. Swig. Don’t gulp.”

Josh rolled his eyes at his brother.

“I *know*.”

Hours later, after a meal of canned tomato soup and canned peaches, Josh slept soundly, curled around the rum having, maybe, just maybe, pleasant dreams. The three of them had huddled together upstairs in the Sunday school room. Tanaka and Julie had busted up a couple of pews, dragged the wood into the Sunday school and set fire to it. They used Jesus coloring books as kindling. Tanaka had tried to use one of the many Bibles but something stopped him. He had it in his hands, gripped a handful of pages and the spine, started to rip.

He stopped, though. Not because it was a Bible. He stopped because it was a book. Evil people burned books. He remembered that, at least.

Funny, the things that stuck with you.

Especially after you had a belt covered in ears and numerous deaths underneath it.

What was the word?

Ironic. Weird. Backasswards.

But maybe that was the only good he'd ever do. Not burn books. He couldn't promise to not kill anymore. He couldn't promise to not enjoy it, either. He couldn't promise Josh's safety. But he could promise to not burn books. For now, anyway.

Aim high, right?

One cold night, he'd be forced to use books as kindling. That was going to happen. People would understand that, wouldn't they? When he was long dead and people of the future found his bones and called him a heathen because he had a belt with ears on it, and in front of him, a pile of charred books, someone with some fucking sense

would say, 'maybe he didn't have a choice.' His bones would agree with that person because it would be true. One day, he wouldn't have a choice. If he lived that long.

Then again, maybe there wasn't a point. Maybe it was really gone.

Everything.

Maybe all the libraries, archives, whatever the presidents and leaders and tyrants had locked away in their prestigious basements were already gone and all he, Tanaka, was doing, was preserving a couple of Bibles that surely weren't the last ones. However, if it was the last bit of good he could do, he wanted to do it.

That's why he put the book down. That was why now he was staring at the pews and the Jesus coloring books and not real books crumble against the heat of the flame.

Better this way.

His belt felt heavy. So did his eyes. So did his heart.

Where's the fucking rum?

He stood up. Without waking his snoring brother he slid the bottle from the boy's arms. Josh rolled over, continued snoring.

Julie made a clicking noise with her tongue. Her eyes hid underneath her cap, her legs crossed at the knees, a foot tapping the air to the beat of an unheard song.

"We must be crazy," she ventured.

Tanaka took a swig. "Why?"

"We lost Ty yesterday."

"Shit happens."

“Exactly.” Julie lifted her hat back so Tanaka could see her big blue eyes. “I don’t feel anything. Do you?” He didn’t have to think.

“No.” He broke her gaze, looking at anything, the fire, his jacket, his brother because if he looked at her...

“I mean. I want to,” he continued, “I feel shitty about it but...”

“...that’s it,” Julie finished for him.

“Yeah.”

“Me too.” Outside the wind howled and pawed at the grey snow.

Tanaka sat down heavily next to his friend. She linked his arm into hers, resting her head lightly on his shoulder. He leaned against her, snuggled closer, offered her the drink.

“Thanks,” she said. She gulped the liquid, winced as it went down. Waited. Tanaka could tell by her suddenly still body and pursed lips that something was on her mind. “We’re going to have to join a community,” she blurted.

“No.”

“Tanaka...”

“I said no.”

“We’re not going to survive without it. You’re getting weaker. We don’t have Bob. We’re not going to keep getting lucky scavenging.”

“Not after what just happened. I was ready to stay there until...” *I died* “until we wanted to leave. But no way. We’re safer wandering. I mean, did you see that pile of arms, Julie? In the other room? There are some sick, psycho people out there. Also, do I

need to remind you about the sewer? Do you fucking remember? They had us. They were going to eat us. We escaped by the hairs of our chiny-chin chins!”

“Maybe they were just really hungry.”

“No. No. Never fucking say that.”

“Who are you to talk? You practically eat ears.”

“No. That’s not true. I don’t eat them. I put them on my belt like people used to do with scalps.” He stood up, bottle in hand. How could she even suggest this? Stupid. Fucking stupid. “Maybe, maybe one day I’ll burn books but I’ll never, ever fucking eat a person.”

“Burn books? What? Tanaka, I’m just saying that not all communities are going to be like that,” Julie insisted.

“You can go. But Josh and I are staying far away from other people.”

“You’re dying, Jake! You are *dying*.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“What’s going to happen to Josh when you croak?” Josh shifted in his sleep. Tanaka watched him settle before turning to Julie, deflated. He sat down heavily. Did she know he was trying to find a place for his little brother? Was she purposefully playing that card?

He ran a hand through his greasy hair, pinched his eyes shut with a thumb and forefinger. Something he’d seen his father do when he was tired or thinking. It felt right to do it now.

“I don’t know,” he whispered to her.

She reached over, squeezed his hand.

“We’ll figure it out. No one is going anywhere yet. Just promise me you’ll think about it? I don’t want to split up. It’s just us three, now.”

They leaned against each other.

“We’ll figure it out,” she whispered. Tanaka didn’t want to leave her, but the next day, he would anyway.

Aleric

He sat in front of the fire he’d created with the doctor’s *lux*, thinking about Azalea and how she’d betrayed him.

Azalea.

Finally he was out. It didn’t matter that he and Graham had to share a body. It was better than a Mason jar. He’d never go back to the captivity of the Mason Jar.

He’d tried to convince the kids to let him out but they didn’t have the same drive that he needed. He’d needed someone with ambition. Someone *curious*.

He’d caught a glimpse of himself in one of the walls along the street that had a reflective surface.

He’d stretched his new arms out in front of him. There wasn’t a lot of wear and tear on the body, so that meant he was young. Aside from being hungry he felt good. That meant he was strong. The skin tone was strange to him. He was darker than some of the people he’d seen, lighter than others. Dark brown hair that the doctor hadn’t remembered

to cut hung in his eyes unless pushed to the side, or back. His height was all right. He only had other humans to compare to and he seemed taller than most.

Graham was still there, in the back of Aleric's brain. He clawed at the sides of Aleric's mind, trying to push his way out, an itch Aleric couldn't quite scratch. He wanted to kill Graham so very badly but the body dies without the mind.

Possessions were just so hard these days.

He considered it very serendipitous that Graham's *lux* could produce fire. After being stuck in an ice mountain he was very, very attracted to the idea of having fire at his disposal.

Aleric broke another branch, set it on the fire in the trashcan. It didn't burn fast enough for his taste so he extended his arm, Graham's arm, and scorched it with a long burst of flame.

The fire sizzled with ravenous appetite. He could relate. His stomach felt hollow and grumbled constantly. Providing for this body was going to be difficult. Nothing tasted good and he'd tried a great many things. He found it difficult to swallow or stomach things that didn't taste at least a little appealing.

These beings were picky.

Graham was hitting the walls of his mind, attempting to break through. Aleric closed his eyes tight, stuffed Graham back down.

It was a crazy, insane thought but it felt like Graham understood something. It felt like in the recesses of Aleric's mind, Graham's was back there, piecing the puzzle together. Like he could see into Aleric's mind the way Aleric could see into Graham's.

That was concerning, but in the same breath, what could the good doctor really do?

Go ahead, Doctor.

He had bigger things to deal with. Like the witches.

The witches.

They had fallen through ice and wind and clouds, turning, screaming and so intertwined Aleric didn't know where he began and where the witches ended. The eldest, Belladonna, brought her wand up high, her voice carrying through the wind.

“A caelo usque ad centrum!”

The spell flew past his body, landed in the snow and below them the ground yawned open, ready to swallow him whole.

