

Offshore

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OFFSHORE

“No mercy, no power but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe.” -Herman Melville. Moby Dick, 1851.

“What was that?” -Crew of the Eikō Maru. Gojira, 1954.

Prologue

Legally, they had to have the radio on. In this part of the ocean weather could skulk around like some great surly cat; it could pounce on you, if you ever let your guard down. Of course that would never happen to Adrien and his father, Victor, but if your family hadn't been fishing these waters for three generations it might be a risk you'd consider.

They left it on anyway, though not out of any particular respect for maritime law--Adrien couldn't be certain, but he'd imagine that every trip out to this particular stretch of the coast involved breaking a variety of laws. No; they left it on because, in low visibility, it was the best way to make sure they were going the right way.

The fog was a curtain on the world, made only heavier by the dark. He could barely see his father at the helm even in his bright apron--"Overboard yellow," Victor called it. On the radio, the weatherman droned on about isolated storm systems, rain and wind blowing in from deeper waters, a seasonal oddity in the beginning of summer, everything he said edged with just a flicker of exhaustion. The guy sounded like he needed another cup of coffee. He must have drawn the short straw to get this shift, thought Adrien. Just like him.

When the man's voice started to crackle at the edges, dipping strangely low or getting caught on one syllable, Victor reached over and switched it off. One by one he killed every electronic along the dash. The first time they'd come out here, slipping past the line of Coast Guard ships in the dark, they'd blown out everything with a circuit board. It was the thing in the water that did it, Adrien believed. What else could it be?

At first it had scared him to run the longline within eyesight of it. Now, after a month of these trips, he was used to it. It was like driving on the highway; the first few times feel like

white-knuckled, pulse-pounding skates along the edge of life and death. Every time after that feels about as thrilling as doing the dishes. They generally kept three miles out, give or take. Today, because they couldn't see more than twenty feet in any direction, they let the radio interference guide them.

Victor pointed the boat more or less perpendicular from their last heading and ran the engine low. Adrien let out the main line behind them, with its many dangling hooks. Every fifteen feet or so was an orange float, like oversized pieces of candy, to keep it from sinking all the way to the bottom. The spool whirred busily as it fed into the water.

"Let it out even and slow," called Victor from the helm, same as always. It didn't seem to matter how many times they came out here.

"Oh, right," said Adrien. "Because I was just gonna drop all the snoods at once in a big tangly meatball. Thanks for reminding me."

"The kid is seventeen and thinks he can talk to his father like that. Do not think that I won't tow your ass in the life preserver just because you're my flesh and blood."

For months, every time they'd gone out, Adrien had found himself wondering what exactly his sister was doing while he was running the line. First it was just the obvious answers that came to him, nothing too creative--she'd have her nose in a book, or her face illuminated by a laptop essay. She'd be doing shots of cheap vodka at a college party. He'd been to a few of those, at least, here in Florida.

But he got more imaginative as the fear of fishing so close to the thing in the water wore off. It was the only way, he reasoned, that he wasn't losing his mind: picturing Marta swinging from a trapeze between two crumbling, ivy-covered turrets. Marta, poking a flashlight into the cavernous space behind a trick bookshelf. Marta, in a circle of other women, levitating a naked

man with only the power of their wills. Who knew what kind of things you really did in college?
Not Adrien.

The *Ghost* was a longliner, dangling many hooks off one main line. One by one Adrien watched the bobbing floats sucked into the fog. Over the course of about an hour Victor drove them in a slow circle. He was very careful to keep his distance. Then they started turning the crank, dragging it all back in.

The first fish they reeled in was a mahi mahi, a midsized one with a face like a miniature grandpa. Adrien tugged on the line until the fish was close enough to reach with his gaff, then in one clean motion dipped the hook-end through the gills and lifted it out of the water. After that it was a flounder, then a bonito. There was never any rhyme or reason to it; fish from all over the Gulf showed up here, a diverse and thrashing seafood market. He couldn't explain it and he didn't have to.

Next they got lucky: a swordfish, easily over a hundred pounds. His father had to cut the engine to help Adrien haul it onto the deck. It slashed twice at their ankles before Adrien pinned the bill down with his boot and his father drove a harpoon through the artery beneath its gasping mouth. He knew exactly where to thrust; Victor had done it literally hundreds of times. It was only as brutal as efficiency dictated.

“Quick, see? Before they know what’s happening. Otherwise the fear gets in the meat.”

“I know, Dad.”

“If you knew I wouldn’t have to repeat myself.”

The next fish they pulled in was a flounder with a maw of needle-sharp teeth, which was not a thing that flounders were supposed to have. It made the fish, which was otherwise small and somewhat shrimpy, resemble something from deeper and stranger waters. There was an odd

sheen to its scales, too. It seemed to almost glow in the red glare of the running lights.

“Dad?” said Adrien, holding the fish just barely out of the water.

Victor squinted at it. “Yeah, throw that one back.”

The wind was starting to pick up now, blowing the fog in currents around them. The next hook was covered in a small and mangled pulp of flesh; Adrien poked at it with one gloved finger, discovering the small squid they used as bait just underneath a mess of meat and delicate little bones. Something had eaten the bait, and then something had eaten that something.

There was a slap along the starboard side of the *Ghost* that made the whole ship tilt to one side. A rogue wave--Adrien grabbed at the rail to steady himself, dropping the gaff, which slid up against the gunwale.

“Steady!” called Victor from the helm. Adrien gave him the finger. As far as he could remember his sister had never received this much shit.

Adrien started reeling in the next float. Maybe it was the fog or maybe it was all the thinking, but it took him too long to realize that the orange ball was more than half-submerged. Something must have been dragging it under--something heavier than the swordfish.

“I could use a hand,” called Adrien, pulling at the line with both hands now, trying to drag the caught animal to the surface. Could it be a shark, or even a dolphin? It wouldn’t be the first time.

Victor leaned over the railing and gripped the line. Together they hauled it up.

What they pulled out of the water was like nothing Adrien had ever seen. End to end it must have been seven, maybe eight feet long. The body was huge and fat, like the biggest varieties of tuna, but it didn’t seem to have scales. Or if it did they were hidden by the constant, pulsing pattern running along its skin: white and black, white and black, in stripes and whirls and

blotches, like a rorschach test. It was almost hypnotic, a thrashing, living blur, and Adrien felt a sense of vertigo looking right at it. Not just because of whatever biological miracle was playing out on its skin--he had grown up on these waters. To see something he couldn't classify or name felt *wrong*. Like the world itself might be starting to slide out from underfoot.

The wind was blowing harder now. Adrien felt it through the sweat soaking his back. Just behind the boat, the massive fish twisted its body and left and right. Each jerk kicked up a spray of salt. He could hear bolts under the spool start to creak.

"We need to cut the line," snapped Victor, returning him to his senses. "Clippers, *now*."

They kept a pair of bolt cutters under the life jackets; they were the only thing that could cut through the steel filament of the main line. Adrien went running for them.

He was lucky, as far as luck could go, that he was looking down, struggling with the knot securing the life jackets down, when the flash happened. One moment the only thing pushing against the night and the fog was their running lights; the next, a white flash, brighter than anything he'd ever seen, lit up everything. The sky above and the ocean below both went a sudden and startling blue. Even the fog seemed to shine for a moment, permeated in every molecule with a kind of heavenly radiance

Then, just as he was looking up, it was gone, and they were plunged again into darkness.

For a moment, there was nothing. Even the thrashing in the water behind them seemed to have stopped. Adrien turned to look at his father, who was staring back at him, wide-eyed. Both in the grip of whatever the fuck had just happened.

Victor was the one who broke the spell. "The wheel," he said. "We need to--"

Whatever else he might have said then was drowned out by a wall of wind that slammed into them like a wall. Even nosed into it, the *Ghost* lifted halfway out of the water, rearing like a

scared horse. Adrien found himself suddenly weightless. Everything seemed chaotic and ridiculous in that moment; the life jackets soaring uselessly into the air, the hold opening and spilling both live and dead fish, his father tumbling and sliding towards the edge of the ship. Adrien fell, sliding along the now-slanted deck helplessly, reaching out to try and catch hold of something, anything. He hit the transom hard, the breath dropping out of him, but he didn't roll over the side. Not yet.

He struggled to his feet. He couldn't see his father anywhere, but the fog--somehow the fog had cleared, and now the night stretched in all directions. Around him, fish still flopped about on the deck, freed from the hold, now slowly succumbing to their own little deaths. He called, once, out into the dark.

“Dad?”

His voice sounded smaller than he remembered. And there was a hissing, too. At first he thought it was radio static, but he remembered Victor shutting it off. No--it was something else, and it was getting louder.

Then he saw it. A piece of darkness, lurching towards the *Ghost*, towards him--a solid wall of it. Water. A wave. The largest wave he'd ever seen.

His last thoughts before it hit were of his sister. What was she doing right now? Where would she be?

Sleeping. Or drinking. An easy answer, this time.

Preamble to Classified Report to the Authority, #137

by **sdfsdfsdf sdfsdfsdfsdfsdf**

I don't eat. I barely sleep. I never leave this place, because even though it is undeniably a facility of horrors it is better than the alternative--everything out there is so nightmarishly *ordinary*. The end of the world is coming, and batteries are two-for-one at the drugstore, and there's a new happy hour special at the town sports bar.

You can't see it moving with the naked eye, but it's coming. At this very moment, as you are reading this, it's coming. Displacing, according to our best guesses, 600,000 gallons of seawater, creating even with its nearly undetectable speed seismic and unprecedented shifts in the global network of ocean currents, not to mention the unimaginable environmental impact a foreign creature of unearthly size and chemical composition *must* have, even if we can't determine precisely what it eats, if it breathes, and whether or not it shits. I, on the other hand, am for some reason sitting here and writing another *useless fucking report*.

Look, I know this language must be surprising to find in a work of serious scholarship, but I find it impossible to overstate just how comprehensively and absolutely fucked we are unless immediate and drastic action is taken by every single person reading this. It is *coming*, and every word you read here means it is closer. But no matter how many nightmarish projections I offer, nothing seems to get through the screen. I've recommended, at this point, *total evacuation of the eastern seaboard*. You have asked me to design a *pamphlet*. I have told you it exists on a scale utterly foreign to life on earth--the Empire Goddamn State Building could fit inside it. How can I more clearly illustrate the danger here?

This will be my final report. I intend to deliver the data, what little data we have, in as clear and direct a manner as possible, so that there can be no confusion about what we have

learned and what is still in debate. It is walking across the bottom of the Atlantic ocean (*likely*). It is moving inexorably towards us (*very high confidence*). If it arrives, coastal areas across the Eastern seaboard of the United States will be devastated (*virtually certain*), and then it will start to move inland (*high confidence*). It is a vast living thing, the likes of which we have never seen before (*absolutely fucking certain*), and it does not seem at all hindered by conventional weaponry, which we learned almost ten years ago. The accounts I have read claimed that we lost three jets before we determined the distance that had to be kept. The planes, of course, proved impossible to recover; only one of the pilots managed to swim to rescue, and he died three weeks later, in a blacksite hospital, in a state I'm sure you can imagine if you've been reading even a third of the reports that I've sent you.

Some days I cannot even bring myself to study the materials, to look in the microscope, to review the goddamn tapes, because I am worried that it will *notice me*. Sometimes I imagine I can feel it, when my back is turned to the ocean. Like a thread tugging at the base of my neck, pointing out towards the water. I am *aware* of it, always. What if *it* is aware of *me*?

You have asked for a magic bullet. I am not sure such a thing exists, but we will not know unless these endless subcommittees, these hearings of distractible and elderly men, are brought to an end. Reports will fix nothing, they will *do* nothing. If you read a single sentence of this document, make it this one: if we don't commit everything--every spare biologist, physicist, engineer and high school chemistry teacher, every beaker and bullet, every moment, every passing thought--to stopping it, we are doomed.

Now, here are your fucking charts.

Marta - Chapter 1 - Leviathan

In the bar, they were showing the giant monster on the TV. As the waitress bobbed and weaved through the Friday rush, people pulled at her sleeve, men mostly, asking her to change it to basketball, since there was a game on and the Miami Heat were due an easy win after this bear of a season. One man pinged french fries off the suspended plasma screen, booing loudly.

The Flask was a bar for locals. That meant the drinks didn't come with little umbrellas and they didn't have names like *The Big Catch* or *Sunshine in a Bottle* or *Resting Beach Face*. It also meant that Marta, at nineteen, could drink here, which was exactly what she was doing. Her Jack and Coke sweat big ugly tears onto the bar, joining thirty years of spilled beer, liquor, spit and blood--the Flask didn't carry wine.

Marta could drink here not because the bartender, Jeff, didn't know she was underage--he did--but because he'd been serving her father drinks for almost twenty years, and because he knew that right now, she needed a drink or three.

"When did they say they were supposed to be back?" said Jeff.

"Twelve hours ago," she said, unhappily noting that she still wasn't slurring. That first year of college had done a number on her tolerance.

"Hey, that's not so bad," Jeff said unconvincingly. "Just last month Kjellson and his crew got their propeller snagged in a sargasso. They were drifting for three days before the Coast Guard cut them loose. You're worrying yourself sick over there."

"Not sick enough."

Another fry impacted the still image of the creature, this time leaving a visceral red smear across the screen. It wasn't much to look at, even on a screen so high-definition it could catch

each bead of sweat on a running back's furrowed brow. They couldn't get closer than a few miles, so everything had to be taken with a telescopic lens, but to her it just looked the same as it had for the last ten years. Below the picture, closed captioning was laying out a new theory; it was an amalgamation of plastic bags, a big oceanic waste dump shaped vaguely like a person. Then the closed captions fell behind, or sped up too quick, and she lost track of what was being said. It must have been a slow news day. That was the only reason they showed it anymore.

“For what it's worth I hope he gets back soon, too. Your dad's the only one bringing in any serious catches these days, and the out-of-towners might riot if they can't get their fresh vacation seafood.”

Marta had heard of the scarcity, of course. Most fishermen didn't like to talk--her family was the notable exception to that rule--but when they did it was almost always about the state of the enemy. Who had caught the biggest swordfish, where schools of mackerel might be found, how much a pound of tuna would earn you one particular morning. Ever since she'd gotten back the only thing anyone would talk about, from the young to the old, was the queer emptiness of the fishing grounds that had given so much for so long. Even the closely guarded spots, the secret coves and hidden shoals passed down like family heirlooms from parent to child seemed to have cleared out. The fish had vacated, scrambled, or else they had finally figured out some countermeasure to the lines and hooks and nets that had plagued them for so long--except, it seemed, in the case of Victor Gonzales, her father.

At first Marta had--yes, childishly, okay--actually hoped that something had gone wrong. Nothing serious, just a bent rudder, or maybe the bolts on the reel would come loose again and tug the whole apparatus overboard. It would have served them right for leaving her behind like this, for reasons they had barely explained.

“If you want to help, go graduate. Go make a million dollars a year and read the Odyssey and Shakespeare or whatever. That’s how you can help the family business,” her father had told her when she complained.

What a joke. The whole last year had felt like a mistake. Whatever the welcome packet had said, the kids she met weren’t the “future leaders of tomorrow.” None of them seemed very confident in a future of any kind; nearly all of them had taken out staggering loans just to come here, and why? To scurry between dorms and class all week like rodents, waiting for the screaming bacchanals of Thursday night? It astounded Marta; without that scholarship she never could have dreamed of going to a school like this, and Victor still had to write fat checks once a semester. They were children, all of them. Her roommate hadn’t even known how to do laundry.

Adrien, of course, had a different take on it. Just not one he would come right out and say. She’d had to read it in the way his jaw tensed when she came into the room, or how he wouldn’t look her in the eye for longer than a half second at a time. The real tell, now that she thought of it, was how quiet he’d gotten. He never argued with her anymore, or called her a bitch, or punched her in the arm. That’s how she’d really known that he was mad at her.

Stupid brother. Stupid Adrien. It wasn’t like she could take his tests for him, or show up to algebra two on his behalf while he got high in the Walmart parking lot. She sucked down the rest of her Jack and Coke through a straw and resolved to go through his room when she got back to the house, see what she could steal.

Finally, the waitress had had enough jeering. She dug out the blocky black remote from somewhere behind the bar. A moment later, the giant monster was replaced with a view of the American Airlines Arena, the Heat just now filing out onto the court. Cheers went up, inside the screen and out. Marta put too much money down and slid off her stool.

“Hey,” shouted Jeff, over the din of the crowd. “Try not to worry, okay?”

“I’m not worried. I’m not a worrier,” said Marta. That last part, at least, was true.

