

THE NAMELESS: A NOVEL  
Aleksander Drakos  
Ph.D.: The Contemporary Novel  
School of English, University of Kent  
September 2018  
Word Count: 78,149

## **ABSTRACT**

An economically depressed United States is thrown into civil chaos over conflicts between protest groups and a militarised police force. Caleb Dumas, via an encounter with his neighbour, Carys, learns that he is a hybrid of human and Tskiri, a humanoid species with telepathic and thermokinetic abilities. Caleb and his family get separated during a riot, and he, along with his twin brother, Ben, is arrested and sent to a penal work camp. Meanwhile, as modern society begins to break down, the Askala – a species of vampiric humanoids who live underground – begin attacking humans once more as the elements which kept them underground begin to falter.

Six years later, Ben is killed, and Caleb injured, in an altercation over food. Caleb is then rescued by Jasha, one of the Askala, who takes him to the nearby Farm, where Jasha's family raises humans for their blood. Unbeknownst to Caleb, however, the Farmers have recently attempted a revolt against the Askala, which results in a retaliatory attack by the Askala, during which Caleb intervenes.

As he communicates with Roan, the leader of the attack party, Caleb learns that the Askala and the Tskiri are two halves of the same thing. Caleb accidentally kills Roan with his thermokinetic ability, which only heightens the tension between the Farmers and the Askala.

Carys returns, having tracked Caleb to the Farm through their shared connection, and together the two of them challenge Father, the leader of the Askala for power over the Farm. The Askala Father nearly kills Caleb, but ultimately, he and Carys triumph, placing the responsibility for both the Farm and the Askala compound entirely in Caleb's hands.

## **REVISIONS**

Following feedback from the examiners, I have partially rewritten the critical component, stripping away much of the theory to focus on the more practical aspect of the writing process involved in completing this novel. I have also sought out more contemporary critics, delving more into the theory revolving around monsters rather than animals, and discussed the question of literary versus genre fiction.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my supervisors, Alex Preston and Patricia Debney, as well as my family and Livvy Cosh for their help in putting this thesis together and making sure all my sentences make sense.

## **CONTENTS**

Revisions	1
Acknowledgements	2
The Nameless	4
Critical Component	236
Bibliography	252

pt i

## ONE

She was 7 lbs 10 ounces of all his fears.

It hadn't been that way with Lacey or Alain. He'd been nervous, yeah, but not like this. Nothing like this. It was in the clenched balls of her tiny fists crossed over her chest, the soft pink of her cheeks. Jaime's nose, his father's mouth. The wisps on her forehead showed signs of being blonde, but the twins' – her uncles – hair had been nearly white as a baby, and by the time they were two, it was jet black.

“Daddy?” Lacey sat up in bed, rubbing her eyes. Her dirty blond hair was a mane of tight, kinky curls.

“Shh,” he said softly. “Your brother and sister are sleeping.” Sebastien glanced at the top bunk and the mound of his son. That kid could sleep through hurricanes.

“I heard a noise.”

“Your sister woke up.” He held his breath as he lowered his youngest daughter onto the mattress. At least they hadn't given that away after Alain.

“No, it was a different noise.” Lacey crawled out of bed. The cuffs of her pyjama bottoms were already hovering high above her ankles. Her hand curled in the fabric of his T-shirt. “Outside.” They'd gotten those PJ's at Goodwill last month.

He placed his hand on her head. “It's only the house, honey.” Together, they watched Cat sleeping. What were they going to do when she outgrew the crib? The three of them couldn't share one room forever.

Lacey jumped against him. “There it is!”

“I don't...” He heard it. It was soft, the creaking of wood under stress. Almost rhythmic, but slightly off. Human. “That's only the house,” he said again, but this time he didn't believe it. “We

need to be very quiet now.” He couldn’t believe he hadn’t heard it before. “No more talking.” He made himself look away from the door. To look at his daughter’s face. “Back in bed.”

Sebastien ushered Lacey towards the bunkbeds. Every action seemed to take minutes and he felt the time slipping with his heartbeat. “Stay very quiet.”

Jaime kept saying it was too dangerous to stay with the neighbourhood the way it was – the rest of the block was basically squatters. If her dad hadn’t left them the house when he passed... Well, Sebastien used to think it was a silver lining, but these days having anything just meant it was a matter of time before someone came and took it away from you.

There she stood on the landing staring down into the dark. Jaime held her hand up for him to be quiet. The sound was louder out here. The backdoor in the kitchen. A crowbar maybe. Sebastien eased the bedroom door closed and stood beside his wife.

“I’ll go down,” he whispered, reaching for the bat he put by the stairs when the looting first started. It wasn’t there. *Shit*. He must’ve left it downstairs when that racoon got into their trashcans the other night.

“No,” she grabbed his arm, “We’re supposed to call the hotline.”

“Guy at work did that and their place got ransacked before they even got through to anyone. We have to scare them off.”

“What if they have guns?”

He took her hand from his arm and squeezed it. “Don’t worry. Just stay upstairs with the kids.”

Descending the stairs, he couldn’t think about what would happen when he reached the bottom. He’d always been a big guy, and in the dark like this, maybe that’d be enough. He thought of Lacey upstairs beneath her Sunny Smiles comforter. He didn’t feel big.

The backdoor gave with a snap, and then voices whispering. More than one. Jaime started to come down, but he waved her back. There was an old umbrella by the front door. He wished he had

the bat. Or an axe. Anything more intimidating than an umbrella. He grabbed it anyway, hefting it like a club. It made him feel better. Not good, just better.

Sebastien moved through the house, trying to pick out furniture and toys in the dark. There were too many sounds. The house creaking. His footsteps. His breathing. He couldn't tell which direction the looters had gone.

*Stop. Take a minute,* his brother's voice in his head. Calm, rational. He never questioned that it was Caleb's voice he heard. Like a second presence always with him. Sebastien took a deep breath. Weeded out his own sounds. But the looters had gone quiet, too. How many had there been? Two? More than two?

A sound on the stairs made him turn. He saw Jaime's bare feet, and had time to think *No* – before someone tackled him from behind. Bouncing off the wall, he turned as one of the looters darted past him. He reached out and grabbed the edge of a jacket sleeve, but his attacker rammed into him again. There were boots on the stairs. A door slammed. Sebastien hooked his arm beneath the man's armpit. He didn't know what to do next. He'd never even punched someone.

*Use your weight. Just drag him down!*

Sebastien collapsed his body on top of the other man. They scrambled against each other in the dark. Jaime called his name. The baby cried. He tried to block and jab like they did on TV, but his punches only landed on soft points without enough force. His opponent wasn't doing any better. Hits glanced off his elbow, his hip.

*Bash his head down!*

His hand grasped around until he hit on the smooth plane of forehead. He shoved down, but his attacker bucked up, throwing Sebastien off balance. Teeth clamped onto the ball of his thumb. His other hand released the man's arm and slammed, palm out, into his face. He felt the bones give way, and he hit again and again until the man's jaw hung slack and they both went down.



Sebastien pulled himself up, grabbing a chair, the wall. His chest heaved in great bursts as his lungs tried to refill his body. One of them was upstairs. Jaime. The kids. Jesus. He couldn't hear the kids. What did it mean that he couldn't hear the kids?

*It means they aren't scared.*

He started towards the stairs, tripped over the looter's leg. His ears exploded with a high pitched ringing. He gasped and slammed his hands over his ears as there was a sharp jab in his side. He turned to see someone standing in the hallway. Small. A teenager, maybe. A woman. No – a scared shitless kid. A girl.

She was shouting something, but his ears still buzzed so he couldn't hear what she was saying. She kept looking at the man on the floor. Sebastien recognised her. She'd babysat for the kids before... She must be so scared. He reached out and stepped forward. He should tell her it's –

Another jab hit his shoulder. He touched the spot, like feeling his skin through foam. He sunk to the floor.

*People only fall down when they get shot because they've seen it on TV.*

When had his brother told him that? Peach pie. Their last visit home. Caleb had gotten Baz to try a new strain he was growing – the two of them crouched in the narrow space between the fence and the garage just like Baz had done with cigarettes back in high school. It'd made Baz giggly and stupid, like his muscles were butter, but Jesus did it feel good to just not worry for once. And then, inevitably, the craving that only Oma Isner's peach pie would satiate, so they'd found themselves in the kitchen at 2 AM trying to follow their grandmother's recipe and not wake up the rest of the house. It was the worst thing they'd ever eaten; Caleb had misread Oma's handwriting and used three tablespoons of salt. But it smelled good. Warm peaches, cinnamon.

That had been the weekend they'd told everyone Jaime was pregnant again. The weekend Caleb told him that he'd dropped out of SCAD because their parents couldn't afford three sons in

college, and illustration was a bullshit degree, anyway. Their parents' anniversary. The last time he'd even seen his brother. Had it really been that long?

*"Derek has more brains than the two of us together,"* Caleb had said. *"He needs a better chance."*

He'd argued with Caleb, told him they could find a way, but Caleb had made up his mind, and there never was any changing it once that happened. It was no wonder he and Derek never got along; they both had a stubborn streak a mile long.

*Baz. Get up. Now.*

The ringing had stopped, but the house was silent. He touched his ears. Snapped his fingers. *Click. Click. Click.* His shirt stuck to his chest, wet and heavy. He had to get upstairs.

Sebastien rolled over on his side and tried to prop himself up. The man he'd attacked was gone. The upholstery on the sofa had been slashed through. Books lay strewn across the floor. The front door stood open. He felt the absolute emptiness of the house.

*Getupgetupgetup. Go upstairs. Find Jaime.*

He tried to breathe but it felt like sucking through a wet cloth.

*Get up. Get the fuck up!*

*Find someone. Get help.*

Move, *Baz.*

He sagged against the couch. Ten steps to the stairs. He only had to make it ten steps to the stairs.

*Jaime. Lacey. Alain. Cat.*

"Jaime." One step, two. Walking on marshmallows. He closed his eyes to keep his vision from swaying. Jaime.

## TWO

Derek put the bong over his mouth and lit the bowl, breathing in deeply. At this rate, he'd run out before he saw his brother at Christmas. As soon as he took the first hit, he would feel his thoughts detangling, finding order. Weed made his fingers itchy for a keyboard. Something about THC floating around his brain worked magic on code. It made the machine speak to him like a god blessing its prophet.

The left panels of his multiscreen hummed along running his programs – two class assignments and the pet project that he'd probably be tweaking until he died – in sandbox simulations. He was scanning his favourite hacker boards in a couple of the right panels; his level 125 elf rogue idled at a tavern in the bottom corner. His roommate had the graveyard shift and the night stretched ahead of him with endless possibilities, none of which needed to harden into reality right this second.

He took another hit and watched the feed scrolling across the top of the centre screen. President Harris had a press conference in an hour to discuss the proposed bailouts from China. Sen. Rhodes (R) from Oklahoma laid out a new bill to address prison overcrowding and food shortages. Someone had bought an old military compound outside Austin and declared it the sovereign nation of Zalekha. More demonstrations popping up in Chesapeake, Laredo, Buffalo. Tent towns were being built and the governor of Tennessee was considering martial law. Georgia already had. He typed in #savannah and played a clip from Forsyth Park. A blur of bodies, voices chanting.

PEOPLE NOT PROFIT!

PEOPLE NOT PROFIT!

Thousands of hands waving signs and banners; the camera rose above the hands to take in the riot officers that had been deployed around the park for nearly a week. A commotion broke out, the camera jostled, *pht pht pht they're shooting at us they're shooting at us* –

A few shaky shots of the sky and the vlogger – a girl and by her voice, Derek decided she had to be blonde – repeating *Oh God* over and over. She and the camera fell; the camera coming up to shield her face – she wasn't blonde, after all, and she had rosacea on her cheeks – the sound of people – a herd, a horde of people stampeding around her, their feet knocking her head around like a soccer ball. Gashes opened on her forehead, her cheeks, her mouth and blood streamed from her broken nose, diluted with tears and snot as she sobbed in wet, sticky moans.

A dark boot crushed into her face with a sound like ice breaking in the trees and the camera sagged back. Still recording. The top half of her face caved in – eye missing, mouth intact but twitching. Three seconds. Four.

Black.

A video of a cat grooming a parrot had been playing for nearly a minute before Derek felt the impact of what he'd just seen. He wiggled the bong onto his desk among empty NRGIZ cans, assorted SD cards and dirty mugs and went back to the protest clip. Fast-forwarded. Paused. Played. Rewound. Played again. Paused just before it happened. He closed his eyes and breathed through his nose as bile crept up his throat.

He set a search net for any story out of Savannah.

The girl's face, terrified and crying, remained frozen on his screen.

FOX claimed the protestors had attacked first; the soldiers had been justified, but Twitter was ablaze with video after video of protestors fleeing while they were shot with rubber bullets and gas canisters. Soldiers hitting them with guns and batons, shooting Tasers. Kicking them. He even caught a glimpse of the original vlogger at the edge of one video, right before she was pulled under the current.

Derek studied hundreds, squinting at every blurred brown face with the prayer that *if* Caleb had been there surely he would recognise his own brother? Maybe he wasn't there. He could've finally decided to listen to Justin and keep clear of the protest. Or he could've been a stubborn nerf

herder and decided it was worth it to make a quick buck, even though he'd probably lose his scholarship if he got arrested. Caleb never could stay out of things.

Slumping back in his chair, Derek took up the bong again. Reflexively, he checked the screen with his elf rogue, but his brothers' names were still greyed out in guild chat. It would be past the kids' bedtime in Denver; Baz usually did an hour or two of levelling on the weekends they didn't have an instance planned.

The girl's face.

Rogue News reported casualties among the protestors. The President tweeted his support for the troops' actions. Tent towns were rioting in Atlanta, Austin, San Francisco. Movie stars gave their thoughts and prayers to the people of Savannah. #georgiaonmymind and #wearesavannah trended. Reports surfaced that the soldiers shot first, then videos. The governor held a press conference where he commended the National Guard's bravery. @ianoro claimed the Guard had been ordered to clear Forsyth Park "by any means necessary". FOX announced that one of the protestors – an Awad Jalal Assaf – had pulled a gun on the soldiers and they'd been forced to subdue him. Unfortunately, in the ensuing chaos, the 21 year old devout Muslim had been fatally injured, and died on the way to Memorial Medical.

Derek opened a new window, fingers pattering over the glowing keyboard. A few strategic jumps and he was connected to his escape hatch hidden away on one of the NSA's backup servers. Once he was already in, it didn't take much to convince the system to give him access to the treasure trove. With every line of code, his lock pick worked at the tumblers. The key was not to feel rushed.

Once inside, he zipped through the database until he found the digital log of the Guard's orders from the moment they were deployed downtown. He set up a phrase search and skimmed over a week's worth of military jargon while it ran. Most of what he could understand was pretty basic – establish a presence, monitor the situation, keep the peace, report regularly – but the last day or so had taken on a different tone. There was pressure from somewhere to disperse the protestors and

dismantle the tent town. A few officers balked. And then there it was, the governor himself speaking to the commanding officer on the ground: *“I don’t care what you have to do. Just get rid of them. This needs to end today or it’s your ass on the line.”*

Derek looked at the vlogger’s face, frozen seconds before her death, and played the file again. The governor had authorised an attack on American citizens, and only the underground was talking about it. People needed to know.

\*

BLACK SCREEN.

TEXT (BLUE)  
OVERTHROW THE OCCUPATION!!

INTERCUT - GRAPHIC: A US MAP.  
As the voiceover continues, Georgia, Montana, Arizona, and Illinois are selected and raised out of the map. The voice over is modulated.

N3M0 (V.O.)  
The states of Georgia, Montana, Arizona, and Illinois are being occupied by an invading force that shows no qualms about conducting violence

MONTAGE:

A) 3 20-something women chant along with the crowd, holding signs that say THE ONLY MINORITY DESTROYING AMERICA IS THE RICH, SENATORS SHOULD WEAR UNIFORMS LIKE NASCAR DRIVERS SO WE CAN IDENTIFY THEIR CORPORATE SPONSORS, and SO MANY ISSUES NOT ENOUGH SIGN.

B) A man and a woman; he has a toddler on his shoulders. A little girl holds a sign that says: OUR BODIES OUR MINDS OUR POWER.

N3M0 (V.O. CONT'D)

against innocent civilians executing their Constitutional Right to assemble and protest mistreatment by the government.

B) A soldier in black riot gear twists a woman's arm behind her back.

C) A man in red shorts is Tasered.

N3M0 (V.O. CONT'D)

The people of this Nation have been forced to suffer poverty and unemployment, unprecedented rates of homelessness and displacement.

D) A city street in the early morning with a line of people in sleeping bags down the block. Patrol officers wake them up and make them move.

E) A tent town beneath an overpass. A woman cooks something over an open fire. A dirt-smearred child in a pair of underwear watches her.

F) A man bleeds down one side of his face as a soldier advances on him with a baton.

G) A riot officer drags a woman by her hair across the grass.

N3M0 (V.O. CONT'D)

And now - Now, when we stand up and say, NO MORE, that same government takes it upon itself to injure and murder us.

INTERCUT - EXT. FORSYTH PARK. DAY.

A crowd of protestors waving signs and chanting. SFX rubber bullets shooting

PROTESTOR (O.S.)

They're shooting at us! They're shooting at us!

A SERIES OF SHOTS: Camera shakily pans up to the sky, then falls within a crowd of people panicking.

GIRL (O.S.)  
Oh God Oh God Oh God

A SERIES OF SHOTS: The camera is pulled close to a GIRL'S face - long, brown hair, late teens, crying. A boot slams into her face. The camera sags close to a crushed eye socket.

FADE TO:

INT. FOX NEWS DESK. DAY.

A FEMALE ANCHOR sits behind a curved desk. In the corner over her left shoulder is a picture of a line of riot shields.

N3M0 (V.O.)  
The Authorised Media wants you to believe  
those murders are justified, but *look at your  
screens.*

MONTAGE:

A) Protestors on the ground, bleeding and crying, while others are chased after by riot officers.

B) A soldier hits a woman in the head with the butt of his gun.

C) Four soldiers with batons stand over an old man on his back.

D) A soldier grabs a young boy by the back of his sweatshirt.

N3M0 (V.O. CONT'D)  
Does this look justified to you?

MONTAGE:

A) Two men and two women cook over a campfire, smiling.

B) A toddler sits on his mother's shoulders.

C) Four college students wave an American flag.

N3M0 (V.O. CONT'D)  
This is a call to action: We must, in no  
uncertain terms, declare that we will not be  
oppressed by the privileged 1% who dictate  
what we can do with our bodies and our lives.



We must *make* them listen, and remind them that a government's power comes with the consent of the people.

President Harris, we do not consent!

FADE TO:

BLACK SCREEN. In the top left is a picture of GOVERNOR NEARY; opposite is a NATIONAL GUARD OFFICER. The text types onto the screen as it's spoken.

GOVERNOR NEARY (V.O.)

We need to get these protests shut down.

NATIONAL GUARD OFFICER (V.O.)

We don't have cause -

GOVERNOR NEARY (V.O.)

I don't care what you have to do. Just get rid of them. This needs to end today or it's your ass on the line.

TEXT is replaced with a graffiti tag that reads: n3m0. Beneath that in white text: VIAM INVENIAM AUT FACIAM.

FADE OUT.

THE END

## THREE

He has a face that time collapsed, but I can see the ghost of his younger self in the aquiline nose, the points of his cheekbones, the crest of his chin. Another day, I might sketch him. Another day, I might not mind the diversion.

His bony fingers shake as he holds the Rizla. Thick blue veins make ridges over the backs of his hands. “What’re you? Mexican or something?” he asks.

“Or something,” My back aches and my shoes feel too tight on my feet. He’s my last one for the day, but I’ve still got to pick Ren up, plus a twenty minute walk home in ninety degree humidity. New customers are a pain in the ass.

The apartment is dim and shabby – a room really – but the furnishings say once he had money, and a larger space to fill. Paintings crowd the faded wallpaper, and dull silver peeks from the shelves. Tiffany lamps on reproduction end tables. An afghan draped over the balding velvet couch. It smells of smoke and burnt glue and too much humanness in too small a space.

“You look Mexican,” he says. With aching precision, he sprinkles the dry leaf onto the paper. It’s ditch weed, but I don’t say anything. “I lived down there for a while, back before the wall. Rough time, but the women... Nothing beats a Spanish woman, am I right?”

I smile. I just want my money.

The joint wobbles as he licks the gummed edge. His tongue darts in and out like a lizard. “Never met a Mexican named Caleb, though. Where’s that from?”

“I don’t know. My parents liked it, I guess.” *But my servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit and has followed me fully, I will bring into the land into which he went, and his descendants shall possess it.*

“Sounds Jewish.” He lights the end, and pulls a long toke. A deep cough rattles his body. Tears form along his eyes and he pounds his chest with his fist. “Kinda dark for a Jew, though,” he croaks, passing me the joint.

“I’m not Jewish.” I take a hit, but smaller. This is all ritual.

He taps the ash against a chipped pink saucer with gold trim. “Jack said you could help me out.”

I hold up my cigarettes with the unspoken question, and he nods, grabbing another puff from the joint. “I only have kine bud, and I don’t do dime bags.” It’s not strictly true, but he won’t know the difference, and he hasn’t been hit hard enough to sell off that dull silver yet. Besides, as often as the Feds keep hiking taxes on the legal shit, I don’t have to try hard to stay cheaper.

“How much?”

“\$65 for an eighth, or \$120 for a quarter.” I light a cigarette and sit back. He looks surprised, but not enough to make it a deal breaker. I probably could have gotten away with tacking on another ten or twenty.

“Can I see?”

I toss an eighth onto the coffee table. The thick, sticky aroma wafts towards me, a relief from the other smells. He picks up the bag, fingering the deep green bud. He holds it close to his nose and breathes in. I definitely could’ve gotten away with another twenty.

“Where do you get it?”

“Different places.” Again, it’s not the truth, but it puts off too many questions. Benny is paranoid to the *nth* about our side business, not that anyone would ever pin him as a grower. “I’m always hooked up.”

He nods. I see the calculations working in his head, feel the want creeping through his veins. He’s already sold on the quarter, but on the edge of buying more.

I take a drag from my cigarette, and exhale a slow stream of curling smoke. Parts of myself reach out from the blue tendrils, brushing over him.

*You can afford it. You deserve it.*

He sets the bag back on the table and looks at me. “How much for a half?”

\*

St. John’s leads the chorus of church bells ringing three o’clock, coming together for the tenor heartbeat strokes tolling each hour. The city speaks to me.

Steam rises from the pavement, mixing with the already heavy scent of sulphur and decay. The mossy trees sigh *This is but a moment* while their garlands sway in dance. The muggy air crawls up my spine.

Savannah is a succubus. She folds around you, so welcoming, so inviting. Only too late do you realise it’s you that feeds her, but by then you don’t care. You’ll give yourself over to her, becoming her in the humid air and the sweeping moss and that smell... The smell of dirt and wet and old, old things buried under the earth waiting to come out.

I belong to her, and the desperation squirming in closed storefronts and boarded windows. My parents’ neighbourhood used to be *the* street to live on. When we were kids, you could see people re-evaluating us whenever our address was mentioned. Even after the Collapse, people held on with ferocious intent. By our senior year, though, there were more foreclosure signs than not, and these days those iconic townhouses look a little worse for wear. Virginia creeper climbs unchecked over peeling trellises and broken windows. Empty bottles broken on neglected lawns. Layers of graffiti tags crowded on Corinthian columns and ironwork flourishes.

But her children carry it most. Their lives swim over me, becoming part of me the way I am part of her. The easy smiles and polite greetings two hundred years of Southern civility have bred into us can’t hide the wary eyes, the clenched fists, the animal adrenaline looking for any reason.

Across the street, Mrs Tomley glares at me through her curtains. She's lived opposite my parents since before we were born, but the old bat never fails to keep a hateful eye on me. Baz can stay on the front porch all day without even a twitch of voile, but I sit on the stoop for five seconds and it's a whole different story.

"Caleb." There's a girl in paint-smeared overalls and a purple tank top standing over me. I wonder how she got her dreads that colour, a particular shade of blue – cerulean. Her thumbs loop through the pockets of her baggy coveralls, and a cowl of necklaces in leather and hemp hangs from her neck. "Or is it Ben?" She winces. "I have to admit, I can never tell you apart. Is that horrible?"

"Well, we are identical," I say. Meanwhile, I'm trying to figure out how I know her. She mentioned Benny, so she's not a customer. SCAD? I haven't really seen those guys since I dropped out; she could've been on the periphery of someone's group. "How's it going?" But she called him Ben, which meant he introduced himself. She could go to Armstrong.

"Not bad. I mean. A little freaked about what happened, but who isn't?"

"I know, right?" I have no idea what she's talking about, but I can almost see her name. Something with a K sound. Karen. Carrie.

*[Carys.]*

"So what're you up to?" she asks. "I don't think I've ever seen you above 34<sup>th</sup> Street."

She lives in the apartment above us. I even sold to her once or twice. That's how I know her. "Waiting on my younger brother to get back from school. He's staying with us while our folks are away."

A police cruiser rolls by, and I feel especially conspicuous with her on the front stoop. One brown person on Jones Street, sure, but two brown people and they might be up to something.

"D'you wanna come inside?" I ask, too aware of the eighth still stashed in the lining of my backpack. "There's probably iced tea or something."

“Oh, no, I should be going. Thanks, though. I just wanted...” She trails off as she looks at something down the street, then smiles. “Well, there’s no mistaking *that* gene pool,” she remarks.

I curl around the iron railing to see what she’s talking about. René trudges down the sidewalk toward us, his backpack like a tortoise shell on his back. That kid. You’d think one day you just wouldn’t be able to find knowledge, the way he hoards it.

“Hey, Renbird. This is our neighbour, Carys,” I say as he eyes her warily. Ren isn’t good with new people, so I’m surprised when, after a moment, he meets her gaze and sticks out his hand.

To give her credit, she doesn’t bat an eye and gives his hand a firm shake. “Pleased to meet you, *angelito*. Oh, wow,” she cups his chin up and leans forward. “You have ghost eyes.”

“What’s that?” he asks.

“Having different coloured eyes like you,” Carys tells him, releasing his chin. “They say one sees heaven and the other sees earth. Creatures with it are supposed to be more sensitive to spirits. What do you think?”

He’s thinking about it – he gets this look, Derek calls it his ‘processing mode’ – and then he says, “Heterochromia is the result of excess, or lack of, melanin. It can be caused by disease, injury, chimerism or genetic mosaicism. Or inherited. Heredity is the most likely factor in my case, because I haven’t been diseased or injured.”

“Okay, then,” she says, still smiling. “I learned something new.”

“Go get your stuff,” I tell him. Once I hear the front door shut, I say to her, “He’s a little weird sometimes,” basically out of habit. I’ve been explaining René to people since he started kindergarten.

“He’s cool,” she answers. “Have you been through Forsyth since...?”

“Since what?”

“Damn boy, where you been?”

I shrug. It’s Justin’s job to be concerned with the world.

“The National Guard basically stormed the park yesterday. There’s like, four people dead, and a bunch still in the hospital.”

I remember seeing all those soldiers around Forsyth when I started my rounds this morning. The creeping presence of cops every time I turned a corner. I hadn’t thought much about it besides being annoyed at the impact it’d have on my business (not as much as I would’ve thought, turns out). “That’s what that was.”

She laughs, and tiny bells chime as her head shakes. “Boy, you a crazy fool to not know what’s going on right under your nose. Anyway, I should head. I’ll see you around.” She makes it two steps and spins around. “You think it’d be okay to drop by later and pick up? I have hella time sleeping here without it.”

“Yeah, sure.” That’s another \$65 in the household funds, though I should give her a discount for being our neighbour. Maybe she’ll get to be regular. Benny won’t like it, her being so close to us, but I can probably talk him around. We aren’t in much of a position to say no to money coming in, after all. “Drop by any time.”

\*

The fastest way home from my parents’ is straight down Bull, which means cutting through Forsyth Park to pick up Bull on the other side. I don’t remember what Carys said about the National Guard until we’re standing across the street from them. And I know they saw me. Will turning around right now look suspicious? Maybe, but standing on the corner like a dumbass definitely will so a decision needs to be made – I panic and step off the curb, heading right for them like the glorious idiot that I am.

“What’s in the bag?” one of them asks when we approach.

“Dinner,” I say, but she’s eyeing Ren’s bulging monolith, not mine. “Homework,” I add. “He’s a geek.”

She looks at the bag a minute. “Open it up,” she says.

René gives me a look – *Really?* – and I nod, so he slings the bag to the ground and unzips it. The soldier does a cursory glance at the books spilling out, but it’s obvious there’s nothing else in there.

“Now you,” but she doesn’t even look inside as I hold it open. She made a bad call stopping us, but now she’s committed to see it through. “Where you headed?”

“Home,” I say. “I live on the other side of the park.”

“ID?”

I hand mine over, explaining, “He’s fifteen.”

She touches it to the scanner on her belt. I know nothing will come up – a side effect of running an illegal business is you tend to keep your nose cleaner than clean – but I have to struggle with the anger I want to feel. There are plenty of people in the park. At least three white kids just walked past us – one even had a bag bigger than Ren’s – and they didn’t get a second look.

It’s better to let it go. It’s only a big deal if I make it one.

She hands back my ID. “Straight home,” she says, already forgetting us.

I help Ren put his things back together and we set off through the park. As we come around the fountain, I stop – something doesn’t feel right. There’s a noise I can’t place, like static almost. And then I realise there are *a lot* of people in the park. The wide lawns are polka-dotted with huddles of people lounging in the grass, but not seeming *right* about it. Like they smell it, too. That warning in the air.

*We should not be here.*

“Ren,” I say, pulling him close to me.

More soldiers patrol Drayton and Whitaker on either side of the park; a pair of them lingers by the Confederate Memorial straight ahead. From where we are, there’s no quick way out of here. Why don’t I ever think things through?



“Do not let go of me.” I can feel it counting down. East or west? The Whitaker side looks marginally less dense, so I push him in that direction. “Walk quickly, but calmly,” I tell him.

“What’s going on?” he asks; the question, I know, coming more from curiosity than any resistance. The great thing about Ren is that he will pretty much always do whatever you tell him to.

“I don’t know, but it isn’t good.” I can almost hear time moving, marking each moment as *until*. I don’t want to be here when that *until* happens. I know we’re not going to make it, but I have to try.

It feels like being punched in the spine by Iron Man. Maybe the Hulk. Both. It knocks us flat to the ground and I lose Ren’s hand as the air fills with dust and smoke and angry voices yelling. There’s grit in my eyes – stinging and blinding – and feet trip over me as I try to clear my vision. I manage to get up, but my vision’s still blurry and I keep being jostled by people running away from the blast. I call for Ren, over and over, as loud as I can but he never answers, and when my vision finally clears, there is no René.

Mr Prez:

w3 R n3m0's ARMY + w3 w1ll pwn u

v14m 1nv3n14m 4ut f4c14m

## FOUR

Naoto Kimura had never understood what had possessed his grandfather to pick Buckhannon, West Virginia to start his new life as a landscaper. The mountains spoke to him, he said, but Naoto had never had that experience. The mountains were full things waiting to kill you. Snakes. Spiders. Mountain lions. Bears. Chupacabra.

He slapped a mosquito against his leg.

And now he was stuck out here with his sister, Mai, and her dickhead boyfriend, Harlan, all because the jackass took out the spare to make room for his weights and then barrelled down Laurel Mountain at 90 miles an hour even though the whole lane and a half of it was riddled with potholes you could sink a man into and don't you know, Dickhead Harlan smacked right into one. Ten miles from anything remotely useful.

"I'm telling you, this is the wrong direction," Naoto said for the umpteen-millionth time. Naoto had been in favour of going back the way they'd come – at least they knew there was a town that way, and reasonable hope of help. What they'd do if there was more damage than just the tire, he didn't know. That car got everyone to work, and they weren't even scraping by as it was without car repairs and missed shifts on top of that. Dickhead Harlan, though, wanted to keep going. His "friend's" place had to be just up the road, and they'd feel like idiots walking all the way back to find out they'd practically been on the doorstep.

Mai, of course, agreed with him.

That was two hours ago, the sun had already sunk behind the mountain, leaving a blood orange stain on the sky, and Naoto was really curious about how far "just up the road" actually was.

"Stop whining," Mai said. "You're not special. No one's having a good time right now, and Harlan needs to concentrate without you nagging him all the time."

“It’s not nagging,” Naoto said. “He doesn’t have a clue where we’re going, and the best thing to do would be to go back to that town and get a tow.”

“We’ll get there when we get there,” Dickhead Harlan called over his shoulder from a few feet ahead. “Don’t be such a pussy. Your *sister* is doing better than you.”

Something big and black swooped into the road – *There really are chupacabra* – and pounced on Harlan. Almost immediately another one joined the first, and together they brought Harlan down. “What the fuck –” Mai grabbed her brother’s hand.

“Run,” he said, pulling her in the opposite direction. There were more of them running alongside, darting towards him and Mai as they ran up the road.

Mai screamed – Naoto turned, twisted his ankle and fell onto the tarred road, hard. There had to be four or five of them – people, he guessed, but what sort of people...? They wore some sort of black gown, even covering their heads and they – *bit* into her – her wrists, her neck, thighs.

*This can’t be real.*

He was grabbed from behind by something with sharp claws that dug into his shoulders – *mountain lion* – but it spun him around and he was facing one of them – definitely a man-shape, with a veil of fabric covering the face.

“Please don’t kill me,” he said. “Please. Just let me go. I’ll pretend this never happened. My sister and her boyfriend got lost and I don’t know where they are. Just let me leave.”

The figure lifted back the veil, revealing a face so pale that even in the dark, Naoto could see the delicate blue veins running across his cheeks. Two thick fangs curved over his bottom lip. He pulled Naoto close to his face, and snuffled through Naoto’s hair with deep, noisy breaths. Then he bit into Naoto’s neck, and ripped the flesh outwards. Naoto screamed and grabbed the man’s shoulders, clinging to him as the man lapped up the blood spilling from the wound. Another one bit him, then another, until there had to be at least a dozen sucking the blood from

his neck, his arms, his chest. He was lost in the musty wool of their garments, nothing to see but matte black that smelled of damp and sheep.

*Will anyone tell Mom?*

## FIVE

*Take your hand off the wheel.*

Jaime took a deep breath, stared at her hands gripping the steering wheel so tight her knuckles were white, where they weren't scraped an angry red. From the dark windows of Munroe Animal Clinic, the sign *Your pets are our family!* stared back at her through the windshield. She didn't even know where that was, or how far from the house they were. Once the kids were in the car, she'd just driven. It was only when Lacey complained about being hungry that Jaime returned to herself and pulled off at the first exit they came to.

The gas gauge had been riding on empty for who knew how long. The dash clock read 1:00 PM. She'd been driving nearly eight hours and didn't remember anything but strapping the kids into their seats.

*Take your hand off the wheel and turn off the car.*

"Mama?"

She flicked her eyes to the rearview, and Lacey's tear-puffy face. Her mad genius girl, hiding with her brother and sister in the crawlspace behind the bathroom door. *Talk to your daughter.* "Yeah, baby?" Did her voice sound normal? Oh, God, she had blood on her forehead. Maybe Lacey wouldn't see.

"Why isn't Daddy with us?"

"Daddy —" Baz, at the dinner table, tickled pink about some awful joke Caleb had sent him. Pacing and worried while the radio played news of the shooting in Savannah and he tried dialling his brothers' numbers again. On the floor, not moving, his shirt soaked with blood. She forced herself to take a breath. "Daddy couldn't come right now."

"Will he come later?"

“Sure, baby.” What was she supposed to say? Can you tell a six-year-old about death? None of the parenting books told what to do when your husband was murdered in your living room.

*Take your hand*

*off the wheel.*

Slowly, she relaxed the muscles in her hand, then put the car in park and switched off the ignition. She kept seeing Baz’s face, back at the house. His eyes. The absence of him caved her lungs in. “Babygirl, watch your brother and sister,” she said, taking the keys from the ignition. “Mama’ll be right back.”

She thumbed the lock on the keychain as she walked briskly from the car. Ducking behind the side of the building, she paced back and forth along the tree line. She was no longer a woman, no longer human. She tapped into the primal energy of the forest and felt the magnitude of her grief channelling through the grass, the earth, the forest spreading in front of her.

Jaime pulled off her sweatshirt and held it, balled up, over her mouth and screamed into it over and over until she was kneeling in the grass, gasping for air. What were they going to do now? Where were they going to go? Where would be safe?

She allowed herself to lay there until the count of sixty, and then she sat up. She dug through her pockets for a balled up tissue. Wiping her eyes, she did what she could to steady her breathing. Her hair was probably a mess, but there wasn’t much she could do about that. Still, she ran her fingers through it, getting most of the tangles, and pulled it back into a ponytail.

She walked back to the car, got the wipes out of the glovebox. Alain and Cat were asleep, but Lacey watched everything she did with quiet interest.

She stood outside while she washed her face, using the side mirror to get all of the blood off. When she got to her hands, Jaime stopped. This was Baz’s blood. Her Baz. She’d left him behind. She pressed her arm to her mouth and sat, crouched by the side of the car.

*You cannot lose it right now.*

“I can do this,” she whispered. It felt good to hear the words, like calling up an invocation. “I can do this,” she repeated, washing her husband’s blood from her hands. When she was finished, she threw away the wipes and got back into the car.

“Mama,” Lacey said from the backseat.

“It’s okay, baby,” Jaime told her. “Just sit tight. We’re going on an adventure.”

“To find Daddy?”

“No, baby. We’re not going to find Daddy.” Putting Lacey off wasn’t going to last much longer. “Daddy – Daddy got hurt, and he won’t be with us anymore.” Jaime turned around in her seat so she faced her daughter. “I need you to be really brave for me now, honey. We have... We’re going on a quest, okay? Like Daddy does on the computer with your uncles.”

“Can I be an elf mage?”

“Sure, baby.” Digging through her purse, she pulled out her cell phone. She pushed the power button. No signal. Of course. Next she tried the map app, just in case, but the loading icon spun endlessly. She left the phone on the seat and started the car up. She would just have to wing it. She put the car in reverse, backed into a three-point turn, and navigated out of the parking lot back to the highway. Might as well keep heading in the same direction. She was bound to get somewhere eventually.

Another mile down the road, she came up on a GasMart station. The place was more than a little sketchy, and had probably closed down years ago, but she spotted a payphone tucked against one side. She drove in, and positioned the car so her door opened right at the payphone. Pulling her purse up into her lap, Jaime sifted through the contents for any loose change, finding only a quarter and two dimes. Not even enough for a local call, let alone long distance. She checked her phone again, scrolling through the contacts. The signal bar wavered tauntingly between one and none. Zach and Vi’s home number slid by.



“Be right back, baby,” Jaime said to Lacey. She climbed out of the car and followed the instructions to make a collect call. She whispered a quiet prayer of relief when it actually rang. Baz had tried six hours before he got through to the boys earlier. *I’m going to have to tell them he’s dead.* The knowledge had been a weight, rolling around in the back of her mind, but she felt as long as she didn’t acknowledge it directly, it wouldn’t be real. It was just an idea inside her mind. Once she said it – really said it out loud for another person to hear: *Baz is dead*, he would be.

Fifth ring and still no answer. Voicemail would click on soon. She sighed, and rested her forehead against the metal dome around the phone. Her cell phone rattled against the metal lip of the payphone; a second later, the relentlessly cheerful theme song of Perky Patti played from the speaker.

She dropped the handset in her rush to answer, and didn’t even bother to check the ID before she hit accept and said, “Hello? Hello, I’m here.”

“Man, I thought for a sec I wouldn’t get through.”

Derek. He sounded so good, so normal. She clapped her hand over her mouth and closed her eyes, willing her body into her control again. She could not lose it with Derek. He was still just a kid.

“Jam?” he asked. “You there?”

That nickname – Baz had been the first one to call her that – tore something loose in her so she was left crouched on the pavement sobbing as quietly as she could so the kids wouldn’t hear. And Derek, bless his heart, on the other end, saying her name and anything he could think of. It made it so much worse. That *kindness*.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” he said. “We can fix it.”

“You can’t,” she managed. Her voice sounded thick and snotty. She probably looked a wreck. She’d have to check before the kids saw. “You can’t fix it. Baz...” She took a deep breath. “He’s dead, Derek. Baz is...” She couldn’t bring herself to say it again. That one time had been hard enough, and now that she’d said it once, she was going to have to keep saying it. Keep telling people.

Keep killing Baz over and over for everyone he knew. “Some people... broke into the house. They must have fought. I was upstairs with the kids...”

Derek was too quiet on the other end. She worried they might have gotten disconnected – she might have forced herself through that telling for nothing – but she was afraid to ask, in case he really wasn’t there.

Finally, meek, “What do you mean?” And then more confident, “No. You’re wrong. You made a mistake.” There were voices in the background; he wasn’t alone. That was good, at least.

“Honey?” A woman’s flat, Midwestern twang filled Jaime’s ear. “You don’t know me – I’m Rylee – but my son is friends with your brother here. I think I’ve got the gist of what happened – your family was attacked?”

“Yes.”

“Are you in danger right now?”

“I don’t think so.” Jaime stood up and glanced around the deserted parking lot. Even the highway was empty. “No. We’re safe now. But I don’t know where to go.”

“Don’t you worry about that. You just listen to everything I tell you, and it’ll all turn out as good as it can.”

## SIX

I don't know what to do.

People run. Lie on the ground. Stagger through the smoke with bloody clothes and tear-streaked faces. My head pounds and the ground sways. I taste the dust coating the back of my throat.

I can't see my brother anywhere.

I yell his name again and again.

My bones vibrate like any moment they'll burst out of my skin. A zigzag of light jumps from my chest like a bungee cord hooked in my ribs. Darts around the gathering people, towards the playground. The light tugs. Rhythmic. Urgent. My skull throbs in time with it. The light drags my body after it.

He's lying on the ground next to a swing set, a white guy standing over him while another one dumps out Ren's backpack and kicks through the books.

"Hey!" I yell, making it up to a hobbling jog. "Back off!"

The closest one shoves me to the ground. "Stay outta it, Osama." A sharp kick to my already aching ribs. The fire in my veins burns to get out.

I curl up when he pulls back for another kick – his foot flies toward me – I reach out my arms and wrap his leg in a big hug, throwing him off-balance. We're on the ground together, struggling to be first on top with fists and feet battering my sides but my skin is numb to each blow, like it's happening to someone else. Time warps out of sync so I'm able to watch the elbow *I hope it doesn't break my nose* crash into my face. Blood rushes warm and salty in my mouth. He screams and screams and hits my arms and shoulders and any part he can get with pure defensive instinct. I get the upper hand and pin him down.

The heat of flames beneath my skin. The smell of his panic. Terror. Oily and heady like gasoline. Burning flesh and burning cloth. The flames get brighter and brighter, a blinding dance of

*orangeredgold* until nothing exists but me and the flames and this... this *thing* that was hurting what's *mine*. I press harder on its throat, letting the fire travel through me –

[STOP.]

The fire goes still, and then dark.

I'm kneeling on the rubber mulch, and Carys watches me, too close and too hard. Ren stands behind her, holding his side. Blood down the side of his face. Shirt torn. Looking at something on the ground. I try to see around Carys, see what he's looking at, but the world sloshes sideways and Carys holds me upright.

"You're okay," she says. "You're okay."

Sirens are everywhere. People yelling. It doesn't feel real.

Carys pivots away from me. "Come here a minute," she says to Ren. "Sit with him."

She moves and, for a second, I see the man on the ground. He's making wet, choking sounds. Water on a dock, but it's not water and there's a red, seeping blister in the shape of my hand around his neck. Carys kneels over him, talking soft. I don't know what to do.

I don't know what I've done.

"Fuck," like a snake gliding from my mouth.

"Hey." Cat-eyed Ren, one blue and one green, kneeling in front of me. There's a gash on his forehead, blood matted in his hair. I feel like all my atoms have sped up so fast any second, they'll go flying out in every direction – *I wonder if this is how the Flash feels?* – but Ren looks calm. So calm. Calmer than any fifteen-year-old should be right now. "Are you okay?" he asks.

"Are you?"

He touches the cut on his head and looks at the blood that comes off on his fingertips. "My head hurts." He wipes his hand on his jeans and offers it to me.

I take Ren's hand because he's solid, he's real, he's here, and I let him help me to my feet. I concentrate on my breathing. Make it come in a slow, even rhythm. Phantom fists beating my sides. Burnt skin. Fire.

Looking at how small Ren is, so much smaller than the other kids. Smaller than I was at fifteen. The fear of losing him steals my breath all over again.

The man stands up and looks at us like we aren't even there. Carys turns him in the other direction and gives him a little push, and he starts walking.

All I can think is, they'll think we did something.

We did do something.

*I did something. What if someone saw? What did I even do? That shouldn't be able to happen, you shouldn't be able to touch someone and have their skin... It shouldn't do that. What if I killed him? I wanted to. What if he tells someone? Who would believe him? People can't burn things by touching them.* But my handprint is on the guy's neck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck –

*[Caleb. We need to go.]*

It's a whisper. The rustle of leaves. A cobweb on skin. A line of pressure loops from temple to temple. I touch the base of my skull where it pools in a dull hum. It doesn't belong and I want it out. Static electricity sparks across my skin and my molars grind into each other.

*NO.*

Carys jerks her hands away from my head, holding them up in surrender. "Okay. Okay. Point taken." She looks at me with a mixture of confusion and disbelief. Pity. "This is so not the time or place for this."

"Did anyone see?"

"I don't think so. Everyone's focused on –" She gestures towards the wrecked monument. "But we need to get out of here."

Ren tugs on my sleeve. "She's right," he says. "Let's go."

People run by us as we walk down Whitaker but we might as well be ghosts for all the attention they pay us. One paramedic makes an attempt to treat us, but she leaves us for more deserving patients when I say we don't have insurance.