The hail hurt Aleric's face and the air froze in his lungs but he continued to fight them because what else could he do? He tried to turn back into his *primordialis* so he could shoot through the air and stuff himself down their pretty, pale white necks. The storm was pressing against him, keeping him in his body and no matter how hard he focused, all three witches were more powerful than he was.

“*Sanguis!*” they all yelled.

He'd watched in midair as his red blood froze. He fell heavily to the snow beneath him, teetering on the edge of the open ground.

She ran to him. Azalea.

She placed a hand on his face and he was surprised to find that he still loved her.

He knew he'd always love her. Then the other witches, Belladonna and Narcissus, were there and they were controlling the storm, pushing him back, sliding him along the ice. Something that felt like claws raked down his back, causing him to arch with pain and scream in the flurry of sleet and snow.

"Azalea. Please," he begged, tears leaking down his cheeks. "Help me."

She pulled her hand away from him.

"I'm sorry," she joined her sisters. Their arms were outstretched, calling out an incantation. He knew his time was almost up.

"Malos Spiritus Sigillent! Lagena Signatoria!"

"You can't kill me!" he'd yelled wildly, smoke coming out of his nostrils.

"Malos Spiritus Sigillent! Lagena Signatoria!"

The wind pulled against his skin and underneath his feet the ground began to swallow, sucking him down. He'd clawed at the snow, his long fingernails scrambling against the icy edges for a hold.

"Azalea!" he screamed. "Azalea!"

She wouldn't look at him.

Her eyes were creamy white, staring at the sky. Her mouth moved in perfect synchronicity with her sisters'.

He slipped further. Hands gripping his legs, pulling.

"Azalea!"

That was the last image he had of her. The last time he saw her. Her long pink dress whipping around her small body, her dark hair swirling around her in a tangle and her eyes, far away as he slipped lower, lower and lower into the abyss.

Azalea. The woman he'd loved. Still loved if he was completely honest with himself. His mother had once told him that his kind should never go into love and expect a good outcome. "Look at us," she'd said, arms outstretched. She didn't mean how they looked. They could look however they wanted. How they were made though? His family was made in incest and affairs and sacrifices.

He should have taken a job like his brother. He should have settled for carrying souls to the underworld. There was dignity in that. Maybe no fame, but dignity, yes.

Now though, could he even go home? He'd figure that out after he killed the witches. After he looked into Azalea's dimming eyes and figured out if she still loved him too. If she had ever loved him.

He casually tossed a rock into the fire, just to see the sparks fly up into the air.

She wouldn't recognize him now, wearing someone else's skin. In fact, no one would. That was the plan, after all.

He needed to figure out where the portals were. There was definitely one open, if not more. He'd seen Alarum circling around in the yellow sky. He passed one Invicta, hunched over something dead, giggling to itself. He'd kept his distance. So far, he hadn't seen any Arachnosapiens and that was a very, very good thing. Hopefully they were extinct. He shivered involuntarily. He hated those things. The head of a human and the body of a spider was just not *right*.

He leaned down next to the fire, squinting to see stars through the smoke and haze of this world. Something crinkled in his jacket pocket.

Aleric fished for it, curious. Something smooth and cool met his fingertips. He brought it out, inspecting it with a furrowed brow and wary eyes. He felt like it was food. He could ask Graham but that would bring on a headache.

He felt like he recognized it as a food the kids had eaten. The wrapping was blue. He could feel something inside. Something round. He sniffed the packaging. It really didn't smell any different from the rest of this world. Not entirely sure what blue food meant in this world, but his vessel needed sustenance and he needed his strength.

He fumbled with the wrappings, revealing black food with a white filling in the middle.

He took a bite. Pieces of the food stuck to his teeth and the roof of his mouth and the taste was nothing short of delightful. And the best part? There were six of them. After he finished, he licked the bag clean, threw it into the fire. A wind blew against him, bringing with it ash and a chill. He scooted closer to the fire.

He never wanted to be cold again.

Never be this alone again. He rocked back and forth by the fire, angry with himself for thinking of Azalea.

He just wanted the pain to go away.

Whatever it took to make the pain go away.

He felt his eyelids drooping, felt the strongest urge to lie down and close them completely. After he got some rest he'd figure out where the portals were and how to get through them.

Molly

She'd tried to staunch the blood flow. She covered her father's stomach like Lopez had taught her (both hands, pressing down against the wound, one on top of the other to maximize pressure) but the blood still ran across her hands, down her father's torso leaking onto the floor creating a pool beneath them.

"Help!" Molly screamed down the hallway. "Gaby! Annika! Help!"

Molly's breaths came shallow, tears blinding her eyes.

So much blood. She could reach the intercom but that would mean letting up pressure and she knew she shouldn't do that. There was so much blood but maybe she was holding a little bit in and the idea of leaving him in anyway, of not keeping contact was scary, like he might just disappear if she turned away for a second. No. She would stay. She pressed down harder, her father groaning.

"I'm so sorry, Daddy. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Conner writhed, howled a terrible, guttural noise that came from somewhere deep within. She tried to keep pressure but his squirming body made it difficult. Her hands slipped against the liquid.

Footsteps and yelling down the hallway.

"Help!" Molly cried out. "Please help!"

Jeremiah was first through.

“Molly, what’s...oh my god!” Jeremiah’s mouth opened, moving wordlessly. He ran to the intercom, found his voice and throughout the ship his voice sounded: “Gaby! Gaby repot to the engine room! It’s the Captain!”

Jeremiah grabbed some of the burned newspaper from the floor and shoved it into Conner’s gut, undid his own belt, threaded it behind Conner’s back and then tightened it on top of the wound, over Molly’s hands.

“Molly, let go.” His voice was firm but far away.

She shook her head no.

“Molly, let go,” he said, a little louder. A little more firm. She could see herself in the reflection of his glasses. She looked small and scared.

“I’ve got it,” Jeremiah assured.

His hands on hers, she was still trying to press down, shaking her head, breathing too fast. Hot tears mixing with blood and something was happening to her *lux*. It was getting brighter, warmer. The smell of cooking meat in the air sticking in her nose just like the night her Dad had charged them across the compound to the safety of the submarine.

Someone was pulling her back. Firm hands around her waist. Lopez came in with Annika. Lopez dropped to the floor, pressing a white lump of padding onto Conner’s stomach, her hand at his wrist, fingers searching for a pulse.

Annika stared down at Conner. Then knelt, touched his face with the back of her hand, her head bowed.

And then her hand curled into a fist, shaking.

“I told you,” she growled. “I told you to be careful.” She pointed at Molly’s *lux*. I told you, you were not ready!”

Molly’s heart turned to ice and she felt like throwing up and she was losing control and her arm was glowing. It was getting hotter than it had ever been. Normally the power came from her palm in a focused kind of way. Now it was just electrifying. Burning. Like when she first got it. Like five years ago when she hid under the table not understanding that she was somehow powering it.

“Back up, Molly!” Jeremiah shouted. His voice wasn’t smooth the way it was when he sung. She had danced to that voice when she was younger. Now it was clipped, stern.

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.” She was shaking, backing up yet wanting to move forward, blood on her hands. Her father’s hands were limp at his sides.

“Help me take him to the infirmary, let’s go,” Lopez ordered.

“I can help!” she cried.

“No!” they all shouted at once.

“Annika, Borelli, please. I didn’t mean too.” She was sobbing now, pleading, and gripping their shirts. Annika looped her arms underneath Conner’s shoulders. Borelli and Jeremiah supported his torso.

Molly ran after them, lights falling down after her with crashes, darkness stretching out behind them.