Outside the salt air battled exhaust from the highway for nasal real estate. Cave-like, the Flask was buried under a freeway overpass, turning what should have been an ideal business location--it was literal blocks from the boardwalk, that strip of gaudy chain stores, rides perpetually mid-repair--into a well-kept secret. Marta lit a cigarette, the lone hobby she shared with the other kids at Bennington, and pictured, for some reason, the whole street filling with water. The highway becoming a bridge, the Flask becoming buried treasure. A whimsical daydream, until she saw the people curled up under the bridge, dirty sleeping bags pulled up and around their prone forms, even in the heat of early Florida spring. Sagging cardboard signs propped up their legs. Immediately she felt guilty for the thought. They were probably Antillian. Half of the homeless in the city were refugees, they said.

She dug around in her pocket but couldn’t find any change. She’d put down all her cash at the Flask. Ah, well. She’d had the impulse, at least.

In Marta’s pocket, her phone buzzed, but when she checked the number, it wasn’t one she recognized. Local area code, but scammers could fake that, easy. She sent it to voicemail and started walking.

Marta took the boardwalk back, not because she had any great desire to linger with the vacationers escaping their freshly thawed midwest but because for the first time in her life she understood why they’d all come here. The sea--there it was, as she tromped down a maintenance access stair and onto the wooden planks of the boardwalk proper. The sea. She hadn’t realized

how much she would miss it. How can you miss something you spend your whole life staring at? Only in Ohio did she start to notice its absence tugging at her, like a loose thread caught on a nail. They had snow out there, in college-land. Snow and mountains and plenty of new things, but they didn't have the sea.

But then she'd come back, tired of new people, tired of the cold. All she'd wanted was something familiar. In less than a full year everything in her home seemed to have changed. though. It was an uncanny feeling, like finding your childhood bedroom painted a different color. She passed her favorite pizza place, which was no longer her favorite pizza place. Just a year ago it had been where her father had picked up pies when he was too tired to cook--gone now, replaced by some sterile-pink frozen yogurt chain.

The Salt Market, further downtown, had changed too; she'd seen the ruins just the other day. In spring it should have been already pulling visitors, the pre-summer crowd, and locals too, what part of the city's population actually *bought* their seafood instead of pulling it from the water. Instead those long booths were empty, the tables bleaching in the sun. The canopy tents had been taken down after the last rain. Not enough fish to go around; anything that came in was being bought up, in advance, by restaurants that could afford them. Now and then she'd see a lone Michigander or something, a red-faced man with a camera, lost and confused between the empty stalls. Otherwise it was abandoned, skeletal, like a dead reef.

Something was wrong with this whole place. Some sickness she couldn't work out. Her father, he'd changed, and her brother too, and now they were late, and they had left her waiting, and she was trying to tell herself how stupid it was to be worried.

When she and Adrien were younger they'd badger their father into taking them here once a year, the first day of their summer vacation. Even as a kid she knew he despised it; the way he

would scowl while he bought them soft serve or check his watch, a blocky waterproof thing that could probably survive a nuclear blast, while they shot at balloons with air rifles or picked through bakelite bangles under a canopy tent. She understood now, though, as she drifted through the Thursday crowd, passing smiling European couples eating ice cream, businessmen drinking through a company trip, intramural volleyball teams posing for group photos with the ocean. This part of the city had been entirely ceded to people from somewhere else.

The first time she saw the Skrimshanders--though she wouldn't know to call them that until later--Marta thought they were just a gaggle of homeless, maybe just Antillian refugees. The kind of people she could feel bad for and mostly ignore. They were lined up in front of an old busted ride, one of those swinging boats designed to ratchet back and forth like a pendulum over the water. It was shaped like an old viking ship. The paint was peeling and spiderwebbed with cracks after years of neglect, and the masthead--designed, at one point, to look like a beautiful, scantily-clad mermaid--appeared to be suffering from some kind of flesh-eating virus.

The crowd clustered under the ride didn't look much better. Their bodies were wrapped in homemade grey robes, all in varying states of filth, with little twisted bracelets made of seawater and some rough material, hemp maybe. Their hair was either shaved or clumped into tangled dreads and almost all of them were so obviously sunburned it was apparent even from that distance. Propped up next to them was a cardboard sign, and written on it, in Sharpie:

LEVIATHAN MAKETH A PATH TO SHINE AFTER HIM - JOB

NOW THE LORD HAD PREPARED A GREAT FISH TO SWALLOW UP JONAH - JONAH

LEVIATHAN WHICH GOD OF ALL HIS WORKS CREATED HUGEST THAT SWIM THE

OCEAN STREAM - MILTON

One of them was lying back across the boards, head dangling over the edge. A woman, Marta noticed, though it wasn't easy to tell between the shaved heads and the nasty robes. Two of the others were flanking her, holding her arms, and for a second Marta's heart started to race. But she wasn't struggling; actually, when her face tilted towards her, Marta could see that she was smiling dreamily.

Nearby, another one of the Skrimshanders seemed to be pulling up a rope which had been let down over the side of the boardwalk, into the water. He was the tallest one there, with a beard as matted and blonde as the braided hair running down his back. If his robes had once been grey it was hard to tell from the state of them. Instead they seemed to be a hundred shades of gross, and shined in places as if wet.

A few more pulls of the rope and he'd drawn up an old plastic bucket. Bright orange, dripping seawater, a strip of black seaweed clinging to the side. He reached in.

"In the name of the Leviathan I give the gift of baptism to you," he said. His voice deep and booming, like a country preacher. "Welcome, sister. Welcome."

From the bucket he pulled a small, wriggling fish. She couldn't be sure, at this distance, whether it was white or black; it seemed to be changing between the two in his hand. A trick of the light, maybe. She kept walking.

Marta came home to an empty, dark house. Still no brother, still no father. Out there on the water, somewhere. Still. In the driveway she patted the refrigerated van as she passed, like an old cow she was fond of. Years ago, her father had hired a local graffiti artist to spraypaint a smiling cartoon fish along the side of their truck, thinking it would bring in more business and

stick in people's minds. But the guy had done a bad job, and the fish-smile was full of unsettlingly human teeth. Victor had tried to strip the paint himself and failed; now the mottled, dessicated grimace made all the neighborhood kids cry when they'd drive home after their last delivery.

She went to the kitchen, not bothering to turn the lights on, and grabbed a beer from the fridge. Three more months of this. She paused briefly at her closet. Inside waited nice pressed skirts, white conservative blouses. "Can't wear jeans and a hoodie to the office!" Her father had practically shouted that at her. Let alone rubber boots and aprons. Her internship started a few days from now, would go until the end of August. A whole summer of bringing coffee to important men; a whole summer of paperwork, of the hot smell of printers, while the rest of her family did what they'd done for generations. Marta opened the bottle, turned on the TV.

She flipped randomly between channels. There was a professional golf tournament on one. On another, they were warning the public about some dangerous domestic terrorist. She settled on an old movie. That matched the syrupy pace of her own thoughts, and the swelling, dreadful cello felt like an old friend. Batman, their gray tabby, jumped onto the couch and pushed his face into her hand until she was involuntarily petting him.

Her phone buzzed again in her pocket. Another phone call, she saw, from the same scam number as before. Seconds later there was a new voicemail. It joined a few others, actually, all from the same number. Jesus, they were getting desperate. No luck conning retirees out of their social security checks, she guessed. She picked one of the voicemails at random.

"Ms. Gonzales," started the message. A human, rather than one of those weird computer-generated voices. Batman purred, loud and obnoxious. At least somebody was happy she was home.

“I’m calling on behalf of St. Anthony Medical Center,” continued the message. Wait.

Under the fog of the Jack and Cokes, somewhere in the distance, alarms were going off. The hospital was calling her. Why would the hospital be calling her? She knew the answer should be obvious, but she couldn’t quite make it out.

“We have a Victor Gonzales in our ICU, and I--look, would you just give me a call please? I have to go.”

There was a shuffling sound, and the message ended. A curious coldness spread through her body, then. In an odd, peaceful part of her brain, Marta noticed that the voice had sounded rushed. They must be pretty busy.

In her lap, Batman kneaded her thighs, happy and oblivious.

Marta tried to remember the last time she had been in the hospital. Four years ago, maybe, when Adrien had nearly gotten lockjaw from a rusty nail. She hadn’t liked the place back then--too sterile, all those white lights--but it had only gotten worse. In the lobby where she waited, one of the overhead panel lights flickered on and off. Sharing the room with her were people who seemed in dire need of help. One young woman had a bloody wad of paper towels pressed to her forehead, an older woman rubbing her back comfortingly. Another man, in a thick sweater despite the heat outside, kept politely excusing himself to throw up. She had yet to see a doctor.

Marta put her head down and pressed her hands into her eyeballs, trying to relieve some pressure from the storm system in her head. Somewhere close by, she could hear the awful sucking rush of an oxygen machine. After all these years, the sound still made her woozy.

Finally a nurse called her name. The bags under his eyes matched his purple scrubs. He

didn't bother to introduce himself; just waved his hand for her to follow. Everyone they passed seemed to be in a rush. "Bad flu season," explained the man, noticing the expression on her face.

When they arrived she almost didn't recognize him. Victor Gonzales, her father, had always been a figure in motion. She couldn't remember ever seeing him asleep, even. Now, though, he was lying very still under the rumpled blue sheets of the hospital bed. She couldn't even see his chest move; the only indication that he was alive at all was the quiet beeping of the heart monitor.

"He looks worse than he is," said the man in purple. "It's mostly dehydration. And he's got a fever. But that's all stuff you can manage from home. He's out of the danger zone now."

Marta couldn't find any words that seemed appropriate. She thought that guy back in the waiting room had had the right idea; she would have liked to politely excuse herself to throw up, then.

Next to her, the nurse was discussing release paperwork. Marta interrupted him: "Was there anyone with him? A seventeen year old kid, maybe?" Adrien, she didn't say. Stupid Adrien. Stupid brother.

"Oh," said the man in purple. Looking, with an awkward grimace, like anything other than tired for the first time. "The Coast Guard will be in touch about that."

Chapter 2 - Beach

The previous night, along the shore at Joyous Beach, the kids burned trash in a big pile. They weren't really kids, they were teens, and it wasn't really trash, or at least it wasn't their trash. In the last few months something had changed in the tidal patterns, and now flotsam from every beach, dump and spill along the coast inevitably found its way to them. Probably it had something to do with that thing out in the water, but what were they supposed to do about that?

It was hurting the town's economy. This, they had heard from their parents--Joyous Beach depended on the money from other people, city people, who could afford to buy second houses and eat at the nice restaurant and buy kitschy little doodads carved from driftwood. The trash was a problem for their little town, it was true. But that's not why they were burning the trash. They were burning the trash because they were kids, and it was an excuse to be down here alone, and because it seemed like something they probably shouldn't be doing.

Piled nearby, ready for incineration, were bottles, ropes, fishing nets, license plates, even a few hunks of real, if waterlogged, wood. One of them, who knows which, had just tossed a half-rotted surfboard into the pyre, sending up plumes of carcinogenic fumes with great whoops of approval from the crowd. That's when the flash of light appeared out over the water.

It was white, like the kind of fluorescence that might spill off a boat at night, but a thousand times brighter--for a second the whole sky lit up blue, like morning had been tossed hastily over the canopy of stars.

A few moved closer together. Some used the opportunity to grab the hand of someone else, the drunker ones going to far as to plant kisses on necks while their partners were distracted, but almost nobody could look away. For a moment, they all forgot their pyre for one

far brighter and stronger than anything they could have built on their own. Then, as quickly as it had ignited, the light was gone.

Everything was normal for about four more minutes. They heard the rush of water long before they saw it.

Black - Chapter 3 - Meteorological Offshore Hiccup

Black thought there would be more emergency vehicles. When Hurricane Zulu had gone through Baton Rouge like rotten fruit through a paper bag, there had been helicopters, ambulances, fire trucks. Semis from private shipping companies had been co-opted by the government, given some sort of voucher or tax credit to haul food and medical supplies and an industrial crate of floaties, whose danger-orange plastic you could still see clogging the gutters today. The effort was well-intentioned and doomed, the food pillaged constantly by packs of animals and the medicine left in the sun so that half of it was useless by the time it got passed out. He'd read all about it online.

Since he'd gotten to Joyous Beach, though, he hadn't seen a single badge. Even the local police cruisers were gone. It was like the floodwaters had swept out all the cops, along with a third of the houses in the seaside town. That was good. A run in with the authorities could make his life a lot harder, especially now. Technically he wasn't supposed to leave the state of Texas.

He met his contact in the old movie theater on main street. The lights along the marquee, somehow, were still on; they had a backup generator in the basement, he guessed. He left his pickup in the middle of the street and still managed to plant his boot directly in a puddle.

"Dammit. Great start," he muttered. From under the marquee, someone laughed.

She'd been waiting for him. Sadie was older than him, although sometimes that was hard for people to tell on account of his condition. She was sitting in a folding chair, smiling at him as he walked over. He could see that she was missing her two front teeth.

"So, you're the guy they sent me."

"I guess so," he said.

“Well, come on,” she said, waving her hand. “I’ll give you the tour.”

He followed her inside and she showed him around. Theaters two and three were already being shared by a few families--people who had been pushed out of their homes by the flood, she told him--but he could sleep in the lobby or the projection room, since he was helping out. Over bowls of steaming chili that made them both sweat, Black asked her where the cops had gone. Or the marshalls. Or the National Guard, or any of the other people that usually showed up in times like this, for better or worse.

“The elementary school,” Sadie said.

“Finally decided to better themselves and complete their degrees, I see. Government shelter?”

“That’s right, big guy.”

“You can just call me Black.”

“Funny name for a guy that looks like you,” she said. “Like Tiny, I guess.”

Sadie told him about the tiny desks piled into hallways, the classrooms converted to sleeping areas where dirty, exhausted people laid end to end, like sardines. Helicopters touched down and took off from the blacktop outside, after men in hazmat suits had knocked down the jungle gym with a backhoe. They were taking in anyone who showed up but plenty of people got one look at the thick-necked goons toting assault rifles outside and decided to take their chances in the waterlogged corpse of Joyous Beach, or in the theater, with Sadie.

“They’re scared. Deportation, parole violations, that kind of stuff,” she explained. He could understand that much; he was violating his own parole just being here. Sadie paused, then.

“Not to mention the rumors.”

“The creature,” said Black. He’d seen the pictures. It was strange to be so close to it,

now. To know that it was only a few miles offshore.

Sadie made a *tch* sound. “There are rumors,” she said, “of people getting their kids grabbed. Or kids winding up with no parents, suddenly alone. Like some bogeyman is taking folks in the night.”

“I thought the bogeyman was out on the water.”

She hit his hand with the wooden spoon, leaving a red-orange mark on his paper-colored skin. “Hush. We don’t talk about that thing here.”

He rubbed at the mark, but it seemed to have set in remarkably quickly. “So, what’s SPEAR doing here?” *What am I doing here*, is what he really meant to ask.

“What needs doing. For starters, providing food, water and a roof to anyone who’s papers won’t get them into the government shelter. But there’s folks that can’t make it here, or don’t want to leave their homes. They need help too.”

“We’re delivery men?”

“That’s just to start,” she said. “The houses still standing need mucking out, and the ones that got knocked over need replacing. There are families here. They can’t live in a movie theater forever, can they?” She gave him a big, gap-toothed smile. “There’s a whole lot more that these people need, and they’re not going to get it from anyone else. So we’ve got our work cut out for us.”

“And--the Red Bands,” said Black. “I know they take advantage of situations like this sometimes. Come in, round up the Antillians and Mexicans and everyone else they don’t like while everyone’s busy or overwhelmed, and then--”

“We don’t get many of them in Joyous Beach. One or two high school kids who’ve watched too many Youtube videos, I guess. They told me you were a real brawler back in

Houston. Don't worry, those muscles of yours will be put to good use," she said, patting him familiarly on the arm. "You ever lift a pallet of condensed milk? Heavy as sin."

Three days earlier, Joyous Beach had been hit by a flood. Now missing posters collected like plaque on the telephone poles still standing, most for actual humans but some for dogs. As fucked up as it all was, those were the pictures that really wrecked Black's day. The pups staring into the camera with oblivious love, gnawing on some rubber anemone, flopped across a lawn that no longer existed. But he had been sent here to help the people, not the animals.

For some reason Black found those who had been irrevocably fucked by the flood easier to work with. When all you could see of someone's house in the dirty tide was the roof shingles, he could always count on them to come along quietly and accept whatever help was offered. When they could go on pretending things were fine, though, it got more difficult.

Their first stop of the day was a condo in one of the richer parts of town. A place, according to Sadie, mostly occupied by rich people from the city, and even then only in the summer months. Before the flood Sadie had been one of the local women who had cared for these homes in the winter, sweeping them and dusting them and chasing out the massive swamp moths that sometimes made their nests among the cashmere sweaters and imported European furniture.