I can feel eyes hiding behind curtains and drawn blinds. I can taste the fear. I pray that we'll make it back to our apartment, and that we'll be safe there, even though I don't know what I'm praying to. I feel more nine than nineteen and I wish my parents were here instead of Atlanta at that wedding. I want them to tell me it's going to be okay, they'll take care of it, they'll fix it.

\*

*Home.* Three people crammed into the bottom floor of what would have been a single family home before it was split in two. We were so excited moving in here, getting away from our parents. It didn't matter that the bedrooms were glorified closets, or that the toilet leaked, or that kitchen/living/dining was one room with dividing lines we made up in our heads. It was ours. Freedom. Sometimes I think it'd be easier to move back to our parents' place, but they only keep the house by renting out our old rooms.

Justin and Benny are still at work – small miracles – which'll give me time to clean me and Ren up so it won't look so bad. Justin worries enough when I go on my rounds; I don't need him catastrophising.

Most of Ren's wounds are superficial – a shower and some fresh clothes go a long way, with a couple Band-Aids for his forehead. I'm tempted to take a shower myself – the water would feel so good on all the parts of me that ache – but the relief wouldn't be worth what Georgia Power will gouge out for going over our ration. I rinse out my hair in the sink with cold water, and sponge off the rest of my body. My lip is swollen, I'm definitely going to have a black eye, and every one of my ribs feels tender, but I'm more or less intact. I wonder how many fist-shaped bruises I'll end up with in a few days. I'll have to tell Justin I got in a fight, though I'll leave out the part about burning that guy with my hand.

I watch myself in the mirror as I dab disinfectant from Benny's extensive first aid kit on my cuts. I look like a normal guy. Y'know, average. Maybe a little on the short side, but definitely no metahuman or mutant.

Carys. I need to talk to her before Justin gets home. Ren'll be easy – he doesn't lie, but he sees the benefit in concealing information from time to time – but I need to make sure she won't let anything slip. How do I even explain it to her? Not that she seemed particularly freaked out, but maybe that was just the shock of the moment.

*Hi. So could you not tell my boyfriend I have radioactive hands that burn shit on contact? It might put a damper on our relationship.*

"It'll totally work," I tell my reflection, with not much faith.

In the living room, Ren is watching the local news on TV, national news on his laptop, and browsing through Twitter on his phone. "No one's dead yet," he says. "But they're implementing a curfew."

"Do me a favour and text J and Benny we're okay," I tell him. "I'm going upstairs for a minute."

"I like her."

"Who?"

"The girl upstairs," he says, fingers flying over his touchscreen. "She's nice."

"Okay," I say. It's not that Ren dislikes people, but he has problems with them, especially strangers. Justin and I were together a year before Ren ever said anything without prompting. "I'll be back, and don't tell J any details."

"I do know that much."

I just stand outside her door at first. What *am* I going to say? She stopped me from probably killing someone – how had she gotten there anyway? Did she follow us? Why would she do that?

Had running into her earlier really been a coincidence? What if she had something to do with the bomb? What if we're implicated?

The door opens, and there she is, the screen door standing between us. There's a language to doorways. "Dude," she says, hand her on hip. "You have *got* to learn to think quieter."

"I'm sorry," I say on cultural reflex, even though I'm not sure what I'm apologising for.

Carys looks at me a minute – I can see a decision being made in her eyebrows – and pushes open the screen door, stepping out. "I was gonna have a smoke anyway," she says. She hoists herself up on the porch rail and pulls a leather rolling pouch from the front pocket of her overalls. "My weed's not as good, but I'm happy to share."

"Sure," I say, taking the old swing. If she wants to direct the conversation, that's fine with me. Gives me more time to come up with my Don't Tell Justin I'm A Mutant Freak appeal.

"You should put ice on that eye." She sifts through the pouch, finally pulling out three dime bags. "Did you tell the other two what happened?"

"They're not home yet."

"Work?" She sprinkles herb from each bag on the paper and rolls it back and forth. Something about the way her fingers move – reverential – I want to remember to sketch them later.

"Justin is," I say. "Benny's got school."

"Right. Armstrong." She nods and licks the gummed edge. "You're not in school?"

"It's not really my thing," I say. I've said it so much this past year, I even believe it. "What about you?"

"Travelling for now. University, eventually." She lights the joint and takes a deep toke. "Y'know, I kept meaning to come down and talk to you guys, but it never seemed like a good time. Like, does Justin know? I didn't want to, y'know, out you guys on accident or anything," she says, passing the joint to me.



I take a hit. Has she mixed up their names? But no – “What are you talking about?” The second hit has a light, fruity flavour.

She looks at me, smiling at first but putting it away when she sees me. Another decision works itself out in her eyebrows. “You’re messing with me,” she says.

“I’m really not. What’s in this?”

“Damiana, chamomile, and the finest grade dirt weed.” She takes a hit, then picks a bit of leaf from her lower lip. “You really don’t have any idea? Does Tskiri ring any bells?” It’s like that moment in the park, after she stopped me, but it doesn’t press any further. “Have you always lived here?”

“Savannah?” And we resume passing the joint back and forth. “Yeah, sure.”

“And your parents? Are they from here, too?”

“My mom is. Back, like twelve generations or something ridiculous,” I say, rocking the swing slowly. “Dad’s from... Haiti, I think. One of those islands.”

“Can I ask you something crazy?”

I should’ve expected that she might bring it up. If I were talking to a guy that I’d seen do what I’d done, I’d definitely have some questions for him. If, that is, I didn’t just run in the opposite direction as fast as I could, which is far more likely. “If it’s about the park, I can explain –”

“Can you?” she asks. “That wasn’t my question, but can you explain what happened?”

“Well... No,” I say. “But there has to be an explanation. Things like that don’t just... This isn’t a comic book.”

“No, it isn’t,” she agrees. “Can I try something? It might not work...”

“What’re you going to do?”

“It’s easier if I show you.” Carys stubs out the joint and hops down to take my hand. “Just... zone out for a minute,” she tells me.

I sit there like an idiot, my hand sandwiched between hers. The city speaks in sirens. Cops and soldiers packed like ticks around Forsyth Park. I get impatient and start to take my hand back when I smell it.

Musky, but sweet, like cinnamon. I've known that smell as long as I can remember, and never been able to identify it. The sirens fade into the sound of water splashing on stone, and birdsong in the trees. There's a gazebo made of iron, so overgrown with vines and exotic flowers that the interior is dark and cool. But the colours grab me. I can't look at them all fast enough, and some of them, beyond the familiar purples and blues and greens, are colours I don't have names for. I stand in the coolness of the gazebo and feel the vibrancy of the garden surrounding it. And then it fades, leaving me with the city's sirens and my hand in Carys's.

There's a trace of her left in my head like someone's perfume after they've gone. It fits into the groove of my mind like it always belonged. I could get used to it being there. I don't like it.

And that place.

I *know* that place. I used to dream of that garden nearly every night as a kid. Before the dreams went dark. I even put it in my comic. Is that why she showed it to me? How *did* she show it to me? "What was that?"

"Oh, boy. How to say this without blowing your mind a little?" She begins rolling a cigarette, so I offer her one of mine, but she refuses. "Rolling helps me think," she says. "That garden, it's a place I go to sometimes. In Oros. My city. The people there – we're called Tskiri, star fire, we're... we're connected. To each other's thoughts. I showed you a memory."

"Are you from the Green Initiative or something?" It'd explain a lot. I had one talk to me for three hours about how dogs are really our canine overlords, and control us through various conditioned cues in their barks, and all of human society is built solely for their comfort.

"I don't know what that is."

“Neo hippie weirdos,” I told her. Basically, the happy, cuddly version of the survivalist faction, all about zero impact living and harmonising with nature. Great customers, though.

“Really?” she asked, incredulous. “Is that what you think this is?”

“What am I supposed to think?” I return. It’s crazy. Telepathy is crazy. All of this –

“You’re *supposed* to listen to what I’m telling you,” she says. “You just scalded a man with your bare hands. What’s it going to take to convince you?”

“Shit like that is *not* supposed to happen.”

She crosses her arms. “Well, it did. And I can tell you how.”

“Okay. Tell me.”

“You’re – at least partially – Tskiri,” she says, “and we’re made of fire.”

I laugh. I have to admit, for half a second, I expected her to give me a real answer. Some explanation that would put what happened into a neat, little box where I wouldn’t have to think about it ever again. But the idea that we were made of fire... “You agreed this isn’t a comic book.”

“It’s not, and I’m no superhero, but we *are* made of fire.”

“So if I cut you right now, you’d, what? Ooze fire instead of blood?”

She props the finished cigarette between her lips and lights it, weighing her answer. “More like both at the same time.”

“I can guarantee I’ve never bled fire,” I say.

“You’re *ilyjk*. Who knows how that works?”

“I thought I was Tskiri, and now I’m *iliad*. Which is it?”

“*Ilyjk*. It’s – Never mind. You’re part Tskiri.”

“How do you know?”

“We’re... linked. It’s how I know where you are.”

“So what’re you doing here? Where is this Oros place and how come no one knows there’s another race of humanoid beings who just happen to be made of fire?”

“Oros is on another plane. Reality... has layers. Humans only see one, but the rest of us exist on the others. A physicist could explain it better, but that’s the gist. We usually stay away from the human layer.”

“And you’re here now, to, what? Spread the message of the Flame Keeper?”

“I’m here on Pilgrimage,” she answers. “After we graduate from the Academy and before we start our Apprenticeship, each Tskiri must go on a pilgrimage to *Ileja* – what we call this layer. I thought you were, too, since Cassie...”

“So our landlady is involved, too.” The thing is, it doesn’t sound as crazy as I know it should. Something about it all *makes sense* in a way life hasn’t until now. Maybe it’s the weed. Maybe I just want it to make sense. “Cas has known my dad since he moved to Savannah. That’s how we found out about this place.”

“Of course he has,” she says. “Cassie is a – she looks after us during our Pilgrimage.” Her eyes say nothing about what she’s thinking and I don’t like it. No one’s ever been so hard for me to read, besides Dad. It feels like walking through a strange place in the dark, not knowing if you’ll run into something sharp and painful.

She relights the joint right as Justin’s lime green Piece of Shit pulls up to the kerb. I have that panic I get every time he comes home early. We barely pull it together as it is, and if he gets laid off, who knows if he’ll get another job?

“Look at you degenerates smoking in the middle of the afternoon,” he says, jogging up the steps. “You got mugged?” he asks when he sees my face, frowning as he examines my eye.

Sometimes I really love this man. “Yeah,” I say. “They didn’t get anything, though.”

*[You said you were going to be more careful.]* “What happened?”

“He was totally heroic,” Carys says. “Some asshats tried to swipe Ren’s bag and Caleb chased them down. Hi, I’m your upstairs neighbour. Carys.”

Justin shakes her hand, smiling even though I feel the worry dripping off him. “I think I’ve seen you once or twice, with some woman...?”

Carys offers him the joint, but he declines. “My Auntie,” she says.

“Well, it was nice to meet you,” he says, shaking Carys’s hand again. “I need to scrub off this grime before dinner.”

“I’ll be in in a minute,” I say, kissing him before he goes.

“Go talk to your man. Take care of your brother,” Carys says, giving me the joint for the final toke. “I usually like to spark up around midnight. Helps me sleep. I know you’re usually up then – not that I’m spying on you or anything – the door, when you smoke –”

“It’s cool,” I say, but I’m still thinking about that gazebo. “We hear you all the time. You’re not noisy. It’s just –”

“Thin walls.”

“Bad insulation.”

“Right, because it’s the floor – my floor, your ceiling. Not walls at all.” She stands like she’s forgotten how her muscles are attached. “I’ll catch you later,” and she scuttles through the door to her apartment, closing it firmly behind her.

Justin is stripping off his work clothes in our bedroom when I come in and perch myself on the bed. The bruise on his back has faded to a pale ochre. He said it was an accident at work, but I know he’s too embarrassed to admit he got mugged for ten bucks and two cans of spaghetti.

“How was work?”

“If I get one more hour this week, they have to give me health insurance, so I got sent home, which shut down the department because they already cut Jenkins’ hours. Parts need to be replaced, but we don’t have the budget to order new ones, so trucks keep breaking down, routes don’t get covered, trash doesn’t get picked up...” He takes a deep breath. “Of course if China pulls out of the bailout, we’ll have bigger problems than trash in the street.” He sits on the bed next to me to take off

his shoes. He smells of soap and gasoline. “Tell me about *your* day,” he says. “I wanna hear all about these superhero moves of yours.” Oil permanently stains the lines of his hands. I wonder if that means his destiny is set in stone.

“What’s China got to do with our trash?”

“The president promised this bail out from China so the banks can reopen, but the negotiation isn’t going so well.” He pulls off his shirt and starts rummaging through the closet for clean clothes. “Not that it’s any big surprise. Harris is a fucking idiot,” he says, his cheeks flushing the way they always do when he gets worked up.

“They have to do the bail out, though, right?” I say. Politics always seems like... I don’t know, something that doesn’t have anything to do with real life.

“Not necessarily,” he says. “And if they don’t, the banks stay closed and our economy just crashes.”

“Come on. You sound like a Prepper.”

“Maybe they’re onto something.”

I reach for his hands, but he pulls them back. His shame over them evaporates from his skin and condenses in my chest. Those hands should be designing aircraft, not fixing trucks for the city. I pull him toward me and push my face against his neck and breathe in the purer scent of *him*. “I got a surprise for us,” I say, remembering the Tupperware in my bag, and wanting to cheer things up.

He leans his head against me. “Two thousand dollars,” he guesses.

As if two thousand dollars would solve our problems. I slip away and dig through my bag for the Tupperware container, still warm, shoved to the bottom. “Better than two thousand dollars.”

He looks sceptical. “What’s better than two thousand dollars?”

When I pop the lid off, garlic and onion rises from the tightly packed boiled crawfish, bright red against the watery brown stew. “Caught fresh this morning.”

He stares at them. I get a flicker of beach barbecues from him. The smell of salt and smoke and sand. Sunscreen on a freckled shoulder. “Where did you get this?”

“Customer.” I grab one of the crawfish. Hold the tail joint until the head snaps off. “She didn’t have enough so we worked out a deal.” It’d taken some convincing to get her to part with the shellfish her family poached from the marshes, but in the end the promise of a great high won out. I’d be out of business if it didn’t. “Figured it was worth it.” I suck the fat from the head, the rich flavour spilling in my mouth. I hold it there, savouring the texture on my tongue. Smoky spices and garlic, the kick of cayenne pepper.

“Too bad we can’t pay our bills in crawfish,” Justin says.

“Don’t be so grumpy.” I peel away the tail to reveal the juicy meat underneath and hold it out to him. “Just have one.”

He sighs, but eats the meat out of my fingers. A soft moan rises in his throat and his eyes close. The hint of a smile as he swallows. “It’s not better than two thousand dollars,” he says, “but it’s close.” He runs his fingers over the slick, red shells. “We should probably save some for Ben.”

“We don’t have to tell him.” I twist the head off another crawfish, give the tail to Justin.

“I’m waiting for the day you keep anything from Ben.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

He shivers as I suck the fat from the head. “I don’t know how you can do that.”

“Oh, it’s the best part, baby.” I offer him a whole one, plump and slick with juice. “Try it once.”

He hesitates, considers. “It’s too gross,” he says. “It’s like sucking out their brains.”

“But it’s so good.” I dip my finger into the shell and scoop around the side, coating it in the bright yellow fluid. “Here, no brain-sucking required.”

Tentatively, he licks the fat off my finger. For a moment, I see the worry drifting through his eyes. The shadow behind his smile. He sits back. *[You went to Tybee. You said you'd stay away from Eastside, but you had to go to Tybee to get these.]*

I place the empty shell in a row next to its friends. “You’re not doing it right if you don’t snap off their heads and suck out their brains.”

“That’s what I have you for.” *[Someone was shot on Skidaway again. What if next time it’s you?]* He picks a crawfish from the container and holds it towards me. “I think you enjoy beheading them.”

One more quick twist and snap. “A necessary evil.” One more empty crawfish face for the line. I squeeze the tail until there’s a soft crack, and then I slowly peel shell segments away from the white flesh. I hold the meat towards him.

He watches me. Smiling, but I can feel the shadow in it. Finally, he leans forward and takes the crawfish in his mouth. The fingers of my other hand brush across his forehead and through his hair. *I’m always careful.* It’s just a little push. A suggestion slithering through all the what-ifs in his brain. *I always come home.*



## SEVEN

Every panel of his multiscreen played footage of the explosion in Forsyth Park. Before and after. Kids coming home from school. People walking their dogs. Soldiers patrolling along the perimeter. The scorched stump of the Confederate Memorial. Burning trees. People bleeding and charred. Sirens, lights, screams. Chaos.

A facial recognition programme runs in the background but he can't stop himself from scanning every image himself.

3:08 PM. René always, *always* walked through Forsyth Park on his way to the twins' apartment. The soldiers wouldn't be enough to put him off. Why did he have to have those stupid routines?

Derek messaged Ren. As soon as it sent, he hit call but the icon just spun. He cancelled and redialled.

Ren could've been late leaving school. Maybe he decided to stay home or meet up with friends. Who was he kidding? Ren never changed his schedule for anything, including non-existent friends.

Derek dialled again. Shit like this happened to other people. Other places. Ren couldn't have been anywhere near a bomb – even the alt.news channels were throwing *terrorist* around fast and loose.

A still image blossomed on the centre panel. "My brother was not killed by a terrorist," he murmured, leaning close to inspect the highlighted figure. Sleight and alone, but Derek couldn't be sure whether it was male or female, and he was only reasonably convinced it was the right colour. But here was the same dilemma. Did he want to see Ren – find confirmation that Ren had been in the park when the bomb went off – or was it better to wonder?

Gary burst into their cramped dorm room, shutting and locking the door behind him. “Dude, the shit is about to hit the motherfucking fan,” he said. Gary Olson had the lanky, toned build of a basketball player, and when they’d first met, Derek had written Gary off as just that. He seemed almost excited about whatever the metaphorical faeces represented.

“Not now,” Derek said, squinting at another image. The last thing he had time for was one of his roommate’s conspiracy theories about how the world was coming to an end. “I’m busy.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.” Gary grabbed Derek by the shoulders. “Savannah is just the start. People are rising up. There’s a compound in Iowa, and they took over city hall in Tuskegee –”

“Gary! Stop.” Derek pushed him away and began scanning the screens again. “I need to find my brother.”

“We gotta bug out, like, yesterday, man.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“Bug out. Hit the road. Get the hell outta Dodge.” Gary shook him. “Come on, dude, we gotta go.”

“Why do we have to go anywhere?” He glanced out the window, but didn’t see anything but the usual trickle of students making their way back to the cafeteria. “I don’t have time for this. I need to get a hold of my family.”

But Gary was already in motion. He pulled two massive black backpacks from under his bed. “There’s a SAT phone at Wildwood. Let’s move it. The key to surviving Teotwawki is to bug out *before* the shit hits.”

“You have got to start using words I understand.”

“The end of the world as we know it,” Gary said through a sigh. “The last place you wanna be is in a densely populated urban area, y’know, like downtown L.A.”

“Come on,” Derek said. “It’s not the first bomb to go off in a public place. Savannah isn’t even that big. Society isn’t going to crumble.”

“It’s symptomatic, D,” Gary said. “Georgia was the first place to institute martial law, and people were not cool with that, and a couple days later a bomb goes off in the very same place? There are little pressure cookers going off all over the country. You just gotta see the signs.”

Derek looked at the spinning icon while he tried to connect to Ren. “You have a SAT phone? Would I be able to get through?”

“Long as his phone’s on,” Gary answered. “Worst case scenario, nothing happens and we spend the weekend camping in the mountains. Best case, you don’t die in a riot.” He hefted one of the backpacks from the floor and held it up for Derek. “Put your arms through here.”

Derek staggered under the weight of it, careening around the room until his centre of gravity adjusted. “What the hell’s in here?”

“Everything you need to survive for the next 72 hours.”

## EIGHT

Charlie Anderson stepped out onto the narrow porch with a mug of Lula's gin in his hand. His ass hurt from twelve hours of sitting on it at the call centre and the sleeping trailer park was a relief from the constant chattering in his ear. Someone a few rows over had a TV tuned to one of those late night shopping programs and a whip-poor-will called from somewhere to the east.

*WHIP-po-will. WHIP-po-will. WHIP-po-will.*

Then the dogs kicked off, one after the other – probably started with Hickman's old beagle who'd howl at a ladybug – and then the whole park was alive with barks and howls, and it didn't stop after the usual five minute round. After about ten or fifteen minutes, humans added their voices in, telling their neighbours to quiet the God damn dog, and being told to fuck off and mind their own business in return.

Charlie downed the last of the gin, and was just about to head inside for more when he heard the first gunshot. Two more followed, then what must have been the whole rest of the clip. The screams that followed – two of them – made him drop the mug in his hand.

More and more shots fired, more and more screams followed, starting from the far corner and spreading across the trailer park. Charlie ran inside, locking both doors behind him and checking all the windows as he went around the narrow, one bedroom trailer turning off all the lights and closing the blinds. On his second sweep, he pushed the sofa in front of the door. He grabbed his bat and phone and hunkered down in his bedroom closet.

He punched 9-1-1 into the phone, and then hesitated, staring at the numbers printed on the glowing touchscreen. Was this the kind of thing 911 was for? He tapped the call icon.

“911. Are you safe?”

“Maple Brook trailer park. People are shooting and screaming. I don't know what the fuck is going on.”

“We have units already en route. Are you in any immediate danger, sir?”

He listened. Car alarms had joined the chaos, there were still screams but the shooting seemed to have stopped. “No, I think... I think I’m okay. I’m in a closet.”

“Alright, sir. I need you to just stay right there. Officers will be with you soon.”

And then she hung up. “Whatever happened to staying with me until they show up?”

Charlie muttered. Then he worried that somehow the light from his phone might be seen from outside, so he turned it off. The darkness was suffocating, and it amplified every sound so he turned his phone back on again. The closet didn’t face a window. It would probably be okay.

What if the cops never made it? What if Muslims escaped their camp and were starting riots here like they had down in Georgia? Charlie gripped his phone in both hands he prayed to Jesus, Mary – even though that was Catholic paganism – and anyone else who would listen to please, *please* just let him live through this and he would start going back to church every Sunday instead of watching the football game at Lula’s – he would stop going to Lula’s altogether and he would volunteer at one of those places for people affected by the Collapse.

Glass broke in the living room.

Charlie prayed.

And he listened. But nothing moved inside the house.

What if it was gas, and he was slowly being poisoned? He pulled a shirt from the hanger so impulsively he forgot to be quiet, and the hanger banged up against the door.

Charlie froze.

Still no sound, except the hissing he imagined coming from the canisters that had been lobbed through his window as they pumped toxic nerve gas through his house. Cautiously, he opened the door and peeked into his bedroom. Normal, not even a hint of nerve gas (which was purple, the one thing Hollywood got right). Emboldened, he crawled out of the closet and pressed

himself flat against the bedroom wall, bat ready. Inch by inch he moved until he could just peer through the doorway to the living room.

Nothing – he saw only black – which shouldn't be, because the lamps were still on outside –

A wide, strong hand grabs the back of his head and bangs it into the doorframe.

\*

It was dark and he was naked. Sweaty, sticky skin pressed against every part of his body, and when he shivered, the mass of anonymous bodies moved around him with soft sighs and muffled whimpers.

“He... Hello?”

An elbow jabbed him in the ribs.

“Who was that?”

“Shut up,” someone hissed. “They’ll come if they hear you.”

“Who?” he whispered, trying to locate the voice.

*Sshh...* echoed back to him from multiple directions. How many people were down there?

It had to be traffickers. They'd raided the trailer park to get good, hard-working slaves to sell off for organs. It was the only explanation that made sense. He'd been kidnapped, and they were going to carve out his kidneys and then he'd probably end up with gangrene or AIDS, or gangrene *and* AIDS, and he'd die some grotesque death in a shipping container somewhere.

A door opened – *ffht* – and the bodies packed around him trembled in response. They pushed against him, and he felt himself being moved by so many hands on every part of his body until he bumped into a stone wall. They were forcing him toward the sound. Another *ffht* – the hands pushed him across the threshold before the door closed behind him.

This space was smaller, but Charlie still couldn't see. He stretched his arms out from his side and tried to find the other walls. Goosebumps raised on his arms; he wasn't alone in this

room. But whoever was with him didn't make a sound. A collar was fastened around his neck – someone had to be inches away but the only breathing he heard was his own. A sharp tug on the collar jerked him forward a few unsteady steps in the darkness. Any minute he expected to step forward into nothing and fall to his death from an unimaginable height. Or worse, fall and not die immediately, but get trapped down there and have to eat his own arm.

Through another set of doors and one of Them scooped Charlie up like a baby – soft linen with an earthy, animal smell – and lay him on some sort of metal surface. He tried to escape – not that he had any idea of where to escape *to* but he wasn't going to let Them – whoever *Them* was – strap him down and do God knows what kind of experiments on him.

A hand that had to be at least as big as Charlie's head clamped down on his chest, the fingernails digging through his shirt. They strapped down his waist, both hands and feet, and his head, and then – They were gone. Or he thought they were gone. No sound, no sight, just the sensation of the metal table beneath his back and the wide straps restricting his movement. What if They never came back? What if no one found him? What if he was trapped here to die a slow, slow death?

Something pricked the inside of both elbows. “What're you doing?” Charlie asked, straining against the restraints. “Who are you?”

They made clicking sounds between them. What language was that?

A large needle stabbed into his neck. Tears dripped into his ears as he continued to struggle. The table moved beneath him, his feet tilting up until he hung upside down. A machine switched on, pump moving with the quietest exhale.

This was it. They were going to cut out his organs and not even put him under. He was going to be awake for every excruciating second, and he might even bleed to death –

## NINE

It's a dream I always know is a dream, one I've had since I was a kid. Sometimes I'll have it every night, other times it'll be months or years in between. It only changes a little from night to night, different scenery, different faces, but the city never changes.

In the dream, I know it. Every street, every building is more familiar than my own skin, but it's not any city I've ever seen awake. I tried drawing it a few times, but it vanishes when I wake up and I only have the nagging hole of where a memory should be. Except the light.

I remember shades of pink and purple cast by thousands of glass panes. It isn't blinding; it's soft, muted, like the colour of twilight. The streets are busy with the market but I see the woman immediately, her dress a distinctive (*cerulean*) blue. It drifts around her in a loose haze; rainbows dapple her iron skin in shifting patterns. She walks quickly, but I don't struggle to keep up. I love her. Not as a lover, or a sister. Not like any type of love I've known.

She sidesteps into an alcove and looks directly at me. They never look at me. They never notice that I'm there. Recognition nags impotently at my subconscious. "Wake up now," she says, touching my arm. "The storm is here."

\*

The cement out front is still warm on my bare feet. The night air isn't even a breath cooler than inside. I can feel the static charge through every hair on my skin. The sky is indigo billows, darkening to black. We've still got a few more days of this thickness before the storm even thinks about landing.

*It's too much.*

Lighting a cigarette, smoke fills my lungs, curlicues of grey against bright pink bronchioles. I hold it in until my chest burns, and then I exhale towards the dim stars peeking through the trees.



“You feel it, too.” Carys closes the screen door to her place. “That... sourness everything has.” The streetlight does something strange to her skin. Smudges the edges. Raw umber bleeds into jasmine yellow. The blue of her dreadlocks is nearly luminescent and the beads in them wink like fireflies. She crosses the porch to me, and the air sways. Again, I wish I’d brought my sketchbook with me, but I could never capture that.

I offer my cigarette to her. She takes a quick, furtive hit, still watching me. I look away, and light a fresh one. Carys takes a more relaxed drag, and then boosts herself up on the rail.

“What is it?” In the time since I last saw her, I went over everything that’d happened while Justin, Benny, and René parked themselves in front of the live news coverage – all on different screens. Carys knows about the dream – the one I haven’t even told Benny about – so she has to have *some* answers. “What is that feeling?”

“It’s all of them,” she said, gesturing at the city. “It’s what they’re all feeling.”

“Why do we feel it?”

“You really don’t know, do you?” Balancing the cigarette on the bannister, she pulls a WinterFresh tin from her front pocket, and pops it open. “I’m guessing you won’t object,” she says, borrowing my lighter to light the end of a slim, neat joint. “It helps shut out some of the noise when it’s like this,” she says.

I think of the pills Benny pops before bed just so he can sleep through the night. The nights that I sit up drawing panels I won’t show anyone. “What is that word you said?”

“Tskiri.”

*Tss-kee-ree. Ts-key-ree. Tskiri.* “What does it mean?”

“It’s the name of our people.” She passes the joint to me, and picks up her cigarette. “Here. This might help.”

I have the weird thought that all of my friendships start with joint in hand, but I take my turn anyway. I know what she means about needing to shut out the noise.

“It’s going to sound crazy, but I don’t think you’re human.”

I laugh with the smoke still in my lungs so I end up choking on it. Tears roll down my face while I struggle to breathe. Carys retrieves a bottle of water from inside her door and gives it to me. I force myself to take small, slow sips until my chest stops bucking. *Not human?*

I have visions of my father breaking out of a cult compound in the dead of night, and starting a new life with Mom. Maybe she helped him escape. Maybe she made deliveries there, and they fell in love so she smuggled him out in her truck. I can see my mom playing the heroine. There are alien cults, right? “Is it like a religion...?” I ask.

“It’s everything.” Her brow furrows as she takes a hit, and then right before she exhales, it clears. “Okay. The reason I’m in *Ileja*... Before we start training for our careers, there’s this Pilgrimage we do. We make it to honour the Crow King. At the end, we come to the same choice. Either we return, and accept our duties, or we choose the outside world, and never return home again.”

“Kraiak,” I say. My father made him up. Kraiak disobeyed Mama Roe, and went on a quest to free the crows. Then he ended up releasing death into the world, so he could never return home. I take an extra toke this round. I always thought Dad wrote that story so we would listen to him and Mom.

“So you know the stories,” Carys says.

“We thought he made them up,” I say. “Everyone in your group –”

“It’s an entire race of people,” she says. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. There are humans, and then there are Tskiri – and a whole lot of other things, but we’ll stick with the basics for now. I don’t know where in your family it is, but there is definitely some Tskiri in your DNA.”

“I don’t know.” *This is not one of your comics, Dumas. People don’t have superpowers.*

*[They’re not superpowers.]*

I look at her, a little stunned and violated. Guilty. Is that how other people feel when I do it?  
“Stay out of my head,” I say.

“Sorry,” she says. “Your presence is so strong, and today at the park – I forget this is all new to you. But we don’t have superpowers.”

“So what would you call it?”

“Characteristics, maybe? You wouldn’t say a chameleon has superpowers because it can change colour.”

“What happened today... That was normal?”

She wavered. “Okay, maybe it’s not like it happens every day, but that’s only because we learn to control it when we’re little, and I’m guessing you haven’t had any training in... anything. It’s kind of amazing you haven’t set someone on fire before now, all things considered.”

I picture that man to the ground, choking him. Killing him. Liking it. If Carys hadn’t stopped me – “How did you know to come find us?”

“Boy, you are a supernova in my brain,” she tells me. “I can’t *help* knowing where you are. To be honest, it’s kind of annoying.”

“I’m sorry,” though again, I’m not sure what exactly I’m apologising for. I think, this isn’t real. My life has decided to go off on this weird tangent for a minute, but any second now it’s going to switch back. Life will continue as scheduled, uneventful and boring.

“I wish it would just happen already,” she says, looking up at the skyline.

“The hurricane?” I ask, stepping up to the rail. The sourness is still there, but the breeze through the trees is clean and sweet, with a zing of the ocean.

“Well, that, too,” she says, “but I was thinking about the city. Something’s gonna happen, and soon. Don’t you feel it?”

I feel... The sourness she mentioned. The electric tension I always associate with hurricane season. But that’s all normal when a storm’s coming.

“Reach deeper,” she says. “May I?”

I’m curious, so I nod, and then it’s like – she takes my consciousness out of my body, and there is nothing but the shape of me. I know that I am a distinct thing, even though I can’t feel my own edges, but I still feel solid. And then I sense her with me, a ripple of blue – not the colour, but the *sensation* of blue – sharing the nothing with me.

The slow whine of a string being tightened, and I feel the *tautness* of the city around us. Each new twist puts more and more stress until eventually it has to snap. I get what she means – I feel strained just as much – and I wish it’d break already.

Back in my body, I smell lightning in the air, feel the breath of the storm, but that spring winds tighter and tighter. “Why *do* we feel it?”

“No one knows for sure,” she says. “The priests say it’s because we descend from the stars.”

“What does that have to do with it?”

“The stars are linked, so they can share messages over great distances.”

“You really believe that?”

“It’s the truth.”

“Stars are balls of burning hydrogen.”

“And we are beings made of fire,” she counters.

“Living organisms can’t be made of fire,” I say. I squeeze her arm. “That’s flesh and blood, muscle, not fire.”

“What is it going to take for you to believe?”

“I’m trying to keep up – I really am, but it’s all a little out there...”

She takes a step back, and her posture relaxes. “I should be more patient,” she says. “It all seems so normal to me.”

It’s starting to feel normal to me, too, which means the weed is working. That’s fine. Tomorrow I’ll wake up and this will all be like one of those dreams that’s so ridiculous it makes you

laugh every time you think of it. “If there’s a whole new species of people,” the weed asks, “how come no one knows about them?”

“Tskiri only ever come to *Ileja* during the Pilgrimage.”

“*Il-ay-ha* is what?”

“It’s...” She sits sideways on the swing and lays out her rolling kit. “The part of the world we gave to the humans.”

She starts rolling a cigarette, her hands doing that same graceful dance I noticed earlier. *I need to learn to roll like that.*

“When the stars fell to Aera during the Nine Days of Fire, the birds built them bodies from clay and sticks, and they became the first Tskiri.” She’s completely serious, but it just sounds like a bunch of new age hippie bullshit to me, so I look at the sky and try to think of what to say next and

The city breaks. A line of Princeton orange snakes along the rooftops and smoke billows into the sky. Sirens interrupt the absolute quiet of no-one-in-the-streets. Carys comes to stand beside me, the two of us watching the sky like children waiting for fireworks. But there’s something new in the mix, something sharper and more jagged.

“We need to get out of the city,” Carys says, and I feel the truth of it run through me. [*We are not safe.*] “Get the boys, pack some things, and meet back out here.”

Ren is awake when I come back in, staring at me with wide, deer eyes. “Evacuation drill,” I tell him, and head down the hall to our bedroom to wake up Justin. Maybe he can carry Benny if I can’t get him up.

“You okay?” Justin mumbles into the pillow when I wake him. “What time is it?”

“We gotta go,” I say.

He’s in that stage of wakefulness when he’s seeing the world with dream logic. *You’re going to get up. Pack what we need. Get in the car.* I push that want around him like a cocoon. “We need to pack and go. Right now.” *Trust me*, my prayer in whichever universes deities actually exist.

He fights it, then sits up, shaking off the last of sleep.

While he starts emptying out drawers into a suitcase, I pull a chair over to the closet and feel along the ledge of the top shelf until my fingers hit the warm metal of my repurposed cashbox.

“Seriously?” Justin says when he sees it. “We’re fleeing the city and you stop to grab your weed. At least I know where I rate if there’s a fire.”

“I woke you up first, didn’t I?” I climb down and bury the box in a pile of shirts. Very stealthy. “Besides, we might need quick cash.”

“What’s going on out there, anyway?”

“Something to do with the protest, I guess.” *Something so bad I can taste it.* “I gotta get B.”

The door to Benny’s room is propped open by a box fan shuddering at full blast. He sprawls across his bed, one arm hanging off the mattress. The sheet twists around his legs and drags on the floor. That boy is chaos incarnate, but only in his sleep.

I start throwing clothes in a duffle bag. Maybe he won’t be too pissed about basically being kidnapped in his sleep when we explain it to him later.

“Guys,” René calls from the living room.

When Justin and I get there, we see a group of men – I think they’re men, but they’re all wearing Halloween masks and black trash bags. Most of them have bats. They go up to the people who’ve come out of their houses, menacing our neighbours until they go back inside. *Keep the peace! Keep the peace!* they chant.

“Get the lights,” Justin whispers. Who does that really fool, but we still feel safer when we can’t be seen. “Ren, turn off the phone, and back away from the windows. What the hell is this?”

“That’s what I was trying to find out,” Ren says.

“Just wait,” I tell him. I remember sitting on our bedroom floor, holding Benny’s hand, and Baz, with Derek in his lap, sitting across from us. D wanted to get into everything. Outside they were

chanting, *Build the wall! Build the wall!* I don't remember where my parents were. It would've been close to when Ren was born.

The knock on the side door makes my heart stop, and then start again when I realise it can only be Carys. I hurry to let her in before anyone sees. I don't know who these whackos in masks are, but that's even more reason to stay off their radar.

Something outside catches fire, and we all drop to the floor as the light flares up. "What do we do about the car?" I ask.

"Wait for them to move on?" Carys suggests.

"What if they don't?"

"I think I can make it," Justin says. "Just listen – if I can get to the car, I can drive off, swing back around and pick you guys up in the alley."

"It's way too risky," I tell him.

"We have to do something. What do you think is gonna happen when they run out of people on the streets to harass? I don't want to be the interracial gay couple that got their brains splattered on the next news update."

"Even more reason to wait it out."

"Justin has a point," Ren says, disconnecting from his phone to join in. "He's a white guy. No one's going to say anything to a white guy."

"It'll be fine," Justin says, looking at me. "It's our best chance."

"Wait," Carys says. "Let's think about this." *[I can make them not see me.]*

*[He's never going to let you go out there.]*

*[Am I seriously getting sexism from a gay guy?]*

*[How do I do it?]*

*[It's not something you learn in five seconds.]*

"What if they follow the car?" she asks.

“We’ll get away,” Justin answers. “They won’t be able to catch up.”

“How do you know? There are soldiers and cops, those fucknuts in masks, and who knows what else out there.”

“Where are we going to go?” Ren asks.

“There’s a house out on Tybee we can go,” Carys says.

“Oh, sure, head out to an island in a hurricane.”

“We have to do something.”

“I’ll go,” Justin says, and he walks straight to the front door, grabs his keys from the hook, and walks out.

“Asshole,” I mutter.

“Well, we better be ready for him in any case,” Carys says. “Where’s Ben?”

“I’ll get him,” I say, heading to Benny’s room while the other two get together all our stuff. Tires squeal on the pavement out front. I manage to get Benny into a semi-pliant zombie state, we load him up like a pack horse and file out to the backyard. A gun fires as I put the key in the lock and I tell myself it’s the car backfiring, but there’s no mistaking that sound.

Justin’s not there when we get to the back fence. It’s only a two minute drive around the corner to the alley, and the way Justin peeled out, he could probably do it in a minute and a half.

*This is the moment when he disappears.* I am so sure, I feel the loss of him yawning around me. I hug Benny to me and try not to lose myself in it. A car with its headlights off swings into the alley and barrels towards us, skidding through the gravel when it jerks to a stop. Then we’re in the car and Justin’s reversing while we’re still closing doors, and swerving out to drive the wrong way down Drayton towards Victory Drive. He doesn’t even hesitate at 37<sup>th</sup> and the car swerves sharply to land in the right-hand lane.

“Seatbelts,” he says, and the five of us take a breath together. “Where’m I going?”

“Head to Tybee,” Carys says. “I’ll direct you when we get there.”



## TEN

Wildwood had been built by Stephen Lund, Gary's grandfather, in the late nineties during the Y2K hysteria. It started out as a 10' x 30' basic underground shelter, with bunkbeds for his family along with a utilitarian kitchen and bathroom. The millennium came and went, and so did Stephen's wife, along with their three children.

So Stephen moved into his bunker, and perfected the art of off-grid living while he expanded and improved his shelter to a cosy 1600 square feet, with features like a bullet-resistant door and two escape hatches. He met Carly Shepard during a gun permit class. The way that woman handled an AK-47 was enough to make him go weak at the knees. Thirty years younger, Carly was a no-nonsense woman who took the defence of hearth and home seriously. They married within the year, and Stephen moved onto Carly's farm, with the view that they would continue improving the bunker. Carly christened it Wildwood, after the gun range where they met. The second Mrs Lund installed a green house and gun range, as well as a gym and expanded storage.

Rylee, Gary's mom, and his aunt, Sadie, grew up viewing Wildwood in a way similar to how people in the late twentieth century thought of the family cabin or lake house. The housing market had been in a steep slump for longer than anyone cared to remember when they started their own families, so Rylee and Sadie moved into the bunker. They expanded the sleeping space into five "apartments", each sleeping eight, and with its own living room and bathroom. They added a game room, and garage. To conceal the entrance, Rylee commissioned an unassuming tarpaper shack built on top of it. A false wall hid the entrance from anyone who might walk into the shack. Even more, the shabby looking walls were really camouflage for ½" plate steel walls. Solar panels attached to the roof supplemented Wildwood's electrical system, and enabled the bunker to go completely off-grid with the flick of a switch.

And so it was that Gary Olson grew up in a doomsday bunker. When Derek thought about it, that explained a lot of his roommates eccentricities. The Lunds had gone out of their way to make the bunker homey, though. The walls were all painted cheerful blues and yellows. The kitchen could have been pulled out of any suburban home, and soft couches filled the mini theatre. There were even UVB lights in the fixtures to prevent vitamin D deficiency. The expense that had gone into this structure made Derek feel queasy, but Gary explained most of it had been paid for out of his grandfather's silver stash, and the bunker was designed to sustain them indefinitely. After a few days, Derek forgot they were even underground.

Each of the four kids – Gary, his sister, and their two cousins – had been allowed to bring one person into the bunker with them. Gary's cousins both chose to bring their partners, which left Derek, Gary and the two fourteen-year-olds thrown together in an awkward foursome by circumstance.

The coolest moment by far, though, had been when Rylee had stepped in with the phone call to Jaime and gave her instructions on how to reach them, even the names and addresses of other Preppers who would help get her and the kids across the country. When he tried to thank her, Rylee poo-pooed the idea.

“We're family now,” she'd said. “We look out for our own. Besides, we could use someone with nursing skills.”

He wondered at what point they'd draw the line when it came to taking people in. As long as his family got to safety, though, he wasn't going to complain. Some of them, anyway. Because he'd gotten through with Jaime, Derek had presumed the twins would be just as easy. Boy, was that wrong. It took three hours before he even got to leave a message on Ben's phone, with no guarantee he would even get it.

Rylee stepped in again, with her Prepper network, and sent a pic Derek forwarded in case anyone ran into them. It wasn't much, but it helped him feel less like he'd abandoned his brothers,

though in reality, there was nothing he could do for them anyway. They were 3,000 miles away. Even if he knew what was happening to them, he'd be powerless to stop it. Besides, Caleb was the sort who always landed on his feet, and he'd kill someone before he let anything happen to Ben or Ren.

That's what Derek told himself as he watched news coverage of the riots in Savannah play over the wide screen in the theatre. Downtown had been barricaded off, but that only spread the violence out across the city. Even the Guard was spread thin.

The video started on what could've been any small town main street. Shop fronts burned and gangs wearing masks prowled through heavy smoke. Blue and red flickered through the haze and riot officers in full gear edged every shot. Something in one of the stores explodes, and an arm of fire and shattered glass burst onto the street, catching cops and rioters alike. A man with a flaming shirt ran away. The cops took care of the cops. A couple of the hoodie/bandana set tried to carry their compatriot through the riot shield wall, but the cops weren't letting anyone out. Someone threw a bottle at the cops. A shot fired. Blue Bandana went down.

They played it like clockwork, every fifteen minutes right before the crisis update, which basically meant the whole segment repeated itself again. Everyone agreed that the bomb – or something like it – was inevitable given the militarised response to people who just wanted a way to feed their families. Correspondents speculated on which grass root movement was responsible – no one was taking credit yet – and whether or not the riots had been part of the plan or a natural reaction to the news about the governor and Harris. They even mentioned n3m0, which made Derek absurdly proud, even though physical acts of vandalism didn't interest him much. It was just cool, being mentioned on *national* news like that, even if he was the only one who knew it. Well, him and Caleb.

They always finished with the bomb. The video started with one of the National Guard soldiers questioning the filmmaker.

*“Man, this is a public park. Who say we can't walk through it? We ain't done nothing.”*

*“Put away the phone, sir.”*

*“Hell, no I ain’t puttin’ it away. I’m documentin’ the harassment of private citizens in public places by an invadin’ force. We bein’ held hostage here in Savannah by—”*

There was a thunder clap, and the view skittered sideways. When it righted again, the soldier on top of the Confederate Memorial was gone, and stone from the base lay scattered and smoking. Soldiers ran to the site; civilians too close to the blast wept and shrieked on the grass.

*“Someone just blew up the motherfuckin’ monument!”*

And that always brought it back around to what he did not want to think about: he hadn’t heard from any of his brothers in days – or his parents, and his dad texted some computer question nearly every day.

Every time the video replayed, he scanned every grainy figure lying on the ground for any hint of familiarity. When it switched to the live feed, he studied every face crowding behind the barriers. They weren’t there. He could watch it a million more times and they still wouldn’t be there, but he couldn’t make himself stop looking.

“So that’s your home, huh,” Gary said, coming into the living room with two steaming cups.

“I keep expecting it to not be real,” Derek replied.

Gary passed him one of the mugs. “Sorry, it’s just Dad’s fruity herbal shit,” he apologised, joining Derek on the couch. He watched the screen as he blew on his tea. “They’re okay,” he said. “Your family.”

“You can’t know that.” What would life look like without the twins? He couldn’t imagine it without Benny, but there was a moment of relief when he thought of Caleb, then guilt. What if Caleb was in the park? What if he was hurt? There was karma for thinking things like that.

“They said anything new about n3m0’s ARMY?”

Derek tried to keep his face neutral. It was bad enough terrorists had stolen his handle; he didn’t need Gary to think he’d actually been involved. “Just the cat video,” he said.

They played it almost as much as the video of the bombing. Someone in a Siamese cat mask stood in front of a black drop cloth, and, using the same voice modulation Derek had, claimed responsibility for the bomb, and promised more in every state under martial law.