“Is he going to be okay? Tell me, Gaby! Is he?” What had she done? She hadn’t meant to. What had she done? White panic bursting behind her eyes.

Dad.

A scream. Conner’s scream. His mouth contorting, his eyes cinched shut.

And then all the lights in the submarine went out because she was shooting currents into the floor, the walls, everywhere, short circuiting the ship. She screamed, backing away. Pipes from the ceiling crashed down, the metallic clang from pieces of the ship hitting each other.

Dad.

She was a selfish, spoiled brat. She was stupid for ever thinking she could control it. She would never be like the crew. She could have killed her father.

Had she just killed her father?

They were in the infirmary and she couldn’t stop the light. Couldn’t control where she was shooting.

“Molly! Stay there!” Annika grabbed Molly’s arm, dragging her away.

“Annika? Please, please where are we going? Annika!” They ran until they were in the control room. Annika kicked the door open, shoved Molly inside.

“I told you!” Annika yelled. “I told you, you were not ready! Why did you not mind me? Now all I smell is burning hair!”

There was a burn running from Annika’s hand to her shoulder from where she’d touched Molly.

“I can’t stop. Annika, I’m sorry. Help me, please!” There was just light and pulsing and something ringing in her bones, making her teeth clench.

Dad.

Molly collapsed, sobbing. Annika walked over and grabbed Molly’s *lux*. The current zapped her again. She hissed in pain but instead of letting go, she folded Molly’s arms against her torso.

“You won’t hurt yourself. If you ever get out of control, press it against yourself. And breathe, child. Breathe.” Annika let go, her skin sizzling.

“Annika. My dad.”

“I know. I’m going to check on him. Stay here.”

Molly grabbed Annika’s shirt, tugging her.

“Annika, please let me go. I just want to see him.”

“No. You may not go into the infirmary,” Annika said, disentangling herself. “You are dangerous right now. You can’t control yourself. I’ll keep you updated.” And she left.

Molly curled into herself. A hole was forming in her chest, making her want to cry, scream and run.

Because Annika was right.

She *was* dangerous. She couldn’t control it. She thought she could teach herself. She thought she could be like the crew, be one of them, but she just wasn’t.

Sobs racked her body and even the cool metal of the submarine’s floor wasn’t calming. It had been once, when she and her father collapsed onto the submarine floor,

Lopez above them, pressing oxygen masks onto their faces. Conner had run a hand against Molly's cheek.

I love you.

"Daddy," Molly whispered into the floor.

And then there was a bright orange light.

Just a flash. Molly opened her eyes.

Again. A flash, but this time it stayed on, illuminating the control room in an orange glow, like the morning after a fire and the sun was having trouble shining through the smoke.

Molly brushed the tears from her eyes, stood up. It was coming from outside. She went over to the window where she and Borelli had sat sharing stale Corn Nuts just a few weeks ago. They were above Los Angeles. The city stretched out beneath the submarine. Tall, vacant buildings jutted up towards the sky like the bones of something dead, poking up through the earth.

On the street below the submarine there was a ball of orange light. Alarum were circling it, crashing into it and every time they did there was a flash. Like the bubble wouldn't hold.

Molly squinted, not sure she was seeing it correctly. Another flash.

Kids.

Two boys. One with a *lux* and they were having trouble. One boy wasn't moving and the other was trying to drag him and keep the bubble up in the air. Molly's hands nervously went up to her head, scrunching up her hair. She had to help them.

But how could she get down there? It would take too long to land the entire submarine. It was too slow. She could get the crew to help but they were busy with her father. She couldn't leave her dad, could she?

The boys were so small compared to the giant monsters that swooped down, claws extended.

She'd never make it to them in time.

The Pod.

Chapter Five

Annika

Lopez had done everything she could, which, frankly, wasn't much. She was skilled as a medic but she wasn't a surgeon and Conner had a hole in his stomach. Lopez had sedated him and he lay against the white sheets. They made him look paler in contrast. Annika sat on the edge of his bed, holding a hand. Borelli and Jeremiah hovered at the end.

"He could pull through," Borelli said, his voice low.

"We need a surgeon," Jeremiah pointed out. "A real doctor."

"Thanks for your vote of confidence." Lopez sat at her desk, pouring over a thick book labeled *Human Anatomy Sixth Edition*.

"I'm sorry, Gaby, but if you were a doctor you would know how to do this."

"I can do it, I just need the tools." She closed the book, rubbed her hands over her sweating face. "We only have basic shit here."

"Because you're not a surgeon," Jeremiah said. "You're a combat medic."

She threw the book at Jeremiah's head, knocking his glasses off.

"Not everyone in the military graduated with an engineering degree from Virginia Tech, Jer!"

"Technically, it's a PhD in engineering, specifically for the military."

She threw another book at him.

“Then you fix him if you’re so goddamn smart, cabron!” She marched out of the room, pushing up her sleeves, which were stained with Conner’s blood.

Borelli shook his head.

“Un-cool, dude,” he said to Jeremiah.

“I was only stating...”

“Just go talk to her.”

“Fine.”

They both walked outside the infirmary.

Annika turned back to Conner. His face was handsome and shaved. She squeezed his hand.

She hadn’t said good-bye to anyone in a while. She wasn’t any good at it. It was always messy and awkward. Better to just leave. The last person she had said goodbye to was Robert.

She’d been taken prisoner, obviously. She had tried to kill the King after all. She had flown through the air with a spear in her hands and she almost ended it all. The fighting, the witches’ death. The city turning into some wicked beast she’d helped glue together, encompassing the worst bits of humanity. Fighting. Death. Gambling. Slavery.

She sat in her cell, cross-legged. She took large, deep inhalations. Counted her heart beats. She wanted to pace. She wanted to do pull-ups from the bars, push-ups off the ground. Climb the cage and shake it just to hear the metal noise.

A breath. Exhale. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Inhale. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

The King would bring his scepter. His magic. The scepter controlled the Servium. If she somehow gained control of the scepter, she would in turn control the Servium. She could rule the city.

No.

Exhale. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

She didn't want to rule. She just wanted to kill. And maybe that was the worst side of her.

Inhale. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

She was single minded in that way and knew it. But maybe, if she killed the King, she could get someone better to rule. Someone wiser. Someone who could help the city. Make it more than just money and death.

"Anni."

Robert.

Her eyes snapped open. Robert was outside her cell, his arms lazily hanging in.

"You have been watching me?" she asked, allowing a smile to pass on her lips.

He smiled, leaned his face against the bars.

"Naw. I wait until you're sleeping to watch you."

"That is wise."

"Maybe not. There is that big ass knife you keep on your side."

"I would have killed you long ago if I wanted."

"Good thing you like havin' me around." He reached a tattooed hand out for her.

She got up, slid her calloused hand against his.

“Thank you, for protecting me.” She meant yesterday, when he’d thrown his body on top of hers, ready to take the blow for her, die with her. He kissed her hand, his lips making her tingle, warmth spreading from her toes up to her neck.

“You’re stupid,” he informed her.

“Not as stupid as you.” She leaned her forehead against his. Their skin touched, their breath filling each other, hot against her skin. A part that didn’t seem so small anymore wanted to melt into him. And just *leave*.

“We could go,” Robert said, seeming to read her thoughts. And they could. He had a subtle power in the city as a smuggler. The King needed him. The people needed him. He had ways. Hidden holes in the outer walls that were large enough to fit humans.

She had once come through one of those holes. So had he.

Then there was the witches’ cave. Catacomb tunnels looped back and forth, paintings on the walls from people centuries before. Paintings of a bright blue orb....

“Please,” Robert begged. “I know what you’re trying to do, and it’s noble, Anni. It is. But please. Please don’t make me raise *him* alone.”