They found the owner around back, a white woman who looked, to Black, like she had maybe been jerked or cured judging from the unnatural orange of her skin. She was standing in the dusty quartz gravel circling her home, leaning over a patch of garden that looked like it might have once contained lilies or maybe tulips but now was sewn with seaweed and ocean muck. Over the patch of ruined soil she was tilting a little red watering can.

On the eastern side of the house, where the woman might normally have a stupendous view of the sunrise over the warm blue waters of the Gulf, a fallen tree had smashed through her upper deck. It had caved in the guest bedroom, shattered all the windows of their kitchen, and ensured that the only view she would be getting now was of a traumatized family of squirrels.

Black tried first. “Ma’am I see that you’re, um, engaged in something here. Emergency yard maintenance. But if you could come with us for a moment, we’ve got a truck of supplies over there and wanted to offer you whatever you might need to get through the next week or so.”

She smiled haltingly, glancing up at him now and then to be polite, but seemed unwilling to look away from her poisoned flower bed for long enough to engage.

“Ma’am,” Black tried again, trying not to let the frustration leak into his voice. “There’s been a flood. Your house has been,” he paused, looked over at the tree stuck into her wall like a knife into cake. “Damaged. Are you hurt? When was the last time you ate anything?”

“Oh, I’m fine,” she said. “We’re fine here, really.”

That’s when Sadie tried, gently putting one hand on the woman’s shoulder and lifting the nose of the watering can so that the little trickle stopped. “Who else is inside, sweetheart?”

Black would have put them at about the same age, but now Sadie radiated the mother and the woman’s lip began to tremble like a child.

“If you’ve got young ones we can give you diapers, formula...”

Before Sadie could say anything else, the woman dropped the watering can and power-walked inside, calling over her shoulder the whole time, “Thank you, thank you, thank you, but no!” Afterwards, one by one, the nice Venetian blinds snapped shut.

They left some cans at her doorstep anyway before leaving. It was weird, sure, but hardly unexpected by this point. Back at the theater there was a man who used to work for town hall.

Now he wouldn't stop talking about the Fourth of July parade, how the route would have to account for all the streets that were still underwater. In the passenger seat, Sadie checked her clipboard for their next destination.

"They say it was a hurricane," said Black, starting the truck. It always took a few turns of the key for the engine to catch. "On the radio."

"Well, they'd know, wouldn't they," she said placidly.

He saw it most often while working in the poorer parts of town. He'd set down a few gallon jugs of water and pull his shirt away from his sticky chest and look over and there it would be, off in the water. From this far away it was easy to mistake for a small island. Some days he could see the twinkle of white boats topped with triangular sails skirting some invisible perimeter around it. Some days he couldn't.

It was strange. Even after a week, Black had almost gotten used to it. But the people of Joyous Beach had made do for much longer than that.

Hard to say when exactly it had lurched into sight, at the very edge of where the sea vanished into the horizon. According to Sadie there had never been a singular moment of panic. No town ordinances, no community action, just whispered terror between neighbors and anxious Googling. But a year passed and it never turned towards shore, only drifted a little further northwest, up the panhandle, each day. For a while they even began to believe the news. That it was manmade, a plastic homunculus of unimaginable scale, horrifying in its own right but also comprehensible.

Then the flood came.

At first the authorities had called it a freak storm, winds and rain that blew up out of the

ocean, but this was before the cell phone tower had gone out, which meant everyone had video of the clear skies overhead while the sea ran up and over the beaches like something alive. Now the voices on the radio seemed to be trying out new terminology every day. “Subsurface Current Anomaly” had stuck around for a while, but then they pivoted to “Seismic Ocean Event” and then “Hostile Maritime Sabotage,” which implied that a foreign state had somehow sicced the tide on the people of Joyous Beach like a rabid dog. Most recently they’d adopted a tone so cheerful it bordered on psychotic: authorities, according to the radio, had the “Meteorological Offshore Hiccup” almost completely under control.

Which was a rare example of honesty, however unintentional. From what Black could see, the forces of authority weren’t making things much better--their idea of emergency supplies were truckloads of candy bars, pouches of fruit punch, bags of corn chips dusted with a chemical cheese replacement. They hadn’t brought in electricians or plumbers or carpenters to start fixing the many things that had been broken. But control? They were good at control. The whole town had been quarantined in the name of it. Anyone trying to get out via the interstate had been turned back without explanation. The checkpoints must have come down some time after Black had driven in, trapping him here--with his boring, exhausting deliveries. With Sadie, and all her folksy knowledge. He didn’t know they took tour guides in SPEAR.

Now and then they passed the elementary school. It was on higher ground than almost any other building and he would have guessed it had been mostly untouched by the floodwaters but he couldn’t be sure. The place was a fortress now. Snipers paced the roof, occasionally turning seabirds into sudden puffs of blood and feathers for target practice. So far, according to Sadie, two people had been shot for “stealing” bags of rice from the abandoned grocery store. She was normally an elemental of positivity, bulldozing despair with her constant and

inexhaustible cheer, but she had known the victims. One of them had been in her church; the other had grown up on the same block.

“Idiots think they can solve everything with a bullet,” she said ruefully.

Privately, his own philosophy on the matter was a bit different. Black believed it was always foolish to assume incompetence over plain and simple malice. They gave people trash food because they didn't care if they starved. They shot people over waterlogged rice because they wanted those people dead. If you thought the system was working as designed it all made a lot more sense.

As different as they were, Sadie understood that. At some point or another both of them had grasped the same fundamental truth about the world: if they didn't help each other, no one would.

Black spent all afternoon loading pallets of canned food into the back of a flatbed. A town thirty miles north had been hit nearly as bad during the “Meteorological Offshore Hiccup,” and the megaplex had food to spare, so one man had volunteered to try the backroads, sticking to wilder country to slip by the checkpoints.

Where would he get sent after this, he wondered? Some underprivileged schoolroom? It was a mean thought, but he seemed full of them lately, and frankly he felt entitled to a few. His life changing without his permission like this.

By the end of the work his muscles ached and he wasn't sure he could raise his arms above his head. It took considerable willpower just to raise his cigarette for a draw now and then. He was sitting outside, trying to decipher the mildewed remains of a movie poster--something about dragons?--when they showed up. He heard those heavy boots long before he saw them.

Two men, neither in any uniform he recognized. Dark, with some sort of glossy plating sewn onto the outside. No visible badge, no officer names, no acronym anywhere. One of them was wearing a helmet with an opaque glass visor. The other had a similar helmet cradled under one arm. Both had rifles dangling from straps across their chest.

“Holy shit,” said the helmetless one. “What are you? Albino?”

“Pigment-challenged,” said Black, without humor. He felt his knuckles itch.

“Biggest one I’ve ever seen. You look like Beelzebub’s little brother. Maybe consider wearing friendlier colors. Something with flowers.”

Up close he looked more like a mailman than a classic jackboot thug. Balding along a widow’s peak, a fat and square head. A little nervous, and covering it with jokes. He’d seen their type a hundred times, on the riot lines, in cities on lockdown. Desk jockeys, pushed out into the streets.

From his belt the man drew something boxy and plastic and casually, like a supermarket scanner, and held the device towards him. For a moment Black expected the bright explosion of a taser behind his eyes but all it did was beep. The officer--were they officers?--checked something on the screen.

“You’re clean, Beelzebub. Congratulations.” The mailman gestured at the megaplex, then. “Anyone sick in there?”

“No. No sir.”

He craned his head to look at the double doors behind Black, clearly considering going in anyway. Then the radio at his belt crackled to life. He pulled it with clear annoyance and walked a few feet away, so that Black couldn’t hear much of the conversation. Something about a beach. *Don’t you have anyone else who can do it?*, said the mailman. When he came back over he was

cherry red.

“Well, see you around, Beelzebub. If you start to feel unwell, we’re at the elementary school. Look us up.” He clapped the other man on the shoulder and they turned to walk away.

“Wait,” said Black. “Look who up? What, like, organization? You guys don’t exactly look like cops.”

The mailman raised a hand to wipe his nose and got tangled, for a moment, in the straps of his assault rifle. “National Weather Service. Duh.”

Black never told Sadie about the armed weathermen. He assumed she already knew. Together, they delivered food and water and gas. They carried old people down from attics, from roofs. They served hot meals from the concession stand, lined the aisles and hallways of the megaplex with cots and sleeping bags and improvised piles of blankets and pillows. They reported their progress via biweekly Zoom meetings, to a collage of grainy, masked faces. They also mucked out houses, a task which everyone in their right mind hated.

There were homes in Joyous Beach that would never be livable again. Where the flood had risen too high, mold ate through the walls in gangrenous black patches. Load-bearing columns and foundations swelled with both water and weakness, pregnant with a collapse that might be months or years in coming. Some could be saved, though, and it was these that Black and Sadie focused on.

He didn’t blame anyone for hating the work. Not only was mucking out houses gross, it was dangerous. Under inches of stagnant water waited broken glass and bent nails. It wasn’t uncommon to find loaded guns, abandoned in the storm. Black knew a crustpunk from Jacksonville who said his hand had been taken off at the wrist by a gator napping in a flooded

master bedroom, though it came out later that he'd just lost it to plain old sepsis.

When they pulled up to the Bower house, though, Black was excited. It was a break from the monotony of every other day as delivery man, sure, but there was more to it than just that--he loved the smell of the face masks, for one. Like sweat and old paper, which reminded him of the kind his mom had worn while spray-painting canvas in her garage. The thick gloves and goggles made him feel like he was touching the surface of an alien planet, or salvaging some colossal rotting spaceship. In prison he had bunked for a while with a burglar who had made his living picking through the vacation homes of the rich. They hadn't gotten along much, especially after the burglar joined the Aryan Nation, but there was something in his description of going through those houses that struck a chord with Black. The same exploratory thrill.

The Bower house was three stories of blown-out windows and salt-stripped wood. Black made sure the gas and power lines were disconnected and then they suited up. Each of them-- Black and Sadie and Howard, a handyman pushing sixty who had been fixing things for the theater--donned heavy work-boots along with the rest of the protective gear. When Black managed to shoulder in the door, the first thing he noticed was the smell, even through the face mask. Rot mixed with something else. Bleach, ammonia, he wasn't sure.

"It's a ripe one!" said Howard.

"Smells like a laundromat died in here," said Black.

From this side of the house there wasn't much sunlight filtering in, so they picked their way through the hallway with flashlights, their footsteps squelching in the carpet. It should have felt stifling in there, but there was something pleasant in the smothering heat to Black. They found the source of the smell in the dining room, positioned on the table like the main course in Satan's dinner party.

“It’s a dolphin,” said Sadie, sounding both heartbroken and muffled through her safety equipment. “It must have gotten trapped in the currents.”

Black wiped his sweaty forehead with his baseball cap. He was no expert but he didn’t think dolphins could look like that at any stage of decomposition. Too many teeth, for one, and the bones didn’t look right. Pearly and pale blue and opaque, sweating opalescent beads. This close the smell was almost overpowering. Howard poked it with his push-broom.

“The poor baby. The sweet and poor baby,” said Sadie.

They talked it over in the fresh air. On one hand, none of them had ever seen or heard of an animal like that. But what was the alternative, really? Call in the feds? Tell the Bowers--back at the megaplex, caring for their three-month old--that they had to make their new home somewhere between theater two and the women’s restroom?

Black and Howard were the ones to drag it out onto the sidewalk. Whatever it was started to bubble in the sunlight almost immediately, the points of each “rib” collapsing into itself like melting candles. In minutes it was reduced to a pale, lumpy puddle.

“I’m gonna change my gloves,” said Howard.

It took all morning to drag the bloated furniture out to the curb. Everything was made of old and dark wood, half of it now covered in a layer of fluorescent yellow mold. Black could tell just from the weight how expensive it all was. After the furniture they took to the first floor with push-brooms and flat shovels, emptying the place of mud and silt and muck from where it had pooled in the den, the nursery, the bathroom. With the “dolphin” gone the smell was a little more bearable--just the rotten sea floor, nothing chemical about it. By three they had stopped working except in little bursts. Black’s hair stuck to his face like a bug on a windshield. Howard was puffing on his inhaler.

“It’s too hot,” Sadie said, sitting in the bed of the truck. “We’ll have to come back tomorrow. Early, before the sun turns that place into a double boiler.”

“We haven’t even started on the second floor. Or the basement,” said Black.

“Well, it’s not going anywhere,” said Howard, wheezing only a little.

The longer they waited, though, the further the mold would spread, and the deeper the wood would rot. This was only one house, too. They were hoping to have a dozen mucked out by the end of the month, and Black didn’t want to spend any more time in Joyous Beach than he had to.

Later he would question the impulse to go back inside. Why was he so eager? He would wonder if the effect of the creature, its curious ability to draw in life, was at work here too. He couldn’t explain why else those cramped, dark hallways seemed to cradle him.

“I’m going to poke around a little more,” said Black. “Just see what the situation’s like down there.”

“You gonna be okay in there?” asked Sadie. The concern was evident on her face, and he hated it. “I just heard you were--well, you were dealing with some episodes lately. If you pass out down there--”

“I’ll be fine,” said Black, tightening his cardboard mask.

Howard gave him a thumbs up. “Holler if you see any snakes!”

Even the dim light in the rest of the house stopped short of the basement stairs. By flashlight, Black descended, testing each step carefully before shifting his considerable weight onto it. It was like entering an open mouth--he could feel the damp air rising from below, like something breathing.

Once, this basement had been someone's man-cave. The western wall was covered in four decades of Batman posters, the biggest of them wilting off the walls and dipping its corner into the three inches of water that filled the room. In the corner was a pool table, the grassy green surface now a mosaic of dead fish and rotting seaweed. Built into the far wall was an enormous flatscreen TV which seemed miraculously whole. That ammonia smell was in here, too. He couldn't see any melting dolphins but it reeked of cleaning fluids.

Black stepped into the room, the water so dark and still part of him expected it to hold his weight. Howard's comment about snakes was getting less and less funny. They'd have to get the vacuum pumps in tomorrow.

For that smell there was no obvious source. No corpses in the water or anything like that. But he didn't feel right, exactly. His mother had been a painter, until the migraines made her stop. She said she could feel them coming from far off. Like a magnetic charge building inside her head. Black had never gotten those. At twenty-nine he thought he had dodged that genetic bullet, but now he wasn't so sure. There was a buzzing in his head, like a thousand cicadas looking to get busy.

When something bumped against his leg he jumped a full foot out of the water. It wasn't a snake or a crocodile or a mutant fish, though. It was just a bottle, floating there.

Black leaned down and picked the bobbing shape up. It wasn't a soda bottle. More like something medical, like you'd find in a doctor's office, shaped octagonally and made of a plastic so hard he could make no dent in the sides by squeezing. The lid was off.

I shouldn't be here. The thought came to him out of the blue, fringed with static. As if it was finding its way to him through some interference. He couldn't even pinpoint a reason for it but he knew that something was happening in this room he didn't understand. He was afraid,

really afraid, as if there was something in there with him, something he couldn't see or smell or hear. Something haunting even the drowned bones of this place.

The buzzing in his head was getting worse, too. Black stepped back and nearly tripped on something--a submerged stereo, thumping hollow against his ankle. He got halfway up the stairs before stopping to catch his breath. It felt a little safer in the stairwell, away from all that water. In the narrow cone of his flashlight beam Black could see a label along the side of the bottle. He picked at the corners but it wouldn't come off, even though it had been soaking for who knows how long.

He turned it over in his hand, which was when the next strangeness happened: Black couldn't see what was on the label. It wasn't just that he couldn't read or recognize what he saw, he couldn't see it. He changed his grip and pointed the flashlight directly at the blocky geometric bottle, but to no effect.

It wasn't that he couldn't see it, Black realized, it was that he couldn't look at it. His vision just seemed to slide off whenever he tried. Whatever was on the label, his eyes would not or could not fix on it. He knew it was a color. A color he had never seen before. A color his eyes would not let him see.

It didn't make sense, and this scared him more than anything. More than napping gators inches below floodwater, more than the fascists wandering these streets with assault rifles. It scared him so badly that he didn't notice the buzzing in his head getting louder and louder, or the rest of the world getting farther and farther away.

When he collapsed, his consciousness switched suddenly off like a flipped circuit breaker, Black didn't even have time to scream.

Marta - Chapter 4 - The End of the World

Marta was making breakfast when the phone rang. In her haste to pick up, she bumped the handle of the frying pan, sending it--and the four half-fried eggs inside--clattering across the floor. With one hand she grabbed the pan, immediately burning herself. With the other, somehow, she picked up just before it would have gone to voicemail.

“Hello?” she said, through gritted teeth.