“So’re you gonna let me in on the plan or what?”

“What d’you mean?” What *did* he mean? Did he think Derek was connected to the bomb – no, he couldn’t, because then he’d have to know about Derek’s hacker alias, and he couldn’t know that – he was careful, so careful, Caleb had pounded it into him pretty literally when he’d had that close call with the Koreans –

“Dude, we lived in a twelve by twenty box for a month,” Gary said. “I know everything about you.”

He knew. Oh shit oh Jesus fuck *he knew*. “That’s not creepy,” Derek said, but his heart raced. How did Gary find out? Derek kept his machine on triple, quadruple lockdown, masked his location through proxy after proxy – if the *FBI* couldn’t track him down, there was no way that *Gary* could figure it out –

“Standard Wildwood background check,” Gary told him. “We’re not gonna just let anyone in without vetting them. So, do you have any info on n3m0’s ARMY?”

How long had Gary been planning this? And what did a ‘standard Wildwood background check’ include? If Gary knew, and still let Derek into the bunker, he probably wasn’t going to turn Derek in. And if he could track down the link between n3m0 and Derek – *mental note to find it and eradicate it* – maybe Gary could help him figure out his next move. “I don’t know anything about them,” Derek confessed. At this point, he didn’t have anything to lose. “It’s not me.”

“That’s our first step,” Gary said. “Finding out who this army really is.”

“I’ve tried. The original video is gone.” Not that there would be any clues there. They’d probably distributed the packages via zombie computers, and covered up anything that led back to their location.

“Someone’s gotta know something,” said Gary. “We’ll sniff them out.”

\*

**m0gwa1:** bombs rn’t enuf. gov can 2 ez isol8 & elimin8.

**nyx:** nvr shld hve bn bmbs. jst gna snd mre sldrs, mre gs, mre bl1ts.

**4tomFr34k:** had to do sumthin tho. n3m0 was right – the government is waging war on us.

**nyx:** bt who gt hrt? nt sldrs; ctzns.

**m0gwa1:** we need to get the prez’s attention. force em out.

*6r1mm enters.*

*h3xmonk3y enters.*

**h3xmonk3y:** wut iz up, my peeps?

**4tomFr34k:** Y or N on da bomb

**h3xmonk3y:** Y all the way, bro! The goons need to know ppl r serious. They attack us we attack them.

**nyx:** it jst gvs thm mre rsn to snd the mltry

**m0gwa1:** give it up, **nyx**. U lose

**6r1mm:** The system isn’t going buckle cos a few bombs go off. **nyx** is right. Violence begets violence. The rich, right, white hegemony will only pay attention if you hit them where it hurts – the wallet.

**h3xmonkey:** n3m0’s ARMY should figure out how to wi[pe away every1’s debt. National reset, back to 0.

**6r1mm:** There are contingencies on contingencies to prevent something like that happening. It’d take a whole network of players to completely erase all financial records.

**n3m0:** you’d only coz temp disruption goin aftR the \$\$ records. hold d stock mrkt hostage til harris withdraws troops.

**4tomFr34k:** hpow?

**n3m0:** infect the SYS w/ rogue algorithms til trading halts, + ddos hit. they're 2 bz dealing w/ dat so U git onto the trading platform + lock it dwn. dey can't do Biz if the mrkt stays closd.

## ELEVEN

Jaime winced as the minivan scraped against the rutted road. Any time now, the muffler was just going to come right off, and then what was she going to do?

“I’m tired of driving,” Lacey said.

“I know, baby. We’re almost there.” She hoped they were almost there. Jaime was sick of being in the car, too.

“Are these people gonna smell like the last people?” Lacey asked.

“The last people didn’t smell,” Jaime corrected, though, in fact, they had. Horribly. The wife claimed to make her own soap, but if she did, they certainly weren’t using it. If this new family smelled as bad, she didn’t want her daughter telling them so, though. “That’s not nice to say about people.”

“They *did* smell.”

“It’s still not nice to say. These people are doing us a favour by helping. We have to be gracious.”

“If Daddy were here, we wouldn’t have to stay with people who stink.”

“Daddy’s not here.” Jaime breathed deeply through her nose, and exhaled slowly. She still hadn’t told her children their father was dead, and she did not want to do it out of frustration. She couldn’t blame them, really. All things considered, the kids were handling being cooped up in the car and quick departures in the middle of the night better than she was. She still hadn’t sleep for more than twenty minutes at a time. She told herself, *When we get to Derek, it’ll be alright*. They would be safe. Maybe then she would sleep.

The drive came to an end by a weathered black barn, with a Victorian farmhouse tucked beside it like lace on a burlap sack. Jaime put the car in park, and shut off the lights and engine. “I need you to be real quiet now, baby,” she said. “Like we practiced.”



Jaime knew by now to let them come to her. The first place Rylee had given her, Jaime made the mistake of hopping out and knocking on the front door, which got her a shotgun in the face. The couple were apologetic, of course, when they found out who she was, but Jaime preferred not to repeat the experience. These places were so rigged with surveillance, they'd probably been tracking her for the last five miles anyway.

Sure enough, after a few minutes, a stocky woman in cuffed jeans and a Boise State sweatshirt stepped out onto the porch. She carried a shotgun with her like a walking stick. "Step out the car nice and slow, hands where I can see 'em," she said.

"Sit tight, baby." Jaime unbuckled her belt and followed the instructions.

"What's your business here?"

Jaime had been through this scenario, too, but she didn't think her nerves would ever adjust. She'd never had so many guns pointed at her. Their polished metal parts, the smell of them, the little clicks they made as the parts moved, all made her feel how fragile her own body really was. "Rylee sent me," Jaime stammered. "I'm on my way to Wildwood."

The woman hefted the shotgun in her hand, and scrutinised Jaime for what felt like ages.

"What's your name?"

"Jaime Dumas."

Alain whimpered her name, and Jaime heard Lacey's confident whisper trying to soothe him.

"Alright, best get them little 'uns inside. Y'all can sleep here tonight. I got beds. And we'll get you off on the right foot in the morning. Name's Gayle, by the way." Looping her arm beneath the barrel of the shotgun, she extended her hand to Jaime.

"Thank you so much," Jaime said, taking the woman's hand.

Gayle helped her get the three kids fed and settled into the spare room, and then she made a pot of real coffee, not the hodgepodge of roots and seeds that passed for it these days. "You can call your brother from here," Gayle said, leading Jaime to what Gayle called the Command Hub. The

setup was a growling beast of a computer, with a multiscreen so big Derek would be envious. “They make out like we’re kooks, but we see it like it is. Whole damn country’s disconnected but us. So what does that tell you?”

“You don’t have to convince me,” Jaime assured her. Whatever her life had been, she’d left it firmly back in that living room with Baz’s body. The only way to survive – for her children to survive – was to adapt with every curve ball that came her way. She’d do it even if it killed her, too.

Gayle sat her down in front of the monstrosity, and hit a few keys. Derek’s face filled the screen. He looked good – thank God – really good, in fact. What must she look like? She tried combing her fingers through her hair, but Derek laughed.

“You look fine,” he said.

“You’re lying, but thanks.” She couldn’t get enough of his face. The past few days had been such a blur of things she’d never thought she’d be faced with, and here he was talking to her. So real, so normal, so *Derek*. Finally, something stable she could cling to. “You have no idea how glad I am to see you. Have you talked to the twins?” She could tell by Derek’s face there wasn’t good news behind that answer. “Never mind that. Tell me how you are.”

“I’m okay,” he said. “This place is weird, but it’s pretty amazing. They practically have everything down here. I’m such a noob, though, and they all know how to play the game really well.”

“It’s just for another day, and then we...” She had no idea what they were actually going to do. Technically, she’d fled the scene of a crime, and not just any crime – the murder of her husband. Were they looking for her? Did they think she’d done it?

“I think we should stay for a while,” Derek said. “Just until things settle down. A bomb went off in Forsyth Park this afternoon.”

“Oh my God.” The twins. Caleb. He was always in that damn park. She wanted to ask, to know, but she was afraid to find out more of her family had been killed in... in... what *was* this?

“No one was killed, but a lot of people ended up in the hospital. I don’t know about the twins. I left Ben a voicemail, but that’s the closest I got to speaking to one of them. I couldn’t get through to Ren at all.”

“I’m sure he’s with the twins,” she said, though it wasn’t as reassuring as she wanted it to be. “What about your parents?”

“I sent an email, but Atlanta’s... The phones are all dead. It was pretty rough because of the shooting, but after the bomb, people just lost it. It looks like Venezuela or something.”

Jaime felt every hour she’d been awake, every mile she’d sat in the car. This could not be the world she lived in, the world where things just fell apart. Where people put bombs in parks next to playgrounds and the police did nothing. The police *were* the enemy. Where her husband was dead.

“How... How are you?” Derek asked. The poor kid, he looked terrified she might actually give him an honest answer, but at least he tried. It shouldn’t be his responsibility to comfort her. He should be out chasing girls and getting drunk at parties. He should be enjoying his first year at college, not sitting in a Prepper bunker, with the rest of his family either missing or dead.

“It’s been very tiring,” she said, feeling how closely she skated to the edge of tears. She was that side of exhaustion, where anything from a cashier’s greeting to the image of Baz’s face threatened to set her off bawling bad enough to put Alain to shame. She almost welcomed it, surrendering to that spread of feeling that wanted to swallow her up, but she couldn’t do that. Not yet. “How are you?”

“I’m okay. I mean...” He faltered, uncomfortable. Like he’d been caught at something he wasn’t supposed to do. “It doesn’t seem real,” he finished quietly. “I keep thinking, with all this stuff happening back home, I should be there, y’know? I should be helping people, standing up.”

“So you’d be dead, too?” She regretted it as soon as she said it. It was so hard remembering how young Baz’s brothers all were in comparison. “I’m sorry,” she apologised. “It’s been...”

“It’s okay.”

“You wouldn’t be safe there,” she said. “Don’t wish yourself into danger.”

“Yeah, but that’s my home, Jaime. My city. My friends. And what am I doing? I’m hiding, safe as can be. It’s pathetic.”

“Who would I have, if you were in Georgia, too? What would I have done if you hadn’t called? You’re helping.”

“I wasn’t thinking.”

She curled into the chair and rested her head on the arm. “I understand,” she said.

“Everything’s coming apart, and we don’t have any rules for this. But you and me, we need to stick together to get through this, and we’ll find the twins and your parents.” She pressed the bridge of her nose and took a deep breath until the wetness in her eyes subsided. “We’ll get through this.”

And they would, if she had to claw her way to the other side.

## TWELVE

The house smells of uncooked fish and fresh paint with an undercurrent of burnt coffee. The furniture is eighth generation Goodwill, so saturated with living it sticks to me like marsh sand. Photos in Dollar Store frames decorate the faux panelled wall, but they don't look like the usual family memorabilia. No children, no babies. Teenagers mostly, probably some college kids. There's no evidence in the house there were ever children of any kind here, either. The people in the photos could be nieces and nephews – there's a similarity among the eyes, and the compact frames – but I can tell by the clothes that the pictures span decades.

I find Carys among the newest, sitting on the porch swing out front. She doesn't have the dreads in the photo, or her tattoos; thick, dark hair rolls in waves around bare shoulders. But I keep looking, scanning the photographs backwards in time further and further. I don't realise what I'm looking for until I see my father posed in a geometric sweater vest, an older man's arm around his shoulders. The Savannah Bridge rises behind them. Dad's smile is the same one Benny gets for every picture – a little too wide and with a hint of self-consciousness. It had to be before Baz was born – Dad grew his beard that year and kept it until right before Ren was born, and by that time he also had a pair of thick, fishbowl lenses.

Seeing him at the same age I am now – had to be, since he married Mom when they were twenty, after they found out about Baz – has a weird feeling attached to it, like some piece of his essence is trapped in there and if I knew the right words, I could draw him out and ask all the things I wish I'd asked when I had the chance.

“Your dad?” Carys steps up beside me.

I don't want to say yes, but I could be his clone, except for Mom's eyes. Admitting that's him in the picture, though, is saying *yes*, to my father lying to us. *Yes*, to every crazy thing Carys said. To every crazy thing that's happened. I'm not there yet.

“So he’s *aski*.”

“What does that mean?” My head aches with the list of Words I Don’t Know.

Carys pulls her tobacco pouch from the front pocket of her dungarees, and sits in a tweed armchair with splitting seams. “At the end of our Pilgrimage, we’re given a choice,” she says. “We can either return home, and take our vows, and live a productive life.” She sprinkles tobacco onto the paper and twists it up into a tube, licking the gummed edge to finish it off. “Or we can stay, and forsake every part of our lives before. The ones who choose *Ileja* are known as *aski*. Unwritten?” She shakes her head. “As if you had never existed at all.”

“It doesn’t explain why he didn’t tell us,” I say.

She puts away her rolling pouch and joins me at the wall. “Maybe he thought it’d be easier for you to act human if you didn’t know anything else.”

“Maybe he didn’t like who he was.”

“Maybe,” she concedes, “but does that matter? It’s all part of the same person. You have to think that whatever he did, even if it turned out to be wrong, he did because he thought it was the best option.”

“You’re pretty quick to defend him.”

“I can see his side,” she says. “Think about how much he had to love your mother to leave everything he had behind forever. And then think about how terrifying it would be to lose that kind of love.”

I think of the girl in my dream, and I know I would do that for her, and then I feel guilty, for not thinking of Justin. Which makes me hyper aware of Carys. The subtle cloud of spices that hangs in the air around her, the names of which nag at my brain but I can’t quite place. I keep thinking of liquorice, but it’s woodier. Not strong enough to be patchouli – maybe related? How long since one of us said something? Is it awkward? I say the first thing that pops into my head, “Why is it so bad to

be... What did you say I am? Illick?" There are probably worse things than being a mutant. Maybe we can band together and fight crime in Kevlar bodysuits.

She hesitates, and our glances meet unexpectedly. Neither of us is comfortable keeping it up, but I can tell in that exchange that something is different between us. Familiar. I'm not sure I like it.

"It doesn't matter," she says, staring straight ahead at the photographs she probably has memorised. "It's a stupid word."

Her dreads are a cerulean smear against the sienna of her face in my peripheral vision. I think again of the dream girl, darting in and out of the crowd. This is something I need to understand. "But what does it mean?"

"Not pure."

"That's a big deal?"

"Would it be a big deal if you told a human that you were actually half Tskiri?"

"The difference being no one would believe me if I told them."

"It's not that much of a difference. The idea of a Tskiri and a human... I mean, there are stories but no one believes it could be real."

"It's real enough you have a name for it."

"That's..." She shakes her head with a soft tinkling. "It's an old word for a kind of... Monster. Children have this game... It's not important."

"Monsters," I say. I guess I can't escape being a monster to someone. "Maybe so."

"No," she disagrees. She touches my arm. The lines of her body soften, blur, like an out of focus lens. "I wish there was a way –"

Her – *ness* – absorbs? me.

Like before, but this time I don't resist.

Black – no. Nothingness. Absolute nothingness. A spark, and the nothingness trembles.

An explosion – fire – I am. There are voices, so many voices speaking this *I am*. They speak of spheres of gas and mineral, hard rock and icy streaks of light.

Time fast-forwards.

The explosions drown out the voices – *bak bak bak* – a sky of fire. A vacuum sucks me toward it, stretching my very substance until I scream with the pain but it doesn't stop it won't stop not until it's torn me apart and then it starts – a small chip, then another, then larger ones and I weep as I disintegrate into the smallest piece – the fire – packed in clay –

I *see*. All around me, these... creatures – human-ish sometimes? – are packing mud around the fires dotting the scorched landscape, forming legs and torsos, arms and heads. Like me, these newly formed beings open their eyes and see a wasteland around them.

Time fast-forwards.

Farmwork is long days and worn out nights, but we make do. I carry water out to the barn, the dirt cool on my bare feet. A young man is replacing the siding and when he looks at me, I know he is Carys. S/he smiles and wipes the sweat from his forehead. He tells a joke in a language I don't understand but I laugh anyway.

Fast-forward.

There are nine of us having a meal outside. Carys chats with another woman across the far corner of the table. I have this feeling with these people – like that thing I have with Benny only ten times stronger. I never knew anything could be so –

A park. A house. Classrooms. Studios. Workshops. Always Carys and the others. Always with different faces, sometimes genders, but I always know it's them – I *feel* it. And that sense of affinity – I would do anything to hold that feeling forever.

– we both jerk away from each other. In my deepest pit, I mourn the lost connection. Mourn. I am ice cracking on a wild river. That... nothing worse than nothing.



“I wondered,” she says, quiet, to herself. Her hand darts toward my arm, but stops before touching. “My grandmother used to say...”

I look over her shoulder and see Justin. His expression wobbles between anger and hurt, and he struggles to keep both of them back. What did he think he walked in on? What had he walked in on?

In the end, he says nothing. Turns and clatters down the stairs, and then the screen door to the enclosed porch bangs open.

“Tell him the truth,” she says. “He can handle it.”

\*

The waves are sculpted into sharp peaks. The wind snaps my T-shirt and shorts against my skin. Justin is sitting in the dunes when I find him.

“Don’t,” he says, shaking his head. [*Fucking asshole. What am I even doing here?*] “We have shit going on, and we better just hope the storm doesn’t hit before we leave.”

I get his point, but I can’t stop the hurricane. I can’t clear all the soldiers out. I can’t materialise my parents out of thin air (note to self: ask Carys if this is possible). But I can try to make up for making my boyfriend feel like shit. I kneel facing him. “Let me –”

Justin looks past me. “Can we just focus on getting out of Savannah?”

“I found out stuff about my dad and –”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Fury brews around him. He’s embarrassed, hurt. It tastes like chicory and molasses.

“I can do things!” I cup a handful of sand between my palms and try to remember what I did to burn the kid on Whitaker. I will my hands to heat up, for that fire to race under my skin, and show Justin I’m not making it up.

“This is ridiculous,” he says, pushing himself up. “Don’t treat me like an idiot.” He starts back to the house.

I try to follow, but I'm further down the dune, and my feet sink over the tops of my sneakers in the loose sand. "Justin!" I call, the wind stealing my voice as he gets further away, literally and figuratively. I can feel him closing off from me. So I focus all my energy on him – like balling my self up and pitching it at him. *WAIT!*

He spins like I've slapped him, staring across the marram grass. It gives me enough time to scramble up the dune to him.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He holds up his hand, and I stop. I have no control over what happens now, I feel that so clearly – probably the first time in our relationship. I'm hollowed out, waiting to see what he'll do.

His face goes through a few permutations as he tries to understand what just happened. The anger gives way to more complicated combinations. He even smiles once, and I think he's going to laugh, but he shakes his head and walks a few feet down the beach instead. Should I follow? Should I leave? What's the protocol for situations where your boyfriend finds out you can invade his mind?

Sand whips against my bare skin, and I have to shield my eyes.

I'm tempted to spy, but that seems in poor taste under the circumstances. I just feel that he wouldn't be cool with it. Could I really resist tweaking his thought processes in my favour? Where do I draw the line with that?

He walks back. Slowly.

I hate this feeling.

"Are you telling me," he says, "that every time we got dragged to some awful party, you could literally read my mind, and we still never left early?"

## THIRTEEN

Michelle O'Neal was sneaking a cigarette behind the bus and re-evaluating her recent life choices. The Guard had been a ploy to get help with college; it was only supposed to be part-time, and here she was, driving a God damn school bus of Migrants around bumfuck nowhere. How did that happen?

All these narrow back roads made her skittish, driving what amounted to a drunk elephant filled to the brim with people who all presumed she knew what the fuck she was doing. To make it worse, at the last truck stop, some long-haulers had been passing around a story about a fellow trucker driving up this way a couple days back that'd been found sliced open top to bottom, just a few feet from his parked rig. It was just the other week, Bedford had gone out hunting and come across a bear that looked like it'd been torn right open. Chupacabra, the truckers said; nothing else big enough to make that sort of damage to a black bear. Michelle didn't need to think about that freakshow prowling the woods on top of every flushed rabbit or twitch of shadow that made her heart seize up like Armageddon.

*Is this what Armageddon looks like?*

No thinking like that. These people were counting on her, poor dumb fucks. They didn't know she only got her CDL so she could ferry around her dad's congregation to church functions. Like he was doing her a favour by letting her drive, and earn the measly six bucks an hour he doled out. Charity begins at home, her ass.

To tell the truth, she'd thought he would call her bluff when she signed on. It wasn't until her second week of boot camp that she finally gave up the hope that he would call her out, say it was all a mistake. It hit her, lying in her bunk with her body pushed well past any limits: the stingy old bastard was relieved to have her off his hands.

“They’re all loaded up,” Byrd said, making her jump half out of her skin. “Figure if the weather holds, just another hour or so ‘til we reach the camp.” The guy was friendly enough – okay, as far as she was concerned he was a goody-two-shoes with a stick up his ass the size of Rhode Island – but he had this habit of just appearing and scaring the bejeezus out of her.

“Can’t happen soon enough.” It didn’t do anything to call him on it. He’d just get over-apologetic and make a bunch of embarrassing overtures to ‘smooth things over’. “My bed is callin’ my name.”

“I hear ya,” he said, already heading back around the front of the bus.

She thought he said something else, but he didn’t respond when she called his name. She stubbed out the cigarette with her boot and ducked through the gap.

Every shadow sprung to life on its own, and swarmed over something on the ground like ants on a Jolly Rancher. Her eyes couldn’t make sense of it at first, so she kept walking, and then she saw –

Her instinct told her to run. Make a break for it and run as fast as she could, and then she remembered she couldn’t. She was supposed to be one of the ones running *to* the monster.

That was Byrd lying on the ground, and blood, so much blood, but the worst part was when he looked at her and she realised those weren’t shadows, those were creatures – like the chupacabra her granddad insisted prowled these woods, slurping up the blood like it was Kool-Aid, and Byrd – Byrd was *alive* – he looked right at her so she gasped. As a pack, they turned on her, black hiding in black.

The ground fell away beneath her –

*I’m flying* –

She thought at first the night itself had reached in and grabbed her but fabric brushed against her skin – thick, soft, like felt and smelling vaguely of sheep. The thing that held her was completely swathed in it. The creature stood on the roof of the bus, holding her up by the neck.

Dimly, she was aware of the headlights blinking out. *This is it. I'm going to die.* It wasn't profound, but that's what she thought, with an extreme calmness about the whole thing. She would've liked to go to college; she thought she'd have been good at it. Maybe there would've been a nice guy in her lit. class who could explain the difference between sonnets and villanelles. It could've been fun.

The creature pulled the waves of fabric away to reveal its – his – face. She was struck first by his humanness, but it was an eerie humanness. Skin so pale it was nearly translucent, with the luminosity of cave fish. He held her as if she were nothing, even though all in all he couldn't weigh much more than her. There was such a strange look in his eyes, an overwhelming steadiness, the gaze of a bobcat lounging in a tree. For a moment, that feeling caught her, and she forgot to be afraid.

He pulled her close, his nose working over her face in quick, dry bursts. She didn't know whether to hope she passed whatever test this was or not. *Please let whatever needs to happen so I get out of this alive.* The man bared his teeth at her – large canines like a chimp's curving from his mouth – and sank his jaws into her neck. She stared at the stars while he slurped at the wreckage of her jugular. There, like a message from the stars, was the Sparrow Queen. Michelle used to make her mother tell her that story over and over again.

*It wasn't supposed to be like this.*

## FOURTEEN

“It wasn’t so much that I’d been blind to the truth,” Gary said, taking a hit from the vape. “It was just that I’d seen the truth differently.”

On the small flat screen in his apartment, Zabana Bentley – KSTR’s new weekend anchor, after the abrupt and unexplained departure of her predecessor – introduced video after video of stilted footage. Her voice shook. The videos she spoke over were blurry, chaotic. Mobs swarmed over clusters of police. “Peace-keeping forces” patrolled city streets with automatic weapons. They’d watched their dorms at UCLA go up in flames.

“How did you know which was the right truth?” Derek asked. He’d wanted to steal a few moments to himself. All of this – the riots, the violence, the bombs – was his fault. n3m0’s ARMY had posted another video – same cat costume, same voice modulation – taking up the call to arms and promising even more acts, both cyber and irl, if their demands weren’t met. n3m0 was all Rogue News *and* FOX could talk about, which was now more terrifying than exciting.

But then Gary had shown up with the vaporiser and asked to join him. It wasn’t like Derek could really say no.

“Look where we are,” Gary said, passing the vape to him.

“I mean before,” Derek clarified. “When things were still normal, how did you know you were doing the right thing?”

“When were things ever normal?” he asked. “My whole life people have been scraping by while things get more and more expensive. And it’s never the rich guys who suffer. They just keep getting more while everyone else has less. It made sense that it couldn’t go on forever like that. Eventually, something was going to break, and I wanted to be prepared when it did.”

Derek knew he should feel guilty. He’d done this. To the Preppers, he was a folk hero. To the government, a dangerous terrorist. Zabana Bentley spoke his name on television with a mixture of

awe and fear, a sentiment the public itself seemed to grapple with, whether *n3m0* represented thief or saviour.

This ambiguity troubled Derek – was he the hero, or just another villain? *What if*, a secret voice whispered into the silences. Not just *what if*, though, but *what next*? What would they expect him to do next? What had he done, by drawing this unexpected spotlight onto his alter ego – and, let’s be honest, *n3m0* felt more like his real identity than *Derek* ever did. Would *n3m0* be allowed to fade into obscurity, or would he be expected to plan new and ever more daring attacks on Uncle Sam? *Could* he do that?

Beneath that lay the fear that the rest of Wildwood would discover the truth: that he hadn’t acted out of any noble or altruistic motive, but instead for the greatest of reasons – because he could.

An alarm – it reminded Derek of elementary school fire drills – buzzed from the ceiling. “What’s that?” he asked.

“Perimeter alarm,” Gary said, already moving to the door, and the security hub across the living room. “Someone’s here.”

Derek followed him out, anxiety building in his stomach. Until this moment, life at Wildwood had been so normal he’d forgotten what its true purpose was: protecting them from everything – and everyone – outside.

The others hadn’t forgotten, though, and they now moved with well-practiced efficiency. The alarm switched off. Guns materialised out of couch cushions and hidden wall panels. Gary – Jesus, *Gary* – and the others took up positions with their guns trained on the door – though if anyone managed to blow their way through the triple-reinforced bullet resistant steel, they were well and truly fucked. Rylee had started closing off the other rooms, the doors blending seamlessly with the walls to conceal the true size of the bunker, while her sister studied the monitors in the security hub.

Derek hovered behind her, helpless and unprepared for the world he found himself in. Guns still terrified him, even though Rylee had been teaching him to shoot – but if anything that just made them scarier.

On the central monitor, a camo green pickup barrelled up the gravel drive to the safe house. “Looks like Mom,” Sadie observed.

The truck veered into the grass, disappearing behind the garage until another monitor caught it on the hidden lane that lead around to the tunnel entrance at the southern edge of the property.

“What if it’s not Carly?” Derek asked.

Rylee smiled at him. “Don’t worry, hon,” she said. “That garage door can withstand an 8 tonne load.”

“Great,” Derek said. He didn’t feel reassured. But if it was Carly, that meant Jaime had made it. In a small way, he’d been dreading his sister-in-law’s arrival. Locked away in an albeit very cosy bunker with his college roommate’s crazy family had given everything a good helping of unreality. Real only existed outside those doors. But Jaime would bring it in with her. Patient Zero, infecting his denial with truth.

Carly’s identity was confirmed as she leaned from the cab to punch in the door code, and Wildwood relaxed. Weapons were safely stored, and Rylee shepherded Derek into the garage to welcome the new arrivals while the others stayed back.

Derek almost didn’t recognise the blond woman who climbed out of the truck. She wore an oversized UGA hoody and plaid pyjama bottoms, her hair in a tangled ponytail. On her face, an expression of *I will do anything*. Then it hit him – this was the first time he’d ever seen his sister-in-law without a smile.

The kids, too, showed a new reserve; they each clung to Jaime’s hands instead of racing to pile on him like they normally did. Lacey, at least, seemed to brighten a little when she saw him. “Is Daddy here?” she asked.



Derek saw two things occur in her small face at that moment: first, her unconditional hope that *yes*, her daddy would be right around the next corner and second, the acceptance that she would never see her father again. Or her uncles and grandparents. The five of them in this room, they could be the last.

He made a sound in his throat, and Rylee nudged him forward. Jaime met him halfway, wrapping her arms and her children around him as she squeezed him until his bones ground together, sniffing, with the patch of his T-shirt beneath her cheek damp and warm.

Jaime broke away first, wiping her cheeks as she put her smile back in place. “We’ve forgotten all about Cat,” she said, turning to the car.

“I’ve got her here,” said Carly, a tiny brown woman with freckles splashed across her square face. Derek’s youngest niece squirmed in Carly’s arms, making soft burbling noises. “Y’all looked like you needed a good hug.”

“Come on, now,” Rylee said. “Let’s get you settled in.”

\*

After all the homes she’d been in over the past few days, Jaime had to concede that, without doubt, Wildwood had the best showers. Rylee had told her to take her time – the kids were occupied recounting their westward adventure to Derek and his friends – so Jaime held her to it. As long as she stood in the steamy wet-room she wouldn’t have to think about *what next?*

She switched the water off when her muscles went rubbery from the heat. The air filtration system hummed like the whine of a lost dog. What would life down here look like?

She’d have to start home-schooling the kids, for one. What if they didn’t get properly socialised, and became like those weirdly grown up children who are always a little bit creepy? (*Like René.*) No, because he couldn’t help that, and besides, René wasn’t creepy, exactly, just...

Taking a deep breath, she exhaled, imagining her thoughts being purged from her mind by the force of her lungs. It didn’t help. She’d been so focused on getting to Derek she hadn’t really

thought about it. She'd just made herself responsible for one more kid. One that could take care of most of his needs himself, but didn't that put him at more risk, because he *wouldn't* always be in her sight?

*But he can help with the kids.* Like he was then. Enough for her to breathe. Have a shower. Her fingers caressed the shower tap, tempted to turn the water back on. It wouldn't change anything, though, and one day in the near future, she may regret that extra five minutes of water. She wrapped the towel – she'd bought the same kind just last month – around her, and left the bathroom.

It was generous of the Lunds to give away one of their apartments to the reduced Dumas clan. Jaime knew there was a practical element to it – she would be able to act as bunker medic, and train others with her skills.

The bedroom looked more like a room in a midrange hotel than somewhere you'd wait out the apocalypse. Pale blue paper covered the walls, cream carpet on the floor. Standard ensemble of bed/nightstands/dresser/table/chair. An abstract painting in green and orange hung above the bed. A terry cloth robe monogrammed with two W's hung in the closet. *This is mine*, she thought, trying to make it stick as she took in the room. Most of what she'd brought from the house belonged to the kids. Did she own anything anymore?

She sat on the bed and wiggled her toes into the carpet. *Any second, this will end. We'll go home. Baz will be there. Happy to see us. We'll be fine.*

Someone knocked on the door, and she jumped. "One second," she called, slipping into the robe and belting it at her waist. "I'm not dressed."

"I brought you some clothes," one of the women said through the door – though saying that, most of them were just girls, probably not any older than Derek. When Jaime opened it, Rylee stood there, a brown paper bag in her hands. "We weren't sure what you'd like," she said.

The idea of all those women picking out things that they not only thought would fit, but things she might *like*, that simple gesture lifted a latch inside her – her heart caved in on itself and her hand went to her mouth to prevent her soul escaping as she exhaled, “*Oh.*”

Rylee glanced behind her to make sure the game in the living room continued, then she came into the room with Jaime, shutting the door behind her.

Jaime felt ridiculous, standing in just a bathrobe with this stranger when all the while her stretched-taut nerves threatened to undo her and she would *not* – after everything – she would not start blubbing like an idiot wearing just a bathrobe.

They faced each other for an awkward moment, and then Rylee pulled Jaime into a hug, inviting without demanding. “It’s alright now,” she said.

“No,” a yelp in Jaime’s throat. *Get a hold of yourself*, but the thing inside her had already come loose, and Rylee had such a gentle voice. Jaime folded into the older woman’s arms, Rylee stroking her back as Jaime shivered into a crumpled ball on the floor.

“I left him,” Jaime said in a cracked whisper once the crying slowed.

“I know, hon.” Rylee nodded sympathetically. “But you couldn’t have helped him.”

Jaime wiped her cheeks with the sleeve of the bathrobe. Could she say it? What would this kind, friendly woman think of her once she knew what kind of person Jaime really was? It weighed on her chest so heavy it was difficult to breathe. “He wasn’t dead.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When we left, he wasn’t dead.” Jaime closed her eyes. She saw Baz lying on his back in the living room. His grey T-shirt slick with blood. More blood on the floor around him. She’d always felt so safe around him, like he could protect them from anything. “But I couldn’t get through to 911, and he’d lost so much blood...” She covered her mouth with her hands; tears blurred her eyes. “So I left him behind.”

“You did what you had to do,” Rylee told her, clasping Jaime’s hand. “The world’s different now.”

Would Derek agree, if he knew she’d left his brother alone to bleed to death? Did she? *He wouldn’t have left me.* “I could have –”

Rylee stopped her. “Carried a grown man on your own?”

“Stayed.”

“Honey, what good would that have done?” Rylee asked.

It wouldn’t have done any good. Jaime knew that. Still, she held herself accountable. Baz would be here now if she’d just been stronger braver smarter better. Now, because she hadn’t been, the kids lost their father. Derek lost his brother. She lost her Baz.

Rylee cupped Jaime’s face in her hands; she smelled of flour and fresh laundry. “Be kind to yourself,” Rylee told her. “It won’t be the last hard decision you’ll have to make. Your job was to keep those children safe, and that’s what you did. You hear me?”

Jamie nodded, even though she knew that leaving Baz behind would never be okay in her heart. But she understood what Rylee meant. They didn’t have the luxury of feeling bad about things; now was a time to make decisions and move on, good or bad. That was the kind of person Jaime would have to learn how to be.

## FIFTEEN

I walk through fire.

It cracks and hisses in my ears. I know what it wants. I feel how hungry it is.

Glass crunches beneath my feet and the flames caress my skin; the fire beckons me onward. The great old houses crumble in on themselves as it snakes through their skeletons. The trees are gnarled black hands reaching to the sky with glowing embers at their hearts.

My mouth tastes of ash and smoke.

Hands reach for me through the flames, begging me to release them – save them – pull them from the heat searing their skin. But I am the fire and I can't let them go.

\*

The house speaks in the night language of shifting walls and settling floors. The windows creak under the pressure of the wind outside. I can still see the flames projected on the white plaster from my retina.

My mouth tastes of ash.

Justin's breath is cool on my shoulder, my arm sweaty from lying beneath him. Lowering his head to the pillow, I sit up and push the damp hair from my face.

"Another dream?" he asks, curling around me. His hand runs up my back. "You're burning up."

"I'm alright."

"You sure?" He starts to sit up, but I lay my hand on his chest to stop him. *Go back to sleep.*

"Yeah. Just going to get some water." I kiss his forehead, willing him to drift off.

I used to have night terrors as a kid. I'd wake up drenched in sweat, unable to tell my parents what had been so terrifying. A world constantly burning because the fire came from me. *And now the world really is burning.*

I make my way through the unfamiliar house to the veranda and settle on the steps to watch the pre-storm. *Some kind of idiots for hiding out on an island during a hurricane.*

Benny pushes open the screen door, handing me my cigarettes before sitting beside me. “Maybe we should leave,” he says. “What if it isn’t safe to stay here?”

*Where would we go?* I push the lid open again and look at the six little tubes inside. I need to buy more soon. What a time to run out of smokes.

“I don’t know.” He leans into me. He’s worried about Mom and Dad. Worried about Baz. He nudges me again with his shoulder.

I don’t know what to say. We need food. Baz’s phone goes straight to voicemail. Jaime isn’t picking up. I can’t even connect to Mom or Dad. Derek’s the only one I can keep track of – if you can call it that – through the occasional mention of n3m0 working in the ether. If that is our brother, and not some other anarchist coder adopting Derek’s alias. It’s better to believe that it’s Derek. Still. Over half our family is missing. What do I do with that?

*[We need a plan.]*

“Do you think there’s anything left?” Between the hurricane and the riots, not to mention the National Guard infesting downtown like ticks on a dog...

“We could try Southside.” He takes one of the cigarettes from my pack and lights it, passing it over after the first drag.

I take mine and pass it back. “We have to drive through crack head country to get anywhere.”

“You work Eastside every day.”

“Yeah, but...” That’s different. On my own, on foot, I’m just another brown kid with a backpack. In a car. Together. That’ll draw attention.

*[It’ll be flooded if we don’t go before the storm hits.]*

And then we’d be well and truly fucked. No way off the island. No food. No water. The house being whisked up in some Wizard of Oz cyclone.

“That’s a tornado,” Benny says.

*You know what I mean.* I knock his shoulder with mine. The ocean crushes itself against the shore, and the sky overhead is matte black. It’s going to break soon. “We need to get off the island.”

“That car isn’t going to get us very far.”

“Mom’s car is still in the garage,” I say.

*[You want to go back downtown?]*

*What are our options?*

“Hey.” Justin stands at the screen door. “Did you hear something?”

“Just couldn’t sleep,” I say. “Did we wake you?”

“Had to pee.” He steps out on the veranda and tucks himself into a rattan chair. “What’re you guys mind-melding about?”

“Where we can go if we can’t stay here,” Benny tells him.

“We could go to my parents’,” Justin suggests.

“Really?” It’s hard to say which they’re more uncomfortable with – my gender or my skin tone – though, if they knew the whole story... They’d probably feel totally justified. Hell, maybe they’re right. He started hanging out with an upper middle class art student and ended up living with an unemployed drug dealer who can set people on fire. Ish.

“They can’t turn us away,” he reasons. “How would that look? Pastor turning away people in need, even if those people happen to be going to hell in a handbasket?”

“I just can’t see them welcoming us in,” I say.

“Well, I didn’t say they’d be welcoming about it,” he answers, “but they’ll let us stay.”

“Will your car make it that far?” Benny asks.

I’m afraid to hope this will work. Pastor Thomas has a congregation down in Blue Hill near Valdosta, and there’s nothing but nothing around there.

“I’d say it’s 50/50 we get there, or we end up stranded along the side of the road somewhere,” says Justin.

Carys emerges from her room wearing a fuzzy yellow robe. “I thought I heard voices,” she says. “Why are we getting stranded by the side of the road?”

“We’re trying to figure out whether to take Justin’s car or try for our mom’s,” Benny tells her.

“I vote for not getting stranded,” she says. “But driving around downtown is going to be tricky with the barricades.”

The grid of downtown unfolds in my head, marked with all the places cops usually hang out and various short-cuts I’ve found. “If we can get as close as East Broad, I can walk from there.” Would they have barricades as far north as Jones Street? We might get lucky. “We’ll meet up somewhere afterwards. Then we have two cars.”

“What if you can’t get out with the car?” Justin asks. “I don’t like the idea of you going.”

“Benny can’t drive and you don’t know where the keys are,” I counter. I’m good at moving through the city unnoticed.

“How likely is this to actually work?” Carys asks.

The truth is, we don’t know. The house doesn’t have a TV and the radio accounts are sketchy at best, not to mention all the bullshit you’d have to wade through on Twitter. Movement is restricted to work and home. The curfew is still in place. Banks are shut. Most of downtown has closed except for a few stubborn local businesses. The Steam Room started a promotion where cappuccinos are half-price for protestors.

“We should split up,” Benny says finally. “Things should be quiet in their neighbourhood. We’ll be able to get out. It’ll go faster with two of us.”

“I’m coming, too,” Justin says. “Not up for debate.”

“Where are we going?” Carys asks.



“The worst my parents can do is turn us away,” Justin says.

“The worst they can do is shoot us,” I say.

“Fair point. So what’s the next option?”

“There isn’t one,” I say. “Screw it. There is no good choice. We try to get Mom’s car and we leave town. Go to Blue Hill or whatever. Maybe if we have a landline we can get through to someone.”

\*

The POS smells of patchouli and night-thievery. It’s only 12:30, but mid-afternoon thievery doesn’t have the same ring, and it’s dark enough to be midnight. Carys guides the wide nose with the strength of any captain battling gale force winds, using only the parking lights to navigate through the premature darkness. Lightning flashes deep within the cumulonimbus clouds, casting a neon lining around the edges; by the time the thunder comes, you’ve almost forgotten you were waiting for it. It’s the kind of night that would make this sort of drive fun, if –

We would always put the windows down and drive up to Hilton Head, or do the loop – Truman Parkway to 204, then Veterans Parkway back downtown. Mostly it was me and Benny on those nights, usually after taking Ren back home again. Other people always want some destination in mind. They don’t understand that the purpose is in the driving, in becoming a servant to the machine’s rhythm and the quietness that brings about our greatest secrets. Benny and I rarely talked, though; that’s part of the appeal. Just the two of us without any of the inhibitions about what to conceal and what to present.

Tonight, we sit in the back with Ren on my other side, Benny’s presence beside me palpable and grounding. The car is our spaceship, our magic box, protecting us from the storms waiting right outside our windows.

*“Look...”*

The three of us scrunch forward to see through the windshield. The POS coasts over the Bull River bridge, headlights switched full on so we can see the river spiralling over the bridge in a tunnel of water. Awesome the way only nature can be. In a weird way, it's like a blessing. The bridge could've been flooded, or washed out completely, but some fluke of nature kept the way open for us.

We can do this. I've walked this way hundreds of times. It takes ten, fifteen minutes. No big deal.

No big deal.

The first fat raindrops hit us as soon as we get out of the car, and by the next block we're running to escape the rain pelting down on us like little bullets.

You can feel the absolute emptiness of every house on the street. I figured most who could, would have left by now, but it's different seeing it. It's hard to believe anyone ever lived here at all. But that means the only people still here are ones without any choices, and I can feel them behind the dark windows adding a hard edge to the city.

After we turn down the lane that runs behind the houses, it gets so hard to see through the rain that Benny has to shout to keep me from passing our parents' garage. We file through the fence and over the squidgy grass so we don't bust our asses on the stone path to side door.

I jerk the handle up and give the frame a little bump with my shoulder and stumble into the garage. Inside is a stuffy wall of gasoline fumes, grass clippings, and grease. I take a few cautious steps forward, trying to picture where things should be and hoping I'll bump into a fender every step. Mom pulls the minivan all the way up to the wall, but Dad is more of a neatly centred guy, so it's 50/50 whether I'll actually come up on the car like this, but the only light switch is over by the door to the wine cellar. My toe hooks under something – lawnmower? Metal scrapes against concrete – I stumble and bang my hip on a sharp edge, the work table maybe, knocking me backwards – *Jesus fucking* – plopping on the hood of the car with my ass.

I keep one hand on the hood and the other out in front of me, and manage to reach the light without killing myself, then sift through Dad's jars of nails, bolts, and god knows what. The key had appeared after Derek got caught sneaking in one night. He got grounded for a month, but the next night the spare key started living in the garage. It never got put in the same jar, though – part of Dad's two-pronged approach to parenting, making sure we had a way into the house, but knowing to use it we'd have to sort through potentially hundreds of jars full of all the random crap Dad collected for that purpose.

Benny slaps my arm and steps up to unlock the door.

"Where'd you get a key?" I ask, following him inside the cramped hallway.

"Made a copy," he answers. "Didn't you?"

Fucking hell.

The only way into the house from the garage is through the wine cellar. We used to dare each other to go down there when we were kids. Well, sort of. Benny and I would goad Derek into it when we'd planned some kind of shenanigans to scare the shit out of him – at least until Mom found out and we were forbidden from even thinking about the wine cellar... Which just made it that much more enticing.

Mom and Dad never used it, so throughout our childhood it was this long, dark room littered with the carcasses of wine racks from the time beyond. Plenty of places for anything to jump out and get you – bloodsucking wereghouls, harpies with extra long talons perfect for ripping out little boys' eyeballs, older brothers with too much time on their hands.

A spiral staircase takes us up to Mom's studio/gardening command centre, and Benny goes on ahead, but I linger. The table is laid out with this season's seeds in yoghurt pots and Mason jar lids. Little sketches on torn out notepaper of the flowers they belong to serve as labels. I know that stem of trumpets is creamy white with a shock of violet at the centre. Those pompoms come in rose, lavender, powder blue. But I couldn't list the names to save my life.

I take one shaped like a starfish with laced tendrils on every side because a small voice in my ribcage says it may be the only way to save the sketch. I'm still trying very hard to ignore it quietly and persistently saying *They're gone. They're gone and they aren't coming back.*

The wall in the kitchen with our height charts. Baz still towers over us all, but Derek passed me and Benny up two years ago, so he could catch up. Little bastard. Not so little.

Third step up creaks – Benny always forgets that – how, when you hear it every time you go up or down, I don't know. I find him in Ren's room, throwing clothes into a duffle bag. Good thing he thought of that. Poor kid can't run around in Justin's T-shirts forever. I leave Benny there, and head to our parents' room at the back of the house. Mom keeps the spare car keys in Dad's sock drawer.

The meticulousness of their room bothers me. There's something about a line of perfectly straight objects I can't resist fucking with. But now is not the time. Still, after I grab the keys, I find myself walking around the room, looking at all the little mementoes of their lives. Some of them I know – the China squirrel Dad gave Mom for their second anniversary, the antique pill box with a bronze bee on it passed down through eight generations of Isner women – but others are a mystery. The photo of their younger selves on River Street with another couple I've never seen. A masquerade mask with purple feathers and glittery sequins.

It's only when I tilt back the lid to the octagonal jewellery box do I realise this is what I really came for. The box, of course, was legend when we were younger. It's nothing special – one of those mass-produced Made in Italy engraved wooden boxes with different sections of purplish velour for different types of jewellery. When you open it, these two little wings rise out and to the side of the main compartment, with another removable tray beneath that.