Conner twitched, bringing her back. She was squeezing his hand so tightly.

“Molly!” Borelli ran into the infirmary, out of breath and maybe a little green.

“Annika, please tell me you’ve seen Molly.”

“I put her in the Control Room.”

“Yeah, the control room is fried and the door has been blown the fuck off.”

“We’re in the air. Where could she go?”

Then they heard the thunder.

Tanaka

The Alarum grabbed Josh, its talons burying themselves into his back. Josh screamed out. Tanaka launched himself at the monster, stabbing it in the leg with his K-Bar. Its long, thin black beak snapped at his head. Slicing, white hot pain. Something warm spilling over his face. He stabbed again, a little higher on its leg. It released Josh, green blood flowing from its leg. Tanaka brushed the liquid from his face, grabbed his brother's jacket shoulder and ran.

He chanced a look up at the sky, afraid of what he might see. Three others, circling around them like buzzards. Instead of cawing there was a high-pitched shriek the boys were almost used to by now. They needed cover.

Like, yesterday.

Behind them, another Alarum dove, covering the ground around them in a giant black shadow. Tanaka pushed Josh out of the way. The boy tumbled to the ground. Claws grabbed Tanaka. Pain crashed through his body. He tried to reach up but he couldn't, something wasn't working. In his arms. In his shoulders. It didn't matter. The Alarum must have realized it had the wrong kid because it stopped before taking flight. Tanaka's arm wasn't glowing, after all.

In its disappointment the Alarum slammed Tanaka onto the ground.

Game fucking over.

The Alarum released him, going after Josh once more. Tanaka writhed on the ground, soaked in blood but not caring because he couldn't get any air. He was gasping, choking, drowning on nothing. A full feeling inside, an empty feeling in his throat.

No, not now.

He rolled onto his back, everything tingling, ablaze, in pain, straining. His teeth clenched involuntarily. His eyes shut tight. Josh kneeled next to him, pulling him. Trying to drag him.

“Get up! Tanaka! Get up!”

Josh put his shield up, deflecting another Alarum. It crashed. The force field rippled white from the blow.

Josh was panting, shouting, “Tanaka! Get up! I can't hold it! Tanaka!”

Tanaka was thinking about his mother and that wasn't a good thing. You thought about your mother before you died.

The force field was stronger than Tanaka had ever seen it; he wanted to tell his brother how proud he was. That this was the coolest, coolest fucking thing he had ever seen. It must have been five stories high, encompassing them in a giant, warm orange bubble. Huge and beautiful. Josh was still screaming at him, turning pale. He allowed his head to roll back, wet snow and old cement against his head, staring up into the clouded atmosphere. He squinted his eyes, furrowed his brow.

Is that a fucking submarine in the sky?

You saw some weird shit before you died.

The force field collapsed. Josh fell to his hands and knees. The Alarum, seeing their chance, began to dive.

Tanaka lay down on the ground, wishing the ground wasn't so cold. He would have liked to feel hot asphalt one last time, as weird as that sounded. A blue light. There was a blue light careening towards them and for a terrible moment, Tanaka thought that Bob was back.

But it wasn't Bob. It was a very short person with long blonde hair and a glowing blue arm in dark clothes. A girl?

She was running towards them. Josh was on the ground, tears leaking from his closed eyes.

"I can't..." he whispered.

"Look out!" she yelled. She stopped by the boys, her blue eyes locking with Tanaka's dark brown. Then she turned around, facing the monster. An Alarum was closing in. Josh brought his arms up to his head, crouching down over Tanaka.

There was a crack, a bright blue light and then a deep, thunderous *boom*.

Josh looked up. Tanaka saw his brother's mouth drop open.

"What's happening?" Tanaka coughed.

"She's shooting lightning."

"What?"

Tanaka pushed himself up onto an elbow. The girl had her arm extended. The carvings were alight and leaking color towards her hand. From her hand came what looked like a bolt of blue lightning. It flashed through the air, stabbing an Alarum in the

belly. The sky lit up and the animal fell to the ground with a crunch. Its guts oozed out underneath it, green and putrid.

The girl turned to them, her curly blonde hair dancing around her in the wind, alive and wild.

“Hi. I’m Molly. Are you guys okay?” She extended a hand to Josh. He clasped it.

When they touched, Josh’s force field flew up around them, blue suddenly mixing with the orange.

“Whoa,” Josh whispered.

“Oh my...” Molly said.

“Holy fuck,” Tanaka mouthed.

The force field was completely stable. They stood there, hand’s linked, faces bathed in awe from the sudden burst of color in the grey world. Molly turned to Josh. She was about a head taller.

“If I can help you make your bubble, I bet you could shoot. Want to try?”

“Shoot a lightning bolt?”

“There are still two Alarum in the air. Let’s try.”

“You aim like a gun?” Josh asked.

“Yeah, I look between my fingers because it kind of comes from the middle,”

Molly answered.

“Okay, I’ll have to let the force field down, though.”

“We’ll go on three? You take the smaller one. I’ll take *him*.” She pointed to the biggest one, the darkest one.

“Really?” Josh croaked. She smiled, toothy and long, like the purple cat from that one fucked up book.

“One,” Molly said.

“Two,” Josh said.

“Don’t let go of my hand.”

“I won’t.”

Tanaka willed his eyes to stay open.

On three, the force field collapsed, a waterfall running out of water. Molly and Josh redirected their energy into orange and blue lightning. It left their hands, tearing through the sky, jagged and bright. Tanaka’s hair stood on end from the volume of electricity pushed into the atmosphere. The air felt muggy and charged, like it was going to rain any minute. Thunder above them.

Both Alarum fell to the ground, dead. Josh and the girl released their grip.

Molly turned to face Tanaka. She was dressed in military fatigues that were rolled at the legs. A navy shirt that was baggy.

“I’m Josh, by the way.”

Tanaka really did mean to introduce himself, but he put a hand on his chest, wheezing, feeling like something was broken. His world had been dimming and now it was really starting to tunnel. He couldn’t prop himself up anymore. He fell forward, landing on his face.

Josh and Molly were on either side of him. He tried to crawl into a standing position but couldn’t. He stayed on the ground, getting tiny gasps of air. But the air,

although much needed, felt hot and unwelcome. He started coughing, could feel warm liquid on the sides of his mouth and when he spat, he spat out blood. Coughing red lumps. Coughing up chewed meat.

It was happening.

After they were miraculously rescued.

My fucking luck.

“What’s wrong with him?” Molly asked. To her credit, she didn’t step away, but had her hands on his arm, keeping him from falling into his own lung pieces. Josh had the other side, talking to her literally behind his back.

“What’s wrong with him?” she repeated.

“What? Like, besides his face?”

“Yes, besides his face.”

“Radiation poisoning, or something like it I guess.”

There was a long pause and then Molly said, “Help me get him into the Pod.” She motioned in the direction she’d come from.

“What? No. I just met you, we’re not putting my brother in that.”

“I just saved you, show some faith.”

“No.”

Although Tanaka was incredibly proud of his brother for being wary, being saved sounded really, really good, whatever that entailed. He wanted to tell him that, but something slimy and large was working its way up through his throat.

“Come on!” Molly didn’t wait for Josh to change his mind. She started dragging Tanaka anyway. Josh followed, supporting his brother’s other arm.

“What is that?” he asked.

“It’s an Exploration Pod.”

“Yeah, for the *ocean*.”

“It flies. Like that.” She pointed to the submarine above them.

“It’s not going to fit all three of us,” Josh said.

“No, you stay here. Tell Borelli where we went.”