“Congratulations!” Said a ravenously cheerful voice on the other end. “You’ve won--”

She hung up, swore, and cracked four new eggs into the still-hot pan. Every time her phone rang, now, Marta picked up. It was awful. In her life before, when she wasn’t waiting to hear whether her brother was alive or dead, she’d had no real sense of just how many calls she got every day. It wasn’t so many when all you had to do was ignore or deny them. But now she found herself suddenly assailed by telemarketers, volunteers from both sides of the city council race, robots threatening to suspend her non-existent credit cards, callers speaking Chinese who sounded just as confused as she was. They were endless--seemed, in fact, to come with even greater frequency the more she picked up--and yet none of them had told her a goddamn thing about her brother. Nobody had, including her own father.

When he’d finally woken up, Marta paid a cab to take them home. He was better than he looked. That was what the nurse had said, and what a relief, because he did not look good. His head kept drooping down and bumping the laminated license display. Beats of sweat stood out on his forehead. They’d given her the clothes he’d been wearing in a plastic trash bag; they were still damp, so he was wearing his hospital blues.

The driver kept looking back nervously in the rearview. “Is that guy okay? Is he like,

contagious?”

“He’ll be fine,” said Marta, sounding more sure than she felt. The driver turned up the radio and said nothing for the rest of the drive.

She remembered how he’d been when she came back, over Christmas break; he’d pulled a massive cobia from the hold of the *Ghost* and butchered it in front of her, spattering the countertops, cabinets and tiles with blood. Adrien had watched from the side, elbowing her. *Do they teach you this in Iowa, hm? Any classes on the subject?* It was Ohio. Idiot.

It was hard to reconcile that memory with the man in bed, the same one who had once gone python hunting with a hundred-degree fever. The one who ate raw lemons because he believed the vitamin C, and the burning, would help him shake a nasty case of strep throat. He was diminished in a way that she would have called impossible once. Curled into a cocoon of blankets. His skin, when she touched it, felt heavy and warm, like heated iron. The first day he’d asked about Adrien every few hours; again and again, she’d had to explain to him that his son, her brother, was still missing. Now, at least, his short-term memory was coming back.

Marta set the plate of eggs next to his pillow. He rolled away from it, squeezing his eyes shut as if he couldn’t bear the sight of them.

“Don’t make me pour these in an IV,” she said. “Eat.”

“I’ll eat when I damn well please,” mumbled Victor, about as fiercely as you could from inside a pillow. When he pleased, so far, had been never. He hadn’t had much more to eat than broth since he’d gotten back to the house--but he was conscious. That, she guessed, was improvement.

“Are you ready to talk about what happened yet?”

“I told you I don’t know what happened.”

“You said there was a bright flash, and then?”

“And then nothing. And then some bastard on a dolphin-watching boat was giving me CPR.”

He'd been nearly unconscious, bobbing in the sea, clinging to a life preserver, when someone on board the *Porpoise Peeper* spotted him. They said he'd been in the water for hours. The captain of the *Porpoise Peeper* had dragged him aboard, laying him between a mortified Ohioan with a beehive hairdo and a sloshed lawyer on holiday, the only person who seemed to be enjoying the exciting turn their tour had taken. By the time the paramedics had arrived, everyone else was asking for their money back.

“Maybe you got caught in a storm. Try to remember.”

“You don't think I've been trying?” he said, gritting his teeth. Spending what little energy he could drum up on getting mad.

“Try harder.”

“There was no storm! None, dammit. Just fog. That's all. Now would you just--would you let me get a little rest?”

“It's morning, Dad. You slept all night.”

“Just a little more,” he said. “I'm your father. Do what I say.”

She knew that she shouldn't be mad at him. Not when he was so sick, at least. But lots of things shouldn't have happened; lots of things weren't as they should be. Marta's frustration at the irritable, incorrigible bastard would have to be one of them.

Shutting the door behind her, Marta paused. Across the hall was Adrien's room. She knew what she would find in there. Weights, hair gel, a massive tower computer that lit up like a Decepticon. That, and a hole shaped like her stupid, idiot brother. She kept on, into the kitchen.

Marta was making coffee when the doorbell rang. More of a buzzing wasp noise, really, and that was on a good day. Today she could feel it in her marrow; it seemed to reverberate at the exact frequency of her buzzing phone. She was halfway to the door when it rang again.

“Jesus, I’m *coming!*” she snarled.

She pulled open the door as savagely as she could manage, intending to bite the mailman or Jehovah’s Witness on the other side. Instead, she found something she hadn’t expected: a friendly face.

Ezekiel Wolfson, should he ever lose his position with the city’s maritime police, could have made a decent living as an animatronic pirate. He had a broad, snarled beard run through with gray, a lazy eye he liked to cover with a patch, and a set of teeth that would have been at home in the eighteenth century. Today, in this century, Ezekiel was carrying a carrot cake. “This a bad time?”

Marta shook her head, then reconsidered. “Well, actually, yeah. But you can come in.”

They sat at their narrow dining room table. Marta poured coffee while Ezekial dropped the foil-wrapped loaf between a few unwashed dishes. Whether you were straight or crooked, nobody fished for as long as her family without running across the local water cops once or twice. While Victor called the organization at large *the meter-maids of the sea* he considered Ezekiel an exception. The *Ghost*, like half the other ships in the city’s fishing fleet, violated about a dozen ordinances and regulations every time it sailed out of the harbor. Ezekiel, more often than not, found a way to overlook those. He hadn’t quite become a family friend--her family didn’t have those--but he was probably the closest thing.

“Old man still laid up?” he asked, blowing on the cup in his weathered hands with surprising daintiness.

“He was in the water for a long time. They said it will be a while before he’s back all the way.”

“Ah, kid--your pappy is tougher than fresh leather. And the sea is in your blood. Hard to believe it could hurt you in any permanent fashion.”

“I guess so,” said Marta.

He was doing the best he could to sell that cheer. The daylight filtering into the kitchen was lending him a hand as well, but none of it mattered. None of it could hide the truth for long. In every suggestion that things were okay--Ezekiel’s tone, the sunny day, the warm coffee--she could only see things waiting to fall apart.

“How’s school?” said Ezekiel, somewhere in the gap where she was supposed to speak.

“Terrible.”

“Come on, Marta.”

“I’m serious. I’ve never met kids this dumb. The first week of class someone blew up his microwave trying to cook a potato in foil. Nobody knows how to do their own laundry.”

He waved his hand. “Fuck the other kids. That’s not what you’re there for.”

“So what am I there for?”

“Your dad wanted you to have a shot at doing something else. Christ, you’ve got the brains for it. He wanted to give you a choice. Not like he ever had one.”

She screwed up her mouth. It might have looked like a smile, but it didn’t feel like one. Funny way to give somebody a choice; leave them home, kick them off the boat, order them to get an internship. That stirred funny feelings in her chest. Only a day ago that bitterness would have been hot and fresh. Now it seemed pale, cooled, just a faint acidic aftertaste.

“Listen, Marta,” said Ezekiel, then hesitated. Eager to get off the subject, wary of the next

one. “I didn’t just come to bring you cake or check on your old man. I wish I had. Really I do.”

Marta didn’t say anything. Just sucked in her breath, like she was preparing for a gut punch. Bloating body, washed ashore. Poked with sticks by local children. Already half-eaten by crabs. Marta practised holding her eyes, her cheeks, her mouth very still.

“They’re calling off the search.”

Not a gut punch--a sidewinder, which knocked stars into her vision from an angle she hadn’t expected. They were giving up. “Why,” was all she could think to say at first. Then, “It’s only been two days!”

“I know,” he said. Patting his own knee, as if he wanted to comfort her but was afraid to reach across the table. Probably a smart move, with how hard Marta’s nails were digging into her own hands.

“Why?” asked Marta again.

“Can’t rightly say,” said Ezekiel. “The way I heard it, the order came from somewhere further up the chain. They’re calling it a waste of resources. Lost cause. I’m telling you as a personal courtesy, you understand.”

She could hardly believe it. “Oh, so they’ve tried *nothing* and it didn’t work? It must be hopeless! Really, totally hopeless!”

Ezekiel only folded his hands in front of him. He knew she was right.

“Okay,” she said, nodding. “Okay, fuck the Coast Guard. You’ll still be looking, right? Because he’s still out there somewhere.”

“Marta,” said Ezekiel gently. “You know we don’t have the manpower for that. We can’t.”

“You can.”

“A search of that magnitude--and out of our jurisdiction, too.”

“Your jurisdiction? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“The *Ghost* was hours south when it capsized. It’d take us the better part of the day just to get down there.”

South. He had never told her, Marta realized, where he and Adrien had been going all this time. Where their secret spot was. The last twenty-four hours of her life had been so filled with questions, big, gaping maws of questions, questions that might *never* get answered. She deserved at least one answer. One tiny mystery solved. “Where?”

For some reason, she noticed a fresh wave of hesitation behind those ruined teeth.

“Please,” she said.

“Happy Beach,” he said finally. “Joy Beach. Can’t say I remember, exactly, but something along those lines.”

“Maybe they can help. The local water cops. Maybe--maybe you can put in a good word.”

The look on his face told her what to expect, there. “I’ll do my best. But from what I hear, they’ve got a few problems of their own.” Ezekiel started to stand up. “I should get going. First shift starts in thirty minutes. I’m going to look in on the old man before I leave.”

What Ezekiel said haunted her. An order, from some distant authority. Someone who had never met her brother, who’d never seen his stupid, unearned swagger. Was it maliciousness or ordinary, vanilla incompetence? Did someone see *Gonzales* printed on a form somewhere and decided to leave the latino to die, or had the form gotten lost, used as a napkin and discarded before it could cross the desk of anyone who mattered? She guessed she’d never know.

One thing was certain. Now, nobody was looking for her brother. Nobody but her.

Nobody was looking for him. Nobody except her. That was tricky without a boat, though.

Before she could get any further along that train of thought, Ezekiel reemerged. “Put that cake in the fridge and it’ll last a fortnight. I’ll have the wife bring by some groceries a bit later. It’s gonna be all right, kid. Hell, your old man’s better already.”

“Is he awake?” said Marta.

“Naw. But he’s humming in his sleep. What sort of sick man does that?”

As she closed the front door behind him, Marta paused. For a second, if she listened closely, she really did think she could hear something--a quiet, toneless, low song. It might even conceivably be coming from her father’s room, and not a neighbor’s. But then it was gone, and she decided that she had imagined her. Her and Ezekiel both.

No Joy Beach, no Happy Beach to the south. A quick Google search showed her that, but there was one name that she thought might fit the bill: Joyous Beach. A few hour’s drive, and a lot of weekenders with property down there. Not much else of interest, save for a recent flooding. Was her father raiding fancy koi ponds down there?

Marta pulled up a picture: curling blue waves, the sand almost white. Little rows of pastel houses along the beachfront. It looked familiar, like a postcard she had seen once. Or.

She paged through a few more results, stopping at one. It was lower quality than the others, posted to social media rather than some tourism page. A shot of the ocean: the sky a solid wall of gray, the water a churning expanse of white, frozen in still image. In the distance, at the line of the horizon, she could see something. A shape.

She checked the timestamp on the posted photo. Just one month ago. From the angle of the photograph it was easy to mistake the scale. To think it was something else. If you ignored

the size of the waves, its nearness to the horizon line, you might mistake it for a swimmer, straightening in the surf. It wasn't a swimmer, though, and it wasn't a tanker. It wasn't a boat of any kind.

It was the End of the World.

That's what her mother called it, Marta remembered. It had emerged, or been first noticed, around the same time as her cancer diagnosis. Back then the networks had played footage of it constantly, taken from helicopters with telescopic lens, careful to keep their distance after what had happened that first day. It seemed like some sweaty, white-toothed man was always pointing at photos of it, or gesturing emphatically at maps of the Atlantic and the Eastern seaboard. It was hard to imagine everyone had treated it so seriously back then. Now news segments on it were regularly interrupted by upsets in the local dog show, or psychoanalysis of a presidential candidate's choice of tie.

It had all seemed like such a big deal, but Marta hadn't paid it much attention, even then. She was too young to really follow any of it. And besides, her thoughts were occupied with other things.

The End of the World. It had been a joke. Everyone, for a minute, was acting like it was the apocalypse. For her, though, and for Marta, and Adrien, and Victor, it was. Years passed. So did Ana Gonzales. Eventually, everyone moved on. It turned out that even with the End of the World over your shoulder you still had to go to school, to work, to bed. You still had to wash your dishes and go grocery shopping. It didn't stop. Things never got better. But sooner or later you got used to it. Or at least Marta did.

In the backyard, she scraped her father's eggs into the trash can, untouched. Not far off, hopping through the tangle of overgrown grass and weeds, a little brown bird poked around in

the dirt hunting for bugs. Five feet or so away Batman moved towards it in a slow-motion prow, his gray shoulders raising and lowering in still, silent isolation. Every so often the bird would look up, look right at the cat, in fact, its paws curling up from the ground, then extending forward in a fluid, continuous crawl--before looking back down at the dirt. It couldn't *see* the tabby--not really, not for what it was. Soon it would be too late.

“Hey!” shouted Marta, waving her arms, flicking egg stuff at the delicate little creature. “HEY!” With a panicked flutter, the bird took off into the sky. Batman looked back at her, annoyed.

Black - Chapter 5 - Observer

His cell hadn't had a name. None of them did, in SPEAR--in the Silenced Peoples' Extralegal Action Reserve. It was better that way. Harder for police to track them down, to beat the answers out of street punks who had heard a story or two. Their crimes? There were plenty--feeding people who couldn't feed themselves, for one. That was *encouraging vagrancy*, according to charges filed against several members. There were doctors on their staff, men and women who would treat and vaccinate people who couldn't afford it otherwise, most often refugees from the island. *Crackpot Scientists Shoot Up Strangers with Mystery Drugs!!!* went the headlines. Black supposed there were the street brawls, too, his area of expertise, but law enforcement had been studiously ignoring all but the worst predations of the Red Bands for years, so somebody had to step in. He'd never managed to feel guilty about kicking in some neo-fascist molars.

When they reassigned him to Joyous Beach, he'd fought and kicked and threw a fit. He was still hard, he was still a soldier, he told them. He had to be. He didn't know anything else to be. All he managed to stir up was some piteous remarks--he was a good comrade, he'd done his service, etc. Now go lift some pallets. Go do some community service.

His fighting days were done, they told him. The worst part was, he knew they were right.

In his four years with the cell Black had bricked dozens of windows. He'd started riots. He'd stolen FBI files, in one bit of stupendous luck. He'd stood, arm in arm with others like him, separating a body of protestors and a pack of cops eager to make them bleed. It wasn't any of those crimes that got him locked up. What got him locked up was going eleven miles over the

speed limit, visiting his grandmother in Dallas.

He hadn't even noticed he was speeding when he saw the red and blue lights come on behind him. As he pulled over to the side of the road, Black mentally inventoried the contents of his car, trying to think of anything that might get him in trouble. The wire cutters in his trunk were not technically illegal, even if he'd used them almost exclusively for trespassing. The sock of quarters with which he'd knocked in a neo-nazi's teeth the other day might conceivably just be for parking meters.

He'd tried to smile when he rolled down his window. That smile stayed plastered on, a bad paste job, when the cop had told him to please step out of the vehicle.

"Officer, allow me to tell you how genuinely sorry I am, you see I didn't realize that I was going over the speed limit on account of how my grandmother is sick, at the hospital right now actually, and--"

"No sudden moves, buddy, you got that? *You* don't move unless *I* say you move. God damn, you're a big one, huh?"

Now that Black had stepped out into the full revelatory power of the Houston noontime sun, the officer had gotten a good look at his huge frame and pink eyes, his hair almost completely devoid of pigment, and had fixed him with a look that was very familiar. It was the same look that earned him his first nickname, "Bat Boy," the same one that had once led a pack of Jehovah's Witnesses into silent retreat from his doorstep. It was almost involuntary, he knew. Hard to take personal, after all this time, the same primeval reaction that had guided his very own ancestors to spear bears or stomp on snakes. It was one thing when the lizard brain took over in his barista or his bartender, though, whose most accessible weapon was a milk steamer or a bottle of Stoli. When it was a cop, things got dangerous.

So Black raised his hands--those big, heavy hands--in a gesture of surrender. The cop, of course, saw him doing something very different.

In the end he was lucky. The bullet passed through his left shoulder, just under the collarbone, tunneling through nothing but meat. His physical rehabilitation, all conducted behind the charcoal gray walls of Eastham prison, took only three months.

Being shot. That was the only experience he could relate it to, the only time in his life Black had felt anything similar to what had happened to him in the Bower house, and even that wasn't quite right. But waking up from it had felt the same: like he'd been buried alive in black jello. Like he was surfacing from a viscous and dark sea.

He woke in some kind of cavern. The first thing he saw, when he could see again, was a headless soldier. He was covered in lime-green armor and hefted a gun that looked like several smaller, lesser guns had been smashed together. Next to him, in blocky, death-metal font, the words BE THE HERO floated above a volcanofied cityscape, and where his face should have been was a perfect open circle. It took Black a second to realize he was made out of cardboard.