When we were growing up, though, not only was the box kept tantalisingly above reach, but also in our parents' room, most holy of holies to only be breached in real emergencies, like a

babadook sighting. By the time we were tall enough to reach it, there were hologames and Pop Warner to take up our time.

I trace the little flowers carved around the edge in a border. It's stupid, I know, but lifting this lid breaks one of the earliest rules imprinted in my spongy brain, and that rule battles the pernicious urge to get whatever lies inside until one finger unhitches the latch and curiosity wins.

The side trays are strewn with earrings – little studs, slim hoops, a few with rhinestones glued on. None of them worth anything or they wouldn't be here. The two internal trays are draped with necklaces and bracelets respectively. More rhinestones to replace the pieces that had been sold. Lifting those out, the velvet bed is littered with broaches. A frog. A bear. A hummingbird. Is that it? I was meant to find costume jewellery?

The Urge doesn't let up, and as I continue to look at the box, I realise there are shadows where there shouldn't be. I run my fingers around the inside, feeling for any seam or edge that might be concealed beneath the lining. In the top corner, I find a button hidden in the seams. Another small tray pops out. This one is a plain wooden box, with a single silver ring so tarnished it looks bronze. The design is a bird, wings outstretched, forming the band, with flames as feathers, an ouroboros clasped in its talons.

“We should see what food we can take.” Benny stands in the doorway of Dad's office across the hall, Ren's duffle thrown over his shoulder. “Batteries and stuff.” He lifts a book from one of the shelves and squints at the spine. “Where's Mom keep the first aid kit?” The book vanishes into the duffle. What would he hide from me?

“Kitchen.” My fist swallows the ring, slides it into my pocket. “I'll meet you down there.”

After he leaves, I go into Dad's office and scan the shelves for the empty slot. Third row down, *The Song of Kaya* tilts against an illustrated guidebook on plant life of the Appalachian Trail. All the spines after it read with the names of Dad's novels. The one Benny took must've been Dad's, too. Maybe the same thing occurred to Benny, about things that can be saved.

When I get down to the kitchen, Justin and Benny are busy emptying the cupboards of canned goods and packing them in canvas bags. Mom is a canning nut, so there's plenty to choose from. "I'll start loading the car," I say, grabbing one of the bags and Ren's duffel.

I'm at the midpoint of the wine cellar – that place where the light by the stairs doesn't quite meet the light from the garage, and it's just *dark* – when I hear the sound. *You're trippin', Dumas*, but I hear it again. Voice sounds. There are voice sounds in my parents' garage, and there shouldn't be.

*Holy motherfucking monkey ass –*

*Think, dipshit. Put down the bags.*

*Project confidence.*

Yeah, right. If Baz were here, maybe, but I'm no Baz. I've lost every fight I've ever been in.

"Who's in there?" I call out, pitching my voice with impossible deepness. I sound like an idiot. The voice noises and the movement noises stop. "You're trespassing. Leave now or I'll call the cops."

"Yeah?" a man's voice yelled back. "And who're you?"

"This is our house. I'm calling the cops, so you better go."

We know the cops aren't going to show up any time soon, even if I had called. I can't just stand in the dark and yell at them. Okay. I can do this. It starts with one step, then you just keep going.

Through the doorway, I can see at least three white guys. All big, but more frat boy than redneck. The garage door is open, rain still pouring outside. Is that how they got in, or had we forgotten to latch the gate?

Benny and Justin come up behind me. "What're they doing here?" Justin asks. I sense him butch up – shoulders square, chin up, strong movements – the way he always does around straight guys.

“We saw you sneaking in here,” says the man. His eyes take in the bags in Justin’s hands. “Looks to me like you’re cleaning the place out.” He hefts a crowbar in a fist as big as my face.

I puff up all 130 pounds of me as big as it’ll go, and step into the garage. Carys and Ren will be waiting for us, but we can’t just leave our parents’ house to be trashed and looted. “This is our house.”

“My grandma lives right across the street, and she knows the woman who owns this house. A *white* woman,” the man says, hitting that button that’s trigger-wired in my brain. “I’ve met her, and I’ve never seen *you*,” he jabs the crowbar in my direction, “and I’m here every Sunday.”

“So I don’t know your grandma and I’m not here on Sundays,” I say back.

“Who isn’t home on Sunday?”

“People who have shit to do, maybe? So what?”

Justin pulls me back. [*For the love of God, keep your mouth shut,*] echoes in his touch. “I think we should just take a minute,” he says.

“I haven’t seen your face around here once,” the man repeats.

“Guys,” Justin tries again. “This is just a misunderstanding. Viv Dumas, that’s the woman who lives here, right?” The frat boys exchange looks, and I can tell that at least part of the man’s story is true because he recognises her name. “She’s their mom. We’re just here to pick up some stuff. That’s all. We have a key. How else would we get a key?”

The man lowers the crowbar, and steps back to confer with the other two. I’m just angry. I know if I looked like Justin, there wouldn’t be a question. And this is *my* house. I grew up here. And these pigfuckers are questioning *my* right to be here?

“Show us your ID,” the man says finally. “If Mrs Dumas is your mom, you’ll have the same last name, right? So, your ID says Dumas, it’s all good.”

“For fuck’s sake,” I say, but Benny hands over his driver’s license. “See?” he says.

“Benjamin Dumas. This is my brother. Obviously.”

“This says you live on 34<sup>th</sup> Street,” the man says.

“Well, yeah, that’s where our apartment is,” Benny says. “But this is still –”

“You said you lived here, and you don’t.”

“Look – it’s our parents’ house,” I say, snatching back Benny’s license. “So what? We have every right to be here.”

Justin pulls me back again. “Caleb, come on,” he says, low, in that tone that really says, *Forget this fight for now.*

Part of me knows he’s right to, but that part isn’t in control and I shake him off. “No, I’m not gonna get pushed around by this misbegotten throwback.”

“What did you call me?”

“Look, if we just calm down –”

“Should I use smaller words?”

“I’m not going to be talked to that way by some Apu motherfucker.”

“Jesus, I’m not even fucking Hindu.” I get up in his face and his buddies crowd in, so mine do, too. Justin tries to wedge between us, spilling out platitudes to diffuse the situation, but I’m not listening, and Frat Boy’s not listening either. “I’m *American*, dumbass, just like you.” I jab him in one fleshy pec. He pushes me. Justin is yelling now, using his bigger size to keep me back. I hear Benny say, “What the fuck –” right before the gun goes off.

Everyone stops, and no one looks more shocked than the one who pulled the trigger, one of the buddies. He puts the gun on the work table like it burns his hand. My ears ring and a mist of smoke – the scent of spent fireworks – hangs in the garage.

“Oh, shit, we gotta get the fuck out of here!” from one of the frat boys, and then they’re gone. Justin grabs my shoulders and asks if I’m okay, his face creased in fear.

“I’m fine,” I tell him, but he’s lifting up my shirt, and checking my side, turning me around.



“Justin –” says Benny. He has his hand raised over a spot on Justin’s back. There’s a burnt hole Justin’s shirt, blood seeping into the cloth around it.

“What do we do?” I ask Benny.

“I got shot,” Justin says.

“I don’t know,” Benny says. “I haven’t gotten to that chapter.”

“Oh my God. I got shot. Cay –”

“It’s okay,” I tell him. How can it possibly be okay? “It’s okay, *shé*.”

“Hospital,” Benny says. “Do you have the keys?”

We use our shirts to stop the bleeding, and load Justin into the backseat of Mom’s car, Benny climbing in with him to keep pressure on the wounds. I slide into the driver’s seat and back into the lane.

The rain is coming down so hard I have to guess where the road is, and I can feel the tires hydroplaning every time we go through a puddle.

“Watch your speed,” Benny warns.

“I’m trying to get there quick,” I say.

“We won’t get there at all if you total the car.”

I drop back down to twenty, even though it feels like we’re just creeping down the road and all I can think about is the blood pumping out of Justin’s chest with every second. *How the fuck did this happen?*

*[Just concentrate on driving.]*

I can feel how calm Benny is – every time I let up on the wheel, my hands shake – and I envy that. It takes all my attention to make sure we don’t die on the way to the hospital. I do that, so I won’t have to think about anything else.

The next puddle turns out to be more of a lake; I can feel the drag on the car. I cheer on the car – *Come on. You can make it. Please don’t die.* – but the water keeps rising and we keep going

slower. “Just a little further,” I whisper, leaning against the steering wheel as if I could push the car forward myself – and then we’re out of the water, but the engine is making choking sounds and we’re basically just coasting down the road.

I put it back in first, and try turning the engine even though I know it’s pointless. Any idiot knows your car is fucked if you flood it. Any idiot would have played it safe and found another route. Maybe stuck to Abercorn, but then DeRenne might have been flooded, and no matter what, you had to get on Waters at some point... How long would it take to walk?

[*Caleb...*] “He’s not responding.”

I crawl in between the seats and switch the dome light on. The balled up T-shirt over the wound is saturated, and he is so pale – I touch his face. This can’t be us. *You are not allowed to die on me.*

“He’s not breathing,” Benny says, his voice tense.

“What about a pulse?” I press my fingers against Justin’s wrist, not that I have the faintest clue what I’m doing. *I don’t know what to do.* “Did you check for a pulse?”

“Of course I did, but I can’t tell.”

I check my phone – no bars – punch in 911 anyway, but the icon just spins and spins without connecting. “What do we do?”

He shakes his head.

A cruiser turns onto Victory from Paulsen, and the lights flick on as it pulls against the median. Without thinking past *they can save Justin*, I hop out of the car and run towards them, only to be stopped by a gun and a flashlight pointed at my face. My hands shoot into the air, and I start saying, “Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!”

“Stay right there,” the cop says. “Sir, are you injured? Whose blood is that?”

I keep my eyes down, away from the light. “My – friend. In the car. He’s hurt. Please.”

She doesn't respond. Her partner's light roves over the car behind me. "Looks like two in the backseat," he murmurs.

"Sir, I want you to turn around and place your hands on the hood of the car," she says. "How many people are with you? Just your friend that's hurt?"

I turn around, feeling acutely how vulnerable I am. Every step is a prayer when you're waiting to get shot in the back. "There's three of us. My friend's shot. He needs an ambulance. Please."

The cops approach us then, splitting up, one on me, and the other for the backseat. "I'm going to need you to open the door," she says to Benny, "and step out of the car with your hands where I can see them. Can you do that now?"

I try to see what's happening over there, but the rain's too thick, and the flashlight too blinding in my eyes. I'm afraid to even breathe too deeply.

"Hands on the trunk, please. Just stay right there." She responds to a voice over the radio. "We got a DB over here. Send a bus."

*DB? DB...?* "No," I say, turning to appeal to her. Two guns come out of their holsters and my hands shoot over my head.

"Sir, *do not move.*"

"I won't move," I say. "Please just get him a doctor."

"Boy, there ain't a doctor in the land gonna do that man any good," says her partner. "Read 'em their rights and let's get 'em in the car."

I can feel Benny willing me to keep cool as our hands are ziptied behind our backs and the Miranda is recited. I just keep thinking, *this can't be happening*, and there's Justin's hand hanging out of the open door, not moving – my brave, stupid man who would be just fine *if only if only if only*



pt ii

## SIXTEEN

The Audrey Interviews

Year 37, Third Quarter Moon, Harvest Season

AR03-001

**CD:** Come on. It won't bite.

**AW:** What's it do?

**CD:** It plays – Um. It's a music player. Old School. My brother had one.

**AW:** Ben?

**CD:** Baz.

**AW:** Tell me about him.

**CD:** He was... He always had my back.

**AW:** You were close.

**CD:** Tell me about the Collapse.

**AW:** You know I was on the Farm durin' all that. How come there's no sound?

**CD:** It's recording.

**AW:** Caleb... Nobody wanna hear what I gotta say.

**CD:** I do. Come on. What's your name?

**AW:** You know my name.

**CD:** Audrey...

**AW:** See?

**CD:** Woman.

**AW:** Don't you take that tone with me, Caleb Alain. Now what's this all for?

**CD:** I'm trying to make a historical record.

**AW:** You shoulda just said. My name is Audrey Vivien Waters, an' I was born in Parsons, West Virginia. Whatcha wanna know next?

**CD:** Tell me the first thing you remember.

**AW:** Katie Hendricks' princess birthday party. That was the day Uncle Teddy got arrested. Mama made me go because she said it was about time I had some *girl* friends so I'd stop coming back all muddy from playing with the boys down the street. Didn't hurt that Katie Hendricks lived in an actual house – a small one, just three rooms, but most of us lived in trailers over at Shady Park so it seemed big enough – and Mrs Hendricks didn't work like all the other moms. That was the cake topper. Mama always looked for a way to angle relationships. But Mama got an extra shift at the saw mill so Uncle Teddy had to take me. He didn't fit in with Katie Hendricks' parents, either, but he said we had to go, and as long as we stuck together, it'd be alright.

So I got dressed up in this bubblegum pink vinyl costume from the Dollar Store – it smelled like rubber and stuck to my skin. The Hendricks' had a real yard, too, with a privacy fence all around and the greenest grass I ever saw. I still remember the way it felt on my feet, cool and sharp. Springy. I loved that feeling.

Pink crepe streamers were hung all around the fence in scallops. Matching balloons decorated the swing-set and picnic table. Mr Hendricks had the grill going and was talking to some other grown-ups I didn't know.

Mrs Hendricks was one of those sunny women. Her smile was a well-timed guerrilla attack meant to throw you off-kilter. Mostly you just went along with whatever she told you to do because of the sheer force of her. Which is how I ended up at the picnic table with a frosted pink cupcake I had to hold with both hands, surrounded by Katie Hendricks and the other girls, who all talked in a language that was different than the one we used at school. More than anything, I wanted to go home, but I couldn't do that without being a baby, so the only option was to tough it out. At least it wasn't a sleepover.

We'd just started singing "Happy Birthday", and Mr Hendricks was bringing out the cake topped with a big wax 6, and then all these policemen were surrounding us and yelling for everyone to put our hands in the air and not move. I was too scared to shift even an inch, but some of the girls tried to make a break for their mamas. The policemen yelled at them to stop, and their mamas, too, when they weren't saying *please, please* at the police with tears down their faces.

Real quick, even more officers came in and put all the grown-ups in handcuffs and started leading them around through the side gate while the rest herded us up. A real nice lady officer tried talking to me but all I could see was Uncle Teddy shuffling closer and closer to that gate, and I remembered what he said. We had to stick together. So I hit the officer. Punched her right in the cheek with the ball of my fist, and then I started screaming. I figured if I made enough ruckus they'd have to take me, too, and that way we wouldn't get separated, so I just let loose as loud as my lungs'd go – Uncle Teddy yelled my name, and then the police started yelling at him – and I kicked and hit until someone finally scooped me up from behind and lifted me off my feet.

I saw Uncle Teddy on the ground, then, one of the officers kneeling on his back and he was yelling *Just let me talk to her!* Until finally, they let him up and walked him over to where I was still wriggling mid-air, and he says to me, in that real quiet way we practiced for emergencies, "I need ya to stop, chicken little. I need ya to be good for these people 'til your mama comes."

I told him I didn't want to, that they scared me, and he said there was nothing to be afraid of. The police were the good guys, and I'd be okay. Just be a good girl and wait for Mama, and then they took him off again, and that's the last time I ever saw him.

**CD:** Do you know what happened to him?

**AW:** Honest to God, I'm afraid to know, so much bad happened out there. Same with Mama and Ava.

**CD:** Who's Ava?

**AW:** My little sister.



**CD:** You never said.

**AW:** I didn't really have her for that long. She was only four months when Uncle Teddy got arrested. That's hardly enough time to know what it's like.

**CD:** And you're not curious what happened to them? If they might be out there somewhere?

**AW:** A course I am. Some days it's all I think about. What they doing now, what they look like. If they think about me. What if Mama got married again and now I got even more little sisters I never knew about? I get to imagine all sorts of lives for them. But once I know for sure, I can't take that back. That'll be the only life they had.

**CD:** It drives me crazy not knowing.

**AW:** Well, in your world people didn't just disappear.

**CD:** What happened to you and the other kids?

**AW:** They took us around to the street where a van was parked, with seats in the back for us to sit on. I was towards the back of the line, so I saw Katie Hendricks's princess crown in the grass, and I thought about picking it up, in case she wanted it later. Part of me wanted to keep it for myself, and that deeper thought led me to worry she'd accuse me of stealing it, so I left it. But as soon as it was too late to grab it without drawing everyone's attention, I wished I'd picked it up.

**CD:** Would you have given it back to her?

**AW:** I dunno. Maybe she didn't deserve it.

**CD:** Where did they take you after the party?

**AW:** The police station first. Relatives came for most of the other girls, all except me an' this other girl. The two of us just sat there hour after hour. I didn't know where they'd taken Uncle Teddy, or why Mama wasn't comin', but there weren't no one else to come for me, an' I guess the other girl was in the same boat. We didn' talk, though, not one word. We spent the night in an emergency foster home, and then first thing next morning they put us on a FEMA transport – old school buses chock full a kids whose folks'd just left 'em behind for the state to look after, including me, now.

**CD:** Is that when the Nameless took you?

**AW:** We'd stopped at a rest stop. They came out of nowhere, and picked us up like dolls. It was so quick and quiet. Sometimes I still smell their clothes – our attic used to smell like that.

**CD:** What happened next?

**AW:** You know what happened next.

**CD:** Well, say it for the record. So people know what happened.

**AW:** What people?

**CD:** I dunno. Future people.

**AW:** Why would these future people care what happens to us? We ain't special. Well, you, maybe, but the rest a us is basically livestock.

**CD:** Do you ever look at something – this tape recorder, and wonder what people a thousand years from now will think of it?

**AW:** What kinda question is that?

**CD:** My dad always had a thing about museums. Every vacation, back when we still took 'em. We'd walk through these dimly lit, air conditioned rooms full of cases displaying the leftovers of dead people – a comb, a bracelet, a carved cup – with explanations about how and when they were used. There'd always be one thing – something that stuck out, and I'd stand in front of it for ages trying to imagine the person to last hold it, how they lost it, if it was a big loss or one they didn't notice. I'd spook myself out 'til I was convinced I was standing in a room full of ghosts, all of them trapped there by the things they left behind. Having to listen to all the theories and guesses on what their lives might have been without being able to ever set the record straight.

**AW:** At least they were remembered, even a little bit.

**CD:** It's better to be forgotten than misunderstood. I don't want people making up their own stories...

**AW:** What does it matter? They're just stories.

**CD:** All we are is stories.

**AW:** Your dad tell you that?

**CD:** It's something Ben used to say. What do you remember most?

**AW:** I remember the dark, and the cold sting across my skin, and these big fat flakes just driftin' down in people's hair an' meltin' on their cheeks. Jus' the way that black sky looked with all these little white puffballs flying every which way. It was like watchin' magic.

The rest stop was one a those bare necessity places with jus' toilets an' sinks an' empty vendin' machines. It was so cold, unnatural so for late September, and I remember Uncle Teddy saying we'd have snow before Halloween that year, 'cause the trees were brighter when they turned, and every woolly worm I checked had a short brown band so it had to be true.

We was only going to make so many stops so the lady driver made us all get out and stand in two lines, and then they let us go in, six at a time – three boys and three girls – then made us wait to get onto the bus. I still had on that stupid princess costume from the party, and a Steelers sweatshirt that came to my knees with the sleeves dragging on the floor when I forgot to push them up. It had a coffee stain on the front, over the yellow R and smelled like old mayonnaise, but I wrapped it tight as I could around me to keep from shivering out there in that parking lot.

It was such a clear night, you could just about see every star there was in the sky, and then these great puffy flakes dusted down over all a us. It was quiet enough you could hear the snow settling as it fell.

The man got us all back on the bus, and we huddled together, sleepy but cold, and the windows all steamed up from our breath. We just sat there and sat there, and no one came back. Some a the kids started whimpering and crying. A few a the older ones got real brash. Then someone, I don't know who, looked out the window and scream like bloody murder, saying there was demons out there eating the man and the lady driver. An older boy ran up and shut the doors, but

that must a got their attention ‘cause next thing the demons was swarming all over the bus. We could hear them prying on windows and seams to get in.

Inside, everyone was screaming and wailing. A couple boys tried holding the front door closed but then it burst open and the demons were inside the bus with us. I couldn’t see a thing – I wouldn’t see a thing for days, but I didn’t know that then. Arms and legs were flying everywhere; I felt near pummelled to death – that’s how my front tooth got chipped.

I got scooped up by some creature, soft and musty, but with a firmness underneath. And then we were out in the cold night again, the wind sharp against my face as we raced through the woods, and the whole time these arms held on tight as kudzu vines. I could feel its heart pounding against my ear, and its muscles pumping with the rhythm of its sprint. And I felt... strange. There was this part of me that was terrified, never been more scared in my little life, but it was like that part had got locked away in some container so it was real faint, like an echo that didn’t really affect me at all.

When we stopped, I heard water, like around a dock, that *pat-pat* of it moving. We went through two doors, and stopped in what I guessed must be a small space ‘cause I could feel the other creatures pressed close by but it was so *quiet* and dark... I thought I must be wrapped in something ‘cause I still couldn’t see even though we’d obviously gone inside.

I had that elevator feeling, and my stomach just about felt like it was ready to come out through my eyeballs, and then we came to a stop and – I don’t know – it was like a sound was made that I couldn’t hear, but I could feel the effect of it running through the creatures all around me. The next thing I knew, I was being thrown in this little room, pitch black, with maybe a couple dozen other kids, crowded together so tight we had to stand in one place and not move. There was this hissing sound – must’ve been the door closing – and we were left alone again, just like we’d been on the bus.

After a while, kids started to cry again, and then you’d hear other kids trying to make them feel better. I wanted to go home. I wanted Mama and Uncle Teddy, and Ava even if she wouldn’t

stop crying. I wished I'd never gone to Katie Hendricks' stupid princess birthday party, and that I'd never even known her at all, and before you know it, I was bawling right along with the rest of them.

Someone took my hand and held onto it so tight I thought my hand might break, but I was never so glad for pain in all my life. I reached out until I found someone else with my other hand, and we all stood there, crying in the dark.

**CD:** How long did they keep you down there?

**AW:** I don't know. We couldn't keep track. They'd take us out of the room and spray us down with water – there weren't any toilets so we just had to do our business where we stood and wait in our filth until they came back for us again.

**CD:** How'd they feed you?

**AW:** While they cleaned out the room. They'd put down these plates of... of – It was like oatmeal almost, and it tasted like grass. It was like we'd just know when we were supposed to crawl forward and find it. We were all so hungry, as soon as our hands touched the plate we'd be shovelling big fistfuls into our mouths no matter what it tasted like. They always put us back in the room too soon, though, and the porridge sitting your belly like a hard, cold lump that didn't do a thing to make you feel any better. They fed us three, maybe four times when this girl in our room started freaking out. Most a us stopped after the first while – cried ourselves out, basically – but this girl. I think it was a girl. She started shrieking so high and loud, and then she kept pushing her way through us and pounding on the walls – they were made of this spongy material like the floor so her fists just made a *dmp dmp dmp* sound. People told her to calm down, to be quiet. There wasn't room for her to be carrying on like that, and gradually everyone started yelling and screaming – these wild, animal cries, like she set something loose in us we'd been holdin' back. Every one of us started stamping our feet and hollerin' all get out. I screamed until my throat hurt, and then I screamed some more.

**CD:** What did the Nameless do?

**AW:** I don't know how to explain... All a sudden I had this feelin', an' I knew they put it in me an' it wudn't real but I couldn't stop... It felt like... like when you stop at the top of the Ferris wheel and you look over, so the cart sways, and you know in your heart you're gonna die right there, but you can't show it 'cause the Ferris wheel is jus' a baby ride an' nobody gets scair't at the top so it eats at you wit' these sharp, pointy teeth, like a centipede burrowin' through your belly button. And it jus' kep' goin' an' goin'. I 'member I jus' kep' sayin' please please please... It stopped us screamin', though, an' the whole res' a the time we stayed in the dark, not a one of us drew even a loud breath. They din' feed us agin 'til right b'fore the Rescue.

**CD:** How did it happen?

**AW:** I don't 'member next to nothin'. It was the usual routine – they pull us out, hose us down, then plop goes the food an' we all scramble to eat as much as we can. They din' put us right back in the room like they normally did, though, an' we had time to clean ever' plate. It always felt a little sour right af'er so I din' notice 'til I started feelin' thin an' wobbly as a bubble. Nex' thing I know I'm in a bed with light coming through the windows and the sound of a woman singin' the sweetest song.

It was a long cabin, with trees cut so fresh you could smell the sap on them. A soft, wool blanket covered me, and the window over my bed left a square sunspot over my knees. My head felt like a ton of bricks, and already my eyes started drooping, but I wanted to stay awake. I was afraid if I fell asleep the cabin would be gone, and I'd be back in that dark room, waiting for the next time I might get to shovel that awful porridge in my mouth again. I couldn't go back to that being the only thing I had.

I blacked out again and woke up properly the next morning – I think it was the next morning, anyway. The princess costume was gone, and I wore a plain linen nightgown that went all the way to my toes. The bed was in a long room filled with beds – maybe twenty in all – some had kids in them, but some were made up nice and neat. Beside each bed there was a little wood table with its own lamp, and at the foot sat a wooden trunk. There wasn't much else in the cabin besides the beds

except for a rocking chair at the front of the room, and someone had put some goldenrod and asters in a vase by the window.

Inside the trunk by my bed was three shirts and three pairs of pants, all real boxy and straight with drawstrings in the pants – and made out of such soft linen it was like being wrapped in kitten fluff. Then there was a pair of leather slippers and this big wool wrap. I was just about to change into them when a boy said, “What’s in there?”

He sat up in the bed next to mine, wearing the same sort of nightgown I was. He was a couple years older than me, with this blond hair that half stuck to his head while the other half stood straight up in the air. That was Ethan, a course. So I told him it was jus’ some clothes an’ we introduced ourselves, and then I asked him where were we.

An’ he said, he heard a lady – Mayra – talkin’ to one a the other kids. She told ‘em we’d been brought to the Farm, where she and her sisters lived, an’ they were takin’ care of us. Then she always took ‘em outside to another building, but Ethan pretended to be asleep every time she came so she hadn’t taken him yet.

**CD:** Why didn’t he pretend to be asleep with you?

**AW:** He said it didn’t feel right. Then he tol’ me to get dressed ‘cause we was gonna get outta there b’fore she come back ‘cause somethin’ jus’ wudn’t right about that place. He said we’d go ‘til we found the main road, an’ then we’d jus’ folla that to the nearest town, an’ there was bound to be people lookin’ for us, a whole busload a kids disappearin’ like we did. I didn’t think so, though.

**CD:** Why not?

**AW:** If anybody’d been inclined to look for us, we never woulda even been on that bus.

**CD:** How far did you get?

**AW:** How well you remember the Farm?

**CD:** Describe it anyway.

**AW:** For the future people. Okay. This dirt road ran in front of the cabin – one more just like it on either side – and a long, log building sat on the other side. There weren't no one around, so we crept around the second building where we picked up the road leading off to the lake not too far off.

We'd just about made it to the lake, when I started having my first reservations. It wasn't anything specific, just an uncomfortableness, like daddy-long-legs crawling all over my body. Then Ethan started walking slower, too, and I could tell he wasn't so sure of this plan anymore, either, but neither one of us wanted to be the first to say so. Right as we passed the tip of the lake, I got a real queasy feeling, and I even doubled over thinking I was gonna puke. Ethan was sweating real bad, big beads of it drippin' off his floppy hair.

Ethan wanted to keep going, so I tried, but it got worse with every step 'til I was on my knees in the dirt, huggin' myself and crying. Ethan tried to get me up, but he wasn't feeling so hot himself, so before too long, he ended up on the ground with me looking just about as miserable as anyone can be.

I don't know how long we sat there, but after a while, Mayra came walking towards us. She knelt and hugged us both, and all the bad feeling moved a little further away. By the time she got us back to the cabins, I felt completely better, like I hadn't even been sick in the first place.

**CD:** What did you think it was?

**AW:** Everyone had a story but the general idea was evil spirits lived in the woods an' if you went in, they'd eat your soul.

**CD:** Is that why no one ever left?

**AW:** Mostly, but... Where'd we go? We had food, a place to sleep, each other. The Watchers made it nice for us best they could.

**CD:** Do you blame them?

**AW:** I dunno. I did at first. When you turned twelve, the Firsts grabbed you after lights out an' took you over to the babadook tree by the lake an' that's when you found out the Truth.



**CD:** Which was?

**AW:** I dunno if I can tell you seein' as you didn' go through the ritual.

**CD:** No one has to know.

**AW:** What about the future people?

**CD:** They won't tell.

**AW:** Mm. You know it already. The Watchers worked for the Nameless, keeping us healthy so they could harvest our blood at the Yielding an' make little cakes outta it.

People always changed af'er that, an' I s'pose now I can see why, but at the time, I always thought it was 'cause that's when you had to attend the Yielding, too.

**CD:** How did the Watchers explain all this?

**AW:** They said the Nameless protected the Farm, but they needed our blood to make 'em strong, or monsters would come an' rip out our throats.

**CD:** They told you that?

**AW:** Every time someone complained about the Yieldings. "It's a small price to pray to keep monsters from ripping out your throat."

**CD:** [laughs]

**AW:** That was Sydne. You only met her but once or twice. Shrillest woman I ever. She was the one always houndin' us to do this or do that.

**CD:** What was the Yielding like?

**AW:** At dusk, we put out all the lights, an' those of us that'd Matured went into the Barn. It weren't really a barn, but we called it that. The Barn was where the Yielding happened, an' where the Watchers gave us our daily regen treatment. It was this big, long room filled with rows of these tall, circular frames with wide straps an' all kinds a wires.

An' we waited. It was always fully dark when the Nameless came. They arrived so quiet, like they just materialised outta thin air. Some a the kids said the Nameless *was* the spirits in the woods,

an' they was stealin' our souls piece by piece 'cause it tasted better that way. It weren't hard to b'lieve, neither, quiet as they was, an' all dressed in those black robes what made it so you couldn' hardly see 'em.

**CD:** What happened once the Nameless arrived?

**AW:** They strapped us into the frames, an' spun the frame so we hung upside down. All this in the dark, with just our own sounds an' these ghosts touching us an' moving us with not a footstep or a cough. I always counted seventy-two Mississippis before they stuck the needle in my neck – a big one, the way it felt, an' they were none too gentle about it, neither. I cried every time, snot dripping back down my throat so I could hardly breathe.

**CD:** How long did they keep you strapped in?

**AW:** Not long, really. Jus' a few minutes, but when you're hangin' there, upside down, with these creatures all around you, even a few minutes is too much. They'd take out the needle an' put one in each arm, this time to pump in the regen treatment that'd increase our blood regeneration. The first treatment was the longest; we stayed in the Barn all night 'til the Watchers came an' got us in the mornin'. The younger kids woulda spent the night cookin' up all kinds a treats for us to have for breakfast.

Then everything just went back to normal. We tended the goats and the fields. We canned preserves and mended clothes and made cheese. An' for an hour each day af'er supper, all the Mated would march right back out to the Barn an' get a dose a regen.

**CD:** But the revolt still happened.

**AW:** That was 'cause the Nameless started takin' girls Below an' sendin' 'em back pregnant. Not a whole lot, jus' a couple, really, but we was still scairt, especially af'er they described what it was like down there. Pitch black and claustrophobic, always pressed right up against someone, an' then all their feelin' an' gropin' in the dark. In my head, they always had tentacles. I dunno why, but they did.

**CD:** Who started the revolt?

**AW:** The Firsts. They knew the most about the Nameless and the Farm, bein' oldest when we got here an' having done the Yieldings since the very beginning. They said there was enough of us now, we could fight back.

That first night, we caught them by surprise. We even managed to hurt a couple of 'em. Instead a waitin' inside the Barn, we lined up outside, each of us with a torch an' some garden tool. I had a rake, taller'n I was, and heavy, but I kep' it steady.

The Nameless come. A dozen of 'em, maybe more, all draped in folds of this woolly black fabric, but they had arms an' legs jus' like anyone. For a minute, nothin' happened. Maybe they was confused, or they coulda been talkin' telepathically like they do, but whatever kept 'em still, changed, an' they come rushing at us making these shrill whines an' clicks.

I wanted to turn around an' run but I knew if I did that, the Nameless'd jus' catch me, an' then we'd hafta do the Yielding anyway, an' all a this woulda been for nothin', so I gripped my rake in both hands an' ran at them swingin' that rake for all I was worth, an' I weren't the only one. We was all runnin' forward, waving torches, shovels, hoes, someone even had pans outta the kitchen, howlin' at 'em with all our pent up helplessness.

An' we drove 'em back. We won.

**CD:** Where were the Watchers in all this?

**AW:** At dusk we grabbed 'em an' locked 'em in their house so they couldn't get in the way. Then af'er the fact, it was like they gave somethin' up we couldn' know about.

**CD:** What happened after the Revolt?

**AW:** Well, then you showed up.

pt iii

## SEVENTEEN

### **NYSE DOWN FOR 3<sup>rd</sup> STRAIGHT DAY**

In the on-going stand-off between the White House and the hacker group n3m0's ARMY, the New York Stock Exchange has been forced to close yet again. The attack began last Wednesday with a large-scale DDoS attack which prevented several brokers from accessing the trading platform. Simultaneously, the market's trading algorithms were altered, decimating the value of several major stocks, including JPMorgan, Apple, and CitiGroup.

n3m0's ARMY, following the same time frame as last month's bombings, released a video statement a few hours after the attack began, outlining their terms to President Harris. A statement from the White House asserted that it would stick by its stance not to negotiate with terrorists. The FBI has moved the hacker, n3m0, founder of the group, to the top slot on its Most Wanted list, though there have been no new leads since information surfaced that the attack originated in Turkey. Economists are saying the full impact of the hack won't be known for some time, but that the initial effects are set to rival Black Tuesday. China has stated that it is no longer willing to consider offering any bail-outs to the U.S.

Among the neo-Occupy movement, however, n3m0 is being hailed as a folk hero. Supporters in cat masks have been appearing at protests and riots all over the country.

**n3m0@thevault.net**

(no subject)

10/31/30 00:09:22

i fcuked up. i fucked up in the worst way & i cant undo it. fcu7k.

**n3m0@thevault.net**

re: last

10/31/30 11:47:12

bout my lst email... i did something stupid, then jaime & i got drunk, & i started thinking. i need 2 start @ the beginning. where is the beginning?

TL;DR My nutjob roommate kidnapped me frm school b4 the rioting started & took me 2 his family's bunker. Jaime & the kiddos R here 2 as U mite hav guessed since she got me drunk.

i've bin sitting here 4 an hr trying 2 think of the best way 2 sA this, bt it's awful no matter whch way U put it. they're place got brkn into & Baz was killed. Jaime got away w the kiddos. We were both trying all the numbers we knew, & we hapnd 2 git each other. rylee – nutjob roommate's mom, & she prety much runs this place – said Jaime cld brng the kiddos here & we'd B safe. we've been here a few weeks nw – a little ovr a month, I guess. It's hard 2 believe it's been that lng. this place... it's top of the line in evry way. We saw the news footage of the riots. tbh, til that point I thot all this tweetwaki stuff was bullshit. someone set our dorm on fire, the dorm i'd jst been living in, & would've still been in if gary (nutjob roommate) hadn't dragged me here.

were U in the middle of all that? is that wot happened?

I got off-track...

last mnth. b4 the bomb in the park, i posted a video tellin ppl 2 fite back, & then a cupple days later the 1st bomb went off in SAV. this group of hackers cllng themslvs n3m0's ARMY – i swear nuttin 2 do w me– said they were responsible, & they were gonna keep bombing soldiers in states w martial law. whch they did. ATL. chicago. Pheonix.

so gary & me – i know, i know, U said 2 nevr tell anyone bout that, bt the guy brot me 2 his :X bunker. i thnk i cn trust him w my cyber-vigilante alter ego – we were trying 2 track these guys dwn – they're good, i'll give em that – a lot of frustrating hours so i took a break 2 skim some irc channels. ppl wer talkin bout the bombings so i lurked 4 awhile & then someone suggested 0-ing out everyone's debt & I said it'd B better 2 ransomware d stock mrkt. Totally hypothetical, bt someone frm n3m0's ARMY must've been in that room cuz a cupl weeks later, they struck agen & did exactly wot I said.

11 days latr & they're saying the economy won't recover 4 years, decades, maybe, if it ever does. & n3m0's ARMY is still ransoming the NYSE. wot if i hadn't given em the idea?

basically, frm the min. the hack hit the airwaves, i've been working 24/7 2 track these ppl dwn. gary & jam wld come check on me frm time 2 time bt i alwys sent them away & kept working bt finally jaime wasn't gonna take no 4 an answer.

she came in2 my room (we haev an "apartment" in the bunker, w a bedroom 4 each of us, & 1 the kiddos share) & sat on d bed, jst watching me w/o saying anything. then she jst said: it was on the fridge.

wht? i askd her.

the motel whr yor parents R staying. the #. it's on the fridge. rght there, under scooby doo. i should've gotten it b4 i left, she explained.

wot wld we say 2 them? i askd.

she said, i dunno. maybe they got taken in by some nice Preppers 2.

do U think they get bonuses 4 recruiting strays in2 the life? i askd.

she laughed, bt then we jst sat there. i tried imagining wot I wld say 2 ben if he were there instead, bt even tho i cld think the words, i cldn't get my mouth 2 say dem. talkin 2 her felt like the hardest thng I wld ever have 2 do.

then she pulled me away frm my dsk & said, i have decided, that U & i need 2 get reckt.

as i'm sure U'll be :o 2 know, the Lunds have their own still dwn here. alcohol, according 2 rylee, is good 4 all sorts of things, not the least when U need 2 get out of yorself 4 awhile. they've got their own recipe whch is only passd dwn 2 the women in the fam. & it's strong. U cld get plastered jst sniffing it.

jaime got a mason jar of it out of 1 of the cupboards w mugs she'd brot frm the kitchen. i was helping rylee catalogue the library, she said, & U'll nevr guess wot i found.

she mixd our drinks – raspberry lemonade kool-aid & enuf of the Lunds moonshine 2 make my eyes water jst thinking bout it – & told me 2 sit on the couch. we were gonna toast, bt neither 1 of us knew wot 2 say, so we jst clinked mugs insted. i sipped mine, bt jaime took a healthy gulp & didn't bat an eye.

i askd wot she'd found in the library & she said, guardians of the galaxy. i usd 2 watch it w my dad all the time, bt I haven't seen it since –

she stopped there, so i'm guessing the last time was w baz. the lst time 4 me was prob w you, justin & ren. that retro drive-in.

the plan is, she said, we drink evry time he says 'groot', & maybe a few more tlmes if we feel like it.

it seemed so ooc 4 her – i know i keep saying, i had this idea of who she was, it was more like some fairy godmother than an actual human – so i askd her Y she'd decided 2 do this, & she said she jst needed something normal, & what's more normL than drinking w yor brother?

so we watched the movie, & we got v :#). we didn't tlk bout much, bt it felt like we shared a lot anyway. we still haven't plotted out all the safe topics – baz, U guys, mom & dad, we move round them carefully cuz neither 1 of us wants 2 B the 1 2 say no, there's no more hope.

U're nevr gonna read this.



## EIGHTEEN

[FADED YELLOW PAGES WITH DANCING TEDDY BEARS PRINTED ALONG THE BORDER, SEWN TOGETHER WITH GREEN DENTAL FLOSS. THE EDGES CURL WITH HANDWRITING IN DEEP PENCIL LINES, NEAT AND TIGHT, FROM MARGIN TO MARGIN. BROWN STAINS MARK SEVERAL OF THE LATER PAGES. THE PAPER IS BRITTLE AND THIN, AND CRACKLES AS ONE PAGE TURNS TO THE NEXT.]

*Day 5 P.E.*

[IT'S A SKETCH OF ONE OF THOSE TWO STOREY FARMHOUSES DONE UP IN WHITE CLAPBOARD THAT DOT THE INTERSTATE IN THIS AREA. TWO PANED WINDOWS SIT ABOVE THE PORCH ROOF LIKE THE ORBITAL SOCKETS OF A SKULL. THE FRONT DOOR IS OPEN, GLASS AND LEAVES SPRAYED DOWN THE MAIN STAIRCASE. ON THE PORCH WINDOW, SOMEONE HAS TRACED I ♥ U IN THE DIRT.]

It's the first time we've stopped moving for more than a few hours at a time since we left the camp.

Ben found me a stationery set in one of the bedrooms. It's so clean and perfect, like he just ran down to the store to pick it up. I think he meant for me to draw on it, but we are so close to disappearing I can feel how thin we've become. It wouldn't take much to wipe us off this planet altogether so something needs to stick. Something needs to say we were here.

So here it goes.

My name is Caleb Dumas, I'm twenty-one, and two years ago me and my brother (Ben) got sentenced to ten years in a WV work camp for a felony weapons charge which was total bullshit – we didn't have anything on us remotely like a weapon and they keep shooting down our appeal requests. Fucking bullshit.

Anyway, so that's how we ended up where we ended up. Two years, 1 month, 17 days growing soy beans to be mass produced into ration bars and shipped up and down the east coast as

famine relief. Conservatives glossed over the sticky points of obligatory unpaid manual labour by saying it gave convicts an opportunity to truly repay society for their crimes. Of course, none of them had to work twelve hour shifts in a sweltering field, or with the threshers kicking up so much debris there was more dust than air.

Where was I? Ben should be doing this – he’s got that organised brain – but turns out he has a knack for catching squirrels, so, as he put it, either I skin or I write.

Back to the beginning. Beginning? Maybe not. More like just the first in the most recent series of fucked up events to grace our lives.

The work camp. Something woke me up. I don’t know what – there was just this buzzing beneath my skin, like sitting in a crowded room with everyone speaking at full volume. The rest of the block was asleep, though, all the normal sounds of men snoring and farting and shifting around on rusty springs.

I had to piss so I left the block and headed down the path to the toilets, the outdoor light by each block a fuzzy little blob against the dark. It was one of those times when the night ate up everything and even the moon didn’t dare raise its head, so I made my way on sense memory, trusting myself to stick to a straight line.

There wasn’t another thing stirring for miles; my boots made a whispery *shnk-shnk* with each step and my skin crawled with too much quiet. This time of year the owls’d be calling for mates at least. So I emptied my bladder as quick as I could, all the while picturing the walking undead shambling in to catch me with my pants down (ha!).

The way back, just when I come up on F Block – I was in D, because of this incident over a spoon, and Ben was in A – he always was Mr Perfect. I had just come up on F Block and I noticed there was something not quite right about the shadow on E. It curved where it shouldn’t, or the texture was different.

Someone screamed to the south – the garage and supply depot – had to be one of the guards – then gunfire. A short burst. Another. Then two – three – fifteen guns firing nonstop the alarm *WHEEEoop WHEEEoop WHEEEoop* – an escape? But who? Only fish tried that and we hadn't had one of those since Fritz six months after us.

The other inmates started filing out of their blocks to line up along the path and the shadows peeled away from their objects, swarming over the men. The first scream came before I fully realised what was happening, then another and another and men running pushing fighting back to the blocks. Something was attacking them. Something... Invisible? Were there invisible things? I saw men – big men, years of hard manual labour size men – lifted in the air like kittens by... by a shadow?

Someone knocked into me and I fell, and one of the shadows crouched over me, smelling dry and musty. *Old cellars*. It was wrapped in something – a dark fabric that prickled where it touched my skin – with tinted goggles strapped to its head. Its face pressed against mine, snuffling along my hairline. It jerked back, making this clicking sound. Then it just left.

The next thing I knew, Ben was hauling me up by my armpits. We have to go, he said.

Go where?

The garage. We'll take one of the jeeps and get the fuck out of here.

The garage. Wait, I said. The first scream. That's where they came from.

They won't hurt us, he said. I ran into three of them who all did the same thing. Sniffed me and moved on. Now's our chance.

So we ran back towards A Block, then cut through the kitchen garden so we came out near-ish to where the garage stood – and beyond that, the supply depot, where the guns had all but stopped firing, which couldn't mean anything good, and we still had a wide open field to cross. The fog would give us cover, but we could just as easily run into a guard or a – whatever they were – by accident and if we didn't keep a straight path, we'd veer off and not run into anything until we were back by the toilets.

Ben's footsteps *crsk-crsk-crsk-crsk* on the frost-rimmed grass.

The cold in my lungs *in out in out* –

*If this is where we die* –

Here. His hand slapped the wood siding. We made it. Inside, he told me to find the keys while he got supplies, so we split up. The garage had the camp's fleet of rigs for shipping out our quota of soy bars, two jeeps the guards took out on perimeter inspections, and a transport vehicle, in case there was any ailment the camp doc couldn't fix, or people got transferred – it wasn't used much. My hope was to get one of the jeeps – I considered the transport, but no, that would have been impractical and we would have been advertising where we came from right on the side of it.

The keys were pretty easy to find – a cabinet by the door labelled “key fobs” – but the fobs themselves were identified by license plate. I was busy checking the log against the plate numbers, which was stupid. I should've checked the garage first and come back to the keys, but I was so focused on that one task – finding the jeep key – and relieved that somehow, when everything was going wrong, something actually went in our favour – I didn't even think before dropping the keys and shooting my hands up when the voice told me to. The muzzle of a gun jabbed into my right shoulder blade.

Turn around, he said, and get down on the ground.

I thought it was all over then but glass smashed on the other side of the garage, and he turned, firing, not quite in the direction of the sound. I tackled him, twisting his hand back to break his wrist the way Ben showed me after that time in Workshed B, and the gun fell to the floor. His other hand flailed against my throat. I grabbed his head and slammed it – *thwick* – against the cement, and he still flailed so I slammed it – *thwick* – again, and this time it had such a satisfyingly wet sound – *thwisht thwisht thwisht* – warm blood on my face.

Keb!

He hadn't called me that in years. It was part of our pact to Stay Alive. Keb and JiJi had to be put away so Caleb and Ben could survive.