“What? I don’t even know where you’re going. And who’s Borelli?”

She opened the Pod’s hatch and dumped Tanaka’s raggedy body into the cockpit or whatever it was. She climbed in after him.

What the fuck am I in?

“Just stay here!” she said to Josh. “Tell them we’ve gone through the portal.”

Portal?

“A portal?”

“They’re on their way. I promise, the sub is just really slow at landing.” She gritted her teeth and there was a distinct edge to her voice.

Molly closed the hatch. Through the glass, blood bubbling up through his nose and mouth, Tanaka gave his brother thumbs up.

She was going to save him. Josh was going to be okay.

Molly maneuvered him so he was sitting behind her so she was basically on his lap.

Possibly the very worst time to have a pretty girl on his lap.

More blood. From his mouth. From his face. From everywhere. It was getting in her hair and he felt bad because her hair was so pretty and looked clean. It had been a long time since he had seen anything so clean.

She put her hand onto the console. She must have done something because the engine roared to life and then the fucking thing was in the air and they were flying. Or were they falling, it was hard to tell, his vision was coming and going with explosions of light.

“Hold on,” she said.

He was trying.

They fell through sky and dove into the ocean. A *whoosh* of water around them. It was dark but far from calm. The water was spinning and soon they were spinning too.

No more air. He was leaning against the girl and her arm was glowing so brightly he had to shut his eyes and pretend he wanted to hold his breath. Instead of hitting the bottom of the ocean because they must be there by now, there was a sucking sound, water being pulled from a bottle. The pod burst into sunlight.

Sunlight.

Josh

He was in a bed. A clean bed.

I told him, Josh thought, smiling to himself. *I told Tanaka there were good people out there.*

That was the first thing he had said to her. The lady. What was her name? Lopez? The submarine hadn't quite landed; instead, it hovered a few feet above the ground. He should have been shocked. He should have been surprised. Instead, he felt light-headed and relieved.

And grateful.

Yes. Grateful.

Even more so when a top hatch opened and a woman climbed down rungs on the side of the ship.

"It's a child! A child!" she called above her. Josh sank to his knees. That wasn't a voice that was going to eat him. He'd heard those voices before. Those voices were raspy and angry and desperate. This voice sounded concerned.

The woman was in front of him. Touching his face. Looking into his eyes, looking at his wounds. She pressed hard onto the wound on his back. There was so much smoke. A flurry of debris and snow around them.

"Hi," she said, trying to smile. She was kneeling down with him, holding his hand with two fingers pressed against the inside of his wrist. "My name is Gabriella Lopez. Can I help you?"

Pulse. That's what she was feeling for. His heart.

"Do you speak English?"

Carry me. Hold me. Take care of me.

"Espanol?"

They were going to help. Molly had helped. Now these people were going to help, too. He crumpled against her. She was surprised, at first. And then folded her arms around him.

“I knew you were out there,” Josh whispered against her.

“We’re here now,” she answered.

“And you won’t eat me?”

“No, love.”

“Are you Army?” Josh asked.

“Navy.”

“I like your camouflage.”

“Did you do this?” She meant the smoldering ground. She meant the dead monsters. “Are you what we saw?” she asked, her hands gripping his arms. “The light?”

She picked him up, allowing him to stay with his head against her shoulder.

“Molly,” he said in a flat, mechanical voice. “Me and Molly did this. She rescued us. I’m supposed to tell Conner that she went through the portal. With my brother. We have to go get them. You know Conner, right?”

Lopez stopped for a moment, her arms tightening around him. He was sure she was going to put him down. She was going to leave him. They were after Molly and Molly was gone.

Then she kept walking.

“We’ll get them,” she reassured. “Don’t worry.”

Of course she wasn't going to leave him. She was hugging him the same way he was hugging her. Something familiar. Like when a lady with light brown hair used to wrap her arms around him and he could feel the sun against his face and dew on his shirt from hiding under the porch in the morning. She would smooth his hair and tell him she loved him, very, *very* much.

Mom.

He allowed himself to leave. To close his eyes. Just for a little while.

He slept.

When he woke, he realized he was in a clean, real bed, with real, clean sheets. For the first time in forever, he didn't feel like he needed water. He didn't open his eyes yet, scared that he was dreaming. His left arm was definitely in a sling, his right arm, the one with the carvings, was wrapped in something that felt like a cob web. It was sticky and stringy. He could feel something poking the backs of his hands but it was more inside than his skin. His back ached. The dressings for the Alarum claw wounds wound around his small chest, tight and fitted.

But he didn't smell better.

He should have. In fact, it felt like something was on him. He opened his eyes. It was his brother. Tanaka was asleep. His face looked like it had been smeared with some kind of goop. It wasn't bleeding but it looked nasty. He was going to have the coolest scars ever. No one would ever, ever mess with them again.

"Tanaka? Tanaka wake up," Josh said. Tanaka grunted, his eyes flittering open. He yawned.

“Hey, kid. You’re okay?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Yeah,” Tanaka said. He leaned over and, being careful of his injuries, hugged his brother. Josh started to break away but Tanaka held him in the embrace a little longer.

“What’s wrong? I’m okay. Really.”

Tanaka sat back, ran his hands through his hair. His hands were shaking.

“The other world, Abyssus, it made me breathe. I feel great. Lopez stitched me up and put me on some awesome drugs. I’m just working up the nerve to shower. It’s going to hurt like a bitch. Can you imagine? A shower?”

“So, why are you upset?” He was disturbed. He’d never seen his brother like this. Then he saw his brother’s arm.

Even though Tanaka’s right arm was bandaged up, a dull, orange glow seeped through.

“Tanaka? Is your arm glowing?”

“Josh,” Tanaka said. “Josh, they took her.”

“Took who? Lopez?”

“No. The girl. They took Molly.”

Chapter Six

Tanaka

He turned the water on. He turned the water off. Off. On. Off. On.

He choked back a sob. Such a silly thing, being able to turn on water. Silly, but amazing and magical and essential and what he had been dreaming about for years.

Off. On.

Tanaka put a tentative hand underneath the shower's flow. It wasn't just water. It was *hot* water. His freshly carved arm was unwrapped and sensitive. Its light wasn't quite orange, wasn't quite red. It felt fucking weird. Like always having bugs under your skin.

This is going to hurt so fucking bad.

He could wait until he healed a little more.

Maybe tomorrow? No. He needed to be clean. To get everything clean.

He looked down at himself. There was his newfound magical arm, of course. Puncture wounds on his shoulders from the flying monsters. The *Alarum*. That's what the crew called them, anyway. His legs were in one piece. Bruised, but other than that they were just skinny. One thing was absolutely true. He was going to clog the drain with his combination of dirt, smog, piss, mucus, and bits of people that still stuck to him.

His face had surgical glue on it. Maybe the water wouldn't hurt it too bad.

So, really, it was just his shoulders and right arm.

Fuck.

Tanaka took a deep breath and put his whole body under the hot water.

He screamed.

On the bright side, his lungs felt *amazing*.

Teeth clenched, he sank down to the floor of the shower. Taking it. Burning away the last five years of his life, writhing until the pain subsided.

Oh my god, clean.

He relaxed, stopped biting down. Biting down reminded him he needed to brush his teeth. That, too, would probably hurt. He swished some hot water around in his mouth, spat. Water everywhere. Every crack. Every groove. Every old scar.

Hallelujah didn't begin to cover it.

She'd done this for him.

Molly.

He felt really fucking terrible about that.

She had gotten him off of the ground through the portal and then they plummeted to the ground, his arm igniting.