That was right. Sadie had found a stack of promotional displays stashed in some second floor closet, safe from the floodwaters, and had propped them up around the megaplex in the name of morale. So he was in the megaplex.

One by one his senses returned to him. As the cavern came into focus he saw rows of leather seats. He could smell the caked-on sweetness of ancient soda spills and the sweat coming off his own body, along with a foreign and stranger scent. Something swelled and ebbed just below his solar plexus. A small tide inside him.

Black pushed himself into a sitting position on the cot and all at once that small tide was pushing up and out of him in a rush of liquid, clear but shot through with little dark flecks that

stuck to whatever it washed over--his cot, the carpet, the blankets he had kicked off in some unconscious fevered thrashing. It even doused his socks, and the smell that rose from it was exactly what his sick-scrambled brain would have thought: brine. It smelled like ocean water, cut with a reeking aftertaste of cleaning products.

That was all the time he had, before the darkness swallowed him up again.

From that point on the spaces between waking and dreaming grew less clear. Black was thrashing against the cot, every muscle hot and coiled like molten copper. Then he was in his uncle's house, playing Nintendo and listening to the goats bicker outside over the last patch of edible grass in Hext, Texas. It had been fifteen years since his mom had sent him to live in that desert corner of the state while she "got her life together" but he could feel the struggling breeze of the box fan in the window like he was really there.

There were other dreams, if that's what they were. Dreams of a bone-colored landscape, a cavern so vast the vaulted roof became a kind of starless night overhead. In some he could hear a song, deep and rhythmless, but so beautiful it brought him to tears. In others he was back in his mother's garage, looking at her latest painting, the one she was so frustrated with--the blues weren't the right blue, the greens no longer pumping vitality into the foreground as they were meant to. In others still he was a dog, paddling through water choked with pale blue algae, hoping only to reach the other side.

He was on an island. It was absent any trees, the landscape a strange texture, like unfired clay, and on the ridges that rose in the distance Black couldn't make out any trees. He knew this place wasn't dead, though. Somehow he could feel the pulse of life thrumming beneath him.

Hear, like a second wind, the rush of blood through unimaginable veins. Above him the gulls swirled like trash in the wind, before a huge bird with strange and leathery wings dived from some higher blue plane, scattering them, catching only air.

Then he was in a clean white room, looking at a man as thin and purposeful as a scarecrow. His moth-gray eyes were enormous, like they belonged to some cave creature, and as they turned and fixed on Black he knew that, somehow, he had been revealed. He tried to step backwards and out of the clean white room, and found himself dropping instead into water. He fell down and down, until the light could no longer find him.

He was under the ocean, in that great darkness. Then, for a long time, he was nothing.

The next time he surfaced it was to the sound of birds. They were calling in long, querying tones. He almost thought he could hear the question marks: *Where am I? Where am I?*

He was, as far as he could tell, in the backseat of someone's car. His truck, he realized after a moment. The windows were down and they didn't seem to be moving. Black tried to unbend his legs and kicked the door instead. He wasn't wearing any shoes and he didn't seem to be thinking very clearly.

Once he sat up Black could see that they were stopped at a gas station somewhere outside of town. Along the side of the road the black reeds grew taller than he'd seen them anywhere else and some kind of cypress tree drooped with quiet, green menace. The lights in the gas station were off but the front door was open and he could see someone moving around inside. He couldn't shake the fact that there was some obvious answer for it all, where they were, why they were no longer at the theater, and he just couldn't remember. Had they been making a delivery? And why had he been lying down?

Then he thought of the basement, the plastic bottle. He remembered that he was sick. But that only explained some of it.

The door to the gas station opened and there was the merry tinkle of broken glass coming dislodged. It was Sadie, carrying several bottles of water and an enormous plastic bucket of peanuts. “You’re awake! Drink some water. They won’t need it--whole store’s probably gonna be replaced when all this is over.

He accepted a bottle from her and drained half in one pull. “Thank you.”

“And how are you feeling, mister?”

“Can’t think of the word,” Black said. Which he guessed said enough. “Where are we?”

“Route twelve. If you’re done getting your beauty sleep, feel free to ride up front with the old lady.”

“I guess I mean why. Why are we out here? What about the theater?”

She only waved her hand. “They got plenty of babysitters back there. But the theater’s not safe for you anymore. There are people who want to talk with you. And I’m not so sure you want to talk with them.”

Black’s head still felt like a stranger’s, his thoughts coming to him as if through a screen door, but he recognized the description she gave him of bored men in black tactical gear. The mailmen--no, the weathermen. They had come sniffing around the theater, brandishing guns and a handheld device that beeped and lit up green every time they pointed it at someone. Against her protestations the men searched the concession stand, the theaters, and even the staff break room, but they’d missed the projection room, where he’d been sleeping.

The men from the “shelter” up at the elementary school. She’d kept him out of prison, then. Black wanted to tell her how thankful he was but nothing seemed sufficient. She seemed to

hear it in his silence anyway, because she said, “You were sick--still are. You needed help. That’s as complicated as it needs to be.”

He guessed it wasn’t all that different from what she’d already been doing. “I thought they had the roads all blocked off.”

“All the major ones, sure. But I grew up here. I know the backroads, the ones they don’t know to close. We’ll get through.” She started the car again. “Now if you get a powerful urge to throw up again, please try and stick your head out the window.”

That’s when Black noticed the smell in the car: ammonia and sea water. Salt and chemicals. “Oh god. Is that me?”

A grim look came and went across her face, before her gapped smile was back in place. “It is *not* pretty, I’ll say that.” Even Black, in his addled state, couldn’t miss the false cheer.

They started driving again, Black in the front seat this time, watching all the foreign green whip by. Sadie was saying something about the air, something about how much cleaner it was out here than in Joyous Beach, even before the flood kicked up lord knows what. Black couldn’t really hear her over the sound of the cicadas filtering in through the windows. It seemed a bit early in the day for a racket like this. Didn’t they normally do this at dusk? He mentioned it to Sadie and she gave him a funny look.

“I don’t hear any cicadas,” she said. Suddenly there was loud popping, and they started to slide, the car drifting in a sick lurch off the road, as sick as him. The back end of the truck hit something and every window exploded in showers of cubed glass.

When they stopped spinning, Black was astounded to find himself alive.

Next to him Sadie’s eyes were wide open; she was frozen there, and it was a long and horrible moment before Black could see the steady rise and fall of her chest. She was alive. They

both were. He couldn't get his door open, though. It seemed to have jammed somehow in the crash.

"Sadie," he said. "Can you open your door? Can you reach your handle?" All the windows on her side were shattered. If it came to it, they could crawl out on that side. He could see smoke curling up from under the hood. This truck definitely struck him as old enough to be the exploding type.

There was a quiet tapping, then, against his window. He looked over. The weatherman was standing there on the other side, waving. "Y'all get into an accident?"

He heard the sound of Sadie's door opening, but when he looked over, he could see she hadn't made any progress. Another weatherman--the same buddy from before or another faceless helmet, he couldn't tell--was leaning over with a knife. Before Black could scream or fight, he cut her seatbelt loose and jabbed once at her airbag, deflating it.

"We can give you a ride to the nearest town if you'd like," went on the weatherman from before. "Cute little town. Right by the beach."

Next to him, Sadie seemed to have finally recovered, and was now swatting at the man trying to pull her from the car. "Get! Your! Hands! Off of me!"

"Hey! Hey, hold on!" Black leaned his shoulder against his own door; at his weight, it popped open, spilling him out onto the asphalt.

"Woah there, Beelzebub," said the weatherman, leaning down and clamping one hand over his shoulder. "Careful there. Don't want you getting hurt."

Out here he could see a thin strip of spikes along the road. Black didn't know why they'd gone through all this trouble for him, but he could picture what was about to happen in perfect detail. It had all happened to him before, after all; maybe they would even shoot him one more

time, just to complete the cycle. And Sadie. What would happen to Sadie?

“Hey,” said Black, stumbling to his feet. “You guys wanted to talk, right? That’s what she said. So let’s talk.”

Across the truck, Sadie’s angry shouting grew muffled, as if something had been placed over her mouth.

“We can talk where we’re going. We’ll have plenty of time to talk.”

“Leave her alone and I’ll go with you. How’s that sound?”

The weatherman sighed. His sense of humor about the whole situation seemed to be fading fast. He looked bored, and mildly frustrated, like he was staring at a vending machine that had eaten his dollar. “You’re going with us regardless. You’re sick. You need help. For all we know, so is she--”

Black threw up on his boots. It had only been partially intentional, but there it was again: that awful metallic taste, the ammoniac smell. The clear, speckled liquid, now all over the weatherman’s boots.

“Jesus Christ!” He took a step back, kicking at some of the thin slime.

On his belt, the boxy device--the one he had used before--started beeping wildly. The weatherman looked between his soiled boots and Black, who was still bent over, hands on his knees.

“Plenty more where that came from,” said Black.

It only took a moment longer for the weatherman to decide. “Let her go,” he shouted across the car. “She can find her own way back. You,” he said, pointing at Black. “Keep that shit out of the car. God in heaven. You’d think we were dragging you to the damn chopping block. Don’t you people want to get *better*?”

He only got one more look at Sadie before he left with the weatherman--his last look at her. She was standing in the middle of the road, her mumu bunched up around her knees, his smashed truck leaking fumes into all that good air. She was screaming something, although Black couldn't hear what through the thick glass of their vehicle. As they wove around the spike strip, almost invisible against the blacktop, she brandished her middle finger proudly. Then they turned a corner, and she was gone.

Soon enough they were back in town, driving through streets still scattered with debris. Branches, fence posts, a stop sign, all of which the heavy tires seemed to roll over with no problem. Black wondered if the helmeted soldier, the one now driving, was the same as the one he had seen before. Neither of them talked.

The only sound in the car, apart from the electric crinkle of their radios, came from the device at the weatherman's belt. Every two seconds it chirped and briefly flashed a small orange light, the color of traffic and danger. From this close Black could make out lettering along the front, molded into the plastic: OBSERVER, it said.

"Can you make that stop?" said Black.

"If you hadn't lost your lunch on my boots we wouldn't have this problem," said the weatherman.

As they drew nearer they passed through armed guards and barbed wire fences and security cameras with red, glowing beauty marks. Along the roof of the building Black could make out men with rifles, pacing like dogs behind a fence, and out the window of the car he saw one guy pass by with an honest-to-god rocket launcher. All things he was fairly sure the elementary school didn't already have. What were they preparing to fight off, the rising sea? The

people they were supposed to be delivering emergency-Twinkies to?

Or the other thing, out in the water. Strange that it had taken so long to occur to him. But Black didn't think sniper rounds were going to do much there.

Another thought, much too late now: that perhaps they weren't worried about people getting in as much as people getting out. Even held up against Sadie's rumors, it didn't look much like a shelter. The perimeter--because that's surely what it was--reminded him more of Eastham than kindergarten.

His first steps out of the car felt appropriately child-like, though. Whether it was the shock from the crash or his lingering illness, his knees didn't feel stable. When he wobbled towards the weatherman, threatening collapse, the smaller man braced himself with a look of utter terror.

While men in hazmat suits sprayed them down with foul-smelling water, Black saw something else that surprised him: tents, huge and white and extending out behind the school building itself. Under them, he could just make out the aimless motion and noise of a crowd. If he didn't know better he would have called it a farmer's market.

"I thought people were sleeping in classrooms," he said, once he could safely open his mouth again.

"God no. Do you know how many refugees are here? Even after the evacuations? The building is for administration, and for--" He paused for just a moment. "For the sick. Lucky you."

"Lucky me," said Black. He could see kids at the outer edges of the tent, chasing each other in some indecipherable game. "I bet it gets hot out here in the sun."

"Leave the forecasts to us."

The weatherman led him inside, through a metal detector. Despite everything that had happened the halls still reeked of children, the same smell from his own school days in Houston: square pizza slices and borax. They passed construction paper finger painting displays and men in black tactical gear and reminders not to bite or scratch your teachers and doctors in white coats and sterile yellow gloves. One room--the teacher's lounge, judging from the lettering on the door--was now filled with computer screens, terminals, and for one instant, a blaring red klaxon, which would have made Black jump if he had any energy left. As it was it took everything in him just to put one foot in front of the other.

Eventually they came to what Black's brain processed as a dead end. It wasn't that he could see a wall, but he couldn't see a door, even as the weatherman put his hand on the doorknob and pushed it open. It was like the man had just reached over and opened a rift in the world, a hole in reality.

But that wasn't right either. Black stood there, still feverish, swaying slightly and trying to concentrate. To look at the door the way he had seen his mother look at paintings, the way she could be absorbed in them for minutes at a time, seeing something his child brain couldn't. They were always looking at the same paint, the same abstract lines and shapes, but in her head they made up a complex, concrete whole. To him they were just noise.

When he realized what was happening, the taste of saltwater and ammonia rose up in the back of his throat, threatening to spill out all over the waxed tile floor, but he managed to swallow. His eyes were working fine. The door was right there, right in front of him. His brain was the problem. It couldn't turn this raw data, that color, those lines, into a concrete whole.

Whatever had happened in the basement of the Bower house was happening here, too.

“What,” said Black. “The fuck. What in the high, holy, almighty fuck.”

“Oh. Right,” said the weatherman. “The door. Just put one step in front of the other, Beelzebub. Right foot, left foot.”

For a moment he didn't think he could do it. To step through that gap would be like stepping out an airplane. He could see a hallway on the other side, the alphabet strung up along the walls in golden letters, but that didn't matter because it was on the other side of a door his brain could not process as existing.

“Let's get this over with,” said the weatherman, already impatient. “Or don't you want to get better?”

In the end what he followed wasn't the weatherman's face and it wasn't the checkerboard tiles underfoot. In the end, he closed his eyes, following only the chirp of the device on the other man's belt. The little orange eye, winking on and off in his mind. Observer.

Chapter 6 - It is Coming

Currently, the Offshore entity is at latitude **xx.xxxx**, longitude **xx.xxxx**. It is moving at .2 m/s, roughly the speed of a drifting iceberg. Projections of landing point have been narrowed to **xxx** locations. No deviations in speed or direction since Antillia.

Marta - Chapter 7 - Beachhead

The Flask was a wholly different character in the morning than it was in the more traditional drinking hours. In the afternoon and evening, you could find people from most walks of life inside; day laborers in paint-streaked jeans, lifeguards tracking in sand, depressed salarymen from one of the office buildings downtown, even a meandering tourist here and there who had heard about the neighborhood's most special, secret dive.

In the early hours, it catered to exactly two kinds of clientele--fishermen back from overnights, and dock workers drinking down breakfast before their shifts could start. It was the latter crowd Marta was looking for, that day.

She found Milosh near the back of the bar, past the stevedores, with their heavy gloves hanging out of their back pockets. He was seated across from a gaunt stranger, who was swaying slightly, like the whole bar might suddenly tip and spill him into the ocean. Still drunk, Marta guessed, from the night before, and delaying his hangover as long as he could humanly manage.

Milosh, on the other hand, was leaning back in his chair, smiling genially while the gaunt men gestured enthusiastically about something. He kept himself awfully clean for a kid who grew up on the docks. Clean shaven, neat nails, on hands that should have been more calloused than they were. His eyebrows were so trim and delicate he had the look of a pharaoh, or a model. A black, fossilized circle of bone sat in the lobe of each ear. His clothes weren't flashy or colorful but they fit him in that exact way that only really expensive clothing did. Marta still remembered him as a surly teenager, draped in his older brother's hand-me-downs. Milosh Kalfar had moved up in the world.

She couldn't make out what the man was saying, other than that it seemed best

emphasized with the occasional pounding of fist on table. Over at the bar, several of the dock men cracked eggs into their pints of beer and started to chug.

Marta waited, balancing on a pair of unfamiliar heels, smoothing down her skirt, tugging at the collar of a blouse. She was sweating already in the cloistering polyester. It wasn't until another round of gesturing that she noticed the red cloth knotted around the stranger's wrist.

He banged twice more on the table and tried for a third. His hand didn't make it all the way down, though, because Marta caught it.

"You seem like you've had enough for the week. Want me to call you a cab?" she said. He tried to pull his hand away and she tightened her grip. A year of writing essays and almost nodding off in lecture halls hadn't been enough to erase a whole adolescence of "volunteered family labor," and this guy seemed like he didn't do anything more strenuous than type angrily at women on the internet. She was stronger, and sober.

"Bitch," he said, slurring slightly.

Now it was Milosh's turn to slap the table, suddenly and with violence. "Friend, I think the lady is right. I'm gonna need you to walk yourself out of here."

The stranger took a minute to shake off his surprise. "You can't be serious."

"Can you manage that? Or do you need some help?"