The guard's head lolled in my hands and whose brain matter speckled the floor in a pattern that was almost pretty.

I wiped my hands on my shirt and stood up.

He's dead, Ben said. For once – maybe even the first time in our lives – I had no idea what he was thinking. He had a navy duffel bag over his shoulder. Where's the key?

I gestured at the cabinet. He began grabbing fobs and clicking the unlock button until the jeep's lights flashed and it gave a short chirp.

Let's go.

The jeep lasted until about mid-morning the next day – Day 1 post-escape. We spent the whole night on this narrow logging track that sidwinded down the mountain on a *steep* incline. Every time we turned a sharp bend with only a few inches between us and the edge of nothing, I could just see the car skidding across that tiny piece of land and careening over the Crayola box of trees in the flush of fall until we crashed in a fiery cherry bomb – would fire kill us? The crash would, and that was enough to keep us creeping along at 15 mph even with the threat of the hunt on our heels – we'd be lucky if we ever made it to trial for killing that guard, not that either of us put a lot of stock in the justice system, such that it is.

We didn't even reach the bottom before the road shot up again – I swear we must've been nearly vertical and I had no idea how we were still attached to the road. Then the jeep sort of shuddered and we drifted back a few feet before I yanked up the emergency brake.

We walk, said Ben, so we grabbed the duffel bag – crammed with soy bars and water – and started hiking, always with an eye out for a good spot to get off the road and head through the trees.

We didn't say one word the whole time.

For me, it wasn't all adding up yet. There was only *right now*, and right now me and Ben had to get as far away from the work camp as possible. And, part and parcel, we'd also be putting some distance between us and whatever attacked the inmates. Win-win. No thinking about what those things might be. Or what had happened to the rest of the inmates. Or the sound of that guard's head – *thwisht thwisht thwisht* – against the floor – only *right now*.

Early evening we came across one of the shanty towns that sprang up after the Collapse. The houses were jack-o-lantern faces in the dark, the repurposed materials used in their construction adding slanted angles. Whatever happened, happened quick – and not one of the residents was left to recount the story. Some of the houses were ransacked: furniture upended, clothes strewn, windows broken, but others had no more disarray than an overturned cup. There was blood *everywhere*. Smearred on the sides of buildings, soaked into sheets and curtains, splattered against windows. People had to have died there, but where were the bodies?

A thorough search got us a couple jars of Mystery Preserves and a dull, thick-handled hunting knife that Ben reckons he can get sharp again if we find the right kind of rock.

Nothing to show what had happened to the people who lived there. Had they died? Been arrested? Caught up in the Migration, travelling from town to town looking for any piece of work or charity they could find to make it through one day to the next? Had the things that attacked the camp been here too?

We haven't come across another person – or recent signs of another person – since we left the camp. Partly that's a relief – the feeling of being pursued is slowly fading into moving forward, making progress, getting closer to home – whatever waits for us there. I can't see these dirt-clouded windows without thinking of home, and wondering what we'll find. Will there be anything left? Will there be *anyone*?

I can't shake the feeling that we are the only two people left on earth, and all there ever will be from now is the walking, always walking, trying to get somewhere that doesn't exist anymore.

\*

Ben says this is too depressing and I should break it up now and then.

What happens to a frog's car when it breaks down?

It gets toad away.

\*

I'm restless. This place is remote as fuck, and loaded with defences and food. We need to rest and eat or we're just going to start moving slower and slower. Ben is right about all of this, but every little sound amps up my adrenaline. Ben, meanwhile, is snoring loud enough people in the next county can probably hear it. Whatever county that is. I couldn't even tell you where in WV the work camp was. None of the town names meant anything to me – when had I ever looked at WV on a map? – and they all sounded like cemeteries. Close to the VA border, I know. Ben wants to find the Appalachian Trail and follow that down to GA. It's as good a plan as any, and it'll keep us away from any areas the cops might be looking for us. At least we finally have something other than those green jumpsuits to wear, even if all of it's a little too big.

Okay. We came off the mountain on Day 3 P.E., landing on a state route we followed to an old trading post. We'd come across three more abandoned shanty towns on the way down, all of them like the first. Like the residents had just been whisked away into nothing. I started to really believe we would never see another human being ever again. Of course, seeing another human being entailed the possibility of being thrown into prison. Again. I figure time served for a crime I didn't commit equals out getting away with the crime I did commit. So I go back and forth on whether I hope we'll find someone out here, and wanting this to be our life now, the two of us out in the woods. The two of us make sense.

The trading post was empty, but we found some maps – none of which had a big arrow saying YOU ARE HERE so they aren't incredibly helpful. Well, they weren't. Now things are a little bit different.

By this point, we were both thinking and not saying that the same thing that had attacked the inmates had happened to those towns. Saying it would mean we had to think about what those things were, what they wanted, and why they disregarded us. We'd have to talk about the night of the escape, and we couldn't talk about that and not talk about the fact that I'd killed someone –

\*

What's the importance of capitalisation?

You can either help your Uncle Jack off a horse or help your uncle jack off a horse.

\*

There was the deer. Ben was pretty sure he could hit it with the guard's gun, so we crept up on it. He fired – and hit it, right in the throat, but the thing took off anyway, so we went running after it. The injury would make it stop – or at least slow down – eventually, and then we could finish the job.

We broke onto a clearing, and the flat terrain let us gain on it a little, not enough, but I could see it was flagging so it was only a matter of time – and then it exploded. Ben and I froze as chunks of dismembered deer and sprayed earth showered down in front of us.

Don't move, he said.

No shit, I answered. What do we do?

We were about midway across the meadow to another copse of trees. There was no guarantee there wouldn't be mines behind the treeline, but we could travel branch to branch if we had to.

Do you remember the way we came? Ben knelt down, inspecting the ground around us.

Not well enough, I said.

Then we go forward – slow. Watch the ground. And check for trip wires at the trees.

How do you know this shit?

I read books. You should try it sometime.

I got you.



He went first, baby step by baby step. I said a prayer to the universe every time I placed my feet where I thought his had just been that this wouldn't be the step that blew apart my body. As we got closer to the copse, I saw that it wasn't the forest continuing like I'd thought; these trees were planted in rows. Someone tended them, which gave me hope that they did, indeed, mark the end of the minefield.

We made it to the trees, obviously, or I wouldn't be writing this now. And beyond them stood a squat little log cabin, with a vegetable garden out front. Big solar panels were fixed to the shingled roof of the cabin, along with a tall antenna – lightning rod? but that tall? Anyway.

Did we think this place was abandoned like all the rest? Did it matter, when there was food right there in the ground that didn't require any more tiptoeing through landmines? We worked quick, pulling turnips and collard greens out of the ground to shove in our bags. When we had as much as we could carry – plus some apples from the fruit trees – we set off east, into the woods and away from the minefield with the view that when we got far enough away, we'd alter course so we were heading south again.

We were maybe a hundred yards from the cabin, when this shot fired – we both dropped. Ben spotted him before I did – this redneck jock type in a camo hoodie and fringed buckskin pants, with a shotgun pointed at Ben.

Not one more step, he said. Next time I won't miss. Them veggies ain't free, boys.

We'll give them back, said Ben. He put the duffel bag down and unzipped it.

Plus something for the time you cost me chasing after you like this.

We don't have anything.

Well, then, that just won't do, he said. We're gonna have to figure out some way you *can* pay.

We don't have anything, I repeated.

Then you're gonna have to do something instead, he told me, with his hand on his belt buckle.

Fine, but we keep the vegetables, said Ben, and the guy lowered the gun and took us back to the cabin. He always kept both of us in front of him, and the shotgun not exactly not trained on us, but he had to turn his back so we wouldn't see code for the lock. And Ben shot him, four times, right in the back.

You were gonna pimp me out, I said.

He shrugged. I knew I was going to shoot him.

I would have argued but I can't say that I'd have done any different.

Not much of a surprise, but the guy was a Prepper. The cabin has a cellar chock full of canned goods, plus a decent selection of fresh greens. The place is fully powered and everything. I had my first good shower since... well, since the last one I took with Justin. I know he'd be alive if it weren't for me. If I hadn't flooded the engine. Or confronted those guys. Or suggested we get Mom's car in the first place. The list of things I can't undo.

\*

What did the hurricane say to the palm tree?

"Better hold onto your nuts because this is no ordinary blowjob."

## NINETEEN

n3m0@thevault.net

Status Report 127

15:02 04/02/33

3/27 sun

the cabin is comin along. it shld be rdy to move in by aug. it's amazing how quick they go up. 5 yrs frm now, we'll have a sustainable homestead going, & the rest of the cabins built. the kiddos are excited, too. it has 2 bedrooms, & a loft for al. they've been building their own furniture. there's that moment when they fnlly get something. it's too cool. & these guys, they're gna have so many more skills than i ever dreamed of. al's already a better shot, & should've been born w/ a gun in his hand.

i'm gonna be a lttle down when they go. it'll be heaps better – their room now is bout the size our bedroom was at home – bt i thnk it'll be a lttle lonely dwn here.

oh, i found ths the other day. skimmed the 1st cple paragraphs bt it's uber boring. do you thnk dad actually thot bout any of this stuff or did he just make it up as he went along?

---

### Fantasy for the Post-Truth Era: *The Aeran Fables* as Political Discourse

Michael Trumbull

It is my contention that the fantasy elements of Zach Dumas's *The Aeran Fables* act as a cover for a deeper political undercurrent that can be read as a critique of the racial and ideological rifts experienced by the American people under the Trump administration. In this article, I will posit that Oros and the Solitude represent not two separate locations, but the same place viewed in two different contexts. In this case, Oros would represent America of, for example, the Obama administration, while Solitude is definitively "post-truth". The Six Tribes [...]

---

3/28 mon

bad storm so evryone cooped up & on each other's nerves. i cn't believe we spent a whole yr dwn here & didn't kill each other. cat's been singing the pokemon theme excpt she doesn't really know the wrds. or more than 5 scnds of it, so it's the same few bars ovr & ovr agin.

3/29 tues

me & gary took al w/ us on patrol to hlp clr up after the storm. i don't know if i laid it out for you yet, bt wildwood is @ the centre of a 300 acre plot. the cabins we've been building are ovr in the south corner, still a good 1/4 mile back frm the perimeter fence. we take atvs out in pairs to patrol – keep a lookout for anywhere someone could've snuck through, that sort

of thng. it's usually no biggie – when the weather's good, it's even kind of nice. we've only come across zombies a handful of times – & nevr inside the fence. most of them wnt us to give them “just a lttle bit of food” or “only some medicine”, like that's no big deal. the coalition has plenty of outposts teaching ppl how to survive off-grid so if they don't know how to take care of themslvs by now, we can't hlp them. bt i'll spare you the lecture :P

anyway, i thot it'd be ok – we ride around, maybe let him practice drivin a lttle. before we go, rylee calls out that there's an obstructed camera in 1 of the sectors, cn we go check it out?

the way the branch fell, we had to go outside the fence to get it. me & gary get the ladder positioned, i tell al to wait by the atvs & i climb up to get the branch. let me jst say that when i use the wrd “branch” i don't mean 1 of those spindly things you use for kindling; i mean a pretty solid chunk of wood bout as big round as my arm. i had a few shaky moments, bt then it popped loose, slipped out of my hands & fell bang smack on al's head – he hadn't listened & wntd a closer look. he conked out.

5 maybe 10 min. he was out a long time. once he came to we figured we shld let him sit awhile so we had Inch & bit by bit al came back to himself. gary went off to take a piss – noob move, we shld've had someone on watch, he didn't even take the gun w/ him – 3 guys jumped him as soon as he pulled his dick out.

redneck zoms – the worst kind. they thnk they rule the roost bc they put on a lttle camo. handgun, 2 rifles. they grab our stuff & march us back to the gate. i'm shitting myself at this point. the gate is manned by 2 mounted machine guns w/ motion sensors. we're spod to radio back to have them disabled when we return which means once we trigger those sensors, both guns are gonna fire for :30 then pause & restart if someone in ww doesn't bypass 1st. we're getin closer & closer to the gate & fary isn't saying a damn thng bout those guns, so i'm pretty much thinking, this is the moment i'm goin to die.

5 ft. 4 ft. evry step, i thnk it's comin. i'm watching gary out of the side of my eye & my body is already resisting being pushed forward, & then gary stumbled. truth, i don't know if it was on purpose or not, bt it was the best timed accident in the history of life. mullet #1 shoves his gun in gary's face & yells, open it up!

gary says he can't. the control's inside (it is, there's a secondary lock that cn only be disengaged frm the hub to counter against situations jst like this yay me, right?). bt mullet jst keeps yelling, & the other two push me & al dwn w/ gary & everyone's screaming, & then i hear rylee's voice – dear, blessed rylee i've nvr been so glad to hear that harpy's voice as i was in that min.

she says they have :10 to vacate the premises or she turns on the guns. then she starts counting. 10. 9. 8. 7. gary yelled @ us to lay dwn so me & al flatten ourselves. the zoms were yelling at each other. 6. 5. 4. al stared at me w/ this look like i dunno, & i kept saying ovr & ovr, don't move jst don't move 3. 2.

they whined when they passed over, & these little waves of heat puffed against my back. i counted to 30 in my head just to give my brain something to do coz i won't lie, i wanted to get the hell out of there like now & if i didn't distract myself i'd stand up & get myself shot through holes.

my hearing went weird when it finally stopped, but then rylee spoke to us over the intercom & told us we could stand up & to make sure we carted those bodies off somewhere & disposed of them right.

i'm not even gonna talk about what that meant. takeaway: al & i almost died but we didn't.

on a brighter note, rylee gave the ok for me to go to the mag meet with them tomorrow. i'm totally psyched – ok, so the mag – mutual aid group; it started before the shit as meetings to share prepping tips, establish a community network of skills, etc. – now it's like a prepper bazaar that pops up the 1st week of the month in secret locations so only those in the know, know. the spc don't even know about it, but they've become such an oligarchy lately it's hard to separate them from the federalist agenda. anyway, to be invited is a pretty big thing – rylee's basically vouching for me & anything i do – don't fuck up, right? haha – i didn't realise this until she said i could go, for me this is like i'm officially part of ww now. stupid, right? living & working here right beside everyone the past 3 years, felling timber & putting up cabins, & i still don't feel like "one of them". j fits in so easy – she's been to just about every mag meet since she got here. it helps that she has a useful skill – but what do i do? i mean, i pull my weight with the manual stuff, but anyone could fill my shoes.

blah, blah, angst, etc. i'm too old for that shit, right? if i want to be useful, i need to stop bitching about it & be useful.

i'm hoping that this meet will help with that. there's this other coder in the region – nyx – we've been chattering & he said he's always at them if i ever want to meet up. it's been neat having someone who gets the geek stuff – gary isn't really into that kind of thing; we literally have nothing in common except the bunker. XD

The coder, we've been talking about doing some sort of team-up – don't worry; he's strictly white hat – survival tips for the collapse generation or something like that.

i just really, really need something new in my life. it's been all ww, all the time for a long, long while. i think it's made me a little weird (you've always been weird, you'd say, & punch me in the shoulder so your knuckle drove right to the bone).

3/30 wed

so nyx is a girl. there's that. um... should i start at the beginning? yeah, why not? let's build the anticipation.

the meet was set up at an old closed down truck stop this time, with tarps of all colours spread out over people's wares – veggies, cheese + honey, clothes, tools – anything a person could make, it was there. of course there were the usual weapons & ammo stalls, & a blacksmith who made some wicked swords. you would've been drooling. these things were intricate as shit, &

so sharp. if i cn get someone to give me lessons, i mite give shooting a rest, especially living topside. swords in a bunker are kinda stupid, bt out in the woods... i'm getting side-tracked.

so this place. 1st i have to say – probably no surprise to you – that the lunds are pretty vanilla as far as preppers go. you cld plopp them dwn in any suburb & they'd look rght at home, nice fam of indeterminate race bt lite enuf to not be threatening. I've talked w/ loads of preppers ovr the years, either on the ham or spc contacts. i guess i jst filled them in w/ the same sorta template in my head, bt damn. there wasn't a unified style amng them, tho it helped pick out groups. there was the hunting orange/camo group. the faux 1st nation (a bunch of white guys in buckskin & turkey feathers). & these guys that lookd straight out of fallout.

ppl came in rv's & pickup trucks, & theer was even a school bus that ppl served chili out of. evrythng is strictly barter, or for silver, & there's kinda an unofficial self-policing that goes on. you don't shit where you eat, & these meets are how a lot of homesteads have been able to get by.

like i said, the lunds have there still, & j is an herbalist now, so our contribution to the mrkt is mason jars of wildwood liquor, & herb pouches for colds, etc., which we sell out of the back of the truck, & we're amng the many camping in tents nxt to our stall stalls. as soon as we pulled into park, ppl started lining up to get their stock. jaime knew most of them by name & chatted w/ them while we set up. i was shocked by how much she knew bout them, & how much they knew bout her. she's made some real friendships here. i guess i felt a lttle jealous when i realised that. all my relationships are so tied up in ww – 15 ppl, that's all i got. well, & you, bt you're a shitty correspondent. then i felt guilty – her husband died, bt he was my brother & it's been 3 years so ugh. i don't know what's rght or wrng to feel.

i took off at lunch to meet nyx – & i got lost, of course. the prob w/ a movable mrkt is there aren't any st. signs. we were sposed to meet by a stand selling these certain wooden bowls – his family makes wooden dinnerware & kitchen things – bt i turned rght at the honey stall instead of left & got so turned round this kid – like young kid, al's age so 9? yeah, he had to show me the way.

so i get there eventually, & then i realise i have no idea who i'm actually lookin for – we didn't agree on any sign or anything – that kid cld be nyx for all i know. i'm standing there debating this quandary & what to do bout it when this girl starts talkin to me bout the bowls, & i sort of respond – she's pretty-ish bt i'm more concerned w/ how i'm goin to find nyx. this girl doesn't let up, though, she keeps asking me dfrnt questions – like what do i mainly cook on & stuff bout bowls, & extolling the virtues of dfrnt designs – so finally i tell her i'm not rly interested in the bowls, i'm jst sposed to meet someone.

she laughs & says, you'd make a shitty spy, n3m0. then she says, man, you look lik a noob! so that was fairly humiliating. she said she didn't mean anything by it; you don't run into many strange faces at the meets, bt it didn't make me feel any better bout it.

when i say "pretty-ish", i mean like, she cld murder me & i'd happily let her, bt the only women i've seen the past 3 yrs are jaime & the lund girls so i tht i shld tone it dwn in case

my perception is skewed. not that they're ugly oh fuck it. you know what jaime looks like, & you're jst in my friggin head anyway so what does it matter? She's hot & i'm an idiot.

3/31 thurs

in the end, we decided to go back early. there was some discussion – shld we all go, jst jaime & snd someone back in a few days, see if she can hitch a ride w/ someone – bt that means giving away our location, & not that anyone here is liable to raid us, you nevr know what's gonna come dwn the pipe so it's better to jst be safe on that issue.

i don't know what to think. we got a msg lst nite that al had some sort of dizzy spell, & was resting now, bt no one knew what cld be wrng w/ him & jaime was mystified by the description, bt point is, the kid's not doin great, bt it mite be nothing bt it mite be something. we worked out that what we'd make on the liquor wouldn't justify the cost in gas for the extra trip (we cldn't sell the herbs w/o j), so we packed up & hit the road. by dawn, which meant i didn't get another chance to talk to nyx – piper is her real name.

i was looking back over this for anything i mite have noticed bout him & came across the log incident, so i told j. she askd a lot of questions – how big was the log, where did it hit him, how lng was he unconscious, etc. bt then she told me it prob wasn't connectd in a way that i didn't rly believe. did i accidentally kill my nephew? he's not dead – bt cld he? wtf is wrng w/ me.

(later)

j finally admitted it was probably the log. tbi, she said, probably in the form of a clot preventing his body frm communicating properly. bt w/o knowing where or how big the clot was, there wasn't anything she cld do, & she didn't have that sort of training. so we jst have to wait & see if he wakes up again. i don't know what we're goin to do if he doesn't. what if he doesn't? the nearest hospital is hours away, & we don't have the cash. j is ready to drive him anyway, bt the lunds are quiet bout it. i heard rylee & her sis talkin bout it – j'd have to say where she'd been since dropping off the grid 3 years ago, & what if that brot ppl round & gave away our location? bt they cldn't jst let al die by doin nothing.

rylee decided j cld take the truck, & gary's sis wld go w/ her, & they'd take al to the hospital. that leaves the rest of us here waiting to hear what happens. i should've told j bout the log when it happened, & then we cld've fixed it or I dunno. i swear it's like i'm cursed or something. everything i touch. i try to inspire ppl. they set off bombs. i try to have a theoretical discussion & the collapse happens. i try to be a good uncle, & I kill my nephew. wtf is my life.

4/1 fri

al's dead.

4/2 sat

we buried him in 1 of the southeast sectors, in this lttle meadow a short wlk frm where the cabins are. they'd gotten maybe halfway to the hospital when it happened. em (gary's sister) pulled over, & they sat by the rd for awhile, then j decided they'd turn back. nothing the hospital cld do now, she reasoned, & it was money we didn't have. i don't think i've

seen her cry once. i'm not judging – i haven't cried, either, bt i don't think it's rly hit me yet, & i worry that's what's goin on w/ her. she had to keep it together for so lng after baz died, what if she doesn't realise she's allowed to grieve now? lacey took cat w/o even having to be asked – lace looks so much like baz, it's creepy sometimes, especially as she's gotten older. j says she jst wants to get back to work, so i guess if that's what she needs to do?

piper msgd me, bt i haven't read it yt. she probably wants to know why i stood her up the other day, bt what do i tell her? yeah, sorry i couldn't hang out bt i accidentally killed my nephew? & then she answers w/ all that fake sympathy bullshit which i don't know how to respond to so i'll say something dickish & that will be that. alternatively, i can ignore her now & apologise later & she'll have to forgive me coz my nephew died. coz i killed him. i am a shitty human being.

where are you?



## TWENTY

[A WIRE-BOUND NOTEBOOK, WIDE-RULED, WITH “*I SURVIVED ANOTHER MEETING THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN AN EMAIL*” PRINTED IN YELLOW ON THE GREEN CARDBOARD. THERE’S A DIAGONAL CREASE WHERE THE BOTTOM CORNER HAS BEEN BENT BACK. THE PAGES ARE WRITTEN IN PENCIL AND PURPLE, BLUE, AND GREEN INK. PAGES HAVE BEEN TORN OUT.]

people still don’t trust the cities – so we won’t save any on gas. In all honesty, I’m not sure how I feel about them these days, either. I know we’re not the only ones there – you hear things, catch glimpses of light or smoke – but it feels like there’s no one left on Earth, just rows of empty houses slowly breaking down in the dampness and the heat.

*Y3 D348*

We found a piano in a field today. Brown upright, with one corner sunk down in the mud, and a frayed rope tied around the back casing. Some scuffs on the wood, and it played a little flat, but otherwise good condition. No tire marks, so who knows how it got there. Ben played it while we stopped for lunch. I said we could get the tools out of the truck and try to load it up, but he told me it wasn’t meant for us. What if he’s the last one to ever play it? The piano’s last song, and it wasn’t recorded. Can music be a ghost? Ben said he likes the idea of his melody being a gift for the field, and everything in it. A way of paying tribute. The impermanence is part of the value. I sort of get it, but it still bothers me that he sat down, wrote this song, and that’s it. The music you’re hearing right now could be Ben’s, and you’d never know that the first time it was ever played was by my brother, here in these woods.

*Y2 D349*

There's a girl on the West Coast who has a station that plays the sort of music Baz used to sing growing up. When Ben puts her on, and it's dark outside, it's almost a relaxing drive. We could be on our way out to the beach for some nightswimming and maybe a bonfire, if we did things like that anymore. These drives are really the only sort of off-time we have, and we only do that because Gurdy's has the best deals in three states.

Ben's still sceptical – and, okay, the yield isn't what we used to do, but we have fewer plants, and we rushed the grow. A few more quick turnarounds, and we can start doing it right, and then the harvest will be what it should. I don't know why he suggested it if he was just going to nay-say the whole thing. Maybe he thought I needed a project. But in my defence, we should know who our neighbours are, because chances are they aren't soccer moms and stay-at-home dads. The courtyard is a real plus, and the walls being as high as they are, but that won't keep us safe forever, especially once the grow room is in full swing. And we need to figure out whyever the hell we can't manage to grow a single scrawny vegetable – I know, right? Doesn't make sense, but there's a woman at Gurdy's who said she can put us on the right track with the veg garden for spring. If we get that figured out, we should have enough to build up our stores for winter, then trade anything we have left over. Between the two crops, we should be able to cut down our scavenging trips to maybe once or twice a month. Stable income.

I know Ben says we should be cautious – we haven't sold anything yet – but I can't help feeling like this is the moment things really start changing for us. Maybe they started changing back when we left the camp, and it's just slowly been building the past couple years, but from now on, we'll be on the right side of things. I don't know what that actually means for us; I know better than to expect any sort of grand family reunion after all this time. I hope Carys took care of René. I hope my parents didn't suffer. Can I imagine Jaime and Baz still alive out there? Yeah, definitely. Jaime's an Amazon. I once saw her square up on this wannabe gangsta on River Street who thought he could slap her ass, and no one in that room doubted she would mess him up if he didn't apologise. She'd

keep Baz alive, too, so he'd be alright. Sometimes I dream about telling Justin's parents how he died, except they hear it wrong because some woman – I don't recognise her in the dream, but she just pops her head in through the window and starts telling them I killed Justin, and I try to explain, no, that wasn't it, but she had my conviction – it was round-ish, like a seal, and glossy red – and then more people come and they're all screaming that I did it

What's the difference between snowmen and snowwomen?

Snowballs.

Gurdy's is a tent town at heart, though some of the occupants have opted for more permanent materials than the nylon tents passed out by FEMA. There are a couple RVs with tarp extensions, and some shanties made out of plywood and corrugated plastic. Someone even put up a couple of those marquee tents and started running a sort of bar/café out of it. The food isn't great, but if you want to trade, you have to network first. It took us nearly two months of showing up before anyone would talk to us about the junk we collected from the highway. Not that there was a whole lot left out there, but every once in a while we'd make a good find and that was how we got the garden going. At least my crop didn't fail – we need this to work or we're going to run out of food this winter. Raids are too risky.

I'm nervous about tomorrow. Needing food for the table has always been part of the equation, but I have this... expectation that I'm going to fuck it up somehow. I can't shake it. It weighs on me. It's the simplest job in the world. Walk around the trading post. Look for potential customers. Send them back to Ben who'll finish the transaction. And I don't even have to worry about getting arrested. What is my deal?

*Y3 D351*

Yesterday didn't start out so well. It was the kind of morning where even the sun hasn't gotten out of bed, and the market was basically deserted except for people working the other stalls (and by

“stalls”, I mean blankets or card tables put out in front of their tents). One family had just a camo tarp stretched between some trees, and everything they owned piled underneath with no separation between what they intended to keep and what they were willing to sell, if there was any distinction.

The afternoon was a little busier, but still no takers. I figure we’ll have to wait until people stock up on necessities and then see how much they have, like the liquor guys had to before they started marketing its antiseptic qualities. I told Ben we needed something like that, so it’d stop being a luxury – even if people could afford a little luxury now and then, you always feel so guilty about it, like everyone is looking at you like you’re taking something from them by having it – then they’d have a reason to justify it.

He didn’t say anything for a minute, and then it was just, “I’ll be right back,” and he took off. So I waited. He hadn’t left me much choice. He’s gone maybe an hour or so, and then he comes back, all smiles. I’d given him an idea and he’d tracked down an herbalist who needed some, and might even have a standing order if it went well. She hinted that she expected a discount in that case, but Ben thinks we can agree to that and negotiate cheaper meds for us in exchange. We met in the canteen that night so she could test it out and see how much she wanted, and she must’ve been impressed because she bought half our crop. After a few drinks, she got pretty flirty, and I was making up my mind – she’s not bad looking, just kind of generic, like off-brand pretty, but how many people do I see these days so what does that matter? – but Ben said no. And he’s got a point. I’d rather have the silver – Gurdy’s economy runs on the SPC’s exchange model, which is handy when you don’t want to be dragging chickens to every meeting with you – or worse, come across something that’s only worth one and a half chickens. That gets messy.

Today went better. I rolled a couple joints for people to try, and after the first one sparked up, we got another dozen or so people crowding around. We managed to sell off the rest of the crop before the 6 o’clock bell. It looks like we’ll be able to get a good little business going. I can’t even say how much of a relief that is. We’re going to be able to eat this winter, and start the veggie garden

again next year. Ben was talking to the herbalist chick about our problems and she said we probably just need to use more compost to thicken the soil up. She wrote down a bunch of instructions for us to follow so we can have the garden primed for planting next spring. We picked up our supplies – more Mason Jar Meals and rice; I’m gonna be sick of chicken cacciatore by spring – and decided to go ahead and make for home since neither one of us minds driving in the dark.

Ben say

[THE TAIL OF THE Y STRIKES UPWARD ACROSS THE PAGE IN DEEP ZIGZAGS. RECORD ENDS.]

pt iv

## TWENTY-ONE

Jasha zipped himself into the plastic suit, securing the hood over his long, braided hair, and positioning the mask over his nose and mouth. Soon, the Scions would return with the *adolo* to be cleansed and blessed, and divided into the daily rations meant to sustain the Family until the next Yielding. Father said soon they would no longer have to ration the *adolo*; the herd was growing. It was strong. And once it reached full size, there would be plenty of *adolo* for the Family, maybe even enough to provide for multiple Families. Then the ones who called Father foolish would plead with him for the precious liquid.

Chaos tumbled through the compound as the Scions returned. A thin whip of pain crossed Jasha's mind. Confusion. Disorder. Too many unfamiliar impressions flooded the Family's shared consciousness, and the corridors filled with the frantic clicks and hisses of their distress. Jasha's body vibrated and he felt the tender matter of his brain pressed tight against the hard curve of his skull. The scent of blood. Scions wailed in pain, a high whistle that made Jasha's ears ache. As one, the Family bent their consciousness in search of Roan, Scion of Scions, heir to Father's mantle, the Family's entire future, but there were too many competing sensations, too much panic and fear. It tasted sweetly sour, like rancid fruit.

Then Father was there, drawn from his chambers on the level below by the cries of his children, and a sort of quiet enveloped the Family as they waited to see what he would do. Father singled out the injured Scions, and called the Grandmothers to treat their wounds – Jasha expelled a short breath of relief that Roan was not among them, not damaged – and a soothing impression flitted through the shared consciousness. The clicks and hisses quieted and the Family waited to see what would happen next.

*Explain*, Father commanded.

Roan's entity joined Father's – *he is safe! Roan is safe!* – and he added his own impressions to reassure the Family. But Jasha felt that Roan was unsettled, and that unsettled the Family.

*The herd is savage.*

A few clicks snaked through the corridor, echoing the uneasy ripples in the Family's consciousness. The first herd became savage, and had to be culled – a huge setback for Father's plan to farm instead of hunt. This herd was meant to be different: hand-reared so they would be more domesticated. Culling the herd now would mean starting over from the beginning again, and Father's position among the other Families depended entirely on the success of the Farm. The *Family* depended entirely on the success of the Farm. Without it, they would starve.

This was the thing Jasha should be concerned about, but he wasn't. Jasha was afraid for the herd. It was his mother's weakness in him; if he were true blood... Well, many things would be different, but most of all, without his mother's weakness, he wouldn't have disobeyed Father and visited the Farm while the Family slept. He wouldn't have watched their dreams and come to have that feeling – the feeling he should only have for the Family – for the herd.

Jasha struggled with his mind to keep this thought from the Family – another weakness of the half blood: greed. No member of the Family kept anything for himself; it all belonged to all. But he had to be selfish to protect his greater sin of disobedience. For that, he would be cast out to become one of the Wretched, forever wandering Above with no home or Family. Alone for always. To be alone is worse than death, because at least in death his body would be shared among the Family, and his soul would return to Genesis to be resurrected as another – and if he were virtuous (which he was not) he may even be reborn as a Scion instead of a half blood *ilak*.

The herd was savage. Scions had been damaged. Roan might have been. Father would have to destroy the aggressive animals – maybe the entire herd – and with this new setback, one of the other Families might challenge Father's title. Father could end up disgraced, staining the entire line, past and present. The entire Family could be outcast as Wretched.



These were the things Jasha knew he should be worried about.

And yet.

## TWENTY-TWO

They passed each other like cats, stalking their prey in the dark. The camp was still, the fire cold. No snow yet to betray their tracks, but the promise of it soon was a sweet note in the air that stung Ben's nose. Caleb tapped his shoulder and pointed into the trees – there. Suspended from one of the lower branches. The stolen food. Ben nudged back and pointed to the shadow huddled at the base of the tree. After a minute or two, the shadow scratched its face and coughed. Alpha Dad? Had to be, with that size.

Ben's nerves flared, but he pushed it aside. The key was to focus on the individual steps. He could do the steps.

They hemmed Alpha Dad in. Hopefully he'd be the only guard. *Focus on the steps.* Ben took a breath to steady himself, and in that moment, he felt his brother rush forward, catching Alpha Dad in a chokehold.

*Press the carotid and the jugular,* relieved that it hadn't been him. Instead, Ben launched himself at the tree, scrambling up to the branch the food packs hung from. With his hunting knife, he began cutting the rope close to the knot on the branch.

Having bound Alpha Dad with their only piece of rope, Caleb positioned himself directly below, hands held up to receive the lowered pack. Ben had to work quickly; Alpha Dad wouldn't be unconscious long. Fortunately, the knife was sharp – mental note to never complain about that chore again – and the packs were only strung up with guylines, so he cut through faster than he expected. The pack dropped suddenly into his brother's arms with a clatter of tin cans. Fuck. Like the camp wouldn't hear that. They must've known the twins would come after them.

The camp came to life. Ben swung out of the tree. They couldn't leave without the food. Stomach acid sloshed up his oesophagus. They were going to have to fight.

Caleb led the way – west, deeper into the forest. Ben stopped when he heard the camp discover the guard, but Caleb urged him forward, darting through the trees like a spectre. Ben put all of his faith in his brother’s instincts, because if Ben started to think himself, he would think about the utter silence that had covered everything, with hunter and hunted prowling among the dark trees. He wasn’t sure at this point which one they were.

Caleb stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. A second later, his brother lifted himself into the nearest tree. Faintly, he heard the sound that had caught Caleb’s attention. Footsteps, precise and muted, coming towards them. Were there two? He thought he’d heard two, but now he wasn’t sure. He hauled himself into the tree with his brother.

Together they waited as the footsteps crept closer, knives ready. They had to succeed tonight, or they would die. That was the equation. *And how quickly we got here.* There had barely been space to breathe between the situation being comfortable and needing to harm other people to survive.

His brother tapped him. Below, a single figure – Beta Dad, probably – eased into the space between the trees with only a stick for a weapon. Caleb held his finger up – *wait* – before readying his attack. His eyes closed and he breathed in deeply, then he was gone, leaping onto the figure directly below him. The pair struggled, then fell to the ground with muffled human sounds. Then one half of the shape separated itself and his brother looked up at him, grinning in a way that unsettled Ben enough to plant a germ of fear, so small it was easily overlooked in the urgency of the situation.

Ben climbed down and they used their belts to tie up Beta Dad.

They circled back around and captured the third man trying to revive the first. Ben thought *man* may have been a little generous; he was probably the same age as them when they’d been sent to the work camp. But there wasn’t room for empathy anymore. It was him and Caleb against everyone else. He had to believe that or they wouldn’t survive.

After they dragged all three to the centre of the camp, Caleb watched over them while Ben raided the camp – first for what had been stolen from them, and then for whatever these people had that might be useful.

“You can take what you want,” Beta Dad said. “Just let us go and we won’t come after you again.”

“Take off your shoes,” Caleb ordered.

*I can't find the gun. It's not here.*

*[It has to be.]* Caleb held up the discarded shoes to his rag-wrapped foot until he found a pair that fit. *[They wouldn't have lost it.]*

A twig snapped, he turned. A boy – what was he, 10? – with a handgun pointed at them as he marched out of the woods.

“Wait –”

Ben felt like he'd been punched in the neck, and when he touched the spot, warm blood spilled over his hand. Caleb stared at him in total horror. Why was there blood on his hand?

The men screamed at the kid to run, *run goddamit!* so Ben looked. The boy had a gun shakily aimed at Caleb, Caleb who stared at him, arms outstretched with this look... He'd never seen that look on his brother's face. A wail of rage came out of Caleb's mouth.

With the full force of his weight, he lunged forward, the knife sinking deep into the boy's breastbone as they tumbled to the ground. The knife lodged in the boy's chest, Caleb ripped the gun out of the kid's hands and began beating him in the head with the butt of it. The men struggled to get free, but the brothers had bound them tight and in the end they could only watch as the Caleb pummeled the boy's head with a sickening *thwicksht thwicksht thwicksht*.

Ben tried to speak, to grab his brother, make him stop, but his body didn't answer his commands. The world swayed and Ben found himself kneeling in the dirt. *Keb...*

Caleb froze, and when he turned, Ben saw the blood spattered across his face and chest.

*Keb.*

Caleb knelt down in front of him, pulling off his scarf to tie tightly around Ben's neck. "It's going to be okay," he said. *[Please don't die.]* "We just need to stop the blood." *[Please don't leave don't die I can't there has to be you don't die don'tdiedontdiedontdie –]*

Ben couldn't understand why Caleb was so panicked. He felt fine, a little woozy, but he never had been good with blood it was probably a good thing he never made it to med school he wished he'd had the courage Caleb had to do what he loved but instead he'd let the guidance counsellor steer him to medicine because the truth was he didn't know what he loved, not yet, there hadn't been enough time, and not enough opportunity in the work camp he was just getting started and he felt so cold, except where Caleb touched him, and that was like two saffron handprints on his body and it was so, so hot but not hot enough to keep him warm –

"*JiJi*," those names they hadn't used since... The work camp – how many years? That name Ben hated – just like Caleb hated Keb, but that had been their thing, between only them.

Ben hears a rustle like wings, and he feels the arrival of someone new, crouched beside them. Grey streaks the temple on one side of her face, and her black hair is tied with feathers and brightly coloured rags and bits of silver. She looks at him with a tenderness he only vaguely remembers.

He wants to tell her no. Caleb needs him. Caleb can't hunt to save his life, so without Ben he'll just wander around until he starves he can't look after himself he's a mess but she shakes her head.

"These things have their time, little one," she says, a little sadly.

*Caleb*, but his brother is out of reach. Ben can hear him, that wordless scream, the cries of the men, the gun firing both shells – the woman reaches into Ben's chest and pulls out a key on a blue ribbon, placing it in one of the many pockets inside the lining of her coat.

The woman kisses his forehead. "Safe journey, little bird."

## TWENTY-THREE

Her grandparents had a house in the countryside outside Oros, surrounded on all sides by wide, sweeping meadows. Spending her summers there as a girl, Carys used to love lying on her back with the high grass all around her while she watched the clouds float by. The rustle the plants made as the wind shook through them. It had felt like flying.

She almost expected her grandparents' clapboard house to be just over the next hill. There was no moon or stars, no light anywhere, and yet everything was supercharged with a sense of vibrancy, of *extra* reality. In the dark, the texture of sound and scent illuminated the meadow in a different way. She smelled the dew gathering on the leaves, felt the vibrations made by crickets rubbing their wings together. She felt drunk.

She held a brass compass in her hand, the chain looped around her wrist. There were no directional markings, just an ornate mandala of fiery petals. The needle swung back and forth, searching for a magnetic pull.

Above, stars spilled onto the sky, lines forming to connect them into constellations. They were all there – the Nine, Kraiak in his magpie form, Kaya throwing the spear. The stars crowded together, so densely populated the sky became nothing more than dark spots in between bright white points. She'd never seen them look so beautiful.

The compass shifted on her palm. The needle had stopped, pointing to her left. Carys gave the stars one last look, and then started walking in the direction the needle pointed. The grass swished against her legs. A screech owl trilled in the distance, the call lingering over the meadow. A breeze touched her skin.

That smell. *Lakilaki* and *aksim* filled her nose, underscored by the scent of smoking meat and fresh pastries. Oros skyscrapers suddenly stretched above her, their coloured glass faces reflecting

prisms of light off each other. She'd reached the market, but it was deserted, the stalls fully stocked and untended.

She pulled out the compass, and turned in a circle until the needle pointed straight ahead. A crow *rork*-ed above her; eight of them perched on the head and shoulders of the statue of Mora in front of her temple. Carys bowed to the wise Lady. The crows all clacked their beaks, and then took flight.

Crows had always seemed a little... Treacherous. The way they looked at her, like they knew a secret she would never figure out.

The compass warmed in her hand, pointing south first, then gradually to the east, towards the Academy. Next would be Ilos Bridge leading to the Arcades and the botanical garden beyond that. The alcove where they usually met was in the opposite direction, near the waterfront.

*Where are you taking me?*

More crows – the same crows? – landed on the metal balustrade, giving her pause. Keeping an eye on them, she started across the bridge. More crows – definitely more this time; the others were still behind her – arrived on the bridge, until they formed a solid line down both sides. They *watched* her. She picked up her pace to a brisk walk.

The Arcades, normally alive with buskers and artists among the brightly coloured mosaics, felt desolate, every sound echoing beneath the vaulted ceilings. She heard the rustle of feathers, the occasional *rork*, but didn't look to confirm the crows were following her.

The sound of them was everywhere in the garden – filling the trees and shrubs, covering the grass. She could feel the weight of their little black eyes all over her skin.

Murders took flight in startling numbers so thick, they made the sky darker. *Do not run. Do not run*, but her muscles twitched to send her sprinting down the gravel path, as far away from the thousands of black birds crowding closer and closer.

The first one veered close to her head at the rose garden. Just a flicker and a slip of breeze. The second one, she heard the *whumpf* of its wings and felt the tips of its feathers brush against her cheek. Crows swarmed around her, their *caw-CA-caw* a deafening chorus. Claws snagged in her hair and clothes, beaks pinched her skin. There was nowhere in the garden she could escape the crows; just a few stone gazebos that wouldn't offer much protection.

But there was a little café on Kitsos Street she'd frequented during her Academy days. If she could just get there, get somewhere safe from the birds – assuming there was somewhere safe.

The crows swept away from her, forming a horizontal cyclone of feathers on the street. Their bodies flew through the air, forming a perfectly round tunnel. She smelled patchouli, and heard rain thrumming on a car roof. Then they were gone, leaving only their feathers drifting gently to the street.

And Caleb. That was when she knew she was in a dream. He looked so old and fragile. So lost. Hair hung in long, matted tendrils around his shoulders, and his clothes were caked with blood and grime. She pulled him into a hug. "Where are you?"

"I couldn't save him," he said.

\*

"Cosh," Carys said, swinging out of bed as she shook the Kikaror's shoulder. "Get up." She pulled on a flannel shirt. "René!" She pounded on the thin panel separating their berths before climbing down the rope ladder to the dark main compartment of the wagon.

Her hands slid over carved panelling, a basket of *jiro* fruit and skeins of Lapi wool until she found the hook with Ivan's bridle and collar. Grabbing both, she leapt down the three small steps leading from the back of the wagon. Ivan stood tied to a nearby tree, and the pony gave a snort before he started nosing her pockets for apple slices.



“Woman,” Cosh said, appearing in the curved door behind her. The Kikaror’s hair was cropped short as was their custom, with subtle tattoos identifying *krei* caste along the hairline. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I have to get to him,” she said, coaxing a recalcitrant Ivan into his harness. She felt the compass from her dream attached to her centre core.

“Him who?” Cosh asked. “Are you sleepwalking again?”

“Caleb,” she answered. “I felt him.”

“Oh. *Oh.*” Cosh glanced over *krei* shoulder to check for René, and then joined Carys at Ivan’s muzzle. “I thought he was dead,” *kre* whispered.

“So did I,” she said. “I thought since I couldn’t feel him anymore – it had to mean that. But this was definitely him.”

“Are you sure it’s not...”

“What?” she challenged. “Go on. Say it. You think I made it up.”

“That’s not what I think.” *Kre* scrunched up *krei* face and rubbed *krei* forehead. “But after all this time... Are you sure you don’t just *want* to sense him?”

“I’m sure,” she said. “He was in my dream, and he is in so much pain.”

“What’re you going to tell...?” *Kre* cocked *krei* head back to indicate René. “Because you can’t say, oh yeah, by the way, I think your brothers are alive after all.”

“Brother. Just Caleb.”

“Isn’t he part of a set?”

“He was.” *I couldn’t save him.*

“You’re definitely going to need something better than that.”

“What’s going on?” René asked, appearing in the doorway. Six years older, he looked even more like the twins. The hair on one side of his head stuck straight out, and red pillow creases streaked his cheek. “Why are we moving? Raiders?”

“No raiders,” Cosh assured him. “I’m going to give you a minute. Instant coffee substitute anyone?” *Kre* slipped past René and disappeared inside the wagon.

Carys finished strapping Ivan into the harness and turned to face René. “I saw Caleb in my dream.” She pressed her palm into her solar plexus. “I feel him again. I think he’s in trouble.”

“Oh.”

“Oh?”

René scrunched up his face. “I just...” [*What if it’s not him?*]

“Who else would it be?” She couldn’t pin down his reticence. Six years they’d been searching for the twins – half of that in the Quarantine Zone, which was no small feat in itself – and yet René seemed... What was it?

“I don’t know.” He sat on the wagon steps and hugged his knees. “We’ve been chasing ghosts up and down the coast. Into the QZ. All on rumours and gossip. And every time it looks like we’re getting somewhere, like we might almost find them, it turns into nothing. I’m afraid... I’m afraid of that again.”

“I can find him this time,” she said, placing her hand on top of his head. “I think he needs to be found.”

“Why now?” René asked, looking up at her.

“Maybe his human DNA had some effect on the connection. Maybe – a lot of things. Bonded go through years of training to cement their connection, and we haven’t had that.”

“I just have a really bad feeling about this,” he said.