Not like real fire. But it felt like it. Felt like he had shoved his arm underneath that pile of Jesus coloring books and burned pews back at the church.

When they crashed his limp body simply rolled to the floor. He heard a grunt from the girl. Couldn't have been too bad though, because she jumped up and opened the hatch.

"Breathe!" she'd yelled.

He didn't. Couldn't.

She climbed out, pulling him, dragging him until he was lying on the sand. Hot. Everything was so hot.

“Breathe! It helps, I promise!” Something landed on his chest. She was hitting him. Driving her weight into his solar plexus (he knew that word because his parents had made him take karate before he refused and played baseball because fuck *that* noise) with what felt like a bony elbow.

He gasped.

He breathed.

“Oh, fuck me,” he wheezed, tears pouring down his face, spit mixing with nasty crap from his nose. Sand stuck to every bead of sweat, every open sore. His limbs came back to life in fire and ice. God, were there knives in every single inch of him?

But something else was happening.

He was shaking and unable to stop his lungs from coughing, from clogging. He clawed at his neck wildly and spat out something foul and black. It sizzled, melted into the sand.

And then he could breathe.

It was the air.

Another gulp.

A little more.

He fell over onto his back, allowing whatever it fucking was to seep into every little bit of himself. How long had it been since he could take a decent breath? He opened his eyes. The girl had crawled over to him, blocking the setting suns.

Suns?

She had a bloody nose. The red seeped down her lips and neck. She'd just saved him. Saved Josh. He wanted to reach up and staunch the blood to her nose and tell her *thankyousofuckingmuch* but he couldn't move yet. He squinted up at her.

"Can you breathe now?" she asked. "It helps, huh?" Her teeth were white.

He nodded. She was really, really close to his face.

"It's the air. It heals radiation poisoning. We had it too." She smiled, held out her hand for a shake. "I'm Molly. Don't know if you heard me when I introduced myself earlier. You were pretty out of it."

"Tanaka," he croaked. "I'm Tanaka." He extended his hand to meet hers. Before they could touch she fell against him, hugging him. Her arms wrapped around his winter coat and he was already sweating from the heat. The added body heat didn't help. He wanted water. He wanted shade. He patted her back awkwardly.

"How old are you?" she asked, still buried against the gross coat he'd worn like skin for the past three years.

"Fifteen."

She's crushing my ear belt.

"I'm so, so happy. I mean, I'm sorry that you and your brother were so hurt but, you have no idea how much I have wanted other kids around. I can't wait for you to see the submarine. I can't wait to talk to Josh. Oh my God!" She pushed away from him, looking into his eyes. "How old is he?"

"Eleven." The embrace she had him in was now bone crunching.

“How about you? How old are you?” he struggled to ask.

“Almost fourteen,” she answered.

“Molly? I’m sorry, but you’re hurting me.”

“Oh! Right, I’m sorry.” She sat up, nervously playing with her hair. “It’s just that, well, I haven’t seen another kid in, oh gosh, like, years...” Tanaka sat up straight, began removing his jacket because it was so fucking hot. “...and I’m just so excited and thankful and...” He dropped his jacket to the ground. Her eyes fell from his face to his ear belt.

She scooted away from him, pressing her heels into the sand, her arm flashing blue.

“You won’t hurt me, right?” she said.

“No,” he answered. She was so clean compared to him. He wore a long sleeved T-shirt. It had the faintest hint of being white once. Now it was stained yellow and grey and red, ripped at the shoulders.

“Because my dad would kill you. I mean, you’d be really, really dead.”

“I believe you.” Tanaka stood up, testing his face, prodding his wounds. His arm was burning. Maybe he hit it in the crash. Every inch of him was still pins and needles.

“You seem a bit young to be in the Army,” he said, pointing to her camouflage pants.

“It’s Navy.”

“Oh. So, what now?” he asked.

“Now we wait to be rescued.”

“Why won’t that thing work?”

“What? The Pod?” Molly cocked her head.

“Yeah.”

“This is embarrassing.”

“What is?”

“Well, here. I’ll show you.” Molly walked back to the Pod, Tanaka following. Inside there was blood on the seat from him, blood on the wheel from her, and a fried console in the front. It sizzled. Tanaka poked at it with his forefinger. Small sparks shot up into the air.

“What the hell did you do to it?” Tanaka asked.

“I panicked when we went through the portal,” Molly said.

“Portal?” Tanaka wasn’t sure he’d heard her right.

“We were going faster than the sub has ever gone and I thought, I don’t know, that our brains might scramble or something? So I *made* it go through.” She pointed across the sky. Tanaka followed her finger up, up and *holy shit*.

The portal moved above them, almost silent except for the gentle swirl of water. Water and sky mixed together to form an endless black hole between the two worlds. Tanaka felt his mouth drop and he couldn’t stop staring.

Just a portal. Whatever. It’s all cool.

“This is where we normally anchor. They’ll be here soon, even if they can’t follow the Pod’s transmitter, they’ll find us.”

Something twitched in his arm. The burn was no longer subtle. If anything, it was getting hotter and there was a light.

What the fuck?

It brought Tanaka to his knees and he fumbled with his shirt, shoving the sleeve up to his shoulder. He expected to find the biggest fucking bug gobbling up his arm. But no. Instead there was blood, fresh carvings, and a light that wasn't quite orange, wasn't quite red.

“What the fuck!”

“What is it? What's wrong?”

Tanaka brushed the blood away, scratched at the skin, praying that the carvings would somehow come off.

“Oh shit oh shit oh shit. What the fuck! How did this happen?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean my arm! I don't have a glowing arm! Josh does! You do! I don't! What the hell!” He ran back to his jacket, searched the pockets frantically.

Found it.

His K-Bar. He held it to the carvings, ready to saw the skin off.

“What are you doing?” Molly grabbed his knife and threw it into the desert sand.

“That won't help!”

“Great, now I'm going to have to gnaw it off!”

“I've seen people try that too and they just have a skinnier glowing arm. I'm sorry that happened to you but...”

“Now monsters are going to chase me and hunt me from the goddamn sky and Josh and I are so incredibly fucked.”

“No you’re not. It’s a weapon.”

“Yeah. It’s also a beacon that screams out: ‘EAT ME, MONSTERS. I TASTE FUCKING DELICIOUS!’”

“Tanaka, be quiet!” Molly put a finger up to her lips.

“Can’t believe my fucking luck.”

“Tanaka! Someone’s coming!”

She grabbed his hand and pulled him into the Pod. He crumbled against the side, still staring at his right arm.

“This is such bullshit,” he said to his arm.

Molly grabbed his face and that hurt. He stopped talking.

“Be quiet,” she hissed. She closed the Pod, pressed her ear against the side, listening.

“Why are we hiding in here?” Tanaka whispered.

“I couldn’t see around the dunes but I swear I heard something. Just, stay in here with me, okay?”

“Fine. We’re not, you know, glowing or anything. See? That’s why these things,” he waved his arm in emphasis and then regretted it when pain from his shoulder wound spread down to his toes, “fucking suck. It’s a beacon.” It didn’t look like Molly was listening to him anymore. Her head was cocked to one side, her eyes closed.

“Whatever it was, it’s not there now.” She sat down next to Tanaka. The sky above them was growing dark, exchanging the setting suns for double rising moons.

Tanaka watched the blood drip from his arm.

Don't freak out.

Maybe he could use his as a weapon too. How would he learn though, without Bob? They needed a monster around to be, what? Activated? That didn't sound right.

It boiled down to the fact that he knew absolutely nothing about whatever the world had become. Whatever *he* was becoming. He wanted to talk to the doctor. To Graham. He may have had answers. A theory, at the very least.