The rest of the bar had gone quiet. The gaunt man twisted in his seat; all the stevedores had set down their drinks and were looking at him. Not with any particular menace--just a calm that implied all sorts of not-calm things which might follow. Jeff, the bartender, fiddled with one of the taps, pretending obliviousness.

The gaunt man got out of his seat. She thought she could see all the slurs he wanted to call her percolating behind his watery blue eyes, but he settled on one that surprised her.

“I didn’t figure you for driftwood, but I can see it now.”

“I’m Mexican. If you’re gonna be racist, at least get it right, you dipshit.”

“Whatever.” He turned back to Milosh. “One week, Kalfar. Come out and see the movement.” He rubbed the wrist Marta had grabbed, shot her one more look she guessed was supposed to be withering, and walked out the door. A moment later, small talk filtered back into the room.

“Marta,” said Milosh, his easy composure back in place. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say higher education has finally made a proper woman out of you. You look different. Is that *makeup* I see?”

“Milosh.”

“Not that I’m complaining. It’s only that, conventional wisdom had it that you were never very interested in attracting boys.”

“Don’t make me march you out like your friend. What the fuck are you even doing, talking to one of those chatroom Nazis?”

He shrugged. “I was merely enjoying my morning in the same manner I always do. It was him who did most of the talking.”

“What did he want?”

“The Red Bands are planning some sort of rally.”

“Here?”

“Here.”

“And I thought the normal tourists were bad. Why?”

“An anniversary. One that’s very special to them.”

Marta tried to think what the internet fascists might be so keen on celebrating, but she

didn't spare much time on the effort. "I'm drawing a blank here."

"The end of Antillia," he said, pitching his voice for maximum mocking drama.

"Jesus. Who lets them celebrate something like that?"

"It's a free country, Marta."

"And they're talking to you because?"

Milosh spread his hands. "Because he was very drunk? Because I have such an inviting and open energy? People talk to me, Marta. You know that."

She did. She knew, too, what kind of people tended to talk to Milosh.

He wasn't a smuggler--or, at least, that wasn't *all* he was. But so many things came in and out of the docks every day, and Milosh had so many friends packing and unpacking those shipping containers. Over the last few years, if the rumors were true, that circle of friends had grown to encompass members of the harbormaster's office, the local police, even the Coast Guard. As she'd heard it, he had acquired the reputation of a man who could get you whatever you might need, or tell you whatever you might need to know.

Marta knew him better as the upperclassman you could buy coke from. But that had been many years ago; now you could buy all sorts of drugs from Milosh Kalfar.

"I'm sorry to hear about the misfortunes in your family, by the way. I didn't know your brother very well, but he seemed like a good kid."

Something curled up in Marta's throat. She swallowed hard against it. Now was not the time to fall to pieces. She'd come here for a reason. Maybe Milosh meant it--maybe he really was sorry--but that didn't mean she wanted to cry in front of him. "Yeah. Well. The thing is, nobody found his body."

"Is that right?"

“It is. In fact, I don’t think they’re even looking. Isn’t that funny?”

“Funny. Well, you know, it’s a hard job. There’s a lot of ocean out there.”

“Sure. And a lot of boats, too. With a lot of people on those boats. With ears on all the people.”

“I can see you’re driving at something here.”

Marta forced herself to exhale. Cards on the table. “The last thing my father remembers before waking up in the hospital is a bright flash. Nobody--not him, not the internet, not the Coast Guard--will tell me what that could be. But maybe they’ll tell you.”

Milosh smiled, like she’d just told him a joke. “And here I thought you were visiting me for old time’s sake. Or old habits. But all you’re after here is my friendly reputation.”

“Just ask around. See if anyone knows anything,” she said. Then, tacking on, “Please.”

“A bright flash. No chance that would be regular old lightning, then?”

“No storms that day. I already checked.”

“Stranger things have happened at sea, you know. St. Elmo’s fire and all that. It’s just a spooky place, when you think about it. All those miles of dark underneath you. No thanks. I much prefer to keep my feet on dry land.”

“Will you help me?” said Marta, again. Trying to keep any inflection at all out of her voice. “Just tell me. Yes or no. I’m going to be late for work.”

Milosh raised his hands in surrender. “On account of our history, and of my regard for your family, and maybe a bit of genuine curiosity on my part, yes, sure. I’ll ask a few of my many friends what they know about a bright flash. Now--where did you say all this happened?”

Marta told him.

“Huh,” said Milosh. At some point he had started picking at the paper coaster sitting

under his beer. “You know, I heard someone on the radio a little while ago who called it--what did he say--a drift of cooled magma. From some volcano under the water. I liked that idea. No reason to be worried about a bunch of floating rock.”

“But you don’t think that’s what it really is, do you?”

He smiled another inscrutable little smile. “Marta. The things *my* friends tell me about that thing? You wouldn’t believe.”

There were plenty of theories, Marta learned. Aliens, that was a popular one. Every variation of aliens, from the lost and the innocent, the ET-phone-home variety, to outright hostile invasion, and the theorist varied in style about as much as the theory. You had your total nutjob to your surprisingly coherent, at least on the forums Marta spent the elastic hours of her work day trawling. There was no other living object on earth that operated on this kind of scale, the arguments went--discounting some stretches of the label, like fungal colonies or supersystems of tree roots. The only reasonable answer, then, was that it didn’t come from earth at all.

Then there were the religious nuts, who seemed to have a bible verse for everything. The Skrimshanders were a prime example--just the thought of the boardwalk people and the glassy ecstasy in their eyes made her squirm in her desk chair. To the benevolently-minded among them it was a second coming, Jesus returned as a skyscraper-sized messianic titan. For the fire and brimstone types, well, it was punishment. Divine judgement for a world long ago turned to sin. Maybe, just maybe, if enough souls repented there was still time to prevent it from making landfall.

She noticed an obsessive quality to those posting online. It was always the same people talking, the same usernames arguing--anyone who’s mind fixed on the End of the World couldn’t

seem to get the barb out. But most people entertained a casual theory. The sandwich guy at the deli where she took her lunch breaks thought it was a visitor from another dimension, something to do with string theory. The guy in the cubicle next to her thought it was a lab-grown monster escaped from containment. A government conspiracy. His name was Craig. Craig liked to massage her shoulders when he “thought she was having a rough day.”

Marta had taken the first internship that had offered to pay her, only days after receiving the bill for her father’s hospital stay. She wasn’t sure how much he had in the bank after a year of fishing in the End of the World’s shadow. It might have been *new plasma screen TV* money, but nobody she knew--nobody she knew *here*, anyway--had *overnight hospital bill* kinds of cash just sitting around.

The company was called Beachhead and Caron, LLC. It was downtown, in that mirror-box quadrant of the city she hated most, the one that looked like everywhere else, like nowhere. But they paid. She hated to admit it, but they paid her--an intern--more than she could have made as a deckhand. They were involved in something called “futures.” An intersection of property and capital she didn’t understand. That was one of the things, she assumed, they were supposed to help her with. Among others.

The internship promised that she would develop “workplace contacts,” learn “valuable skills.” She didn’t feel like she had developed much, there. But the End of the World--she was learning all kinds of things about that. Just a few days ago, beachcombers had found piles of dead, radioactive fish washed up on the shore. Marta didn’t know if that was the fault of the thing in the water, exactly, but they were both strangenesses, so you couldn’t count them out.

Mostly, that’s how Marta spent her day: reading about that *thing*, thinking about it, staring out the wide windows of the seventh floor, with its view of the water. All inbetween the

more mundane tasks: delivering coffee, keeping track of which copier was more likely to jam, which plants were real and which were plastic. She had a lot of free time, especially if she tucked herself in the supply closet or between the narrow walls of her cubicle to think about it. The End of the World. Why the fuck had he gone there? *Because that's where the fish were*, he'd wheezed to her yesterday. Why the fuck were the fish there? *Do I look like I've grown scales and gills to you, Marta? Do I look like I know what a fish is thinking?*

"Here's my pitch," said Craig. "Are you listening? Antillia, it's got that separatist movement. Not happy being a protectorate or whatever it is. Back in the 90s they blew up buses. Remember that? Ah, you were too young. But so Antillia--it's plotting a full scale *revolución*, you know? And that's when they let it out. Release the Kraken, right?"

He was peering over their cubicle's dividing wall like some sort of balding forest creature. A woodchuck with mange. "What do you think?"

"I don't think about it much," she lied, wanting only for Craig to stop talking to her. "I guess it's as likely as anything else."

"Shame. Real shame," he said, shaking his head. "You ever had Antillian rum? That shit was incredible."

The first thing Marta noticed, catching the screen door so it wouldn't slam on her way in, was the smell. A carbon, acrid stink--burning. In her kitchen she found the source: smoke, billowing from a saucepan on the stove. The culprit was slumped nearby, fully dressed, button-down shirt tucked into jeans. Even his boots looked polished. His head lolled to one side, eyes closed, a small trickle of drool crawling down his shaved jaw. She froze for a moment, trying to master all the emotions threatening to flood out of her, before she noticed the slow rise and fall

of his chest. Asleep. He was just asleep.

An empty soup can sat on the counter nearby. She turned off the burner and the pan went on smoking for a while longer. Inside was a volcanic landscape, something from the center of the earth. Black crags, ashen peaks. A curled primordial worm, frozen in a carbon shell--so this soup had been one of the noodle ones.

Marta filled the pot with hot water and soap. She'd attack it with some steel wool later, but she was too tired just then. As the pan hit the sink, Victor suddenly jerked upright, looking around the room in a panic. When he saw Marta--and the pan, and maybe even the layer of smoke still lingering along the ceiling--he sagged back into his chair, an expression crossing his face that made something in Marta want to curl up and die.

"Oh. I guess I nodded off."

"Dad, we talked about using the stove."

"I'm not a child, goddamn it. And look, all I needed was a little sleep. I already feel better. Much better, all right?"

He was dressed for the part, but that's where "much better" ended. The bags under his eyes were a pale bruise color, and his skin had the clammy quality of fever. His hair was rapidly thinning--she'd find clumps of it now and then covering the shower drain. He was sick. Still sick.

"I'm fine. Everything is fine," he said, looking at her irritably, as if she'd said what she had been thinking. "Look, I was thinking about asking Kjellson if he needed another hand on his boat. Just until we get our feet back under us."

"Don't be stupid."

"Unbelievable. Talking to your father that way." But he didn't get up to go anywhere, either.

In the bathroom, Marta dug around the cabinet for her makeup removal pads. It was stuffed with every sort of cold medicine, both pharmaceutical--robitussin and Dayquil and sudafed--and then the home remedies. Tinctures with eyedroppers, bottles with little fibrous specks floating in amber liquid, things Victor had gotten neighbors or drinking buddies to bring him. He drank a cocktail of the cabinet stuff every morning, refusing to step foot in the hospital again.

After their mother died, they only went to the doctor for broken bones. Stitches if they were lucky. After all the specialists had tried and failed and then billed him for their trouble, Victor had never really recovered his faith in the American healthcare system. Hard to blame him. When she and Adrien had gotten sick as kids, he used to dose them with whiskey and grapefruit juice. She was pretty sure it had never helped either of them get better, but it might, she reflected, explain some things. Marta was already thinking of the cold beer in the fridge.

She wrinkled her nose. There was a smell, in the bathroom, that she couldn't pin down. Bleach, ammonia.

"Dad," said Marta, scrubbing her face with an alcohol wipe. She was still bad at this--her eyeliner was too pointy, her blush looked clownish. Not a part of the land-based, office-based world she had adapted to yet. "Have you been cleaning?"

He said nothing. When she walked back out, she could see that he had already fallen asleep again.

Chapter 8 - [UNSPECIFIED TRANSCRIPTION]

VOICE 1: Enough pussyfooting around. How bad are we talking here? Should I be worried about New York disappearing off the face of the earth any time soon?

(muffled, incoherent response.)

VOICE 1: Well, there's that, at least. In one sense, this is bad. Obviously bad. But *how* bad, really? Just for an immediate example: she could have taken one of the bigger ones. I suspect we've set up the goalposts wrong here. I suspect we're doing much better than anyone could have expected in this situation. In one sense, sure, this is bad, but in another, *also* very real sense, could this be fine?

(some uncertain mumbling)

VOICE 1: That's what I mean. I can't say I understand how we lost it in the first place, though, I must admit. This is our country's **REDACTEDREDACTED** we're talking about god-fucking-dammit.

(more incoherence. white noise.)

VOICE 1: *One* posted guard. One.

(twenty-three seconds of silence)

VOICE 1: Christ! So he's dead, I'm assuming.

(questioning mumble)

VOICE 1: Asleep. Literally sleeping on the job. Well that's just--

(interruption. a long series of sounds, distorted into chirps, clicks, and drones)

VOICE 1: ...Interesting. Do we have a name?

(one brief sound)

VOICE 1: The hell kind of name is that?

Black - Chapter 9 - Pendulum

The machine didn't click in a normal way. At least in a way that would have seemed normal for a machine to be clicking, like the skipping of a record player at the end of its groove, or a tape machine steadily marking each second of recording. No; the machine pointed at Black clicked like an angry marble was loose inside, and hunting for a way out.

On either side of him Black had his palms pressed to two copper plates, which were attached to wires, which fed back towards the furiously clicking machine. Leather straps held his hands in place. They were, he had been told, photographing his aura, though he couldn't see anything resembling the lens of a camera. It all had the air of a Victorian medical practice, rather than the high-tech equipment he had expected from a place like this.

"You're doing great, Mr. Gorie," said the lab tech manning the device. Every so often he would adjust a knob or toggle a switch. "Just a little longer now."

There were a few more of his kind in the room, taking notes on clipboards or checking the wires or just standing there. All of them wore full-body suits of white plastic, fitted with yellow rebreathers and an opaque faceplate. Under that baggy plastic Black couldn't detect any difference in body type, and they all seemed to be roughly the same height. Through the rebreather all their voices sounded the same. Sometimes he was even certain that they had the same mannerisms, walking perfectly upright, clipboards high against their chest, punctilious ghosts one and all.

And there, in the corner, the stranger. His stare fixed on Black, blinking only when he absolutely had to. Black still didn't know his name, but he knew that face--it was the same one

from his fever dreams, however impossible that seemed. The architect, he somehow knew, of all this. The principle of this new and stranger iteration of Jackson Douglas Elementary. Most days he said so little, giving off only clipped little sounds, indications of his mood for the rest of his staff to interpret. In his own thoughts Black named him after the other chirping device he had grown acquainted with: Observer.

Today he wore a white button-up that looked like someone had left the iron on too long in patches. Observer was the only one in this part of the school that didn't wear the quarantine gear. Besides, of course, Black and the others. Besides the techs and their silent head honcho, he had met three other people in the secret wing of the school. Well, two and a half.

When his aura was photographed and the techs unstrapped him from the machine and led him to the door, one of them was waiting in the hallway. He was a kid--maybe seventeen or eighteen, Black couldn't tell--with dark hair that stuck out in every direction. The sleeves of his blue scrubs, the same top they'd all been given, were rolled up tight around gym-sculpted biceps. Apparently, he'd been the new guy for all of eight days before Black showed up.

"How you feeling today, buddy?" said Adrien. All smiles, as always--a relentless friendliness that Black had recognized at once as nerves.

"Well. I guess they'll tell me, when those photographs develop."

"Ha. Yeah. Am I up yet?" he said.

"Yes!" said one of the techs, cheer muffled a bit by the mask. "Step right in, Mr. Gonzales."

As they passed in the narrow hallway, their shoulders brushed. In that moment, as he had come to expect, Black felt the buzzing in his head grow just a bit louder.

He had read something on the internet once about déjà vu. How that feeling of familiarity, of having done this before, was born not of any precognitive ability but actually the opposite: the brain lagged behind, stalling like an engine, so that when it finally caught up the sensory information registered as coming from the past. How could this explain his vision of Observer, though? An actual memory, fogged as it was by illness?

There was something wrong with his brain. He knew that much from the buzzing, which could range over the day from annoying and mosquitoid to so loud he was certain others could hear it, but that wasn't the only noise his sick mind was conjuring up. There were also the footsteps. He'd spun around the first time he'd heard them, certain he was being followed, only to see empty air. All signs pointed to his own shaky grip on reality, but Black couldn't help but picture a horde of ghostly children running down the hallway, racing one another to hell.

In the secret wing of the school, behind the invisible door, they had at least taken down all the obvious traces of the gremlins that had once screamed through the halls. Unlike the rest of the building, the walls were bare; no thumb-turkeys and misspelled entries in a "What I'm Thankful For" catalogue, no reminders to keep sharpened pencils out of your various orifices, no cartoon bookworm explaining the value of reading. All that was left were the tiny lockers, dwarfed to Borrower-size by Black's already huge frame. They had even managed to scrub the place of that ever-sticky child smell, though the replacement--the aroma of military-grade floor cleaner--smelled uncomfortably close to what had come out of his body not long ago.