“A *feeling* feeling, or a normal feeling?”

He shrugged again. “I can’t tell. Not about my family.”

“Cosh isn’t worried.”

“Cosh wasn’t worried about the raiders, either.” A silence fell between them, neither comfortable nor un, but the silence of a conversation simply set aside for a moment, waiting to be resumed.

“I *know* this is him,” Carys said finally. She knelt in front of him, offering the impression of Caleb she’d gotten in the dream. “If you trust me, we *will* find your brother.”

He gave a little sigh and looked away. “Which way?”

She ran her finger along the horizon until she pointed a little to the left of where the wagon sat. “That way.”

“How far?” he pressed.

“I’m not sure yet,” she confessed. “I just know he’s that way.” She listened to the compass in her sternum, and felt the strength of its pull against her. “He’s close, though. A day, give or take.”

“But you don’t know.” René tilted his head back and looked up at the half moon through the naked trees. “We can’t *not* try, can we?” he said.

“No,” she said. “We can’t.”

## TWENTY-FOUR

Jasha lay in his bunk and counted 527 breaths after curfew, and then he slipped from his bed and travelled the empty corridors until he reached the elevators to Above. Here, he always paused before activating the panel. If the Family knew –

He pushed the button and the doors swished open. The elevator smelled of Above, and of the Scions, the wool from their *riya*. Jasha felt the weight of irrevocableness as the elevator ascended to the surface. Every time, he pressed his back flat to the wall, and scrunched down on the floor, holding his head. It helped to think of the herd, one of the females in particular. His favourite. She was fearless, and even the older stock would follow her lead. Her dreams were the most vivid, filled with textures that existed so far outside of Jasha's knowledge, he couldn't wrap language around them. They were the best thing about his life.

The elevator glided to a stop at the top of the shaft; the doors opened. Jasha dressed himself in a *riya* from one of the lockers. He still couldn't wrap the long fabric exactly the way it should go; it was either too tight or bunching somewhere or just not fitting quite like it should. Sometimes he imagined that he'd been born a true blood son, like the rest of the Scions, and he was allowed to ride the elevator for the Yielding. In his imagination, his hands suddenly knew the motions to cover every piece of skin with the pattern only the purest of the Family could perfect. In real life, Jasha wrapped the *riya* just good enough. All the important parts were covered, and Jasha knew better than to stand out in full sun even with a *riya* on.

It was still dark when he stepped outside, the ground cool and damp through the fabric of his slippers. The birds trilled above him; chipmunks dashed along the treetops. He loved the feeling of *life* rushing up to greet him as he left the compound behind.

He was about to break from the treeline and cross the road to the greenhouse when the crack came, an explosion echoing off the mountains like he'd never heard. Jasha flattened himself into the

shadow of a tree and listened to the aftershock as it rippled through him. The Family's territory was miles of wilderness; they had wards at every focal point to keep the compound safe. Nothing should be able to –

A cry – a shriek, too primal for anything else. It looped around him like a noose, dragging him as he chased after it to the source. He smelled blood and fire on the air, and up ahead saw the silhouettes of domes in the pre-dawn light. There was so much *blood*. He could smell three, maybe four bodies, recently dead.

Someone tackled him, and they rolled around on the forest floor. Jasha struck out frantically, clumsy, but his attacker was strong, fluid, and pinned him down easily. What straddled him was not a man, but a god. *Askir*. Liquid fire traced every vein beneath the *askir's* translucent skin, and he smelled of blood. Still-warm drops splattered Jasha's face as they fell from the fire god's hair.

He should have said a blessing or one of the Psalms to show his devotion, but he couldn't remember a single word as he stared up at the *askir's* face. He realised the impiety of his gaze and looked away, but the filigree of blood vessels outlined on the *askir's* face remained vivid in his mind.

Something let go inside Jasha, and the panic of the moment subsided. It was more than most *ilak* could hope for – more than most of the Family, to die at the hands of a god. Jasha decided that he would die like one of Father's sons should – without fear. *I am not afraid*, he told himself.

But the *askir* didn't kill him. The *askir* screamed at him, and then took off into the trees.

Jasha remained motionless on the ground, his pulse hammering at his temples. Above him, the tops of the trees were illuminated with a pale rose light, while the trunks below remained in darkness. The fire god hadn't killed him.

He rolled over and got to his feet, still feeling wobbly and unsteady. A strange giddiness tickled his muscles and his legs gave out on him. He sunk to the ground next to one of the coloured domes, the fabric making a soft *zzshh* as his fingernails dragged against it. Three of the slaughtered

animals were bound – their throats slit – but the fourth had been beaten until it was just a lumpy mass of bruises and drying blood.

The *askir* hadn't eaten from any of them. It was like they'd been killed just to have something to kill.

But something was missing. Jasha felt the absence of it – there; an extra pool of blood. Jasha got down on his hands and knees and inhaled the aroma. Another god, so close Jasha almost thought he'd muddled the scents, but the second god smelled of death. He could see the trail – twin threads woven so tight they might as well be one – leading off into the trees, away from the compound.

Jasha filled his nose with the scent one last time and set off in the direction it led.

\*

Jasha had followed a few yards behind the *askir* until they came to the river, where the *askir* carried the body out onto the wide, flat black stones that made up the bank. He walked to the tip of the stone, which jutted into the water like a nose, and simply stared at the rushing, icy current for a few moments.

Jasha thought, perhaps, the *askir* meant to simply keep walking straight into the water. Instead, the *askir* retreated from the water's edge, and arranged the dead god's body. His clothes were dirty, and too big, and his hair was matted with blood, but he moved like a priest. When he was finished, he walked back to the tip of the stone nose and screamed, and screamed, his whole body contorting with the effort. With every scream, the fire in his veins dimmed until his skin seemed to have a strange luminosity beneath it. When his voice finally failed him, the *askir* crouched beside the body and took his hand.

The sun rose high in the sky, and still the *askir* didn't move. Jasha knew he would have to face the *askir* again, and pray the fire god decided to spare his life a second time. Jasha bowed his head, made the clicking sound for addressing Father, and carefully approached the *askir*. Inches away from the dead god, Jasha stopped, and raised his left arm, palm out, over his head, in deference.

The *askir* did nothing. When Jasha's shoulder began to ache, he stole a glance. The *askir's* head rested on the other's stomach, staring at the dead god's face. Jasha could feel the *askir's* grief like black water swallowing him up and blocking out all other senses. Cradling the dead god like that, the *askir* seemed so much like a normal man that Jasha placed his hand on the *askir's* head, to comfort him. The effect was electric; the *askir* sprang back. The gaze of a god was like having his skin unzipped and laid open. And the *askir's* eyes – the colour of malachite, and just as hard.

The *askir* barked at him in quick, sharp sounds that clicked together like stones. When Jasha didn't respond, he repeated the sounds.

Jasha didn't know what to do. He'd always imagined the gods would know how to speak; in the Old Stories, they always communicated with ease with anyone they chose.

The *askir* pulled a dagger from the sheath on his thigh, and Jasha winced, expecting the blade to be used on him, but instead the *askir* flipped the knife and pressed the handle into Jasha's palm. He made more sounds from his mouth, then again. The same two sounds, faster and louder until the *askir* pulled Jasha's hand – and the dagger in it – to the *askir's* throat.

Realising what the *askir* wanted, Jasha jerked his hand back and dropped the weapon. *I am not worthy to kill a god.*

They stared at each other over the body, and then the *askir* made several noises in a row, *click-click-click* like beads falling together on a string.

*I don't understand*, Jasha told him.

The blankness of an empty room behind a closed door came from the *askir's* mind. Then, slow and inelegant, [*Name the reason your existence in this place.*]

*I am your servant, Jasha.* He held his arm up, palm out, for the *askir* to take once more. Those stony eyes remained fixed on Jasha; it was so invasive, being seen. The *askir* shivered. Jasha tasted blood on the air – fresh blood, still flowing. His tongue poked out of his mouth, working with

his nose to locate the source. *You're injured.* He reached toward the *askir's* shoulder. *Let me help you.*

The *askir's* entire body trembled. In painstaking movements, Jasha leaned across the body between them, the *askir* watching every motion like a skittish animal. Jasha sent him calming sensations, trying to impress his well-meaning intentions upon the god, the way he did with the herd. This time, the *askir* let Jasha peel away the layers of clothing to reveal the blood-smearred skin underneath. A ragged, circular wound punctured the flesh of the *askir's* shoulder all the way through, blood trickling from both openings. The *askir* breathed in rapid, shallow bursts and sweat collected at his temples as he continued to shiver. If Jasha didn't help him, the *askir* would die, too.

Jasha unwound the *riya* from his own body, used the *askir's* knife to cut off a length, and wrapped it around the wound to stop the bleeding. He used the rest of the *riya* to cover the *askir* like a shawl, but Jasha knew he would need more to keep the *askir* warm. He just didn't know what. *You're too cold,* he said. *I need to make you warm.*

The *askir* remained motionless for several moments, and then he reached into the folds of his clothing and pulled out a small metal box. He held it up, not exactly presenting it to Jasha, but the implication was still clear. Jasha took the box, stroking the smooth metal with his thumb. It smelled oily, chemical, and the lid slid up on the hinge to reveal a perforated screen around a piece of thread, and a small wheel next to it. Jasha turned the wheel with his finger, speeding up until a small flame sprung up inside the screen. He was so surprised, he dropped it, but the flame didn't go out.

Cautious, Jasha picked it up like the most sacred of relics. The *askir* had given him fire he could hold without being burnt. *Now what do I do?*



## TWENTY-FIVE

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation – and we have beyond reached that point, my friends. We are so far beyond that point it is a blip on the horizon, a haunting memory of the promise made by our forefathers when they opened this Land of Opportunity.

That Opportunity has been squandered, fed only to the economic elite to keep themselves fat and lazy while the common human suffers poverty, hunger, sickness, imprisonment, and death. This administration brought us the detention camps, the work camps, the “relocation depots”, the Migrant Reformation Act, the Eligible Employment Initiative, the Safe Media Act.

Under this administration:

- unemployment increased to 33%
- funding cuts to schools, libraries, hospitals, and welfare programs
- unlawful detention of citizens deemed “un-American” in internment camps without access to legal representation
- excessive use of force against its citizens culminating in the deaths of Najlaa Aydin, Abdul Ghafoor Nasir, Alan Decker, Jesse Bowman, Rayna Powers, Kaamil Mattar, Awad Jalal Assaf, Darren Bishara, Isaac Brown, and countless others

- persistent violation of established rights and freedoms, including: free speech, free press, assembly, racial equality, gender equality, the 9<sup>th</sup> Amendment, and others

Ask yourselves, what has your government done for you lately? How confident do you feel in your inalienable rights?

We are n3m0's ARMY and we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all ~~men~~ humans are created equal, and that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive, it is the ~~Right~~ Duty of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.

We therefore solemnly publish and declare our intention to separate from the United States of America and form the first sovereign cyber nation, NoPlace.

We assert that citizens of NoPlace are entitled to the following Rights:

- KNOWLEDGE. The old regime treated knowledge as a commodity, brokered to the highest bidder through its joke of an education system. Knowledge in NoPlace will be freely available, and citizens have a civic duty to share their knowledge.
- BASIC NECESSITIES. All citizens have the right to food, shelter, healthcare, and other needs for survival.
- VOTE. Each citizen of NoPlace is entitled to ONE VOTE - without intimidation or coercion - equal to that of any other citizen.

- AUTONOMY. So long as no other citizen is harmed, individuals are free to live their lives however they see fit. Citizens are free from persecution on the basis of race, sexuality, religion, sex, gender identity, disability, or medical condition.

To the Harris administration: Let us go. We don't have a compound you can raid or assets you can seize. We are in your networks and databases. You can't win this fight.

VIAM INVENIAM AUT FACIAM

## TWENTY-SIX

The exposed skin where the *riya* had been wound incorrectly had turned a violent pink and his eyes ached from the light, but the discomfort meant nothing. Jasha was almost grateful to it for reaffirming that this was all real.

After he'd built the fire, Jasha knelt at the dead twin's feet, as First Uncle would do when a Father died. The Uncles said the soul was fragile after death, like a butterfly emerging. The prayers were there to shield it so that it could be reborn into the Family.

The *askir* watched the fire burn. His energy vibrated at the *oja* frequency – the deep meditation the Scions used to heal themselves – so Jasha was careful not to disturb him. If the *askir* healed in the usual way, it could take days for the wound to mend fully, but only if the *oja* weren't interrupted.

Jasha had just begun the Sixth Configuration when the *askir* came back to life. He got to his feet and strode back through the trees to the abandoned campsite. Jasha felt conflicted. The *askir* might need his assistance, but leaving the dead god's soul untended...

The *askir* returned before he could decide, carrying several sacks made out of the same satiny material as the tent domes. He took a hatchet from one of the sacks, and started back towards the trees; stopped, his gaze focused on the inert form of the dead god.

Jasha felt the god's grief, then, and it left him breathless. It was so still, like poured glass.

Then the *askir* went into the woods again, grabbed a large fallen branch with his uninjured arm, and dragged it back to the riverbank. He dragged back branch after branch until they crowded the shore, and then he set them with the hatchet, forming a stack of long poles. He arranged them in a lattice work platform, padding branches between the layers. It took him most of the dark cycle to finish, even when Jasha began chopping branches so the *askir* could build the pyre. They finished it close to dawn, and then the *askir* carefully undressed his brother, and washed the body with water

from the river. He picked leaves out of hair and beard, trying to comb them into place with his fingers. Then he removed the *riya*, and wrapped it around the dead god in a shroud. Once they'd lifted the body onto the pyre, Jasha was struck by how similar it looked to the Family's funeral pyres.

The *askir* stripped off his clothes and stepped off the rock into icy river. Jasha ran to the edge and searched the water but he couldn't see the *askir* anywhere, and his hands felt nothing. Water was the enemy of fire; he had to rescue the *askir* before he was destroyed. He began to panic. What if it were already too late? Fire died the instant water touched it, and the *askir* had submerged himself in it.

What if there was nothing left?

A few feet away, the *askir* broke through the surface, swam back to the shore and hoisted himself onto the stone beside Jasha. The *askir* shivered as water ran down his bare, pimpled skin, but the water didn't seem to have hurt him. If anything, the *askir* looked more alert. There were many things Jasha would need to learn about gods if he were going to serve the *askir* properly.

The *askir* wrung his hair out, then got his knife from the pile of clothes and cut his hair shorter and shorter until the blade chased the smooth arc of his skull. Then he turned the knife to the hair on his face.

Jasha watched the shaving ritual with alarm. Without hair, the *askir* wouldn't be able to feel the vibrations in the air. He would be cut off! Jasha couldn't understand any reason the *askir* would do that. The *askir* didn't shave the rest of his body, though, or the eyebrows; instead, he searched through his collected supplies until he found several garments. They fit poorly – too long in the leg, too baggy around the waist – but they were clean.

The *askir* removed his sacred objects from the old clothing and put them in his new pockets. He tossed his old clothes onto the still smouldering fire, stoking it back up with a stick. When the stick caught, he turned to light the pyre.

Jasha stopped him. The sky had been subtly lightening for a while, and it wouldn't be long before night evaporated into day, and the first golden beams shot through the bare trees. There was power in the rhythm of planetary movements.

As the sun came up, the *askir* lit the kindling around the pyre, and then stood back to watch the flames spread.

Jasha smelled the different woods blending together in a smoky miasma, the pine a too-sweet perfume rising to the surface. The damp wood sizzled and popped; the musky scent of metal and dust, like an anchor in Jasha's gut.

It wasn't exactly a thought, but he knew it came from the *askir*. It was never being separate, no matter the distance. The constant ebb and flow of sensations from one mind to another. *Like the Family*, but smaller, a universe of two. And now that universe only had one.

Jasha shared with the *askir* the feeling of the Family, the strangeness of these passing hours without the presence of them in his mind.

*[I can't be alone.]*

Jasha placed the back of his hand against the *askir's* cheek, and the *askir's* hand on his own, the way the Mothers would quiet children who couldn't sleep. *Not alone.*

The *askir* turned back to the pyre, now fully engulfed in flames. *[He would like this,]* he said. *[He loves symbolic shit.]*

\*

The funeral pyres for the Family never burned so long, but the *askir's* fire burned through the light cycle, the dead god's body forming the molten core. The *askir* knelt nearby, motionless except when he would feed more wood into the flames. Even when only the bones were left and the *askir* let the flames die down, the bones smouldered long into the dark hours.

The *askir* remained still even after the pyre went cold. A timid sun crept through the trees. Hunger groaned in Jasha's stomach, and that deeper hunger, too; the one that couldn't be contained

in such a banal word. That one clawed against his skull and pulled razors through his eyes. But he couldn't interrupt the funeral rites; any disruption could cause the dead god's soul to be lost forever.

Jasha breathed in. *Just a few more moments.* That's all he had to last. *It's only a few more moments.*

It wasn't until the sunlight broke through and struck the *askir's* eye that he flinched his head away. He sank back on his heels and sighed. He made more mouth noises, these ones soft, melancholy. He spread a blanket across the stone, and began collecting every single bone down to the smallest knuckle. As if the blanket were made of the most fragile material, he rolled the bones up in a snug bundle. Then he found a deep red tub with a picture of the sun coming over mountains and white markings over top. Unscrewing the lid, he contemplated the contents for a moment, and then emptied it out, dozens of little metal tubes that smelled like musty talc and sulphur pinging against the stone. Taking a small spade from the supplies, he shovelled the ash into the tub. When he'd finished, he refastened the lid, and put both the tub and the blanket of bones into one of the blue satin bag.

He sat for a moment, and then began sorting through the rest of his haul. He tossed several pieces of clothing at Jasha, and handed him a plastic bottle filled with some sort of green gel. "Pudisson." When Jasha simply looked at the bottle in confusion, the *askir* took it back, squirted some onto his hand, and smeared it on Jasha's arm. "Liedis."

The inflamed skin immediately cooled, followed by a faint tingling. Taking the bottle back, Jasha covered the rest of his exposed skin, breathing a sigh as the stinging subsided. Afterwards, he put on the clothes the *askir* had offered – a soft shirt with long sleeves, trousers that were coarse and stuff, and a canvas head-covering with a curved brim on the front. The new clothes covered every piece of bare skin, except his face, which was kept shadowed by the head-covering. Jasha bowed low, raising his arm, palm out to the *askir*.

*[If we're going to do this, you're going to have to keep up your end of the conversation once in a while.]*

*I speak.*

The *askir* made a series of clipped sounds, elongating the final one. Then he said, *[But you don't talk.]* He paused, then repeated the sounds again, this time while he spoke, *[You don't talk,]* repeating the combination a few times.

The sounds were the *askir's* language. Jasha thought it was strange that a god chose to communicate so primitively.

*[At least the food's all here,]* the *askir* said, still speaking his sounds at the same time. From the piled supplies, he retrieved two vacuum-sealed pouches.

Jasha did not see how the pouches had anything to do with food. They smelled bland, with a hint of adhesive. When the *askir* passed it to him with a plastic spoon, Jasha turned his head away.

*That is not food.*

*[There isn't anything else.]*

*There is the Farm.*

The *askir* did something with his face – the eyes widened and became alert, his eyebrows raised and his lips parted slightly with a sharp intake of breath. *[Explain the Farm.]*

*It belongs to the Family.*

*[There is food there.]*

*Yes.*

The *askir* put his arms through two loops on the satin bag. He filled a second with the extra foil rectangles and other supplies he'd gathered, and tossed the bag at Jasha. *[Let's go then.]*

The walk back to the Farm took more time than Jasha thought. In his memory, only a short time had passed between him sensing the *askir* and reaching the campsite. It didn't help that Jasha had been more focused on the *askir's* signal than the landscape around him, so nothing seemed



familiar and the only scent he had to track was his own. The sun had reached its highest point and started its descent by the time they reached the outer barrier.

Jasha hesitated. He was immune to the barrier, but he didn't know if the *askir* would react with the blind terror it evoked in animals. He watched the *askir* carefully as they approached it, and at first the *askir* showed no response, but after a minute or so, he stopped and looked around like he had misplaced something. He walked back the way they had come. Stopped. Returned to Jasha. He did this twice more, then he looked at Jasha – the gesture still felt too intimate, too invasive, even though Jasha knew it shouldn't matter because everything was always shared.

*[Explain this.]*

There was a variation in the sounds he spoke; the intonation was different. Most of the patterns had a steady rhythm with little fluctuation, but this time the last few notes ascended pitch. Jasha wanted to know more about the strange sound-language, but the *askir* didn't explain the way the sounds worked.

*The Scions make a pheromone barrier to protect the Family's territory.*

The *askir* tried to speak, but all Jasha could make out was “the Scions”, and the sound-language had that rise at the end again, and even some of the same note combinations. Jasha could feel the *askir's* frustration – blunt and heavy – as he tried again and again to communicate the idea.

*[Tell me... the story of the Scions.]*

*The Scions do not have a Story.*

The *askir* took a deep breath; exhaled slow. *[Finish this sentence: the Scions are –]*

Jasha faltered. In the Old Stories, the gods were always harsh with their punishments, and he didn't know what the *askir* was upset about. *Father's true blood children.*

*[That is not any clearer.]*

*Tell me how I can better be your servant.*

*[Be quiet for a while. Not quiet –]* He waved his hand in the air between their two heads.

*[None of this.]*

Jasha nodded his consent. He had displeased a god. He would be worse than Wretched. He would probably be doomed to be an *ilak* for every reincarnation until the end of eternity, if he was allowed to reincarnate at all. The *askir* might decide Jasha's soul was no longer worthy of belonging to the Family. He felt the veins in his cheeks dilate and the blood rush to warm the sensitive skin. Perhaps the *askir* would send him away. The Wretched sometimes grouped together, but even they wouldn't welcome him in once they knew he'd been cast out by one of the gods. Jasha would be forced to be alone forever, another century at least, give or take a few decades. All that time –

*[Tell me about the Farm.]*

Relief washed out Jasha's fears. The *askir* was giving him a second chance. *When the Family began, Father decided we would farm adolo instead of hunting, so we would never be hungry. He built the compound where we live, and the Farm in the Above, where the herd would be tended. The Uncles trapped the first herd – fully mature animals so we could harvest more quickly – but they became savage and killed one of the Scions. For the second herd, the Scions found young ones, and we are raising them to be more docile. Roan said they're savage now, too, though, so they will probably be culled, as well. But maybe some will live.*

*[Tell me about adolo.]*

Jasha didn't know how to describe *adolo* – even newborn *ilak* screamed for it from their very first breaths – so instead he showed the *askir* the sticky-wet texture, the musky scent of metal and salt, the vibrant impressions that drowned out the hunger the Family always felt. The hunger Jasha felt now.

*[Tell me what the herd looks like.]*

That one was even trickier, because each member of the herd looked very different, unlike the Family. Jasha thought of his favourite – the young female – and pictured her as he'd seen her

many times, racing through the meadow with some of the males. The pale gold of her arms and legs as they pumped through the air, the rich brown of her braid trailing behind her. Her dark wide eyes set into a square face and the small, round bulb of her nose dusted with freckles.

The *askir* stopped walking and made a two-toned sound with his voice. His entity had changed – not angry exactly, but not pleased. When Jasha responded with confusion, the *askir* sent him an image. This one was an adult male, muscular and lanky with skin several shades darker than any in the herd, but the resemblance was unmistakable.

*Yes.*

“Hyu-muns,” the *askir* said. “Yur eedin hyu-muns.”

## TWENTY-SEVEN

Audrey was up to her elbow in goat working to disentangle the legs of two kids trying to be born when she realised she was being watched. She glanced up through the open shed door, expecting to see Will or Ethan come to check on her. She would give them all hell if they spooked Ruby Mama before Audrey got the kids loose. Everyone knew Audrey was the only one –

For a moment, she forgot what she was doing, stunned by the strangeness of him.

He was in the woods, for one, just inside the treeline on the other side of the paddock fence, which meant he'd had to come *through* the woods, and only the Nameless did that. The woods were cursed. Then there was the fact that his was the first new face she'd seen in the six years since she arrived at the Farm with the other children.

And he was black. Brown. Ish. He definitely wasn't white like she was, but he wasn't as dark as Lilah and her brother, either. His head was bald, with even his cheeks as bare as a girl's, and he wore strange clothing that made his body look fatter than it was. Through his open coat, she could see a white circle on the front of his black sweater, with three diamonds in red, blue and yellow inside. Big, gold letters were stencilled above it in a word she almost remembered. She'd seen the design before, and it *meant* something...

The nanny bleated – if a spirit had come from the woods to eat her, it was just going to have to wait until she finished helping Ruby Mama – and Audrey refocused her attention. Delicately, she manipulated the tangled limbs and eased the first kid from the womb. Once its sibling was free, the second practically tumbled out after. She placed the two kids near their mother's nose and left the new family to get acquainted. Outside the warmth of the shed, her breath came in foggy puffs and her moccasins crunched through the icy top layer of snow. She wrapped her poncho tighter around her body to cut out the breeze.

The black man was gone.

*You're a damn fool, Audrey Waters*, she told herself. Everyone was on edge since the Yielding, and no one had slept wondering when the Nameless would come back and retaliate. And the does all giving birth on top of it. The work of the Farm didn't stop just because they had other worries to contend with.

She cut a path through the snow to where she thought the man had been standing. She hoisted herself over the fence and scanned the treeline until she spotted it – a roughly circular patch about a foot into the forest where the snow had been disturbed. Four little furrows led away from it.

Footprints.

Audrey felt a heady vindication that she hadn't imagined the black man, followed by a sense of trepidation that cut her breath short. A stranger had come to the Farm – a stranger had *come out of the woods* – and he hadn't been alone.

Where had they come from? If they'd come from the forest, did that make them cursed, too? What would that mean for the Farm?

She followed the footprints away from the goat shed. They curved with the treeline to where the tall oaks kissed the back of the storehouse. Every time Audrey had to fetch food for the kitchen from the building, she worried that the forest's curse was somehow seeping into the building through that simple contact. And now someone *had* come out of the trees, and who knew how dangerous that could be?

Taking a breath, Audrey ducked under a low-hanging branch and slipped around the side of the storehouse. The black man lay collapsed in the gathering snow, with a boy – he couldn't be no older than her, and fourteen at most – crouched over him.

The boy was so pale she could see the veins running beneath his skin, with black hair in a long braid down his back. She recognised his clothing though; it was the same combination of goatskin and undyed linen the Farm used, with the same boxy cut, but he definitely wasn't one of the Farmers.

She took a step closer, but he shielded the body and made a gruff cough in his throat. “It’s alright,” she said, using the same careful tone she used with Ruby Mama. She crouched down to his level and crept forward slowly. Keeping her eyes averted, she offered her hand toward him, just the way she would with a spooked animal. “I ain’t gonna hurtcha.”

He stretched his head forward, nostrils working the air.

“Your frien’ sick?” she asked, keeping her voice light. “Lemme see an’ I can help.” She concentrated on her good intentions and hoped he’d somehow be able to sense that she meant well, but the questions still swirled in her stomach. Who were they? Where had they come from?

The boy leaned so close she felt the feather of his breath on her skin, but after a moment, he drew back. He opened the black man’s coat to reveal the shirt underneath, the entire right shoulder soaked in blood.

“Ohmyword,” she gasped. “Okay, okay. It’s gonna be alright,” she told the boy. “I’m gonna get help.”

The boy grabbed her wrist – he was *strong* – and she saw the fear plain as day on his face.

“It’s just my frien’,” she said. “He’ll know how to fix it.” She looked straight into the boy’s eyes. “I promise.” *Please believe me. I just want to help.*

The boy seemed conflicted, but in the end, he let her go.

“Don’t you move,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

She ran around the side of the storehouse, skidding in the snow, and raced straight to the infirmary, where she knew Will would be. He was one of the First, though, so it was like telling the Watchers without telling them. The boy’s fear had touched her, and she wanted some time to think through the options before notifying the entire Farm – but to get that time, she needed to fix the man’s shoulder. To do that, she needed Will. At least, she hoped Will was who she needed, because if he didn’t know what to do, either, then she’d *have* to go to the Watchers, and some small part of

her whispered that the Watchers might not have the best interests of the man and his friend in mind. She couldn't say why she thought that; the Watchers took care of them.

And yet.

She'd barely shaken the snow from her moccasins before Will was grabbing his supply bag and a sheet, and they were running back across the Green to the storehouse.

The boy bristled when he saw Will, but Audrey soothed him. Will spread the sheet out on the ground, and she helped him carefully lift the man onto the fabric. Using the sheet as a hammock, they carried the man to the Infirmary, the boy trotting along beside them. *If any of the kitchen crew happen to look out, there won't be no keepin' this secret for long*, she thought.

As delicate as Audrey had been with the doe, Will peeled back the man's outer coat, then took scissors to the remaining layers. Blood-stained rags wound around his shoulder, so saturated that small rivulets trickled down his side. Will cut those away, too, and, propping the man on his side, set about cleaning and examining the wound.

Audrey and the boy stood at the man's head, watching the quickly efficient ministrations. The boy's hand snuck into hers. His skin was cool, untextured. He squeezed.

"Is he going to die?" she asked Will.

Will made two thick dressings out of linen bandages. "I don't know," he said, placing the dressings over the wounds. "Hold this," he ordered, and she stepped forward to hold them in place while he rebandaged the shoulder. "This exit wound looks partially healed, but I don't see any sign of sutures, and the entrance wound is fresh. It doesn't make sense." Together, they eased the man onto his back, and Will covered him with a wool blanket. "He's lost a lot of blood. Grab an ampoule of regen from that cabinet and start an IV. He was just standing in the woods?"

"By the goat shed."

"What about this one?" Will asked, looking over the boy. "What's your name? Are you hurt?"

The boy backed away and grabbed Audrey's hand again. "I think he's feral," she said.

"So why aren't we telling the Watchers about this?"

It was a good question, and one she should've been asking herself. "I don't know. I—" The boy squeezed her hand. "I just don't think we can trust them entirely."

"What're you going to do when they find out?"

"What if they don't?"

"Come on, Pig," he said. "The Farm isn't that big. All it'd take is someone coming in here with a headache and everyone is going to know there's a strange man in the infirmary. They'll have questions, so come on. What're we going to tell them?"

"Maybe we can hide him until he's well enough to leave," she suggested.

"That is a big if," Will said. "We don't even know if he's going to wake up, let alone be able to walk out of here. People are going to freak out if they find him in here. Who is he? Where did he come from?"

"What if he has something to do with the Nameless?" she asked. "What if he was sent by God to help us?"

"Pig..." He sighed. "You know that stuff's not real."

"Well, how'd he get here, then? Only the Nameless go through the trees."

"Maybe the Nameless sent him."

"Why'd they send a hurt man?"

"I don't know, and that's the point," Will said. "We don't know anything about this guy — who he is, where he came from, what he wants. The kid isn't saying anything. We can't keep this to ourselves. What if he's dangerous?"

"He's not dangerous."

"How do you know?"



Audrey looked at the sallow face of the man on the bed. In her mind, she saw him illuminated in flames of glory. “I feel it,” she said, with absolute conviction. “We need to protect him.”

“I’ll give you until after dinner to get some answers out of his shadow here,” Will decided finally, “and then I’m going to Lorh. She should be the one treating him, anyway. She’s the expert.”

“Okay,” Audrey agreed. It wasn’t what she wanted, but it gave her some time. And after dinner, everyone would be preoccupied getting the fires lit and the lanterns set out before sunset. She might be able to postpone all the way until morning if she planned it right.

Outside, the meal bell began to ring, but dinner wasn’t supposed to be for another hour. “Stay here,” Will said, grabbing the hoe propped beside the door. “Block the door after me.”

“Where you goin’?” she asked, following after, but he pushed her back inside.

“*Listen* to me,” he snarled. She hadn’t heard that tone in his voice since the day she almost stepped on a copperhead right outside the cabin porch. “Stay here. Block the door.”

She turned because she thought the boy had said something, and when she looked back, Will was running across the Green to join the Firsts and Seconds gathering there.

*[They’re here.]*

“It’s not dark,” she said. “The Nameless only come in the dark. Wait.” This time, she walked right up to him so they were standing nearly toe-to-toe. “You... said somethin’ without sayin’ nothin’.” She didn’t know how it was possible, but she knew without a doubt it had happened.

Whatever Will said, she *knew* there were more layers to the world than the one she could see.

“How’d you do that?”

*[It’s how we speak.]* The boy touched his temple, then touched the same spot on her head.

*[We share.]*

“Who’s ‘we’?”

*[The Family.]*

She knew it but she didn't want to name it. She couldn't. Was this what they looked like beneath those funny outfits they wore? *Boys*? "Why," she said. It was the only word that kept pounding in her brain. She thought, if she just knew why.

*[The Family needs the blood.]*

"And you..." Had Will been right? Had this been a ruse of some sort? It didn't make sense. The wounded man had a serious injury. Had that been deliberate?

*[I am... Wretched.]*

"Did you bring 'em here?"

*[No. You attacked the Scions.]*

"The...? The Nameless," she realised. They were retaliating. "How do we win?"

He backed away, reaching toward the man for comfort.

"You know it ain't right," she said. "I see it in you. You know what they do ain't right."

*[The Family.]*

"Your family?" she asked.

The boy placed his hand on the man's stubbly head. *[Light.]*

"Light?"

*[Light burns the Family.]*

She looked him over. He was pale, a little sunburnt, maybe, but no rash was going to save *her* family from the Nameless. "Don't bother you none."

*[The god gave me medicine.]*

"What do we gotta do with the light?"

*[On their skin.]* She felt the sting of burst blisters and pus dripping down her arms.

"You swear—" Was she really going to trust one of them? But she saw the way he looked at the black man. "You swear on his life? I'll kill 'im if you lie." She made herself believe it so that he would believe it, too.

He nodded.

She burst out of the Infirmary, scanning the Green for Will, but she only saw Thirds and Fourths waving brooms and shovels – and the Nameless. Black silhouettes against the setting sun that were faster and stronger than any person should be, and moved in an utterly silent coordination. They fended off the Farmer’s attacks easily, without even seeming to try.

“Light!” Audrey screamed. “Light will hurt them!” She darted into the fight, screaming it as loud as she could over and over, and then something snagged the back of her coat and she was being lifted up off the ground. A hand clamped around her throat, and then she faced one of the Nameless, without his head covering. His eyes were just as pale as his skin and he had long fangs like a bear. His grip tightened around her throat, cutting off the air. She hoped he wouldn’t squeeze so hard her head popped off.

Her fingernails dug into his hand, trying to pry his fingers away, and her legs kicked helplessly through empty air. He just stared at her with those ghost-pale eyes and no expression, like he was watching a cake rise or something, and the black clouded around her vision – *This is how I’m going to die.*

[ENOUGH.]

## TWENTY-EIGHT

*Enough.* The word shoots out of my chest like a shockwave. The other Askala move back as I walked toward Roan, but he watches me, holding that girl like a forgotten toy.

A wave folds through the Askala, their shock at Jasha's presence with me momentarily overriding their wariness. From Roan, though – from him, I get only curiosity.

He's huge, easily a foot taller than me and probably a hundred pounds heavier. But he doesn't scare me. The worst that could happen is he'd rip into me the way he's about to rip into that girl, and that might not be so bad. It'd be over. Maybe I didn't die with Ben because I was meant to die here.

*[What are you?] he asks.*

*I want these people, I say.*

*[They belong to the Family.]*

*Not anymore.*

*[You have compassion for them.]*

*That's my business.*

*[You're ilak,] he says, and I feel a shift in him, like a piece has just slotted into place. [The teskerii lose their children too easily, and here you are, unaware of what these creatures are.]*

Fire crackles in my ears, the fire I hear all the time, that I'm made of. But I am not alone; there are others. Together we are one, stretching into eternity. I speak the stories that have been spoken to me as I've always done, passing them along to the next, and the next. But these stories are troubling. The gods are at war, brother against brother, and the citizens of our stories pay in blood. All their magnificent creations, their intricate buildings and clever machines break and crumble. It is the end of everything.

The destruction even reaches us, high above the war being waged, and I hear the screams of my companions as they're ripped from the skies and crash into the blue ball. The universe trembles

and I am pulled along, hurtling through the sky as fast as the specks of stone that travel through our space. I can't hear the others. I can't hear anything.

My body tears apart, the various pieces of me fracturing and splitting off. I shriek, but I can't even be sure anyone will hear me, or what they can do but watch as I have – it stops. I stand – myself, alone – on a plain of grass, the sky above me filled with fiery balls raining down. The ground, pocked and smoking, shudders with every impact.

The air vibrates with millions of wings, and swarms of birds swoop into the craters, carrying mud and twigs in their beaks.

*[This is our world,]* Roan says. We both stand in the snowy grass, and we are both elsewhere, somewhere his mind creates. I still feel the stars falling as if it's happening in this moment. *[Even before the Six Tribes, it was made for us.]*

He shows me the Askala running, hiding in the dark; of being chased by humans wielding fire, always fire in every image, every scene of heads been chopped off, bricks shoved in mouths and stakes plunged in hearts. Buried alive – dissected – kept in cages chains coffins cells but always kept alive through every rending, agonising moment of it, shared with every member of the Family as it happened through the stream – all of them remember, all of them experienced it.

*You want them punished.*

*[It's more complicated than that.]*

*I'm listening.*

*[We knew the power of blood from the animals butchered on Ninth Day, so when the humans began bringing their lights into our lands, we let their blood to learn their secrets. They hunted us, so we needed more blood, so we would know how to escape them. Our ancestors drank so much their bodies craved the memories and feelings floating in it more than the blood in their own veins, until the addiction passed from generation to generation. We can live for months without food or water, but not even one day without the blood.]*

*It doesn't have to be human.*

*[No, but they are the most efficient source. And yes, I want to punish them. They punish us.]*

*These humans are mine.*

*[I can't allow that. My Family needs them now.]*

*Why? Just find more. There's no shortage.*

*[Father built this Farm so our people will never feel hunger again, but he was not meant to have a Family, and his Brother is eager to take back what Father was given out of his inheritance.]*

*I know all that. What's so important about these ones?*

*[We were the first ones who live as we do. Others believe we don't deserve the territory we have, and that we have turned our backs on tradition. If this Farm is not successful, they will challenge Father's right to lead, and the Family will be scattered as Wretched.]*

*Why not tell them to fuck off out of your business and go home?*

*[That's not our way.]*

*What if I tell him?*

*[You?]*

*I deal with your uncle, you give me these people.*

*[I like you, teskerii.]*

*So we have a deal?*

*[What happens if you get sentimental about our next crop?]*

*Then we have another conversation.*

*[I trade one would-be master for another.]*

*Look, I don't care about humans in general, just the ones attached to me.*

*[A Father submits to no one.]*

He's inside my head – not just his thoughts so we could communicate, but his consciousness is actively searching mine, and I hadn't noticed. Hadn't even thought to try the same with him. He

pulls them out of my memory stores – all the deaths I’ve ever seen replayed in perfect detail, ones I couldn’t stop, ones I haven’t thought of since I’d first seen them as a child – and I know eventually he’ll get to Ben’s and I *cannot* see that again, cannot not experience it like it’s happening again, but I don’t know how to stop it – I can’t move, or speak, and they just keep coming, so many faces, old and young, so many scenes and scenarios, and there it is:

A twig snaps. I see the boy. The gun. But my brain is too slow figuring out what it means and he fires – *WAIT*.

The *psnkth* of the bullet passing through my shoulder –

The force spins me around in time to see Ben grab his throat, and the blood – so slick and dark seeping between his fingers. The way he looks at me – he knows how bad it is, and that realisation drags a rake through my chest.

A bullet whizzes past my ear.

That kid, holding the gun in both hands but it still wobbles, and this look on his face like he can’t believe he even hit something once, he’s backing away – the bound men yell at me but they aren’t going anywhere.

The kid drops the gun. Runs. I run faster.

He screams like cats in heat and when I stab the knife into the side of his neck, blood burbles from his mouth, but he’s not dead yet – his eyes keep blinking – so I stab him again, again, again – blood splattering my face iron and salt on my tongue – until the hilt is too slick with blood to hold so I grab his gun and beat his skull with the butt in wet, smacking blows until his face is a lumpy mush.

I wipe the knife on his shirt and go back to the camp.

*[Keb.]*

I take off my scarf and tie it tight around his neck to stop the bleeding, but before I do, I check the back of his neck and there’s no exit wound which isn’t good because god knows what it hit inside –

He grabs my head, smearing his blood on my face. *[I need to say –]*

“No,” I say to him, because I feel the acceptance filling him, and I don’t know how yet but *we are going to fix this* there has to be a way. “We’ll find someone. It’ll be alright.”

*[Don’t do anything stupid.]* He sways and I catch him beneath the armpits, and *this* close I see all the ways we are the same and I can’t breathe with my need of him. *[Don’t stay out here on your own.]* I can’t keep us both up anymore, so we fall, and I hug him tight enough to absorb his being into mine – like he could stay alive by taking my body and I could be the one *should* be – *[Be with people.]*

*I don’t want people.*

*[I know.]*

It’s an Amazon rope bridge on a windy day, and 14,038,920 minutes of coexistence becomes one second, two seconds, three seconds of separation and I feel how *very* big and dark the trees are around me, and feel how cold the dampness seeping through my jeans is while the warmth of his blood trickles down my neck.

My right arm is totally fucking useless so I use my left. It’s not natural, but I only have to stab Alpha Dad ten times or so before I hit something good and the blood just oozes right out of him. Beta Dad – because he’s a snivelling little shit asking for *my* forgiveness and *my* mercy when they came up and stole *our* food when we hadn’t done anything to them and then we come to take back what’s ours, and *his* dumbass kid *kills my brother* – I stab him in the gut and scoop down so his intestines spill out.

The third one is still unconscious but I hear the roar of the river so I sheath my knife, grab an arm and start dragging him through the woods until we reach the flat, black rocks that make up the shore. Ice clings to their edges, but in between the river runs smooth and clear. There are so many ways I want to hurt him. But mostly I want him to know as Ben had known that he is going to die and nothing’s going to stop it. I fetch some nylon rope from the camp and gather the heaviest stones I



can lift with one hand – two for each limb and one for the torso. When I have them all tied, I dunk his head over and over into the water until at last he comes up spluttering and flailing.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” He clings to my wrist. “He’s not even my real dad! I hate him! Please don’t kill me, please.”

I can feel everything he has to live for – which isn’t much, but to him it is, and he wishes Ed hadn’t made him come on the supply run it’s high time you learned to be a man in this world he should’ve just asked his mom to let him stay –

I kick his body into the river, and he bobs for a moment, then goes straight down, and the river is so clear I can still see him at the bottom, just a black smear against grey stone. I watch until he stops struggling, and then a little longer just to be sure.

Their deaths should feel liberating, like equalling a balance but Ben’s absence is just as strong a presence as it ever was and grief still carves out my ribs. For a moment, I envy the man at the bottom of the river, and contemplate joining him, but then I remember Ben. I can’t leave him like that to be chewed on and picked over by scavengers. I have to make him safe first.

Someone is at the camp when I return, kneeling by Ben’s body – *touching* him – another one of *them* because they haven’t taken enough from us the scream rips from my throat as I throw my body at him if they all suffer maybe I will stop because they *need to know* what they did –

*[I am not afraid.]*

A shockwave knocks me to the ground – a plume of fire – that smell, metallic and smoky – scorched grass – the girl. Parts of her tunic are singed and she coughs as she rubs her throat. The Scions click and whistle to each other – their unease like an oil slick down my spinal cord. I send them a challenge – a bluff really – Roan – the ashy dust on my lips – just  
stay  
standing  
until

## TWENTY-NINE

*“See how the wound on his chest looks fresh while the other side is almost healed?”*

*“Those are just from the wound rupture.”*

*“But the wound –”*

*“Looks perfectly normal. Clamp, please.”*

Audrey watched Jasha while Will and Lorh worked away on the angel – after the scene with the Nameless, she’d decided he was definitely an angel if there ever was one – behind a fort of privacy screens. Audrey didn’t know what the screens were meant to do, since pretty much every sound carried across the five feet to where she and Jasha waited on a bench. He sat perfectly still, his attention focused on the drama behind the screens. He looked so much like the other boys on the Farm.

*“Did you drink my blood?”*

*[It’s likely.]*

*“Get Lilah and Olene in here. I need more hands.”*

*“What about dosing him with regen?”*

*“It’s too soon since the last one.”*

*“Din’t you know it was wrong?”*

*[It’s what we’ve always done.]*

*“An’ that makes it okay?”*

*[The Uncles teach that humans are soulless animals. Humans don’t feel or think as the Family does.]* He blinked slowly. *[I have thoughts sometimes that the Uncles might be wrong.]*

*“Sure as heck they’re wrong,” she shot back. “I have a soul.”*

He looked at her, his nostrils flaring slightly as he took in her scent as well. *[I saw your dreams.]*

“What?”

*[I wanted to see the Farm. I hoped to – The Farm is very important to the Family. The first time I did it, I'd just been moved into the — dormitory. I couldn't sleep without the soft murmur of Mothers' voices nearby. I tried to find my way back to the harem, but found myself standing by the elevators instead. I truly believed that I wouldn't return to the compound, but something possessed me to touch the panel anyway. When I got to the surface, I travelled to the Farm and saw your dreams.]*

“You spied on us while we slept?”

*[You watch the goats sleep.]*

“I'm not a goat.”

*[The Family thinks you are.]*

Olene and Lilah came into the infirmary and slipped into their smocks, Lilah stopping to give Jasha a long look before Lorh barked at them to hurry up. Olene nudged her forward, and they both disappeared behind the screen around the angel's bed.

“So you spied on us and decided we had souls then?”

*[I began to think differently, and that conflicted me. We're taught the Uncles are always correct, but what I saw was different than what I had learned. I thought it was a weakness of being — but the god says it is having 'questions'.]*

Audrey felt that she had to be angry at Jasha, but she was having trouble maintaining it. She should be angry. She had every reason to be. But – and maybe it was a side-effect of his communication method – she found herself empathising with him instead. It wasn't his fault he'd been taught the wrong thing, and he *had* told her how the Farmers could beat the Nameless.