"I'm so fucked," he sighed.

"You're not. You'll be on the sub."

What?

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, this rescue mission is for real. You're one of us. If you want to be. My dad will interview you, but you guys are kids. He'd never put you back out there unless you were a total psycho." She glanced down briefly at his ear belt.

"So you just have a floating ship in the sky and you go around rescuing people."

"Yup."

"What happens to all your rescued people?"

She shrugged. "Most want to go back to the ground, look for their families. We give them rides to wherever and then leave."

"Do you ever stick around in one place?" Tanaka asked, curious as to why a community wouldn't want the protection of the military around them. Why these guys weren't living like kings.

"Jeremiah says that we make people feel uncomfortable," she responded.

“Why?”

“Because of the nukes. Because of the radiation in the air. I guess they think we did it or something.”

“Did you?”

“No. We still have all of ours.”

That sent shivers down his spine and through his fingertips.

“Are you sure my brother is safe? Are you sure they found him? The people on that ship aren’t cooking him as we speak, are they?”

“Do people do that now?”

“What? Eat each other? Yeah, I’d say cannibalism is more common than I’m comfortable with.”

Molly giggled, her eyes catching Tanaka’s ear belt again. She reached out a tentative hand, looking like she wanted to touch them, but pulled her hand back at the last second. She played with the end of her hair, a nervous tick, Tanaka guessed.

“So. Um. Want to tell me about the ears or...” She paused. She was focused on his carvings. “Wait.”

“What?”

“Your carvings. Look.” She put her own arm next to his, her blue next to his orange. Her scars were white, jagged lines with blue light just beneath the surface.

“Everyone I’ve ever met has their carvings on their left arm. Yours are on your right and the writing is all weird.”

She was right. Josh's carvings had always just looked like scribbles to him. Childlike scrawls that wove in and out and around each other without clear intention. Molly's weren't dissimilar to that. Maybe a little cleaner. Maybe a little less haphazard. Tanaka's, however, looked ornate. They didn't cross or intersect. It didn't resemble a child learning how to write. Instead it looked planned. Thought out. Words, even.

Their skin touched. The light merged, blending together. Molly yelped. The two jumped apart in surprise as far as the Pod would allow.

"What was that?" Molly asked, pressing her arm against her chest.

"It must be like what you did with Josh," Tanaka said. She shook her head, slowly.

"No. That was different. That was strange. When Josh and I touched, it was like, something warm. You, it was...well. Like touching a live wire."

He laughed at her. "Have you touched many live wires?"

She ran her hand along the carvings. "Let's try again."

"You just said it felt like getting electrocuted. And you want to try again?"

She laughed and the sound wasn't musical. It was loud and maybe even a little annoying. But it was real and sounded like something she liked doing.

"Listen," she said, getting her breath back. "Once we get back on the ship, can we still talk?"

"What do you mean? You think I'll stop talking to you? Why?"

“I, uh. I did something. Something I’m going to have to deal with when we get back.” She went quiet, looked outside the Pod, staring at the expansive desert that stretched out on every side of them.

“Well,” Tanaka said, breaking the silence. “Even if I, for whatever reason, don’t want to talk to you, my brother still would. He thinks there’s good in everything.”

“What do you think?”

“I think people are fucked up.”

Molly scooted a little closer to Tanaka. They were both sitting on the floor, their backs up against the chair. It was cramped but there was still a noticeable inch between them. Tanaka closed it, scooting closer so their shoulders touched.

“So, you wanted to try again?” he asked.

Molly held out her hand. Tanaka took it. There was still a shock but it wasn’t electricity. It was just *power*. Wisps of light stretched above their hands and arms, intertwining, dancing, churning a couple inches above their skin. It tickled, spreading up from his forearm and into his shoulder.

“Do you feel that?” Molly asked.

She probably meant the warmth and the peace and just the general calmness about everything. The last time he felt like this was when he was waiting for a fly ball to land in his glove. He’d just watched it, knowing exactly where it was going to land.

“Thanks, by the way,” Tanaka said to Molly.

“For what?” she asked, still watching the light, watching it dance.

“For saving Josh. For saving me.”

“Are you glad you’re here?” He didn’t think she meant ‘glad to be alive.’

She meant here. With her. In the Pod. In another dimension with double setting suns giving way to darkness.

So so so so so so so so fucking glad.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m really glad I’m here.” He turned to smile at her but their faces were so close. Their noses were almost touching and he could see small flecks of brown scattered around in her blue eyes. He wanted to say something clever, something witty or something terrible but instead he had his hand on her jaw bringing her lips up to his.

He didn’t expect to feel a kiss back but he did and it was strong and planted and meant to be there. He felt her fingers gently close around his.

Around them their light burned brighter and brighter, shining through the swirling dust of the desert.

And then a spear soared through the air, crunching against the Pod’s glass.

“Holy shit!” Tanaka yelled. Molly screamed. Lights in front of them. Another spear.

They weren’t piercing the glass.

Not yet. Shouting outside. More lights. Twenty. Thirty. More.

“What the fuck is that?” Another spear soared through the air, this time lodging itself in the outer layer of glass. Tanaka looked up at the portal. This would be a great, great time for the sub to come soaring through to their rescue.

Tanaka automatically reached for his Mossberg but of course it wasn’t there. Hadn’t been there for weeks.

Molly's arm was already glowing but somehow it seemed focused. The light leaked out of her carvings, drifting into the ball of light she held in her hand.

She was channeling it.

Tanaka turned to his. It was glowing but his hadn't changed the way Molly's had.

"How do I?" he motioned to his arm.

"Think happy thoughts!"

An armored hand from the outside punched through the glass. Molly shot her lightning but the thing already had her by the waist, ripping her out of the Pod. As it ripped her from the Pod, it tumbled the Pod over, trapping Tanaka inside.

"Molly!"

She screamed once, twice, and then not at all. Her light went out.

Tanaka tried to shoot. Light definitely came out of his hand but it didn't blast through the door like he wanted. Instead, it seemed to whirl around the Pod. The lights in the Pod came on, then died, and then surged again. Tanaka felt his teeth clench, his pants go wet and his bones vibrate.

In his moment of panic, he had managed to electrocute himself. He didn't wake up until he felt hands on his back, beneath his legs.

Adults.

His eyes shot open. The first thing he felt was nothing. And then everything.

His arm was burning, his head was killing him and his face was oozing something salty onto his lips.

"Easy, kid. Easy."

“ ’fuck off me,” he grunted.

He felt his body being dragged, everything limp behind him. The next time he woke up he was being set down onto a cloud but that wasn't right.

“It's alright, kid.”

A bed. He was being set down on a bed.

He didn't trust that voice because he didn't trust any new voice. But the sheets smelled like something his brain labeled as 'mountain fresh.' That was a name from some far away world where there were dryer sheets and a steam cycle.

Josh was next to him.

That had been all he'd needed. Strangely though, his last thoughts had been of the girl, leaning in front of the double suns.

Curly blonde hair and a bloody nose and eyes that asked for stories, thought of questions.

Now, though.

He rubbed the hot water from his eyes and looked at his arm. The blood was gone, making the carvings clearer. They were glowing and focused. An un-flickering flame.

Molly.

He knew how to turn it on. It was that feeling that made his heart ache powering it, powering him. And now she was gone. He leaned his head gently against the shower wall, water pooling around him, reflecting his orange-red light.

Molly.

My fucking luck.

Annika

She was going to have to get Molly back and the thought made her heart cold, her stomach sour. It was obvious. She was from Bellum. The crew assumed she was going to go back. Just go back to Bellum, rescue Molly. They were already asking her questions.