He hadn't thrown up, at least. Not since his arrival. Not after he'd started taking those red pills and receiving shots in the morning and evening, which had left a deep and seemingly permanent bruise on the translucent skin of his inner elbow.

They had gotten his real name on that first day--Jonathan Gorie--along with his blood

type (O negative,) his birthday (July 22nd,) his list of known allergies (none) and, bizarrely, childhood fears (just one--the relatively boring nyctophobia, fear of the dark). They had done stress tests, making him run laps around the indoor basketball court with sensors taped to his vitals, until he was sweating through his hospital scrubs. They'd shined lights in his eyes, ears, nose and mouth and made him piss, shit, and spit into a series of small cups, which they placed in bags with a huge red biohazard symbol on the front. Observer had been there the whole time, evaluating with those huge moth-gray eyes. That first day Black had asked him questions whenever the current test didn't occupy his mouth.

“What is this place? Because it's definitely not a shelter.”

“Why couldn't I see the door?”

“Who are you guys, because when I last checked, the National Weather Service didn't have a small army of paramilitary types armed with machine guns.”

And most importantly, “What's happening to me?”

Observer never said a word. After four hours of being poked and prodded, Black stood up from the table. His knees still felt shaky, but just straightening to his full height was enough to make the techs on either side of him step back. Observer just watched, impassive, as Black yanked out the feed of his IV, wincing at the unexpectedly sharp pain.

“Okay, that's enough. I'm gone. You and your black ops friends can shoot me if you want.”

The techs exchanged a look that should have been impossible through the faceplates. But the small smile on Observer's face was clearly meant for him. “You're welcome to leave,” he said, his voice higher than Black had expected. “Just go out the door you came in.”

Black wandered the school for an hour. He tried focusing and unfocusing his eyes. He

tried turning around suddenly, where he believed the door had been, as if he might be able to catch it in the act of disappearing. When he finally returned, no one said a word.

That first day, while hunting for the exit, he saw something he would have chalked up as another fever vision, had he not been told otherwise later: a child, peanut-colored, wearing a miniature version of the scrubs they'd given him, bouncing down the hall. He turned around, only once, and fixed Black with two bright blue eyes.

But that wasn't right. It wasn't his irises that were blue, it was the *whole eye*. No white, no pupil, just that sick, detergent blue.

He smiled at Black, then. Actually smiled. Then, like a wandering spirit, he turned the corner and disappeared.

At first Black had panicked on behalf of the kid. Was he some refugee from the last iteration of Jackson Douglas elementary? Had his parents failed to pick him up from school after the flood?

"His name is Daclan," Adrien told him over dinner that night. "He was here before anyone else apparently, and he barely talks to anyone. Says he sees ghosts. You know, a weirdo."

Adrien was a talker. It seemed almost a kind of therapy to him--the more he talked, the more he seemed to settle into a rhythm. On the first night he'd shown up to Black's room--a library, one caterpillar picture book the only thing remaining--with a tray of food and three cigarettes. "I had a feeling you and me shared the habit," he'd said then. "I found them in one of the lockers. Must have belonged to some extremely cool fifth grader. Gotta make these last, though."

It wasn't the flood that connected them. He learned that pretty quick. Adrien had never even heard of Joyous Beach--he'd been fished out of the water after his boat capsized by one of Observer's patrols. His father, who'd been with him, hadn't been so lucky.

Oluchi, a PhD student who had barely looked at him since he arrived, was from Boston. Daclan was from Antillia. Out of the five patients, Black was the first to actually be brought in from Joyous Beach.

"Well," Adrien told him. "That's not entirely true. They've brought in others, now and then. Locals."

"What happened to them?"

An uncomfortable look passed over Adrien's face. "They didn't get better. But that was bad luck. You and me, I've got a sense we're lucky guys. Hey, can you--what color are my eyes?"

"What?" said Black.

"My eyes. Could you tell me what color my eyes are? That's where the changes start."

Warily, Black leaned in a little, careful not to touch the other man. He liked to keep the weird buzzing in his head as quiet as he could manage. "I don't know. Brown."

"Just brown?"

Black nodded. Adrien exhaled a little. "Good. Okay."

"What kind of changes?"

Adrien shook his head. "I don't know. I only just got here. Once you--once you change, they bring you into a different part of the school. Gotta be for, I don't know, special procedures. Machines and stuff they don't have out here."

"You really think they're trying to help us?" said Black. "I feel like a lab rat. All these

tests.”

“That’s how it works,” said Adrien. “Can’t treat something you don’t understand. Look, just keep doing what they tell you. Keep taking the meds, keep getting the shots, and we’ll be okay.” It sounded like he was trying to talk himself into it.

The next time he went to the bathroom, Black studied his reflection in the mirror for a long time--it was so low he had to squat. There was no blue, though. Not in those rattish, pink eyes he supposed he had to call his own.

On the second day came the pendulums. “Don’t think of it as a crystal attached to a piece of string,” said one of the techs, probably imagining that as a helpful comment. “Think of it as a carnival strength test. All you’re trying to do is swing the hammer hard enough to ring the bell.”

“Except the hammer is--”

“Your mind, yes. And the “bell” in this metaphor represents any significant change in the arc of the swing.”

“And, assuming I move the pendulum with my mind, how exactly does that lead to me being cured?”

He already knew the answer, of course. It was the same one Adrien had given him yesterday. “We must understand the disease before we can begin to treat it!” said the muffled hazmat muppet.

From the corner, Observer watched as Black tried to squeeze the proper brain muscles to move the pendulum. He squinted. He popped his ears. None of this worked, though the techs scribbled on their clipboards with furious interest. It didn’t help that they were pointing what looked like a Beatles-era microphone at him the whole time, which fed into a barrel-shaped

bundle of blinking electronics and lights.

When they finally unhooked him from the neural monitoring wires and led him to the door, Oluchi was on the other side. She was a tall woman, though not quite as tall as him, with cords of muscle running between her shoulders and her neck. Not really his idea of an academic. There was an odd quality to her skin, though--a kind of constant, sick sheen, like she was always damp with flu-sweat. Her eyes, he noticed with a lurch of his stomach, were speckled with blue dots, some bigger than others. Slowly expanding, he imagined. A little each day.

“Hey. Can you do it?” he said. Feeling a bit like he was poking an animal with a stick.

She reacted like a section of the wall had started speaking to her. “Excuse me?”

“The pendulum thing. Can you make it move?”

“Oh. No.”

“Okay, good. I was worried it was just me. Which, I guess, is a crazy thing to worry about--”

“No,” she said again. “I mean, I’m not doing this. Bonding. You’re scared, and I get it, and I’m sorry, but I’ve got no interest in it. Having a heart to heart with a guy who will be dead in a week anyway.”

Black turned around, as if looking for another witness to the conversation, but the tech who had led him out was already back inside, helping set up the pendulum test again. Observer had gotten up to micromanage some detail with the recording equipment.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“It’s really nothing personal,” she said. “You seem like a nice enough guy.”

As she passed him going in, she brushed his arm. He’d never been this close before; what Black expected was a rise in volume of that feedback, the buzzing in his head all the time. But

the moment they made contact he felt a sharp jolt run through his arm--the exact sensation, as only Black would know, of being tased. It lasted only for a moment, since both of them jumped apart as soon as they could.

When Black could focus his eyes again, Oluchi was holding her arm like something had stung her. Everyone else in the room had frozen in place, including Observer, who was watching the two of them with almost predatory interest.

“Miss,” said one of the techs. “If you’ll just sit down at the pendulum, we can begin.”

In the ventilation room, muted by the rumbling of the huge machines behind them, Black and Adrien passed a cigarette back and forth like drowning men sharing an oxygen tank. It was hard not to see Adrien as a kid, but he was also the only person in here who would talk to him. The shared addiction didn’t hurt their budding kinship, either.

“Am I going to die?” asked Black.

“No. No way,” he said. Pausing, afterwards, in a way Black didn’t like one bit. “Well. I mean--your odds are better in here. That’s for sure.”

Black didn’t feel like he was dying. In Eastham, in physical therapy, each day had been excruciating, but the following morning had always felt a little better. It was like that. He was still weak, and it was hard to keep food down, and then there were the dreams--he tried not to think about the dreams--but now he was able to walk around without worrying his knees would buckle under him. He didn’t know if it was the drugs or the pendulums, but he was getting better, not worse.

Of course he’d heard about the same thing happening to people with radiation poisoning, at Chernobyl. The firefighters who’d gone into the core, spraying water on an open reactor

spewing plumes of uranium smoke. They got better and better in the hospital, right up until their veins unraveled like old yarn.

“Don’t listen to her,” said Adrien. “Oluchi doesn’t know what she’s talking about. She’s one of those conspiracy nuts. Thinks the government is hiding everything.”

Black looked around, at the school, and the secret facility behind the invisible door.

“Hm.”

Adrien, at least, was willing to theorize about the color. “You ever been to Disneyland? Don’t look at me like that, I’m educating you. Well along with the roller coasters scraping heaven’s asshole and a park layout mathematically designed to drive children into a kind of joy-seizure, the geniuses old walt kept locked in his basement dreamed up a color. Let me ask you: in your time at Disneyland, have you ever seen a construction area? How about an employees-only door?”

“Well, like I was trying to tell you, I’ve never been to Disneyland,” said Black. That was exactly the kind of childhood his mother had never been able to afford.

“Assuming you *had*, the answer would have been no. And that’s all thanks to go-away-green.”

According to Adrien, go-away-green was the color of moss on concrete, or a teacher’s handwriting--not truly invisible, but designed to blend in with almost anything, and easy to ignore if you aren’t looking for it.

“But it’s not just that we don’t *notice* the door,” said Black. “We literally can’t see it. Even when we’re looking directly at it.” Though the rules didn’t seem to apply for everyone--the weatherman, after all, had had no trouble getting in.

“Right. It’s not that, exactly. But maybe some kind of juiced up version. Stay-the-fuck-

out-green. Don't-even-fucking-think-about-it-gray. It's a working theory, all right?"

First the bottle, then the door. Black tried to imagine what this place would look like if every inch of it was painted that same impossible color. Would their brains short-circuit entirely? Or would they just appear to be floating in some kind of void? There were parts of the ocean, he had heard, that had never seen sunlight. How long would it take them to adapt, as the glowing monsters of the deep had?

The next day, when the techs brought him into the testing room, Oluchi was already there. Her surprise mirrored his own; both of them turned towards Observer, though he had never once been the one to actually give them instructions. All he did was stare back, mute and intense as ever.

"This will be a partnered trial," announced one of the techs. Even he sounded nervous.

"If he touches me," said Oluchi.

"That won't be necessary."

The tech gestured towards one of the seats. The testing room was the same as always, a nurse's office that had somehow maintained the smell of hand lotion, even after the desk and the cabinets and the poster of a big, smiling food pyramid had been taken down.

Black sat down. Like most chairs, this one was too small for him. Their knees were almost brushing, and this close he swore he could *feel* Oluchi's discomfort. They both did everything in their power to avoid eye contact.

"We need you to make eye contact now," said the tech.

"What exactly is the point of this?" said Oluchi.

"Measuring the immuno-response of sustained proximity to another contaminated

individual.”

“Ah. Of course.”

Before that moment, Black didn't know there was a way to sarcastically meet someone's eyes. Meanwhile the techs around them strapped them into place, affixed electrodes to their temples, and drew little Sharpie dots on their foreheads and at the hollow of their throats.

He looked back at her. Aside from the blue specks, Oluchi's eyes were almost the exact brown-black of old iron. With a lid set low, making her always appear a little sleepy.

He was looking into those eyes for almost a full minute when he started to hear the sound of waves lapping against one another. Yet another sign of his impending mental collapse, thought Black. That's when they stuck him with the needle.

“Shit!” said Oluchi. She'd gotten one, too.

“Just a mild sedative, to help you relax. Eye contact, please!” said the tech. Out of the corner of his vision, Black saw them drop the needles into a heavy-looking cylinder. It looked different from the typical biohazard container they used, and it made a metallic sound as he closed it.

He was only looking away for a moment. When he looked back, he didn't just hear the waves anymore: he could see them. As the room fell away, the techs vanishing beneath the waves, the food pyramid poster carried off by the winds whipping along the surface of the sea, even Oluchi sinking down beneath the water, that look of bitter focus never once leaving her face, Black found himself alone.

In the open water, Black realized very quickly that he wasn't in control of his body. It took him much longer to realize it wasn't *his* body anymore.

Chapter 10 - Extenuating Circumstance

It might be said that when a man climbs out of his Cherokee Jeep outside a church, carrying an assault rifle spray-painted a bright cherry red, and proceeds to shoot no less than thirteen people in the space of twenty-three seconds before fleeing the scene, shouting all the while racial epithets that leave his motivation, his specific aim in regards to this church, all too clear--when eleven of these people turn out to be Antillians, because this is an Antillian church, one of the few in the city in fact--when such a thing happens, it might be said that the man, the shooter, is solely to blame for the crime. In the case of Tyler Cawfield, though, the extenuating circumstances must be considered.

Consider, for one, his absentee parents. His father altogether gone, and his mother working day-long shifts as a security guard at the auto insurance place downtown, so that Tyler, who was enrolled in night school, almost never saw her, and could not therefore benefit from her motherly, compassionate presence or parental guidance.

Consider, also, the provocations young Tyler must have been subject to. Not, it must be said, by the Antillians themselves--the only thing they were guilty of is having their home wiped off the map, for those who still considered the island their home, for those who were first-generation immigrants, rather than the long-established, US-citizen-type families who happened to have Antillian ancestry. No--the provocations in question, here, coming from the vicious masked members of SPEAR, who callously prevented Tyler and his friends from peeing on a sleeping homeless Antillian man one night, in fact punching his friend Gavin in the face, in fact making Gavin pose for his high school graduation photo with a cheekbone looking like someone had pumped it full of hot water. Also, they had called Tyler a racist, though he didn't have

anything against the Antillians personally, so he said on his social media posts, he just thought they should maybe go somewhere other than America. And then there were the girls at his school who rejected his romantic advances. But you already knew about that.

One might even blame the entire apparatus of the internet, the unprecedented linking of human networks in an impossibly vast and twisting grid. That is, after all, where he first got in touch with other Red Bands. Never mind that those ideas had long ago taken root, that they bounced off less receptive minds every day, usually with a mixture of horror and disgust. That the problem might not be old-fashioned mesmerism or techno-induced racism was more difficult to accept.

They are gentle, when they finally take him in, after his jeep has come to a gradual stop when faced with the roadblock ahead. The police look almost apologetic as he surrenders his weapon, as they gently click the cuffs into place. Later, when they walk him to the courthouse, they'll swaddle him in a bullet-proof vest, to protect him from the animals that might seek some sort of street justice. For now, they only ask him if he is hungry. On the way back to the station, they stop at the drive-through McDonalds.

Marta - Chapter 11 - Key Performance Indicators

Something was very wrong in the Gonzales home. Never mind, for a moment, the missing brother and never mind Marta's father, who seemed to get sicker and sicker every day. Those were problems--awful, weighty problems that pressed down on every part of her life, yes. But they were not blood on her kitchen floor. A great, wet puddle of it, streaked across the white linoleum floor, smeared in places along the cabinets, taking as its most disturbing permutation the single ribbon leading out of the kitchen, where the bleeding something or someone had been dragged.

It was early, just before dawn. She didn't need to be up for another few hours, but even in college she had always woken up in that still darkness just before the world comes to life. Some sort of genetic coding, she thought, from two generations of fishing folk. She'd walked into the kitchen to make coffee, still half-asleep, wearing pajama bottoms and a band t-shirt too middle school for her to ever wear in public, and stepped into it with one foot. Still warm. Turning sticky.

Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

Any lingering vapors of sleep evaporated in a heartbeat, replaced with the cold, arresting reality of the situation. She tried to breathe, to really think this through--something had gotten into her house. Something had opened a vein all over her kitchen floor.

"Dad?" she called. There was no response.

Think. What if he's hurt? What if all this is his blood? The red trail led out opposite their bedrooms, towards the west side of the house. Marta half-ran back--his bedroom door, she saw now, was open. She hadn't noticed that before.

Think. He wasn't inside--just a bundle of tangled sheets, a little personal apothecary of bottles and medicines, the smell of sweat and that pervasive chemical odor that seemed to follow him everywhere these days. Where was he? *Think.*

The idea of her father being missing--out of bed, somewhere alone in the world--was almost as frightening as the idea of him being seized by a rabid coyote or swamp lizard. Over the last week he had seemed even more sick than he had on his return from sea. He couldn't get out of bed; he barely seemed to see her through his glazed eyes, so trapped in the remote place his illness had brought him to. His hair was falling out in willowy clumps now, casting Marta back to the chemo that had dominated both of their lives ten years ago. His eyes, his glazed eyes, were starting to develop small and spreading spots of blue. She begged him to go to the hospital. Begged. With what was surely the last dregs of strength in his old bones, he refused. But soon, she could tell, even that last bit of strength would fade. When that happened she'd carry him to the hospital herself if she had to.