But he'd still drunk her blood.

*“Do we know who he is? Where did he come from?”*

*“Did you see that boy with Audrey? He gives me the creeps.”*

*“Pay attention. We’re trying to save this man’s life. Will –”*

*“Got it. Angle the light.”*

*“Is he an angel?”*

*[He is a god.]*

*“There’s only one true God,” she said. “B’sides, gods don’t get hurt.”*

*[Gods can die.]*

*“This is the last unit.”*

*“He needs more. Check the type list and let’s start getting donors in.”*

*“What do we do with the boy?”*

*“Put him in one of the cubicles. Wait, we might not have to. Audrey – she’s a match.”*

*“No, she’s too young.”*

*“Did they extract from her this time?”*

Audrey slid off the bench and marched up to the privacy screen. She took a pause before speaking – there had to be a reason she’d been the one to find him, but even after all the needles she’d endured, they still made her shiver. “He saved my life,” she said, pulling the screen back. “I’m going to help him.”

*[I will share my blood, too,] Jasha said.*

“It’s not that simple,” Lorh told him. A second later, her eyes shot up and scanned her three colleagues for a reaction. The others didn’t notice, but Audrey did. Why would Lorh want to hide that she could hear Jasha? Couldn’t they all hear him?

*“He did save her,” Will said., “and she’s old enough to make her own decision.”*

Audrey remembered what Will had told her before her first Yielding, that the Watchers really worked for the Nameless. Was that how Lorh heard Jasha’s thoughts? *Task at hand, Pig*, she told herself, channelling Will. “Jasha –” She wasn’t sure when she’d gotten his name; it seemed to have always sat there in her brain waiting to be used. “He wants to give his blood, too.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Lorch said.

Will stepped back from the table, and stripped off his bloody gloves. “If he’s the right type –”

“It’s dangerous,” Lorch repeated, with more emphasis. She leaned closed to the wound, working two thin surgical instruments around the torn flesh. “We don’t know what’s in his blood. Audrey’s is clean. See who else you can get in here. Let’s move like someone’s life depends on it, people.”

*[I don’t have diseases.]*

Lorch paused, tilting her head up. The fabric of her mask almost seemed to move as if she were speaking.

Will guided Audrey to an empty bed, and unfolded a privacy screen around them. “How are you holding up?” Will asked, tilting her chin to see the bruises on her neck.

“I’m alright,” she told him.

“Y’know it’s okay to be freaked out, right?” He tied the tourniquet around her upper arm, and then slid the needle into the vein.

“I’m fine, really.” She looked at the ceiling. Animal blood, other people’s blood, it was all fine, but her own – the sight of it was a special kind of hell. Still, he’d turned a man to ash to save her life. The least she could do was face a little needle. “Will this save him?”

“It’s gonna be touch and go for a while, Pig,” he answered. “This might give him some time, though.” He glanced at the shadows on the other side of the privacy screen, then leaned close and pitched his voice low, “What’d the boy tell you?”

She’d never lied to Will – not that she hadn’t used the odd fib or two with other people, but the two of them had always had trust in each other. “Don’t freak out,” she answered, “but he’s one of the Nameless.”

“Are you kidding me?” He almost jumped up, but she grabbed his hand. “We just started a war with them!”

“He ran away – something happened – he helped us chase them off tonight,” she said quickly. “He told me about the light. He’s different somehow, and –” She thought of the way he’d watched the surgery, what he’d said about the black man being a god. “I think he worships him.” She thought about mentioning Lorh, but it didn’t sound very convincing when she ran through it in her head. She needed something more solid. “It’s not really a war, is it?”

“What did you think was going on? The revolt at the last Yielding didn’t just happen. We’re going to take the Farm back.”

There had been a plan, and Will had been involved. And she hadn’t known. The room swayed and her head felt like a sack of flour on a spindle –

“Whoa.” Will eased her back onto the mattress. He swapped out the extraction tube for one connected to an IV of regen and electrolytes so she’d make new blood faster. “Don’t get off this bed until I tell you to,” he ordered.

He left to deliver the fresh blood, and then he opened the Infirmary door and called out to a couple people to come inside and help. Suddenly, there was a scuffle on the other side of the screen; the voices of the men were punctuated with a hoarse bark.

Audrey leapt off the bed and collapsed on the floor, her vision blacking out for a moment. You weren’t supposed to move during the regen treatments, but she couldn’t do nothing. As much as she didn’t understand it, she believed Jasha. At least, she believed his devotion to the angel was real, and that was enough for her.

Pulling herself up with the bed, she gave herself a moment to regain her balance. Carrying the IV stand with her, she stepped out to see a couple of Seconds holding Jasha between them while Will and another First debated where to take Jasha.

“No! He has to stay,” Audrey cried, pushing herself into their conversation. “He’s not with them anymore. He’s with the angel.”

“We can’t let him just roam around,” argued Lilah. “He’s still one of the Nameless. We should at least find out what he knows.”

“He’s different than the others.” She wondered how Lilah felt about seeing someone else besides her brother the same colour as her. “Jasha told us how to hurt the Nameless. That has to count for something.”

“Come on, Pig,” Will said. “You have to look at this rationally. He could give away information now to earn our trust, and then turn around and betray us. How do you even know what he says is true?”

“I just feel it,” she murmured.

“Personally, I need proof before we trust him,” Lilah stated. “I think, for the time being, and until we get a handle on everything that’s happened, he needs to be kept somewhere secure and out of the way.”

“But he didn’t do nothin’ wrong.”

“It’s just temporary,” said Will. “Just ‘til we get all the information. Besides, we got enough on our hands. Let Lilah take this one.”

There was a commotion outside, and voices raised in terror or delight, but given the rest of the night, Audrey didn’t think it could be anything good. Lilah stepped onto the Infirmary porch.

“What’s going on?” she called to someone running past.

“A woman just came out of the woods.”

## THIRTY

The trees broke onto a clearing of newly-fallen snow. Three low buildings with curved rooves sat in a row, faint lights outlining the windows. Carys's breath puffed into the air. Then the children appeared – dozens of adolescents in goatskin coats with long, braided hair. They watched with bold curiosity, but remained wary of getting too close. An old Kikaror woman – Mayra, she said her name was – appeared, and led them to a fourth building nudged into what was almost a cul-de-sac of structures around a well-worn dirt track.

The interior was split into two rooms, cut off from each other by a stout timber door. Carys could hear women singing, and the sound of small children through the wall. The main room of the cabin was simple – a small kitchenette, and some couches arranged into a seating area with four simple beds tucked into a corner.

The Farm, Mayra said, belonged to her and her sisters. The children had come from a stranded migrant convoy six years ago. They'd found the bus wedged into the hillside and known immediately it must be the will of the Divinity, so they'd brought the children back to the Farm and cared for them ever since.

The story seemed a little flaky to Carys, but it wasn't unusual for Tribe outcasts to sometimes form communes on the other side of the barrier. Some of them even cohabitated with humans. She'd never heard of it happening to this extent, though. And how had they remained off-the-grid, with a homestead this size? Traders in the region wouldn't be able to keep a resource this large to themselves for very long. Did it have something to do with whatever had affected Cosh and Ivan in the woods?

Maybe it was Mayra herself that Carys didn't trust. The woman smiled a lot, but the expression never reached her eyes; nor could Carys shake the feeling that the women in the other room were listening intently to their conversation, despite the wall between them.



For his part, René stayed quiet while Mayra told her story, and Carys wasn't entirely sure he was even listening. He always was something of a sphinx, but the closer they'd gotten to Caleb, the more detached he became. It unnerved her that he was so distant and she thought maybe that was why the Kikaror woman felt off.

Caleb, Mayra told them, had been injured and was being treated in the infirmary. She could take them to see him, but he could be in surgery for several hours and the cabin would certainly be more comfortable for them to wait in. She even volunteered to prepare them a meal. René had insisted, though, the affect in his voice so flat and still it chilled even Carys. For a moment, she saw him as he must appear to Mayra. Not Ren, the slightly strange boy she'd looked after the past six years, but the man who existed always out of step with reality. That man, Carys realised, might be capable of anything.

Mayra must have picked up the same vibe, because she quickly led them across the cul-de-sac to a beehive-shaped structure. The children outside separated as they passed by, with a few of the braver ones stealing furtive touches.

Caleb's proximity was so palpable he might as well have been crushed into her body, but she felt a growing dismay as they neared the building. What if he never woke up? What if he didn't survive? Six years. They couldn't be this close for it to end like that. At the very least, René – Caleb needed to stay alive for René.

The infirmary was warm and bright, full of glossy white surfaces that clashed with the rustic façade. They entered a small waiting room with benches along the wall. Plastic sheets partitioned the rest of the space into treatment areas and patient rooms.

One of Mayra's "sisters" greeted them – a Vuulph; there was no mistaking those long, narrow features and eyes as cold as their home in the White. Caleb had been shot, she explained, and she'd sealed the wound, but they wouldn't know what permanent damage there was until he'd had more

time to recover. She spoke in a softly lilting, almost mournful tone, and the surrealness of the moment made Carys's skin tingle. Who were these people?

Finally, they'd been allowed to see Caleb. He was still unconscious, and they were encouraged to let him sleep, but the Vuulph said they could sit with him while they waited. He was in the furthest partitioned cubicle, next to what looked like a lab. There were two beds in the room, with a locker behind the plastic strips over the entrance.

Carys hung back while René approached the bed. Caleb was shirtless beneath the blanket, a swatch of bandages around his right shoulder. Black stubble covered his scalp and chin, except for a small X-shaped scar on his cheek. What other scars did he have?

"My best guess is he attempted *oja* but didn't complete it," Lorch told Carys. "Then he aggravated the wound through physical exertion."

*Oja*. The archaic word snagged in Carys's brain. How would a Vuulph know that legend?

René laid his hand on Caleb's chest, then bent over until their foreheads touched. For several moments, he stayed like that, finally uttering a soft sigh as he sat on the edge of Caleb's bed. "When will he wake up?" René asked.

"Once the sedative wears off," Lorch answered. "He'll need to keep that arm immobile for a few months."

Carys held onto the vitality of Caleb's presence in her mind. On the bed, he looked small and old. Brittle. Like a strong breath would shatter him. But the way he *felt* to her, it didn't feel like he was dying, and she took comfort from that.

Chairs were brought in and then they were left alone with Caleb. A girl – one of the younger ones, with dark chestnut hair and freckles like a dust storm – came in periodically to check Caleb's vitals and the machines monitoring his status. She never spoke during these visits, and her hands trembled as she went about her work. Carys guessed the girl was still in early adolescence, though

she had the solid, muscular frame shaped by physical labour. The girl never once looked at either of them, but Carys felt her interest in them all the same.

*[What do you think it means that Ben isn't with him?]*

She took René's hand. It was the question they hadn't faced during the entire quest to find Caleb. What if Ben wasn't there, too? Life after the Collapse was hard, though, and Caleb definitely looked like he'd walked through the thick of it. "There could be any number of reasons," she said, hoping this was true.

René looked at her, that too-old-for-his-face vibe all over him. "What do *you* think?"

Carys sighed. It would be worse if she lied. One thing about this life was you had to face it. "I can't imagine anything good."

"What if we're all that's left?"

"We keep going until we don't."

*[These people smell wrong.]*

*I know.*

\*

The decanter is nearly two feet tall and made of clear crystal. She holds it in both hands, and liquid fire bubbles up from the bottom, filling the vessel. Prisms in the crystal cast rainbow floaters around the cave. She climbs the steps to the platform and tips the liquid into the urn but the urn empties as fast as she can pour. She thinks she might recognise the statue holding the urn, but the light from the decanter is too bright to see the face. She has to fill the urn – she *has* to – but the liquid keeps disappearing. She panics. If she doesn't fill the urn –

Cosh said the word that was a warble in *krei* throat that only the Kikaror could make. She needed to get up so they could break camp and get a move on. Cosh said the word again and this time Carys dragged herself from sleep. Her neck ached from being squished into one of the chairs by Caleb's bed.

It was light outside, but Carys couldn't tell the time of day through the curtains that kept a steady level of dim light in the hospital. "Hey." Cosh *was* here.

She glanced at the bed, but Caleb was still there, with René sleeping in the chair beside him. "How did you get here?" she asked, keeping her voice low so as not to wake Rene. "Where's Ivan?"

"Outside with the wagon," Cosh said. "Relax. Everything's fine."

"How did you calm him down?"

"I had help." *Kre* looked over *krei* shoulder; the strangest boy stood behind *krer*. He wore a camouflage Mountaineers cap with welding goggles, a green plaid shirt and jeans with the cuffs rolled up over a pair of moccasin-like shoes. He had the palest skin where it wasn't burnt bright pink and a long, black braid that hung down to his ass. He wore a blue, mud-stained backpack so it nestled against his chest. He had a weird aura. "This is Jasha. He's... Caleb's disciple? I guess? But that's not the —"

*[You're not Six Tribes.]*

"Neither are you," she told him, glancing at Cosh. Tskiri were the only telepathic race. Weren't they...? Who was this boy?

"He's Askala," Cosh said. "And a bit of Crow, judging by that brow ridge."

"Askala," she repeated, incredulous. "How is that possible?"

"The Tskiri Council doesn't know about it, but it's pretty common in the Tribes to sell yourself if you get in too much debt, and the Askala pay the best prices. My guess is his — what d'you call your leader guy?"

*[Father.]*

"Okay, so his — Father probably has, or had, a Crow woman in his harem, so now Jasha exists."

"But what is he doing here?"

"This place belongs to his family. Their Father built it to raise humans on."

“Don’t be ridiculous. Why would the Askala raise humans –”

*[The Family needs the blood.]*

“Stop doing that.” It crept her out every time she heard him in her mind. “You don’t just barge into people’s thoughts.”

“That’s how they communicate,” Cosh explained. “He can’t talk.”

“You’re making this up,” she said. The boy probably wasn’t even Askala, but how had he put his thoughts in her mind? He didn’t *feel* human. “If you’re fucking with me, I swear by the Nine –”

“It’s the truth.” Cosh held up *krei* hands in surrender. “I’m not making any of it up, you have my word.”

The Askala were near-mythical creatures; no Tskiri on record had ever even seen one. Some said they didn’t exist at all, but the Oalo claimed the Askala often appeared at their markets, and it was true they acquired objects that came from no other race. Could this boy really be one of them? He couldn’t. Could he? “Why do the Askala want human blood?”

“Apparently they make some sort of drug out of it,” Cosh said. “I’m thinking we should get out of here sooner rather than later. The Askala do not share well with others.”

“What about Caleb?” she asked. “He hasn’t woken up yet.”

Cosh checked Caleb’s pulse at his wrist. “Did they say why?”

“Some sort of sedative,” she answered. “But these people…”

“Wouldn’t trust ‘em as far as I could throw ‘em,” Cosh agreed.

René raised his head, eyes bleary. “Did he wake up?” he asked, looking first at his brother. He sighed when he saw there’d been no change. “Cosh. You’re here.”

*[The Family won’t return before the dark cycle,]said Jasha.*

“Good to know. We have time to get out of Dodge, then. What do we say to the Farmers?”

“Who’s that?” René asked, noticing Jasha for the first time.

“He’s Askala, and his family uses this place to harvest blood from humans.”

René bit the inside of his cheek, contemplating the slender boy. “What if we just say, thanks, guys, but we’ve really got to be going now, have a nice day?”

“And we don’t care that Caleb’s injured and unconscious?” Carys asked. Was he even well enough to move? What if they caused more damage? At least here, he had medical care.

But she didn’t trust Mayra or Loh.

“We’re traders,” René said. “Maybe we care more about keeping to our schedule than whether he recuperates in a pretty nice medical facility for a log cabin.”

“That’s cold, *tuku*.”

“I didn’t say it was the truth,” he replied, with a slight shrug.

A hoarse rasp came from the bed, and the tips of Caleb’s fingers fluttered against his brother’s cheek. “Are you real?” he asked in a whisper that took two or three attempts to be audible.

René leaned into Caleb’s hand. “You didn’t die.”

The hard lines of Caleb’s face trembled. He looked so *old*. “I lost Ben,” he whispered.

\*

Once they were alone, René found he couldn’t stop looking at Caleb’s face. In some ways, it was just the same: close enough to reassure him that this man in front of him was indeed his own flesh and blood. Even so, it was different enough to give the impression that he was actually an imperfect facsimile chosen for similarity, not exactness.

He’d never noticed how much Caleb resembled their mother. The eyes, of course, belonged to her Scandinavian ancestry, but she was there, too, in the long, thin strip of nose and the cheekbones that created sharp planes out of his gaunt face. The smooth terracotta of his skin had darkened to nearly the same dusky shade as their father. And his hair – Caleb had always been so fussy about his hair, always sleek and straight and carefully styled. Their mother used to say he preened like a peacock.

René's heart nose-dived at the realisation that the brothers he'd lost six years ago were now irretrievably gone, and this worn, fragile man with the shaved head was the closest he'd ever get to having them back.

It wasn't fair. That was just a stupid and childish thing to feel, but René couldn't argue with it. Caleb should've had a much different life than... than whatever had made him into this brittle person.

When he spoke, Caleb's voice was rusty and frayed, each syllable dredged up with effort to wrap ineptly around the meaning he wanted to convey. How much of him – the man that René had spent so many years looking for – was actually left?

"Tell me about Benjamin," René asked.

Caleb closed his eyes and sunk into the bed, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. René began to think his brother didn't intend to answer. Then he said: "We only counted three."

"Three what?"

"People." Caleb opened his eyes, his gaze wandering the ceiling. "They started following us outside Raleigh. Ben knew all that Boy Scout shit so we had food. We were good. Maybe we got lazy." His fingers ran over the bandage on his shoulder and he took a deep breath in. "Once we knew they were following us, we thought it'd be simple to lose them. We put down false signs and double-backed on our trail, and after a few days, we thought it worked. No hint of them anywhere near us. Then this one night, they raid us. Take *everything*. They even took Ben's coat. He had a nice coat. It was one of those padded ones with the fleece inside – we'd been through a camping store that summer and Ben, he'd been looking ahead. Not me. I laughed at him when he picked it out. Eighty degrees and he gets a fucking winter coat. But who was laughing when winter came?"

René sat quietly, patient. He could feel Caleb struggling, the strain of trying to act normal. "Show me."

Caleb shook his head. “No,” he said. “We weren’t the good guys, Ren. We were trying to steal food, and he died because of it. We could’ve... We could’ve gotten by. It might have been rough for a couple days, but we’d have gotten through it. We always did. Even when it seemed like we were never going to bounce back, something always happened that changed everything. Except this time...”

For a millisecond, René saw Benjamin lying in blood-stained snow with a scarf knotted tight around his neck. Caleb closed his eyes and turned his head away.

“Is that how you got shot?” René asked, trying to piece together the timeline together in his mind. How close had they been? How many times had they missed each other by a few miles or a few hours? If he’d found them faster, would Benjamin still be alive? The thought was a creature burrowing beneath his breastbone, gnawing to get out. He placed a hand on his chest to quiet it, but he only felt the sensation more strongly. “Where is Benjamin now?” he asked, soft as a field mouse’s sigh.

“I burned his body,” Caleb murmured. “Jasha has him.” His voice was clotted with grief. “He thinks he’s protecting a dead god.”

René thought of the muddy blue backpack the Askala boy had been clutching to his chest. Was that where he had Benjamin? René knew he had to look in that backpack. Would Jasha let him? And what was he going to do after he looked inside? Hand the bones back? Bury them? Tie them to his clothes as symbols of the grief he was too afraid to pick up yet? He folded his hands around Caleb’s and held them to his forehead. *It’s not supposed to be like this.*

“It’s not supposed to be anything,” Caleb told him. “Things just *are*. No meaning. Nothing at all.” He sighed, wincing and reaching for the bandage on his shoulder. “Where’s Carys?”

\*

The freckle-faced girl sat on the short bench; she stood the instant she saw them, her distress a sloppy, bilious feeling in Carys’s throat.



“You can’t stay,” she said, holding herself tall even as she trembled. “The Watchers ain’t tellin’ you the whole truth, an’ the rest of ‘em ain’t gonna let ‘im leave af’er what he done to the Nameless.”

“What did he do?” Carys asked, at the same time Cosh asked, “What’s the Nameless?”

The girl seemed unsure which question to tackle first, so when she hesitated, Carys softened, “What’s your name?”

“Audrey,” the girl answered, seeming to steady herself.

“Alright, Audrey,” Carys said. “What is the Nameless and what did Caleb do to it?”

A stillness came over the girl. “My servant Caleb, who followed me, I’ll take to the Promised Land, and his dissidents will hair it.” She gave a little sigh. “Mama always tol’ that story durin’ the Bad Time, ‘cause Caleb believed God when no one else did, and got rewarded. She said we just had to hang on in, an’ one day God was gonna come through.” She looked at Carys with such a hopeful expectancy, Carys felt her gut twist in empathy. “Did God send you to save us?”

“*Oh*,” Carys breathed.

“What do you need saving from?” Cosh asked quietly.

“The Nameless.” Audrey struggled to appear calm, but a quiver hung beneath her voice. “They come for the Yielding –” Then, softer, “The Watchers always said the Nameless was our protectors, an’ kep’ us safe. They come every Yielding to bring us things like clothes an’ medsin, an’ they do health checks on anyone matured. But that ain’t what they really do. The Nameless put us in these machines in the barn that make it so you can’t move an’ then a big needle sticks in your neck an’ the machine sucks your blood out into the containers, an’ it’s all in the dark. You hafta *hear* your blood sucking out.”

Carys just knew Cosh was looking at her. *Kre* always said she was a soft touch, and it didn’t help that she could *taste* the girl’s fear, tangy and acidic. *Be practical*, she told herself. *You can’t save them all.*

“Will said that wasn’t all they did, either,” Audrey continued. “Like when the Watchers told us Cristina Ellzey was with the Nameless for a Very Special Reason an’ we found out she was pregnant afterwards. But Will said she hadn’t been pregnant when the Nameless took her, ‘cause Cristina didn’t have sex with anyone, an’ the same thing happened to all the other girls what had babies after that, except Olene who everyone knows got hers from Kyle Girardi.

“The first cohort said we couldn’t wait anymore an’ things had to change, so this last Yielding it was planned we’d fight back an’ not let ‘em take any of us. When the Nameless showed up, we did jus’ that, an’ chased ‘em all off, but they came back again last night, an’ this time they dragged everyone outta the cabins. One of ‘em, it grabbed me up by the neck an’ I knew it meant to kill me,” her hand went to her throat, pulling away the collar of her shirt to reveal dark purple blotches beneath her skin, “but then the – but then Caleb came out – he had this light innim. He reached out his hand,” she said, demonstrating by extending her own straight out in front of her, “an’ that Nameless just disappeared. People’re sayin’ he came to free us, an’ that so long as he stays, the Nameless won’t come back.”

Carys thought about the scent of hot metal in the air, and the scorched grass near the cabins. Was there more truth to the myth than she thought?

*[The death of First Son cannot stand,]* said Jasha.

“What’s that mean?” asked Carys.

“It means the Askala will come back, and they will come back mad and ready to fight,” answered Cosh.

“Carys,” René said, appearing in the waiting room. “He’s asking for you.” But his attention was on Jasha, and the muddy blue backpack cradled in his arms.

“We need to be gone yesterday,” Cosh prodded.

“I’ll get him ready,” she decided. “Get Ivan and the wagon.”

\*

She brings me clothes. Clean. Warm. I can't stop touching the softness to my face. They smell of cedar and smoke. She helps me into them without saying a word, and I have this... *compulsion* to tell her every moment of the past six years, to spread my sins like wares for her to choose from.

Who is this woman?

Outside, a pair of girls in long, goatskin coats tramps through the snow, a bucket in each hand.

"Thank you," I say. "For Ren."

"Of course."

"You found me again."

"You didn't make it easy," she says. "How did you end up in the QZ?"

"QZ?"

"Quarantine zone. They said it was some sort of mutated rabies outbreak and they put up a fence as part of Stage One, but Stage Two never came and the fence stayed up."

"We saw the fence," I tell her.

We even followed it for a while, but days went by and we never came across a gate, so we gave up. Sometimes we'd run into it again, and follow it for a while, but it always outlasted us.

She clasps my face and her hands are soft leather. They smell like flowers. "Where were you?" she asks.

"The work camp. And then... not. We had to keep moving."

She bends our foreheads together and a rosy gossamer comforts my mind. The kindness breaks me; I cry, for all of them – my parents, my brothers, Ben, the people I killed for things I needed, and the ones I killed because I could.

Her hand cups the base of my skull. Solid. Granting me permission to *let go*.

And I do – dizzy from the impact of the past day – days? I cry through the great quakes of Ben’s death, my almost-death, the mental ache of my reality being rewritten to one where he doesn’t exist and everything that now *means* –

I cry until I can’t anymore.

And she holds me.

Eventually I ask, “What are we?”

“What do you mean?”

“This thing between us,” I say. “Being a supernova in your brain.”

“The Tskiri idea of family is more complicated than with humans. There’s the family of your physical body – mother, father, grandparents – but there’s also another... family for your... soul? Psyche? When the stars fell to earth, they fragmented into smaller pieces, and the fires from these pieces became our original ancestors. Those who had once belonged to the same star found they shared a special connection. But stars burn for a long time, longer than the clay bodies the Kikaror made for them lasted, so eventually one body would crumble and the star was reborn into a new one. That connection remains through every rebirth.”

“What about Ben?” She’s never mentioned having the same connection with Ben, and shouldn’t she? Aren’t we the same? Weren’t.

“Your terrestrial bodies were twins, not your celestial ones,” and the way she says it, it hits me –

“You really believe that somehow we’re stars.”

“We are stars,” she says. “The world has more layers than you’re used to.”

“So we’re stars, and that’s why we have this... link? Because a million years ago –”

I stop. It’s like yellow jackets in my brain.

The way Carys looks at me, I know she feels it, too. “Do you...” she starts.

We both move to the window, watching the trees.

“He said they wouldn’t come out before dark,” I say.

“That’s the Askala? It feels like so many...”

“We need to go,” I say. Jasha’s started tugging on my awareness like a teething puppy. *I know*, I tell him, halfway out the door.

That girl. With the goats. The one Roan had. She stands next to Ren, Jasha still clinging to that backpack in the middle of everything and this – I don’t know what – sitting on one of the benches. It looks like a double-exposed image in 4D, maybe triple- or quadruple-exposed.

It’s a man – maybe? It’s hard to tell – wearing a yellow tunic and a brown coat that flares at the waist, with some sort of tribal tattoo on the crest of the head. And it’s a bird – deep brown with a golden breast and white feathers in its long, fan tail. And it’s a combination of the two – bird and person – and it’s neither. Looking at it awakens the pain that’s been lurking in my eye sockets since I passed out.

“I’m Cosh,” they say, rising to meet me.

“*Kre* is Kikaror,” says Ren. “Six Tribes. Your eyes’ll adjust, but you’re gonna feel like puking for a minute.”

“The Family is here,” I tell them. “Time to go.”

“They’ll kill us,” says the girl, not even scared. Just matter of fact.

*[She’s right,]* Jasha confirms. *[We euthanized the first herd when they became violent. And now Roan is dead.]*

The girl looks right at me – there’s so much in that look – I know that she’s already accepted her death, but not the deaths of her friends.

She is the most untarnished thing I have seen... maybe ever. Certainly since I got arrested and the world went crazy. I cannot let them kill this girl. Whatever it takes, if she lives – it won’t clear my debt, but it might sway the scales just enough.

“Do we run?” Carys asks.

“*Kwo*,” Cosh says. “Absolutely.”

*[For the death of Roan, you will always be hunted,]* Jasha tells me, while the others continue their debate over us.

*Is there any way out?*

*[Challenge Father. He must accept, or forfeit the Family. If you win, the territory becomes yours.]*

*I guess I should try to win, then.*

*[You should definitely try to win.]*

*How does it work?*

*[You challenge Father to battle. You each choose a witness. Then you fight to the death.]*

Do I like my odds against the leader of the Askala? If I don’t challenge him, I’ll probably die anyway. But there’s a chance – a small chance, barely a chance – that I might win, and these people would be free. Don’t I owe the universe those lives? And this girl, this fearless girl embodies all of that.

“I’ll talk to Father,” I say. “You three get everyone into one of the buildings.”

“What’re you going to say to him?” Carys asks.

“Roan and I negotiated an agreement. I can do it again,” I say.

“No offense, *tuku*,” says Cosh, “but you *killed* one of them. What makes you think this guy will even give you the time of day?”

“If I issue a challenge, he’ll have to accept.”

“This doesn’t feel smart,” Carys says. She’s looking at me like she knows I’m keeping something back, and maybe she does. I don’t know how far this connection goes, or how much is shared.

“We’ll fight,” says Audrey. “We’re ready. Some a us fought at the last Yielding, an’ a’fer everythin’ even more’ll be willin’. We jus’ gotta ‘splain what’s at stake.”

“Back up, folks,” Cosh says. I still can’t look at them without feeling queasy. “We’re not seriously talking about taking on however many Askala are out there?”

*[There are thirty-nine Scions.]*

“Great. Thirty-nine of them against us, and a bunch of farm kids.”

“We chased ‘em off last time,” says Audrey.

“Let me talk to Father first,” I repeat. Is it – is there even a possibility that we can just *live* again? I don’t care about living; if I could just exist, one minute without struggle. Is that enough? No, an hour. But then I’d only want more, and then it’d be a week, a month, an entire year without struggle. “I killed Roan. There’s no avoiding that.”

“He’ll kill you,” Cosh objects.

“I’m so tired of being chased by death,” I tell them. “If it’s gonna come, it’s gonna come. I’m too tired to run anymore. Carys, I need a witness.”

## THIRTY-ONE

What is my life?

If I die here, would that really be the worst thing?

If Carys is right, I'll just be reborn to do this life thing all over again. Do we ever get reborn as stars? *Then form'd the moon Globose, and every magnitude of stars, And sow'd with stars the Heaven, thick as a field.*

These people won't even be grateful.

*You're not doing this for them.*

Because the alternative is to be hunted, and I am so damn tired. If the universe wants me dead, then who am I to argue?

It's so cold the new snow already has a layer of ice crusted on it, and the boots Carys gave me make a *grrnch-grrnch* noise with my steps. If it weren't for the trees, you'd never know where the sky stopped and the ground began, and the sun isn't even a little bit visible through the clouds. No way of knowing how much longer until dark.

The Family is so close.

Can I do this?

Ben was the better one.

*[Don't die,]* Carys tells me, and for a moment I feel her presence beside me. The upgraded plan has them all piled into the root cellar with kitchen grease smeared in all the buildings to cover the scent. If I don't come back by 8 tomorrow morning, Jasha will take them to the river, and they'll follow that south out of the mountains.

If I die here, will they make it, or will Father hunt them down, too? Maybe I can make that a condition. My life for theirs. How many human lives is mine worth? I did kill his son. How many human lives is Roan's worth? I should have paid more attention in math.



Father senses me and halts the Scions. I feel his curiosity, light and cautious. After a moment, he steps out of the trees alone. He's wearing some sort of black bodysuit that covers his body, with tinted goggles over his eyes.

Jasha said light burns them, but what would happen on a day like today if I cut open that suit? Does any light burn them?

*[You're the teskerii.]*

*Sort of.* He feels different than Roan. I hear caves with pools of water. *I didn't mean to hurt your son.*

*[You are in my territory.]*

*That's an accident, too.*

*[You have many accidents.]*

*I really do.*

*[The trespassing I will forgive. For my son, you owe me a life.]*

For a minute, I admit, I really thought he would wipe the slate for some improbable goody-two-shoes morality, constructed solely to keep the hero alive for the next scene. Even so, my life for Roan's – it's fair. I've been ready to die for so many years, knowing *this is how it happens* is almost a relief.

*Before you kill me, promise me my family –*

*[I'm not going to kill you,] he says. [You owe me a life. The one who shares your scent.]*

Who shares my scent? Jasha? Taking Jasha back wouldn't repay the debt of Roan's death, though. One of the Farm kids? Do I smell like them now? But the Family already owns them.

Ben is already dead – *You can't have René.*

*[He will take Roan's place in the Family.]*

*I said no.*

*[It is not a decision you can make. This will happen. The boy René belongs to me now.]*

*I challenge you.*

*[You have a child's understanding of this thing.]*

*I kill you, I keep everything.*

*[I kill you, I keep the boy René.]*

He has a point, but that's the outcome as long as Father lives. I can't die. *I challenge you.*

*Accept or forfeit.*

*[I accept. State that you understand the rule of victory.]*

*Kill to win.* Is he stronger than me? Slower? Hand-to-hand is my least favourite thing, especially when I know nothing about my opponent. But I'm a semi-human flamethrower, if I can only figure out how to do that on purpose.

*[Call your witness.]*

I reach back for her, and before too long, she is *grrrch-grrnching* towards us. A ripple passes through the Scions, and then someone else joins Father – a woman, and so old. Her memories fall like cherry blossoms. Layers and layers of fabric sweep around her body, turning her into a black puff that floats across the snow.

*[Don't do this,] Carys begs.*

*There's no choice.*

The old woman takes Carys's arm and leads her several feet away.

*[We mere believers,] she begins, and then the rest of the Scions join in, [appeal to Dhea, Wielder of Seven Swords, for her wisdom. May the battle strengthen you.]*

He grabs the front of my coat and throws me to the ground, punching at my face, but I block one-two-three; still, he gets me right in the jaw so my teeth crash together and the pain shoots back up to my ear. He gets me in the ribs, the stomach – he's faster and stronger, and without a knife I don't have a lot of offensive skills, but I can't just stay like this: I have to win – I have to beat him – I jerk up, a few of those punches hitting my temple, my nose, and it bursts

bloody in pain, but my fist gets him straight in the balls and I can shimmy away but away to where? This isn't a fight you can run away from and come back to when you have more potions.

This is a fight I *have* to win.

Father lunges; I roll. He crashes into the snow beside me and I jump on his back, hooking my arm around his throat. I squeeze down with all my strength on what should be his carotid but it only serves to throw off his balance which makes it harder for me to maintain a tight grip but I know as soon as I let go, he'll get me on my back again and maybe this time I won't get out –

He fucking *bites* me – teeth sinking deep into the flesh of my forearm. I cry out and let go before I even know what happened and he shoves up with his shoulder so I fall on my back, stealing the air out of my lungs and he's on top of me again and this time I can't block him well enough with my injured arm and he gets hold of my head and I feel him squeezing and then he smacks it back on the ground through all the layers of snow until I feel frozen earth on my scalp. Pain ricochets down to my toes and I know he's going to do it again and again but I feel too scrambled to react; he lifts my head up again but this time I just fall back onto the snow and he's looking behind him at something –

It's like a whistle, and then a *thunk*, leaving a curved, snaky blade sticking out of Father's shoulder, with another one in his back. There, a few feet away, is Carys, coat open to reveal the three knives still holstered against her ribs, with one more blade in her hand, standing beatific and fierce. My tears blur her hair into a cerulean haze around her head; fat, white snowflakes melt against my eyelashes. I can feel my shoulder seeping beneath the bandage; blood soaks my sleeve from Father's bite.

I'm not going to win this fight.

At the treeline, the Scions click and rustle – we broke the rules – but Father bares his teeth and roars – I feel the vibration in my bones – and the Scions stay back.

Father grabs the front of my coat, dragging me along as he lopes – bounds – flies through the air – Carys throws another blade – *thunk* – this time into his chest but it doesn't stop him. He releases me and I tumble through the snow; see him grab Carys by the neck and lift her off the ground –

She struggles and claws and hacks at his arm but he doesn't feel it or doesn't care and her face gets redder and redder, mouth opening and closing to pull any morsel of air into her lungs I know he's going to kill her – *her* – there is still so much I don't know but she is *vital* to my existence, my being, I know that I have lost so much and – *I didn't save Ben* –

With the last of me I lurch to my feet, rushing to tackle him. He staggers back, releasing Carys. I can die, but only if *she* lives. Fire lights up my veins and Father pummels my body with his fists while I work the knife from his chest – *now!* My arm swings free with Carys's knife. I push off his arm and plunge the knife into his neck, pulling it around to the front like opening a letter. He falters, stumbles a few feet, but I'm on him again, still working at his throat. Again and again, I hack away at his neck, his chest. His claws score my arms, my chest; blood – his and mine, sprays the snow around us. When he finally lies still, I roll him onto his stomach. Sitting on his back, I slice through all the delicate membranes that connect Father's head to his body until it comes free. His blood is salty and almost sweet in my mouth.

The Scions come out of the forest – all of them wearing the same black suits Father had. Their uncertainty chirps in my mind like a Geiger counter. Beneath that, something else, something...

One of them breaks away from the group, coming towards me. His rage reaches me first, cold and darker than dark. With Carys's knife in my hand, I'm on my feet, swinging when he reaches for me. The blade skids against his forearm. I backtrack out of his reach and consider my options. He saw the fight with Father; he'll be on guard against that tactic. He's got a longer reach, and judging by Father, more than matches my strength ten times over. I have a pointy

stick, basically. I could try throwing it like Carys – *Carys*. I look at her and the Scion takes his chance, tackling me around the waist, claws puncturing my chest. I gasp – reactively stabbing into his back five or six times as he roars before snapping my wrist and the knife drops. He roars and grips my throat so tight I can't breathe and time stretches –

I have time to look at his face – such that it is, covered in black fabric with those goggles that make him look like a bug – a big bug with sharp claws digging into my skin as those fingers squeeze tighter and tighter: *I didn't see this coming*. I didn't expect to walk away, either. But the stakes are different now. Who else will they take to equal Father's life?

There is absolutely nothing I can do and that awareness expands larger than myself and I feel still. Relieved. I've been waiting for this to happen for so long, I'd stopped noticing the dread I carried everywhere until it stopped.

This is how it happens.

\*

Carys watched the Askala charge Caleb in a sort of reverie. Her mind was still working over the fact that Father no doubt would have killed her, not to mention that Caleb... *You'd be dead if it weren't for Caleb*. Somewhere in a back corner of her brain, her senses registered the Askala's movement; her instincts raised an alarm, but her body hadn't caught up. Too late she found her voice and screamed at Caleb to *look* and the Askala had him pinned to the ground.

*Move, girl. Cosh showed you how.*

She took two of the remaining daggers from their sheaths and jabbed one of them into its side up to the hilt. The Askala let go of Caleb, and reared back, striking her cheek with the back of its fist and knocking her to the ground. It pounced on her, but she twisted, and drove the second knife deep into its neck and pulled back like a lever. Blood drained down between them, splattering her, and it thrashed wildly – she could taste its panic – and then went slack, collapsing

on top of her. She wriggled out from beneath the body, forcing herself to ignore the blood smeared all over her and took the final knife from its holster.

Caleb lay in the snow staring at the sky. Dagger ready, she stood over him, watching the Askala for any movement in the swirling snow. Hoping she looked tough. She focused her mind and summoned the fire. Golden light cleared the air around her and the melting snow seeped through the holes in her shoes. *Mine*, she said, pointing at Caleb but including the Farm in her meaning. *MINE!*

The Askala remained still, watching her. A few of them made clicking sounds in their throat.

Carys fainted forward, and they flinched as one, but didn't retreat. She took a step back, but they didn't advance. Satisfied they weren't going to get any closer, she knelt by Caleb's head. "I told you not to die," she said.

"I have to live," he murmured.

"Yeah, that would be helpful, because I don't know what *they're* doing." A few of the Askala had splintered off, still observing the pair, but they remained several feet away. Carys kept an eye on them as she steadied Caleb on his feet.

"Help me up," he said, already bracing his weight against her. "You're gonna have to teach me how you control that fire thing." Once stable, he pushed away from her, took a few wobbly steps, and then limped toward the cluster of Askala. The few who had separated out retreated back into the group. *[It's over,]* he said to them. *[We own this now.]*

A ripple passed through them, followed by more clicking.

*[They wait for you to drink Father's blood,]* the old woman said to Caleb. She'd moved closer to them, but not too close. *[The winner must drink his opponent's blood.]*

*[I didn't win,]* Caleb said. *[She did.]*

*[Females are the property of the male,]* the Askala woman continued. *[Her actions are yours.]*

“I do not belong to him,” Carys countered.

“Maybe just go with it for now if it means they stop trying to kill us,” Caleb suggested.

*[The male victor must take the Father’s place.]*

*[What happens if I don’t?]*

*[They will tear you to pieces.]*

“Some choice,” he muttered.

“Caleb, wait –” but he’d already dropped to his knees. Tilting the head upside down with his uninjured wrist, he buried his face in the neck.

*[You are now Father,]* the grandmother said. *[Tell your children what to do.]*

## THIRTY-TWO

**cadumas@gmail.com**

irn grbil

04:16 01/22/37

d.

i'm alive. r's alive. jiji is dead.

snd coords. will come.

c.

\*

The apothecary still made her a little breathless every time Jaime saw it. The narrow timber frame, with the eaves painted purple because, as Derek put it, why not? *Her shop. Hers.* She'd built it. She'd harvested the herbs. Dried them, ground them, bottled them. It'd taken a little over a year to get here, and the Wildwood clan had all pitched in from time to time, but this shop. It was like getting her life back, finally, after all these years.

She loved walking through the door, and that first waft of seasoned cedar and rosemary, mint. After lunch, Piper and Lacey would be there to help while she met with clients in the back room, but the morning was hers. She liked the leisurely rhythm of restocking and organising, chatting with the drop-ins from neighbouring homesteads who came to pick up their witch hazel, marigold, and valerian.

This morning, though, Rylee had already let herself into the shop when Jaime arrived. She'd wondered when she was going to regret giving Rylee a key. She loved Rylee – the woman had done more for her than even her own parents – but Lord did she like to meddle, and she had an opinion on everything. If Rylee was there, Jaime's plans for a relaxed, easy morning were out the window. On the plus side, there was already a roaring fire in the stove, and the shop only had the slightest bite in the air.



“Mornin’, hun,” Rylee said, busily sifting powder into little paper packets. “Thought I’d get a jump on packaging more flu remedy. Seems like everyone and their brother’s coming down with it.”

“Good idea,” Jaime agreed, peeling off her scarf and coat. “Is there tea?”

“Kettle’s boiling as we speak,” Rylee answered.

The door swung open so hard it bounced off a display case as Derek came barrelling through. “Jam!” Face red, he waved a tablet in the air.

Jaime lurched in front of him before he skidded into the counter, and Rylee’s careful mounds of flu remedy. “Careful!” she admonished.

Derek thrust the tablet into her face. “He wrote back.”

“Who?” Jaime asked, taking the tablet from him. She barely got to look at it before Rylee took the tablet.

“Caleb,” Derek said, grinning like a damn fool. “I’ve been writing him since... Since the Collapse. Like a kind of diary. I gave up on him ever answering, but *he did!*” He grabbed her arms and shook her. “He’s alive. Ren’s with him. Ben... isn’t. But Caleb and René are *alive*. I shouldn’t be happy, because Ben, but yesterday I thought all three of them were gone, and now – two. *Two*.” He hugged Jaime, almost too tight.

“You haven’t responded to this, have you?” Rylee asked, putting on her glasses to read the tablet.

“No, I just got it, and ran over,” Derek said.

“Good.”

“What do you mean, good?” Derek released Jaime. “I *am* going to respond.”

Rylee shook her head in disagreement. “It’s too much of a risk. We don’t know who this is.”

“It’s my brother, that’s who it is.”

“Derek, just slow down,” Jaime said, trying to regain his attention and maybe mediate the situation. “How do you know Caleb sent the email?”

“No, it’s him. The subject. It’s a code phrase. We had a few in case – it doesn’t matter. What matters is, only Caleb would know to put that phrase in the subject line. Plus, there’s JiJi.”

“JiJi...” Jaime repeated. Only Caleb had been allowed to call Ben that. And Ben had some weird nickname for Caleb –

“See, you know. Jaime, tell her. It has to be Caleb.”

“I’m sorry,” said Rylee. “I know how much you’d like to believe this is your brother, but I’d be jeopardising everyone in the coalition if I authorised sharing our coordinates to an unverified source. The answer is no. End of story. Later, we’ll need to have a conversation about what you said in these emails, and I’d like to see them if possible.”

Jamie could see he was already winding himself up to make his case, which wouldn’t end well. Things had gotten a little better since Derek and Piper moved above-ground, but Rylee and Derek were worse than mixing bleach and vinegar. Taking him by the shoulders, she ushered him back towards the door. “Can you help Piper get Cat ready for school?” she asked. “She never does Cat’s hair right.”

For a moment, Derek just stared at her. “Unbelievable,” he muttered, and walked out of the shop, leaving the tablet behind.

“I don’t mean to be harsh,” Rylee sighed. “But he needs to be more practical. We have no idea who actually read those emails, and neither does Derek. He might have compromised the entire homestead.”

“I don’t know about the code phrase,” Jaime said, “but he was right about ‘JiJi’. Only our family knew that.” Rylee was probably right – it was a risk – Jaime knew that. But she didn’t feel it.

“And what if someone other than his brother shows up instead?” Rylee countered. “We don’t need to go inviting attacks, Jaime. Look at what we’ve built. We have a real community here, totally sustainable on its own. We need to preserve that.”

“I should go talk to him,” said Jaime. “Do you mind watching the shop for a minute?”

Rylee waved her on, and Jaime headed back out into the crisp morning. She'd only been out the door for about five seconds before she regretted not picking up her coat, but Derek hadn't gotten far. Plus, jogging had the added benefit of keeping her warm, and she caught up with him quickly.

“She’s just trying to make the right decision,” she said, falling in step beside him.

Derek let out an exasperated huff and stopped walking. “How is it the right decision?” he asked, turning to face her. “Tell me you don’t believe that Caleb wrote that email, and that he and Ren aren’t out there just waiting to know where we are.”

Jaime sighed. Did she believe it? *Could* she believe it? Six years of imagining in the back of her head what the twins might be doing, or where they might be. The occasional fantasy of being out in her garden and three strangers walk up who turn out to be René and the twins.