“So, you need anything before you go?”

Little did they know that going to Bellum was the very last thing she wanted to do. She didn't want to go back to that city.

And Robert.

She shivered. She sat in bed with the lights off, her knees pulled up to her chest, a pounding migraine in her head.

She had almost forgotten. She was happy here. She never had to think or remember or...

She leaned her head against the wall. She would have to leave the ship. That was for sure. She would at least have to pretend that she was going to get Molly. But actually going to the city? Could she survive in the desert for a couple of weeks and just *say* she went?

The worst and best thing, though. Molly had fought. From what the boy, Tanaka, had said, she'd fought very well. Maybe killed one? That would have been impressive. Servium were difficult to kill. They had tough armor and skin that was almost as tough. Maybe it was enough to keep her from being sold as a slave. Maybe she would be in the arena. In the fighting pits.

No.

If Annika was really going to go, and Molly really was going to be in the arena, she would need Robert to get her out.

Was she considering it?

Inhale. One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

She'd watched the girl grow. Molly was a daughter to the ship. If Annika could let herself feel again, she imagined she would feel something for Molly. Something motherly. It was just an emotion she didn't want to dig up.

Exhale. Five. Four. Three. Two. One.

A knock on her door.

"Annika?" Lopez's voice called. "Conner's awake. He wants an update."

Annika opened the door, letting in harsh light that sent a flare through the insides of her skull.

"Fine," she said, massaging her temples. "Go give him the update."

"Well," Jeremiah said. He was fumbling with his glasses, turning them over and over and wiping them on his shirt. "We were hoping you would do that."

"You are all cowards," she spat.

"Statistically speaking," Jeremiah said, "You're the one Conner is least likely to kill. Considering the two of you are. Uh."

"Sleeping together, Jer," Borelli said. "Just say 'sleeping together' if you can't say 'sex.'"

"I can say it."

“Fine. Say it.”

“I’d rather not.”

Annika looked to Lopez, who had her lips pursed. She did that when she was thinking. And when she was nervous. Annika grumbled, scooting herself from her bunk. She wanted to curse them in every language she knew. She walked away from her room, the three crewmen trailing in her wake. Her bare feet made hardly any noise against the cool floors. The infirmary was just down the hallway from her. She could already see Conner sitting up in bed, an arm wrapped around his bandaged torso.

“Conner,” she said, entering the infirmary.

Conner looked at them. His blue eyes were tired, in pain. She already ached sympathetically for him.

Better to just do it.

“Conner, Molly’s gone.”

The boy in the bed next to Conner’s went quiet, watching. Conner blinked.

“What do you mean?” His voice was raspy, forced.

“I mean, she’s not dead, but she’s gone.”

“How?”

“It was the other boy.” She motioned to Josh. “His brother. Molly saved him by taking the Exploration Pod to Abyssus. She saved his life but from the other boy’s description, she’s been taken by Servium. If that’s true, she’ll be heading to the war city of Bellum to fight in the arena.”

“What? I don’t understand. *My* Molly? *My* daughter?”

Annika waited. Conner breathed in harsh, labored breaths. His head hung forward, his chin almost touching his chest. He started shaking his head no.

“We’re going to get her back, Conner. I’m going to get her back.” When had she decided this?

Conner’s eyes flashed open.

“How could you let this happen?” he growled.

“Conner, I...” He pointed an accusatory finger in the direction of his crew.

“How the *fuck* could you let this happen. To *her*! She grew up with you. With all of you!” The crew, including Annika, backed into each other. Conner sat himself up, a snake coiling, a dragon rearing.

“Captain,” Borelli stuttered, “you shouldn’t move. You have a hole in your stomach...”

Conner swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. He was at his full, impressive height, his bandages weeping blood. The lights above him cast shadows under his eyes and his face was somehow, paler than before. Conner took a step towards them. They stepped back further. This person wasn’t the cool headed captain they knew. This was something else. Something dangerous.

“Borelli, set the ship down,” Conner snarled.

“Captain, I don’t think...”

“I said, set the ship down! That’s an order! I’ll go get her myself.”

“Captain, you’re in no shape to go anywhere.” Lopez started to take a tentative step forward, her arms outstretched, the way you would approach a growling dog.

Conner took another step towards them, then curled over himself, reaching an arm down for the support of the floor. He groaned, gasped.

He was on all fours, his head hung forward, wavering.

“Leave. All of you just go!”

No one moved.

“Go away!” he bellowed.

Lopez, Borelli and Jeremiah scurried from the room. Only Annika remained.

Minutes passed and Annika stayed rooted to the spot. She listened to his labored breaths, the consistent drip-drip of his blood onto the cold metal floor.

“You’re still here,” he said to her.

“I’m not leaving you like this, Sir.”

She added the sir because she *was* still on his ship and he could kick her off. She definitely didn’t want to leave the ship. Even though she was apparently going to rescue Molly. She went to Conner, helped him sit on the bed. He shivered under her touch. Fresh blood stained his bandages.

She had been like that once. Doubled over, trembling. But she’d at least had Robert to help bear that burden. That thought was too close to home. It made her want to run and hide in the back of the ship but something, loyalty or gratitude or empathy, made her stay, kneel down next to him and place a hand on his shoulder. Slowly, he raised his head. There were angry tears welling up in his eyes. She spoke softly.

“I’m going to try. I owe it to you.”

He held a hand over his eyes.

“What’s the plan?”

“I have a...” what was Robert to her now? He was *someone*. He had been someone.

“I have a friend who can get me into the cells.”

“My daughter is in a cell?” he said it like a question, but here was horror in his voice.

“Yes. Probably.” *If she’s lucky.*

“How will you get her out?”

“My friend.” *My friend, the smuggler. My friend, my husband. My friend, the father of my son.*

“I’ll go too.” Annika and Conner turned to the Infirmary bathroom. In a puff of steam, Tanaka emerged. He was dressed in the same Navy uniform everyone but Annika wore. His *lux* was on his right side and that struck Annika as more than peculiar.

“Tanaka! Shut up!” Josh had stayed silent until now.

Conner looked at the boy. Annika could practically hear the gears in his head working.

When no one responded, Tanaka spoke again.

“Think I can’t do it? Check this out.” He reached back into the bathroom and then tossed a belt onto Conner’s bed.

It was a belt with ears sewn badly into the faded leather. Trophies.

“Jesus Christ,” Conner murmured. “Are they all dead?” he meant the previous owners of the ears.

“As doornails.”

“Why?”

“To survive.”

Annika cursed inwardly. She couldn't take him with. She would really, really have to go if she took him with.

Or kill him.

She pushed that thought from her mind.

His arm, though. His arm. It wasn't just on his right side. There was something there and she wanted to see it close up. She strode over to him. He backed up but she caught hold of his arm.

“Get off me, what are you doing?”

“Were you born with that?” she asked, staring at his carvings. The were so delicately done.

“No, it just happened.”

“When?”

“Right after I jerked off!”

“What?”

“No, lady. It happened when I fell through the fucking sky and landed on your hot-as-balls desert.”

Very peculiar, indeed.

The only other people she'd heard of that happening to were...

She could see their arms so clearly. That day at the gallows. The sisters could control their light with both arms but it really came from the one...the right one. She could see it on all three sisters.

She turned to Conner.

“He can come,” she stated. “In fact, I want him to.” She brushed past Tanaka, muttering, “We leave tomorrow. Be ready.”

This was perfect. She wouldn't have to confront Robert. She could trade Tanaka for Molly and no one would be the wiser. She could hold a council with the King and trade. Who wouldn't trade an ordinary girl with an ordinary *lux* for a warlock