“We need a place,” Derek said finally.

“I thought the point of NoPlace is that it’s not any one place.”

“It is,” he said. “But *we* still need a place. Where *we* have some say in the decisions.”

\*

*“I know dark clouds will gather round me.*

*I know my way is rough and steep.”*

The sound of Piper singing as she and Lacey rolled clean bandages at the front counter carried through the open door of the apothecary’s storeroom. Jaime found herself humming

along as she updated her client files. She hadn't liked Piper at first, and she'd only accepted the girl's offer to help in the apothecary because Derek begged her, but Jaime couldn't deny it'd been helpful having an extra pair of hands around. Maybe it wasn't such a mistake for Derek to marry her, after all.

*“But beauteous fields lie just before me,  
where God's redeemed their vigils keep.”*

Derek's tablet had ended up sitting on her desk, and as much as she tried to concentrate on ordering her records, Jaime found herself staring at the dark screen, trying to imagine what Caleb's email had said.

Finally, she picked it up and unlocked the screen to the still-open email. It didn't say much, and she didn't know what “iron gerbil” was a reference to, but there was still that JiJi. She read the lines again and again, hoping there would be something else in the email to support Derek's hunch.

Jaime opened Derek's nav app and set it to tell her their exact latitude and longitude, copying the result. Then she went back to the message and hit reply, pasting the coordinates into the message field.

*“I'm only going over Jordan.*

*I'm only going over home.*

*I'm just a going over home.”*

She hit send.

## THIRTY-THREE

Carys sat on the wagon steps and watched the stars dim as the sky slowly lightened. The birds had already been going for at least an hour, and the Farmers were beginning to start their morning chores. Their anxiety was a neon charge in the air, but they went about their tasks like nothing out of the ordinary had happened. The sandy-haired boy who came to open the infirmary even smiled at her, albeit tensely, as he passed.

And why shouldn't he smile? As far as the Farmers were concerned, they'd won another battle, and were another step towards being free of the Askala. They didn't know that right that very second, the Askala could be down in their compound doing who knew what to Caleb – what if he never came back? What if they kept him prisoner, or harvested his blood, or just outright killed him?

Carys chewed on her fingernail and tried not to think about what might be happening down there. Which only made her think about it more. She resented René and Cosh tucked away in their bunks. She was half-tempted to wake them up just so they could suffer along with her, but she wasn't sure she could stand their presence, either, so maybe it was for the best. But still. She shouldn't be the only one worrying about the *what ifs*. At least Jasha had insisted on waiting for Caleb at the compound entrance. The Askala boy still made her uneasy.

A sliver of molten gold spilled across the mountain ridge. As she raised her hand to shield her eyes, she saw them walking up the path from the lake – Caleb, slowed by his injuries, purposeful; Jasha scuttling behind like some sort of beetle. A ridiculous beetle.

*[Go inside before you shish kebab,]* he told Jasha.

The boy looked uncertain, but after a moment, he complied.

“Between the boy who thinks you're a god, and the girl who thinks you're an angel, you must have a pretty big head right about now,” she commented.

He chuckled and sat beside her on the step. “I don’t know about that.” He pressed his shoulder into hers.

She saw him then. Not the boy he’d been, not the stranger she imagined, but *him*, as he was in that moment. Tired – exhausted beyond all reason – but stubbornly persisting against all odds. Raw and wild, and struggling to be otherwise.

She pressed back.

“They have internet,” he said. “The machine – it’s this weird combination of touch and sound. They had to use it for me.”

“Anything interesting?”

“My dumbass kid brother is a revolutionary, but he’s alive.”

“I thought René was the kid brother.”

“He’s the baby.”

“Have you told him that?”

Caleb smiled then, small and taut; he exhaled slowly through a crest of pain. “My sister-in-law is with him, and my nieces. My older brother is dead, though. And my nephew.” He crossed his arms over his knees and rested his chin on them. “My parents are just... gone. Poof. They drove off on a trip to visit my aunt and that was the last anyone heard from them.”

“Then they could still be out there,” she said, and questioned whether that was actually a good thing. They could spend the rest of their lives looking for people who disappeared and still find nothing.

Cuts and scratches zig-zagged his skull, and dried blood caked the back of his head and neck. Dark bruises mottled his face; his eyes were red and rheumy. He’d already paid so much... Her hand hovered over his scalp, cautious.

He tilted his head into her palm, touching for just a moment before he pulled away, sniffing. “It’s creepy as fuck down there,” he said, avoiding her gaze. “Basically exactly

what expect an underground compound built for a race of people who don't believe in lights to be. And they're always touching you, and wanting you to touch them. It was such a relief to get out and feel my own skin again."

"I wasn't sure they'd let you out," she confessed.

"Apparently, as Father, whatever I say, goes." There was a glimmer of the brash boy who'd lived below her, but he immediately grew serious again. "They want me to lead them."

"Will you?"

"I'm the last person who should be making decisions."

"Jasha seems convinced."

"He also thinks I'm some sort of deity, so his judgement is sketchy at best."

"So what happens next?"

"I get Derek home," he said. "Somehow. I can't picture him making the trip, and then what about Jaime and the girls? How safe is it going to be for them?"

"Where's home?" she asked.

"I don't know." He shook his head. "Savannah, I guess. I don't know where else to go."

"We could go get them," Carys suggested. They'd been meaning to see the Pacific coast for years, but something always came up. "It would only take a few months in the wagon."

"It's we now," he said softly, needing to reassure himself.

She felt his consciousness try to separate, but the link between them was strong, and only getting stronger the more time they spent together. Eventually, she would know what he was feeling as he felt it, but for now they were still learning each other.

She nudged his shoulder.

*[I am not the good guy.]*

He shared his guilt, astringent and sickly green.

*Last night you were.*

“Does that make up for the rest?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered; he would know if she lied. “These people probably think so.”

*[I didn’t tell Ren everything.]*

She took a deep breath. Was she ready to hear his confession? What if she couldn’t forgive? Or felt revulsion or horror? He would experience her every reaction. And if she blocked him out, there would always be suspicion in their link. They’d never reach full unity. She’d never feel whole.

She took his hand. *Tell me.*



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake*, Virago, 2003.
- . *Maddaddam*, Virago, 2013.
- . *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage, 2012.
- . "The Handmaid's Tale and Oryx and Crake 'In Context'." *PMLA*, vol. 119, no. 3, 2004, pp. 513-517. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/25486066](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486066).
- . *Year of the Flood*, Virago, 2009.
- Auster, Paul. *The New York Trilogy*. Faber and Faber, 1987.
- Baccolini, Rafaella and Tom Moylan, editors. *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Routledge, 2003.
- Badmington, Neil. *Readers in Cultural Criticism: Posthumanism*. Palgrave, 2000.
- Bataille, Georges. *Literature and Evil*. Penguin Classics, 2012.
- . "Mastery and Servitude." *Georges Bataille – Essential Writings*, edited by Michael Richardson, Sage Publications, 1998, pp. 119-138.
- Bell, Alden. *The Reapers are the Angels*. Tor, 2010.
- Bentham, Jeremy. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Library of Economics and Liberty, [www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthPML18.html](http://www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthPML18.html).
- Berenson, Frances. "Hegel on Others and the Self." *Philosophy*, vol. 57, no. 219, 1982, pp. 77-90. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/4619540](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4619540).
- The Bible (KJV)*. *King James Bible Online*, [www.kingjamesbibleonline.org](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org).
- Blake, Charlie, et al., editors. *Beyond Human: From Animality to Transhumanism*. Continuum, 2012.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster: New Edition*. Translated by Ann Smock, University of Nebraska Press, 1995.
- Booker, M. Keith. *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, Greenwood Press, 1994.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity, 2013.
- Carey, John, editor. *The Faber Book of Utopias*. Faber and Faber, 1999.
- Catling, Brian. *The Vorrh*. Coronet, 2016.

- Ciuba, Gary M. *Desire, Violence, & Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction: Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, Walker Percy*. Louisiana State University Press, 2011.
- Coetzee, J.M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Vintage, 1980.
- Cronin, Justin. *The Passage*, Orion, 2010.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.
- . *Writing and Difference*, Routledge, 2001.
- Dick, Philip K. *The Man in the High Castle*. Penguin, 2001.
- Duncan, Glen. *The Last Werewolf*. Borzoi, 2011.
- Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilisation*. Routledge, 1989.
- . *The Order of Things*, Vintage, 1994.
- Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods*. Headline, 2001.
- Gray, John. *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*. Granta, 2002.
- Green, Richard and K. Silem Mohammad. *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead*. Open Court, 2010.
- Hasse, Ulrich and William Large. *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Maurice Blanchot*, Routledge, 2001.
- Hawking, Stephen and Leonard Mlodinow. *The Grand Design*. Bantam, 2011.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Mind*, G. Allen & Unwin, 1949.
- James, Edward and Farah Mendlesohn. *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Kaplan, Matt. *The Science of Monsters: Why Monsters Came to Be and What Made Them So Terrifying*. Constable, 2013.
- Kirkman, Robert. *Days Gone By. The Walking Dead*, vol. 1, Image Comics, 2009.
- . *Miles Behind Us. The Walking Dead*, vol. 2, Image Comics, 2009.
- . *Safety Behind Bars. The Walking Dead*, vol. 3, Image Comics, 2009.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2012.
- Latham, Rob, editor. *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings*. Bloomsbury, 2017.

- Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Dispossessed*. Harper, 1994.
- Mahon, Peter. *Posthumanism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Bloomsbury, 2017.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*. Vintage, 1985.
- . *Child of God*. Picador, 1973.
- . *The Road*, Picador, 2006.
- McCarthy, Tom. *Satin Island*. Vintage, 2015.
- Miller, James. *Sunshine State*. Abacus, 2010.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Mitchell, David. *Cloud Atlas*. Sceptre, 2004.
- Mohr, Dunja M. "Transgressive Utopian Dystopias: The Postmodern Reappearance of Utopia in the Disguise of Dystopia." *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2007, pp. 5-24. ZAA, [www.zaa.uni-tuebingen.de/wp-content/uploads/05-Mohr-5-24.pdf](http://www.zaa.uni-tuebingen.de/wp-content/uploads/05-Mohr-5-24.pdf).
- More, Thomas. *Utopia: A Norton Critical Edition*. Norton, 2011.
- Murphy, Patrick D. "Reducing the Dystopian Distance: Pseudo-Documentary Framing in Near-Future Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1990, pp. 25-40. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239969>.
- Nealon, Jeffrey T. "The Discipline of Deconstruction." *PMLA*, vol. 107, no. 5, 1992, pp. 1266-1279. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462879>.
- Paik, Peter Y. *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Ranisch, Robert and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, editors. *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction*. Peter Lang, 2014.
- Rosen, Elizabeth K. *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Imagination*. Lexington Books, 2008.
- Royle, Nicholas. *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Jacques Derrida*. Routledge, 2003.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*. Penguin, 2003.
- Shriver, Lionel. *The Mandibles: A Family, 2029–2047*. Harper, 2016.
- Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Collins Classics, 2010.
- Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Penguin, 2003.

Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. Fleet, 2016.

Wolfe, Cary. *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*. The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

---. *What is Posthumanism?* University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Wolfreys, Julian. *Derrida: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Continuum, 2007.

Zamyatin, Yevgeny. *We*. Macmillan, 1924.

Žižek, Slavoj. *How to Read Lacan*. Granta Books, 2006.

## CRITICAL COMPONENT

“Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought. Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself.” *Simone de Beauvoir*

My earliest narrative influences came in the form of oral histories, both familial and regional, passed down from generation to generation. As I got older and began pursuing fiction on my own, I found myself gravitating to authors who also made use of similar influences in their work. Much of Neil Gaiman’s work, for example, features a contrast of lore and technology, or tradition and modernity. The *Sandman* comics centre around the seven Endless<sup>1</sup> and their timelessness and adaptability through different human eras and cultures. *Good Omens*, written in collaboration with Terry Pratchett, depicts the Apocalypse complete with a child Anti-Christ and the Four Horsemen on motorcycles. In *American Gods*, the old gods of myth and legend, led by an incarnation of Odin, are going up against the modern gods of Media and TechnoBoy. In these texts, he seems to be exploring the intersection of fact and belief. Is modern society removing our ability to have faith? Or are we, as Gaiman suggests, putting that faith in something new? Where are our gods and who are our monsters? This is the question that, ultimately, *The Nameless* is asking.

The genesis for *The Nameless* came from the basic idea that monsters are real, and they’ve been here all along; we just stopped noticing them. Rather than viewing monsters as symbols of fears that humanity has conquered over time, in my novel, technology and innovation have been used to merely conceal them. These monsters still exist within us, unacknowledged and unresolved. Or rather, as society became more “civilised”, monsters were forced into hiding. So if society started to become uncivilised, the monsters would return.

---

<sup>1</sup> Destiny, Death, Dream, Desire, Despair, Destruction, and Delirium (who used to be Delight).

In *The Nameless*, I have positioned the human as the Other in relation to the protagonists in order to challenge assumptions about humanity and what it means to be human. I wanted the human to be monstrous, and, as I'll elaborate on when I cover the creation of the Askala, the monsters to be humane. I did not, however, unlike recent trends in supernatural horror, want them to be defined by a humanity that is identical to modern Western ideals. To accomplish this, I had to think outside my own anthropomorphism and imagine how another humanoid species might develop if it were kept in our shadow.

In this essay, I will first discuss the political and societal climate of the United States in the twenty-first century, followed by an overview of the specific influences on my writing as a queer, Southern writer. I will also look at the evolution of the vampire in literature in general, as well as the source material that led to the creation of my own breed of vampire, the Askala. Finally, I will conclude with an analysis of the challenges I faced in writing *The Nameless*.

## **Climate**

During the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the United States experienced the attack on 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror, a recession, Occupy Wall Street, Hurricane Maria, the rise of the Alt Right, along with alternative facts, fake news and Russian hacking scandals. Racial tensions reached a peak perhaps not seen since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, particularly between the police and black civilians (Siscoe 4).

This culminated in a significant shift in the perception of the United States as the leader of the free world (Hundal), contributing to a destabilisation of the American sense of identity and national cohesion (Jones). The Obama presidency increased the divide between left and right, a divide exacerbated to extremes by his successor, Donald Trump. Between the reactionary #AllLivesMatter, the White House's tacit endorsement of Nazis, and the

separation of children from their parents by immigration officials, it became possible to imagine that we might not recover.

Underlying social anxieties can be seen reflected in a rise of dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives<sup>2</sup> that explored the emotions of the normal, average American family coping with a world in which they are forced to fight friends and neighbours for survival. Likewise, there was an uptick in supernatural narratives that squarely placed the Other into safe, easy-to-categorise boxes<sup>3</sup>.

It was in this environment that the original idea for *The Nameless* began to germinate. I had initially thought to use a coordinated terrorist attack, similar in devastation to the attacks on 9/11, as the catalyst that plummeted the United States into a post-apocalyptic environment. The reality of this, however, post-9/11, required a level of detail that overshadowed the main purpose of the novel. Working out the fine points of a believable terrorist attack overshadowed the more character-driven aspects in *The Nameless* so, taking a page from narratives like *The Road* and *The Book of Eli*, I opted for the quieter apocalypse of economic depression and, ultimately, collapse. While political and societal critique was always part of the agenda in my writing, I wanted to focus on how individual citizens coped with and adjusted to a drastic change in their circumstances.

Within the universe of my novel, the United States is in the midst of a depression, and the government is trying to stave off civil unrest through martial law. Interspersed with the primary narrative are vignettes, similar to the opening sequences in horror films, where shadowy figures murder unsuspecting victims. This setting will be familiar to anyone with a

---

<sup>2</sup> Such as: *The Walking Dead* (2010–) and *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015–), *The Road* (2009), *The Book of Eli* (2010), *Fallout 4* (2015), *28 Days Later* (2002), *Revolution* (2012–2014), *Falling Skies* (2011–2015), *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017), *Battlestar Galactica* (2009–2009), *Colony* (2016–), *Jeremiah* (2002–2004), *Jericho* (2006–2008), *Zombieland* (2009), *Contagion* (2011), et numerous al.

<sup>3</sup> Such as: *Twilight*, *True Blood*, *The Originals*, *The Vampire Diaries*, *The Mortal Instruments/Shadowhunters*, *Teen Wolf*, *Lost Girl*

passing knowledge of dystopian fiction (and in a century that brought the multi-media franchises of *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, and *Divergent* trilogies, who isn't?).

## **Influences**

The earliest drafts were very much a product of genre, with lots of big, dramatic events like terrorist bombings and mass casualties. In the process of developing a more literary novel, I found that I began to incorporate aspects of the oral and folkloric tradition I grew up with. Somewhere along the way, my politically-driven concept that was supposed to be an important piece of social commentary became more of an embrace of the Southern culture I had worked very hard to remove myself from.

Within the U.S., the Southern culture, particularly the Appalachian subset that I come from, is portrayed as ignorant, uneducated and simple-minded. “The American South, it seems,” writes Allison Graham, “is frozen at its exoticized apex and nadir, relegated by tacit national consensus to a heaven-and-hell diptych of social types: sleepwalking belles and gentlemen of the Old South, and rampaging crackers and hillbillies of the Benighted South.” She goes on to assert that the South is the “‘dark’ underbelly of the nation”, and remains poised as America’s “repellent yet all too compelling Other.” (335)

This dichotomy is the result of a complex history that is more often than not violent and cruel; a history that has made its mark on the Southern character. Steeped in a multitude of cultural influences, the South is a hotbed of racial and religious anxieties. As Richard Gray points out in his essay, “Writing Southern Cultures,” the South “has never *not* been made up of a number of castes, classes, and smaller communities that at best live in uneasy coexistence [...] and at worst are in active conflict.” (5) For this reason, claims Lauren Fowler, the South makes an especially attractive locale for the undead (5), as I will elaborate



on further in this paper. The vampire, like the South itself, is the product of myriad influences and adaptations, which allow both to possess a certain fluidity of being.

Ideally, I would like to be able to claim that it is this commonality that drove me to once again pair vampires and the South together, but that is not the case. I chose the South as a setting because I wanted to portray the South *I* know – a dynamic, multicultural milieu removed from the “counterfeit South” (Gray 10) that is typified by magnolia-laden verandas and predominantly white figures of genteel society. I wanted to depict an American South that is as brutal as it is beautiful, and explore how both concepts impact the people who live there. That said, there were always going to be vampires; I just didn’t know exactly what form they would take.

My fascination with monsters isn’t surprising considering the part of Appalachia where I grew up, specifically the state of West Virginia, which also serves as the location of the Askala and the Farmers. Even in the twenty-first century, nearly every county in the state has its own monster prowling the hills. There’s the Snarly Yow, which likes to leap in front of cars so the driver crashes, the Flatwoods Monster, which is actually presumed to be extra-terrestrial, and the Grafton Monster, which is supposedly headless (Fauster).

In 1929, Frank Kozul took a shortcut through the woods on his way home, where he ran into a creature about the size of a large dog and covered in white hair, with a bushy tail. The creature attacked him, but no matter how Frank fought back, he struck only air. He ran, the creature clawing him the whole way until he stumbled outside a cemetery, where the creature disappeared. When he got up, Frank found he was completely unharmed despite the creature’s vicious assault (Guiley 104).

That kind of story isn’t unusual in Appalachia. In Greenbrier County, West Virginia, there’s a historical marker that notes that the murder of Elva Zona Heaster is the only known case solved by a ghost’s testimony. Heaster’s ghost appeared to her mother and described

how her husband had murdered her, which led to an autopsy that confirmed the account (Wilson 10).

In the Appalachian subculture, folklore and modern perceptions coexist in a weird sort of parallel that doesn't preclude or inhibit the other. From 1966-67, the Mothman sightings in Point Pleasant were believed to be premonitions of the Silver Bridge collapse that killed 46 people on 15 December, 1967 (cryptid). If, as some stories suggest, the creatures and spirits of legend withdrew from the human world, then this is a place where some of them were left stranded.

My aim was to blend elements of oral folklore traditions and contemporary speculative fiction to re-examine how the Human is situated within the nonhuman world, and explore the impact made on by humans on the nonhuman world. I applied qualities of literary genres such as horror, magical realism, folklore, speculative fiction and fantasy to bring them together in a schema that is both self-aware and reflective. For example, in Caleb's first-person narratives, he acknowledges tropes in popular culture (*deus ex machina*, comic book heroes), and, following the tradition of self-reflexivity in postmodern texts (Lindas 14), even frames his own story within the parameters of these genres.

Evidence of this influence can be seen in, for example, Carys's assertion that her people's creation myth was actual fact. Cosh's dualistic appearance, as both humanoid and bird, serves as small nod to the magical realism which abounds in folklore, and that I hope to explore more fully in later projects. The chapters focused on Audrey's narrative, rather than featuring characteristics of folklore instead reflects the oral tradition that most folklore stems from. This combination creates a richer and more dynamic world through which to explore the novel's themes of alterity and undecidability, while also moving the text out of the typical confines of genre fiction.

## Others

Having the supernatural so rooted in my cultural identity led me to question what makes something monstrous. What do monsters say about the fears that create them, how they evolve, but also the monstrous qualities that people have in themselves? More specifically the question: once someone does something monstrous, are they then a monster forever and always, or is redemption somehow achievable?

I'm particularly interested in the idea of Othering, and that by identifying or interacting with the Other, we are the Other's Other. Or, in a less convoluted way, the monster's monster. Even with my original intention of wanting to present a balanced view of both conservative and liberal ideology, what appealed to me is that there are no "good guys" and "bad guys", generally speaking, and despite being on opposite sides of the ideological fence, there are a lot more similarities than differences. I wanted to de-Other the Other.

As an example of this in the novel, two of the primary races, the Tskiri and the Askala are both created from different aspects of the same source material. In their origin story, stars fell from the sky. As those stars crashed, they broke apart, separating into fire and shadow. Birds arrive to make clay bodies for the light, but the shadows are chased into the ground by the light. The one ability they share – a link back to their star selves – is telesthesia, which is the ability to receive impressions over distances without using normal sense organs. The Askala use it almost exclusively to communicate, sending each other thoughts and impressions rather than speaking. The Tskiri, on the other hand, have a complex etiquette regarding when or if they should use the ability.

The primary conflict of the novel rests between the nonhuman, and the human; Caleb, whose perspective colours much of the narrative, is both of these things. Caleb is a Tskiri hybrid, who's been raised entirely as human so he experiences a dissonance between aspects of himself even before he learns his true identity. At the same time, because he has both

human and nonhuman characteristics, neither label can be accurately ascribed to him. He exists outside the binary opposition of human/nonhuman, and thus serves to disrupt the order that oppositional logic provides. Like many of the characters in *The Nameless*, Caleb represents what Derrida refers to as “undecidability” (Collins 16). Rather than resolve this disruption, however, it becomes the status quo, with Caleb ultimately uniting the Askala (non-human) and the Farmers (human) as one, interdependent collective. The aim here is to force the reader away from the comfortable definitions of self and Other, and into re-examining what those divisions actually mean, and if they are still wholly relevant.

## **Vampires**

With the prevalence of vampires in film, literature and even real life (Browning), we can conclude that vampires have an irresistible fluidity. Since their emergence from folklore to art form, vampires have represented an intertwined fear and fascination with societal taboos – from the latent homoeroticism of Romantic vampires, to foreign aristocracy and female sexuality of the Victorian period, and disease and blood-borne infection in the late twentieth century (Billson 83). The subject of the vampire has witnessed a transformation during the twentieth century from the grotesque monster of *Nosferatu* (1922) to the sympathetic and even sexy vampires of Anne Rice’s oeuvre to Stephenie Meyer’s brooding, sparkling, “vegetarian” creatures. The vampire’s ability to take on new roles over subsequent generations, while still remaining somewhat constant, gives it a continual relevance in the human imagination.

As suggested above, it is impossible to create any sort of vampire without taking into consideration the lineage of the creatures in literature and folklore. The earliest incarnations of vampires in folklore made them indistinguishable from other undead figures, such as zombies and ghosts. Even Polidori’s Lord Ruthven and Coleridge’s Christabel evoke more

similarities to phantoms than what contemporary readers would think of as vampires (Auerbach 20). Stoker adds the trappings of Christianity as a defence against the nocturnal undead, while the twentieth century saw a progressive dispersal of these wards against vampires.

Many late twentieth/early twenty-first century vampires are able to return to daylight through rings, charms, “sacred blood”, and even sunscreen (*Blade*, the comic series and films, *The Vampire Diaries* and spinoff *The Originals*, *True Blood* and *Being Human*, just to name a few). In addition, this new wave of vampires reframed the drinking of blood from something unholy to the more medically-based explanations, addiction and disease, typically a virus that pirates the body’s systems for its own purpose. This can be seen as a reflection of fears associated with sexual contact and blood-borne transmission with the emergence of HIV in the 1980s. The late ‘90s and early 2000s brought a more sanitised vampire, ones weighed down by the presence of a “soul” (“Angel” in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), utilising blood substitutes and integrating with humans (*The Southern Vampire Mysteries/True Blood*) and practicing “vegetarianism” (*The Twilight Saga*).

In his vampire trilogy (*The Passage*, *The Twelve*, and *City of Mirrors*), Justin Cronin blends the vampire with the post-apocalyptic in a scenario that’s usually reserved for zombie infections. In Cronin’s novels, man manipulates nature, and in his hubris, spawns the vampiric “virals”, the result of a military-backed contagion that soon infect most of the human population. Cronin retains the standard tropes to dispatch vampires (a stake through the heart and vulnerability to sun), and even, via his characters, acknowledges *Dracula* as his literary predecessor directly. In the second part of the trilogy, Alicia Donadio, a soldier with the Second Expeditionary, refers to the 1931 film as “like a viral owner’s manual” (*Twelve* 314).

The Count is not the only famous monster to lend attributes to the creation of the virals, however. With an ambitious (and ultimately doomed) scientist spear-heading a military-backed project to develop a serum with the aim of eradicating disease (with the added boon of potentially creating superhuman soldiers to protect American interests), the virus's origins bear a strong resemblance to Frankenstein's monster. This is even acknowledged in the final novel by Fanning, the scientist who became Patient Zero, who refers to microbiologist Jonas Lear's experiments as "mad science [...] The only things missing from his argument were a slap of reassembled body parts and a lightning rod, and I'd told him as much (*Mirrors* 199)." Cronin echoes Mary Shelley's questions of human responsibility to nature, fears of terrorism, invasion and an increasingly technological world (756), fears that citizens of the twenty-first century know intimately.

### **The Askala**

As I've already shown, it could be argued that the vampire has essentially been defanged in the novels of Anne Rice and Stephanie Meyer. They've been assimilated into mainstream society and live side by side with humans as these supercharged sex symbols who get around their vampiric impediments with the previously stated use of abstinence, magic rings, and even sunscreen. But I find their transformation from terrifying to desirable pretty fascinating, so of course I intended to make use of their evolving mythology in my own creations, which isn't to say that the prospect wasn't daunting. As soon as you mention the word "vampire", readers will have a litany of reference material to fact-check your creation against.

To avoid this, I decided they wouldn't be called vampires. I first called them the Nameless as a placeholder until I determined what I would call them. Even after naming them the Askala, I decided the "Nameless" would be the Farmers' term for them.

In creating the Askala, rather than try to revamp the vamp, I wanted to create something that the legend could be based on. Like my contemporaries, I got rid of all the religious trappings, but I opted to go one step further and take away the idea that the Askala were undead, damned, cursed or immortal. So I came up with a rough sketch of what one would be like with only three real criteria: photosensitivity, longevity, and they had to drink blood.

Mistakenly, I believed my work to be done at that point, which left the Askala to stagnate as half-formed creatures suited only for shock value. My fear of trampling on vampire canon had led to a two-dimensional representation that barely limped along. I needed a way to see through the monster's eyes, so I created Jasha.

The process wasn't entirely smooth. Early versions of him were caricatures of a murderous sociopath, but the more I worked with his perspective, I had to really think about how the Askala society was designed, and how it had come to be that way. Through Jasha, I stopped seeing and writing the Askala as vampires, and started treating them like creations in themselves: not something supernatural, but a part of nature the human race had lost touch with after chasing it to the fringes by the 24-hour lifestyle of modernity.

The Askala represent our instinctual fear of predators in the dark, a fear that humans, by and large, only experience in the sanitised and fairly safe confines of the cinema. As the novel's societal structures break down through the course of the novel, the Askala have an increased presence until there are large areas where they, rather than humans, are the dominant force controlling the landscape. This increased presence is meant to illustrate that, however much we may progress technologically, and use that technology to remove ourselves from the natural order of the world, as human beings we are still bound to the ecology of our environment. Once we lose the trappings of modern society, the human

population adopts a more overtly animalistic presence, competing for resources, and, in the case of the Farmers, being used as an actual source for these resources.

The Askala possess an almost sacred reverence – among themselves for Father, and from the Farmers’ mythology around the eponymous Nameless. Despite this, they are neither super- nor preter- natural in origin, and, as a society are highly evolved in the sciences. Rather than being a creation of humanity, however, the Askala exist in a history that pre-dates the human. In this novel, I posit that, instead of casting our faith to something new, it is the old fears that will resurface and claim us.

### **Challenges**

Writing *The Nameless* has been difficult, to put it mildly. As mentioned earlier in this paper, my original concept was too broad and more plot-driven than character-driven. At this stage, the novel was written in third person, past tense, although even then, I made use of the epistolary technique in the form of news reports and official documents with larger portions of narrative in between, similar to the structure of Cronin’s trilogy. I had struggled through the first half of the novel under this original concept before I began to suspect that I had gone down the wrong path. I had reached an impasse where I wasn’t sure how to proceed, and my attempts to progress the narrative either stalled out, or were nearly gimmicky in their execution.

I decided, at this point, to go back to basics and find the heart of the novel: Caleb’s experiences. I switched to a first person narrative in present tense, and wrote what eventually became the opening scene of Chapter Three. This switch gave the text more immediacy and intimacy for the reader when connecting with the world of the novel. From that point, I explored the breaking down of society as it impacted *him*, a queer person of colour in the Deep South.



From the inception of *The Nameless*, I envisioned it as the first in a trilogy of books. This posed several unique challenges in writing the novel, namely that, for the purposes of the PhD, it needed to be able to function as a standalone work of fiction. As a result, there were instances – such as Carys’ explanation of the Tskiri and their abilities early on in the novel – where I had to relay information more quickly than I would have as the first instalment of a trilogy. Equally, the current ending is problematic in that it seems to be reinforcing the patriarchal status quo by denying Carys her own agency.

My intention with the next instalment is to more fully explore the foundation of each particular society’s culture. In this, we will see Carys and Caleb work together to better the lives of both the Askala and the Farmers. Similarly, I intend to explore the role Caleb’s younger brother Derek plays as a subservient member of the matriarchal culture of Wildwood, and as quasi-leader of the hacktivist group, n3m0’s Army. Rather than see any sort of national reconciliation, the second novel will depict a further fracturing of the United States into numerous, autonomous tribes that must compete and/or trade for what resources are left.

Representation has always been a facet of *The Nameless*, throughout the novel’s various shapes. I wanted, of course, to portray the South in a, not necessarily *better* way, but more honest. I wanted to show the great diversity that makes up the South by featuring characters of various races, religions, genders, and socio-economic classes. However, I needed to make sure I didn’t fall into portraying an idealised Southern culture; while the South has a diverse population, it does not necessarily embrace that diversity. That said, I always knew that my protagonist would be queer, and that in his worldview, that would be the norm. My motivation was simple: a desire to see more queer protagonists. Likewise, the inclusion of Cosh, a non-binary character, was created for the same reason, and I intend to more closely explore that in my future work.

While I deliberately made the choice that my world would not be heteronormative, my decision to write about predominantly non-white characters felt more like an understanding than a conscious choice. Switching from third- to first-person narrative required me to further develop Caleb's character. During this process, I realised that he was biracial as well as bi-species, and from that realisation came something I hadn't thought about before: how to portray race in my novel. Of course, even without overtly portraying race, I had been performing a version that was white-centric, i.e. by not specifying the race of particular characters, readers would generally presume that race to be white. I chose to handle this by reversing the standard; a character's race would only be commented on if white, therefore marking dark skin as the norm. It felt important, in an era where people of colour are systematically targeted for violence and abuse (Siscoe 5), to put forward a story where a person of colour plays the role of hero.

As a white writer portraying a cast of characters predominantly made up of people of colour, I experienced a certain amount of anxiety about how that portrayal would be received. Would I inadvertently fall into the traps of casual racism and stereotypical or token characters? In order to avoid this, I researched articles written about problematic depictions (or lack thereof) by white writers, as well as fiction and non-fiction written by people of colour in order to gain a better understanding of the characters I meant to inhabit. I also drew on my own experience as Other, as well as personal accounts of Otherness. One further avenue to pursue in future would be the use of sensitivity readers to gain feedback from people of colour on my representation of their race.

Finally, in discussing where *The Nameless* is placed in the literary field, the question of genre cannot be ignored. Very often, within the academy, genre fiction is not viewed as possessing merit in and of itself. However, with literary authors such as Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing writing within genre as well, the concept of literary fiction is broadening its horizons,

albeit slowly. In this novel, I adopted genre-specific characteristics and placed them beneath a literary lens, always keeping in the forefront the question: what makes this novel literary rather than genre?

The answer to this lies primarily with the characters. From the very beginning, what has interested me is how different people can have widely divergent reactions to the same stimulus due to their variety of experience. It is that variety of experience I intended to capture by utilising several narrators and forms. Initially, I meant to experiment with the stylistic elements, but these attempts fell within the realm of gimmicks so were ultimately abandoned. Inherent in my writing style, though, is a linguistic rhythm that is almost poetic. The sound and weight a particular word has is nearly as important as the meaning of that word, especially in Caleb's passages, indicating a focus on language and style that is distinctly literary. I don't mean to imply that genre fiction never utilises these elements, but within genre they are most often used in service of the plot, whereas in this instance the primary goal is a deep understanding of the character and how his personal experiences shape him.

## **Conclusion**

In writing this novel, I have drawn on several influences – both fictional and historical – to piece together the world it takes place in. As already discussed, a tense political climate and my own interest in dystopian landscapes came together to form the genesis of what would become *The Nameless*. Into that landscape, I injected the supernatural: the Askala, my interpretation of the vampire, and their opposite, the fire-wielding Tskiri. In doing so, I have also inverted the convention of equating “good” with whiteness and “bad” with blackness.

Humans tend to define concepts through dialectical opposition: life versus death, good versus evil, dark versus light, etc. Zygmunt Bauman writes that these oppositions are essential to the establishment of societal identity categories. “In dichotomies crucial for the practice and the vision of social order,” he says, “the differentiating power hides as a rule behind one of the members of the opposition. The second member is but the other of the first, the opposite (degraded, suppressed, exiled) side of the first and its creation.” (Zevallos) As Simone de Beauvoir states in the quote at the start of this essay, concepts of the Other are intrinsically bound up with concepts of the self. We cannot define our individual identities without also defining what stands in opposition to those identities, and vice versa.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake*, Virago, 2003.

---. *Maddaddam*, Virago, 2013.

---. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Vintage, 2012.

---. "The Handmaid's Tale and *Oryx and Crake* 'In Context'." *PMLA*, vol. 119, no. 3, 2004, pp. 513-517. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/25486066](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486066).

---. *Year of the Flood*, Virago, 2009.

Auerbach, Nina. *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. The University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Auster, Paul. *The New York Trilogy*. Faber and Faber, 1987.

Baccolini, Rafaella and Tom Moylan, editors. *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*. Routledge, 2003.

Badmington, Neil. *Readers in Cultural Criticism: Posthumanism*. Palgrave, 2000.

Bataille, Georges. *Literature and Evil*. Penguin Classics, 2012.

---. "Mastery and Servitude." *Georges Bataille – Essential Writings*, edited by Michael Richardson, Sage Publications, 1998, pp. 119-138.

Bell, Alden. *The Reapers are the Angels*. Tor, 2010.

Bentham, Jeremy. *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. Library of Economics and Liberty, [www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthPML18.html](http://www.econlib.org/library/Bentham/bnthPML18.html).

Berenson, Frances. "Hegel on Others and the Self." *Philosophy*, vol. 57, no. 219, 1982, pp. 77-90. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/4619540](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4619540).

Billson, Anne. *Devil's Advocates: Let the Right One In*. Auteur, 2011.

*The Bible (KJV)*. *King James Bible Online*, [www.kingjamesbibleonline.org](http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org).

Blake, Charlie, et al., editors. *Beyond Human: From Animality to Transhumanism*. Continuum, 2012.

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster: New Edition*. Translated by Ann Smock, University of Nebraska Press, 1995.

Booker, M. Keith. *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide*, Greenwood Press, 1994.

Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Polity, 2013.

Browning, John Edgar. "The real vampires of New Orleans and Buffo: a research note towards comparative ethnography." *Nature.com*, uploaded 24 Mar 2015, <https://www.nature.com/articles/palcomms20156>.

Carey, John, editor. *The Faber Book of Utopias*. Faber and Faber, 1999.

Carrington, Damian. "Earth's Sixth Mass Extinction Event Underway, Scientists Warn." *The Guardian*, 10 July 2017, [www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/10/earths-sixth-mass-extinction-event-already-underway-scientists-warn](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/jul/10/earths-sixth-mass-extinction-event-already-underway-scientists-warn).

Catling, Brian. *The Vorrh*. Coronet, 2016.

Ciuba, Gary M. *Desire, Violence, & Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction: Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, Walker Percy*. Louisiana State University Press, 2011.

Coetzee, J.M. *The Lives of Animals*, edited by Amy Gutman. Princeton University Press, 1999.

---. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Vintage, 1980.

Collins, Jeff and Bill Mayblin. *Derrida: A Graphic Guide*. Icon Books, 2012.

Cronin, Justin. *City of Mirrors*, Orion, 2016.

---. *The Passage*, Orion, 2010.

---. *The Twelve*, Orion, 2013.

cryptid. "Mothman Sightings and the Point Pleasant Silver Bridge Collapse." *Exemplore*, uploaded 10 Jun 2017, <https://exemplore.com/paranormal/Mothman-Sightings-and-the-Silver-Bridge-Collapse>.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by HM Parshley. Penguin, 1972, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/ethics/de-beauvoir/2nd-sex/index.htm>.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

---. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Edited by Marie-Louise Mallet. Translated by David Wills. Fordham University Press, 2008.

---. *Writing and Difference*, Routledge, 2001.

Dick, Philip K. *The Man in the High Castle*. Penguin, 2001.

Doniger, Wendy. Reflections. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, pp. 94-106.

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

Duncan, Glen. *The Last Werewolf*. Borzoi, 2011.

Fauster, Ted. "The Top Five Monsters in the West Virginia Hills." *West Virginia Explorer*, uploaded 3 Apr 2014, <https://wvexplorer.com/2014/04/03/five-west-virginia-monsters-0005/5/>.

Fowler, Lauren N. "Southerner as Other: Exploring Regional Identity through the Southern Vampire." East Tennessee State University, 2015.

Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilisation*. Routledge, 1989.

---. *The Order of Things*, Vintage, 1994.

Gaiman, Neil. *American Gods*. Headline, 2001.

Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2012.

Graham, Allison. "The South in Popular Culture." *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. Edited by Richard Gray and Owen Robinson. Blackwell, 2004. pp.335-351.

Gray, John. *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals*. Granta, 2002.

Gray, Richard. "Writing Southern Cultures." *A Companion to the Literature and Culture of the American South*. Edited by Richard Gray and Owen Robinson. Blackwell, 2004. pp 3-26.

Green, Richard and K. Silem Mohammad. *Zombies, Vampires, and Philosophy: New Life for the Undead*. Open Court, 2010.

Gross, Aaron and Anne Vallely, editors. *Animals and the Human Imagination: A Companion to Animal Studies*. Columbia University Press, 2012.

Guiley, Rosemary Ellen. *Monsters of West Virginia*. Stackpole, 2012.

Harris, Charlaine. *All Together Dead*. Orion, 2007.

---. *Club Dead*. Orion, 2003.

---. *Dead As A Doornail*. Orion, 2005.

---. *Dead To The World*. Orion, 2004.

---. *Dead Until Dark*. Orion, 2001.

---. *Definitely Dead*. Orion, 2006.

---. *From Dead To Worse*. Orion, 2008.

---. *Living Dead In Dallas*. Orion, 2002.

Hasse, Ulrich and William Large. *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Maurice Blanchot*, Routledge, 2001.

Hawking, Stephen and Leonard Mlodinow. *The Grand Design*. Bantam, 2011.

Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Mind*, G. Allen & Unwin, 1949.

Hundal, Sunny. "Angel Merkel is now the leader of the free world, not Donald Trump." *Independent*, uploaded 1 Feb 2017, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/angela-merkel-donald-trump-democracy-freedom-of-press-a7556986.html>.

James, Edward and Farah Mendlesohn. *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Jones, Robert P. "The Collapse of American Identity." *The New York Times*, uploaded 2 May, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/opinion/the-collapse-of-american-identity.html>.

Kaplan, Matt. *The Science of Monsters: Why Monsters Came to Be and What Made Them So Terrifying*. Constable, 2013.

Kirkman, Robert. *Days Gone By. The Walking Dead*, vol. 1, Image Comics, 2009.

---. *Miles Behind Us. The Walking Dead*, vol. 2, Image Comics, 2009.

---. *Safety Behind Bars. The Walking Dead*, vol. 3, Image Comics, 2009.

Larsen, Nella. *Passing*. Random House, 2002.

Latham, Rob, editor. *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings*. Bloomsbury, 2017.

Lee, Jen Sookfong. "So You Want To Write About Race." *OpenBook*, uploaded 29 Nov 2017, <http://open-book.ca/Columnists/So-You-Want-to-Write-About-Race>.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Dispossessed*. Harper, 1994.

Lindas, Julie. "Engaging with Postmodernism: An Examination of Literature and the Canon." University of Colorado, 2013. [https://scholar.colorado.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1618&context=honr\\_theses](https://scholar.colorado.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1618&context=honr_theses).

Mahon, Peter. *Posthumanism: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Bloomsbury, 2017.

McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian or The Evening Redness in the West*. Vintage, 1985.

---. *Child of God*. Picador, 1973.

---. *The Road*, Picador, 2006.

McCarthy, Tom. *Satin Island*. Vintage, 2015.



- Meyer, Stephanie. *Breaking Dawn*. Atom, 2008.
- . *Eclipse*. Atom, 2007.
- . *New Moon*. Atom, 2006.
- . *Twilight*. Atom, 2005
- Miller, James. *Sunshine State*. Abacus, 2010.
- Milton, John. *Paradise Lost*. Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Mitchell, David. *Cloud Atlas*. Sceptre, 2004.
- Mohr, Dunja M. "Transgressive Utopian Dystopias: The Postmodern Reappearance of Utopia in the Disguise of Dystopia." *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2007, pp. 5-24. ZAA, [www.zaa.uni-tuebingen.de/wp-content/uploads/05-Mohr-5-24.pdf](http://www.zaa.uni-tuebingen.de/wp-content/uploads/05-Mohr-5-24.pdf).
- More, Thomas. *Utopia: A Norton Critical Edition*. Norton, 2011.
- Murphy, Patrick D. "Reducing the Dystopian Distance: Pseudo-Documentary Framing in Near-Future Fiction." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1990, pp. 25-40. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239969>.
- Nayar, Pramod K. *Posthumanism*. Polity, 2014.
- Nealon, Jeffrey T. "The Discipline of Deconstruction." *PMLA*, vol. 107, no. 5, 1992, pp. 1266-1279. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/462879>.
- Nunally, Mya. "7 Casually Racist Things That White Authors Do." *BookRiot*, uploaded 02 May, 2018, <https://bookriot.com/2018/02/05/casually-racist-things-that-white-authors-do/>.
- Okorafor, Nnedi. *Who Fears Death*. Penguin, 2010.
- Paik, Peter Y. *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Prose, Francine. "The Problem With 'Problematic'." *The New York Review of Books*, uploaded 1 Nov 2017, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2017/11/01/the-problem-with-problematic/>.
- Ranisch, Robert and Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, editors. *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction*. Peter Lang, 2014.
- Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Penguin, 1966.
- Rice, Anne. *Blood and Gold*. Arrow Books, 2000.
- . *Memnoch the Devil*. Arrow Books, 1995.

---. *Queen of the Damned*. Sphere, 1988.

Ro, Christine. "Dear White Writers, Please Stop Doing These Things." *Submittable*, uploaded 28 June 2017, <https://discover.submittable.com/blog/dear-white-writers-please-stop-doing-these-things/>.

Rosen, Elizabeth K. *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Imagination*. Lexington Books, 2008.

Royle, Nicholas. *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Jacques Derrida*. Routledge, 2003.

Schulman, Sarah. "White Writer." *The New Yorker*, uploaded 21 Oct 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/white-writer>.

Selvon, Sam. *The Lonely Londoners*. Penguin, 1956.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*. Penguin, 2003.

Shriver, Lionel. *The Mandibles: A Family, 2029–2047*. Harper, 2016.

Siscoe, Tanika. "#BlackLivesMatter: This Generation's Civil Rights Movement." Portland State University, 2016.

Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth*. Penguin, 2001.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Collins Classics, 2010.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Penguin, 2003.

Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. Fleet, 2016.

Wilson, Patty A. *Haunted West Virginia: Ghosts and Strange Phenomena of the Mountain State*. Stackpole, 2007.

Wolfe, Cary. *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*. The University of Chicago Press, 2003.

---. *What is Posthumanism?* University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Wolfreys, Julian. *Derrida: A Guide for the Perplexed*. Continuum, 2007.

Zamyatin, Yevgeny. *We*. Macmillan, 1924.

Zevallos, Dr Zuleyka. "What is Otherness?" *Other Sociologist*, 14 Oct 2011, <https://othersociologist.com/otherness-resources/>.

Žižek, Slavoj. *How to Read Lacan*. Granta Books, 2006.