Unless she lost him. Unless he was mauled by some hungry night animal, or wandered off into one of the city's gutters to die early. Unless some desperate home invader had found him and--

She opened the drawer of his nightstand and rummaged through until she pulled a hard black case with a combination lock on the front. It was harder to get it open than it should have been, with her trembling fingers, but a moment later she was sliding the magazine home and pulling back the handgun's slide, chambering a bullet. She was no expert, but she knew how to use the thing. Point and shoot. Victor had made sure of that. *Because I may not always be around to shoot your boyfriends*, he'd said. Not that she'd ever had any of those.

Marta retraced her steps to the kitchen, keeping both hands on the gun, the killing end

pointed to the floor for now. She called her father's name again. There was no response.

She turned the corner, raising the pistol. Nothing. The trail of blood continued down the end of the hall, where the door to the garage was ajar. It was dark past the threshold. She couldn't see--but that's where the blood went.

It almost seemed to be another person taking each step forward. Down that hallway, down towards whatever waited for her there. It didn't feel like Marta--there was no conscious will behind each step, no effort made to move forward. And yet something or someone pushed her closer.

"Dad?" she whispered. With one hand, she held the gun out, straight in front of her. With the other she pushed open the door.

The darkness was near-absolute in their windowless garage. Only the fewest particles of light filtered in from the hallway, but Marta could smell the iron stink of wounds. Blood--hot and fresh blood, and everywhere that other smell, the sick one, like bleach. Groping with one hand, the hand not holding the gun, Marta reached for the light switch. Harsh halogen lighting filled the room.

In the corner of their garage she saw her father. He was hunched down, like an ape, shoulders drawn close together. On the floor in front of him was a familiar black patch of fur in a ruined pulp of torn cat flesh. Batman.

None of these details were right. They seemed to come to her in a strange order. It felt like a long time before she noticed his face, looking up at her, blank and almost childish. The mouth, smeared with her cat's blood.

"What we have to look at here are our key performance indicators, our KPIs," declared

the man in front of the dropped projector screen proudly. At some point Marta was certain she had known his name and position--CFO, or CTO, some important acronym the letters of which she couldn't place. Someone had told her once, certainly, but at that moment she could recall nothing except what she'd seen in her garage five hours previously and what was on screen now--some kind of graph pocked with eldritch, inexplicable little symbols, the axis of which pointed out something supposedly very good for the company. None of it made any sense to her.

Most of Beachhead and Caron was packed into the room, a mammoth conference chamber with smooth, egg-colored walls and a curved pane of glass looking out the cubicle floor. Someone--it could have been Marta, come to think of it--had forgotten to bring in enough chairs, so she was standing. Whatever the CMO or CPO was saying was important enough that he wanted "all hands on deck."

He pushed a button on his little slide remote and the picture changed. Her father, crouched over the remains of the family cat. Slivers of stringy flesh between long, inhuman canines.

No, wait. It was just a picture of a hotel. Bellhops frozen in cheerful salute.

The CXO made some more sounds. Probably they were pleasing ones: there was a smattering of applause from the audience, which Marta joined in on too late.

The image on screen switched again. Now it was the teeth she had found while cleaning up her cat's blood. Human teeth, judging from the molars. A neat pile of them in the kitchen trash can.

Actually, it was just another chart. This one was circular.

Marta had stood there, gun trained on her own father for a long time. Trying to figure out if he *was* her father, and not some new thing wearing his skin. When she came a little closer, he

didn't lunge at her or bare those awful, almost translucent fangs.

"Dad?" she'd whispered.

He moved his new and awful jaw up and down. He made words. "Marta. Come back from the water. The tide's coming in. Don't go too far out." It sounded a little garbled through all his teeth, with an oddly musical lift on a few syllables. But it was him. He spoke to her as if from some deep pool, some distance through which could barely see, but he had recognized her. He had called her name.

On screen, the slide changed, showing Marta those eyes. Not that tobacco-brown she knew so well, but blue. All of them, from white to pupil to iris, a bright detergent blue. Except it wasn't that, it was a picture of a beach. There was something familiar about the particular combination of sand and sun, curling waves and blue sky. While the CWO talked about "return on investment" (ROI) and "marginal portfolio losses" (MPLs), Marta realized where she had seen it before. She realized, too, what it was missing.

"Yes?" said the CJO, from the front of the room. He seemed, improbably, to be looking at her.

It occurred to Marta, then, that her hand was raised. That came as a surprise--she hadn't meant to raise it. But there it was, in the air. Acting independent of the rest of her. A parasitic passenger lacking any loyalty to the whole.

Everyone in the room had turned to look at her. Marta thought she'd better say *something*, at least. "That photo is edited."

The CKO smiled thinly. "Keenly observed. Yes, many of the photos in this presentation have been edited. We have a dynamite design department." A few weak laughs floated out of the crowd.

“No,” said Marta. “I mean, in this one you took out the--”she paused. They might not appreciate the family nickname. “The thing in the water.”

They didn’t appreciate any of what she said, as things turned out. An awkward silence settled over the room.

“Well. Yes,” said the CLO after a moment. “It’s hardly attractive to stakeholders to have a giant,” he paused, circling one hand as if he was too beleaguered to find the word. “A giant *thing* floating within sight of beachfront properties.”

“It’s not floating. It’s walking along the ocean floor,” she said. She’d read that online.

The CPO said nothing. By the carafe of hot water, someone coughed.

“Yes. Okay then. I’d like to direct you, next, to our quarterly earnings across corporate junctions.”

Again, he pressed a button on the slide remote. The beach, with its missing monster, vanished. In its place was a stock-photo of two women high-fiving.

Back in her cubicle, Marta stared at her darkened computer screen, waiting for some sense of what to do next. Conversations bubbled around her. She could barely hear any of it. When the hands closed around her shoulders, panic, hot and sudden, flooded her veins. She saw *him* just behind her, face smeared with viscera. He had followed her all the way here. He was still hungry.

“You’re too beautiful to be this tense!” Craig said, pushing his thumbs into the knot of muscles around her neck. Marta spun around and shoved him back, hard, knocking him to the floor, nearly causing a passing janitor to crush him under the wheels of a mop bucket. Craig stared up at her, sprawled out on his ass, as stunned as she was.

“Don’t ever touch me again,” she managed to put together after a minute.

He scrambled to his feet, muttering *bitch*, jostling the janitor, who looked oddly hurt to be in the middle of all this. Then he was gone. Marta sat back in her chair and smoothed down the rumples in her skirt.

The rest of the day passed without her notice. Before she knew it the setting sun was painting downtown the same uniform tangerine shade, and she had gotten no further in figuring out what to do next. When she got home, for instance.

She was on her way out when the door of one of the few closed offices swung open. An older woman, with a blonde bowl-cut and a severely blue blouse, leaned out. “Ms. Gonzales? A word before you leave?”

Marta had only seen this woman once in all her time here, during the on-site interview. She was fairly certain she was her boss.

The office was sparse in a way that was probably tasteful. The woman’s desk was bare, save for her laptop, a single manila folder, and a pink angular stone that was either a paperweight or some sort of chi-restoring node. Marta sat down across from the woman, trying as hard as she could to look like someone you couldn’t fire. Pathetic, desperate? She was certainly nailing that better than “irreplaceable.” She should have removed some key piece of the coffee machine and hid it in her desk, but now it was too late. She didn’t think there could be a worse time to lose her paycheck. On the other hand, she was no longer quite sure how money was going to help her or her father.

“So,” began the woman. “First, I just wanted to say how much we appreciate the work you’ve done for us. You really are a valued team member, Ms. Gonzales.”

“Thank you,” said Marta automatically. When you fired a deckhand, you were supposed

to buy them a shot first.

“There was something I wanted to address with you, though.”

“Craig is a creep,” blurted Marta. “You don’t just sneak up on people and give them shoulder massages.”

That made Bowl-Cut pause. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t know what he said to you, but I can promise it was bullshit.”

“Marta, Mr. Fleischer didn’t say anything to me. What we need to talk about is your comment in the All-Hands Meeting today.”

The All-Hands Meeting. The AHM. “My comment?”

“About the editing of the photo.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Listen, Marta,” she said, smiling with all the charm of a high-school vice principal. “I understand that there are objects--well, one object in particular, or perhaps a collection of objects? Last I heard, the science was still unclear. In any case, there is an object-slash-object-group many, many miles out in the Atlantic. And despite the immense complexity of oceanic tidal systems--I mean, the Gulf Stream alone, for just one example--there are some alarmists who claim that it is coming *here* of all places. That it is on a particular trajectory for this particular city, I hesitate to even share some of the more extreme theories--that it is, for instance, *alive*. That this object is, in fact, some sort of *creature*. Do you understand what we do here, Marta?”

She really didn’t. But Bowl-Cut didn’t really seem to expect an answer. “We are betting on the values of property, essentially. We are gambling on the growth of your city. In general, I would call this a very safe gamble, because it is a *lovely* city. My goodness! That view,” she said, gesturing out her window, where you could make out a slice of ocean. “It’s quite obvious to all

of us that this place has a lot of promise. We'd like to make that *promise* a *reality*. But it's much harder for us if people think some giant monster's going to stomp it all to rubble in ten years!" She said this laughing, like such a possibility was no more credible than Santa Claus picking a bar fight with Mr. Rogers.

"But what about Antillia?" said Marta. Antillia, where that photo had been taken, only a week before the End of the World arrived.

Bowl-Cut crinkled her nose like she'd caught a whiff of old laundry. "Oh. Yes. Well, what happened there was a tragedy, of course. But the island has a long history of natural disasters--hurricanes, earthquakes and the like. Plus there is their ever-precarious political situation."

What that situation was, Marta couldn't say for sure. They were a US protectorate, or something like that--not quite a state, but still under that big American thumb one way or another. "Besides," said Bowl-Cut. "There's so many conflicting reports, and there aren't any videos--or at least any credible ones."

Marta remembered the few she'd seen online: people running past the windows of a store front. Long lines of cars abandoned in the streets. The End of the World was present in almost none of them, except one--the video that was always circulating through those forums she'd spent so much time on. Oddly quiet, taken from a boat, at night. The picture bobbing up and down with the rocking of the dark waves. It was hard to see anything clearly, but you could just make out the shoreline, dotted with frantic, swarming lights--and then, above it, something odd. The sky, interrupted by a towering shape. Tall and narrow like a black obelisk. Seven seconds. The video was only seven seconds long.

"So what I'm saying is," continued Bowl-Cut brightly. "We don't really know what

happened to Antillia. Most likely, we never will.”

“But. The Antillians.” They certainly knew what happened.

“Marta,” she said, smiling conspiratorially. “I don’t really need to tell you how unreliable witness reports are. But credible or not, all this chatter about the whatever-it-is--well, it’s not great for us. Economically speaking. So, I assume we won’t need to have this conversation again?”

She stopped at a Walmart on the way back and picked up sleeping pills, a value pack of beef cuts, and the strongest-looking pair of fuzzy handcuffs she could find in their inexplicable “family planning” aisle. The woman behind the register gave her a wary look as she presented a coupon for the whole load.

Driving home, Marta found herself tallying up the value of everything she passed. She’d always found the used car lot on Mimosa street beautiful, with its red and white streamers, metallic and glinting in the setting sun. But she doubted that Beachhead and Caron would feel the same. Not like the new condos going up along the shore, with their exercise bikes looming in the windows of the first-floor gym like scarecrows. They loved the condos. They had been in the slideshow only that morning.

By the boardwalk, she passed the rotting old mermaid ride, with its collection of dirty little congregants, the Skrimshanders. Surely their unsettling, crazy presence had driven down the value of this particular boardwalk, like a halfway home or a brothel. There seemed to be fewer of them now than the last time she’d seen them. Their leader, the one with the long and filthy hair, was preaching to his diminished flock, all of them crouched down, knees pulled up to their chests, like kids or monkeys, listening to whatever fresh insanity he had cooked up. Marta

rolled the window down a crack.

“...And was Jonah not provided for in that place which he saw as his prison?” he intoned, casting his voice out all along the boardwalk as the tourists gave him a wide berth. “Did he not pull fish from the teeth of his great captor, and in doing so, save himself from the abysmal fate of drowning? We know, friends, that at the moment he was cast into the foaming deep, the ship on which Jonah bought passage was caught in a great storm. We never hear from this ship, or her captain, again. Not in all the pages of the bible! Not in any text, apocryphal or not! But is *Jonah* not delivered to joy once more? I ask this of you: what if the whale was not punishment but salvation?”

Yeah, crazy. Absolute tin-foil hat, Jonestown crazy. But then, was the Beachhead and Caron policy of sticking their heads ass-deep into the sand any less nuts? If it was all greed, all wink-and-nudge businessmen--if they all had mountain homes, complete with bunker, somewhere in Colorado--that she could at least understand. But if they really believed it?

She was so absorbed in the rest of her tallying that she didn't notice the man in front of her door until she got out of the car. He was standing on her step expectantly, sweating through a black suit that was turning blacker in patches. “Marta Gonzales? I've been knocking for a while, but nobody's answered.” A moment later, as if remembering, he pulled a silver badge affixed to a lanyard out from under his shirt collar. “My name is Agent Cline.”

Adrien had never been a boy scout--*unwilling to make the hard choices in life*, Victor had once accused them of--so Marta had never really encountered the type, but the man on her porch was how she'd always pictured the boy scout look. His hair was neatly combed, but seemed to flap out of place every time he turned his head. His suit was neatly pressed, and hung just a bit loose on his shoulders.

A little kid, playing federal agent. That's what he looked like, to her. But that badge wasn't plastic.

"What do you have there?" he said, gesturing at the plastic bag she was carrying.

Oh, raw meat, for my father. Restraints, too. "Tampons," said Marta. "Can I help you with something?"

"I sure hope so. Maybe I can come in and have a word," said Cline, smiling. It wasn't a question.

She smiled back. "Actually, it's been a pretty shit day. So you can go home and come back some other time, preferably with a warrant."

Cline shook his head, holding up his hands. "Woah, woah. Easy there. I'm not your enemy. All I want to do is ask you a few questions. Your father, too, if he's up for it--I heard he might be feeling a bit under the weather."

She could feel those baby-green eyes searching her face for any reaction. A lot less dopey than they seemed a minute ago. Who had told? Who even *knew*? A next door neighbor? She pictured her father pressing his new lamprey mouth against the kitchen window like some aquarium bottom feeder. Was there some government hotline you could call for that?

"Warrant," she said again, and walked up the steps, looking through him, to the door past his shoulder.

Cline didn't budge. Instead, he reached into his suit jacket and produced a folded slip of paper. "As it happens." Smiling that boy scout smile the whole time. *You know what they train boy scouts to do*, she could hear her father saying. *Because it isn't survive. They teach 'em how to die in somebody else's war.*

She half-expected to find him, her father, propped up on the couch. Wouldn't that be a fun sight to explain--her father, milky-blue eyes fixed on a game of hockey. The Panthers were terrible, and had been for as long as she could remember, but he loved them anyway. Marta thought it was all the ice. It reminded him of her mother--the woman from the frosty north, the cold mountains. Marta guessed she'd gone to college where she did for pretty much the same reason.

He wasn't there, though. This morning she'd shut the door of the garage and deadbolted it. That alone had been sending waves of guilt through her all day--but exactly what the fuck else was she supposed to do? All she had to do now was keep Cline from going in there.

"This is typically the part where people offer me coffee or a beer," he said.

"Would you like coffee. Or a beer."

"No, thanks. Not on the job."

She couldn't believe that grin had looked anything less than shit-eating mere minutes ago. He sat down on the couch, right where she'd been picturing her monstrous father moments ago. There was nowhere for her to sit, without sitting next to him. She remained standing. "Am I allowed to ask what you're doing here?"

"We're investigating a possible threat to the public." And how many teeth did this threat to the public possess? She pictured the trucks waiting outside, heavy with men in bunchy yellow hazmat suits. Would they wait to autopsy her father until they reached whatever black site they had set aside, or would they start on the way over?

"So," said Cline. "You and your family are fishermen."

"Until very recently, I was an intern."

He made an allowing gesture. "Just your father and your brother, then. How do they

typically do it? You'll have to excuse me, I'm not very familiar with the business."

"Well. Generally, you bait a hook. If the fish bites that hook, you're in the clear."

"I meant in terms of time, location. Where do they go?"

She almost smiled. What the fuck did he want her to say? *Near the giant monster, sir. Right up against the End of the World.* "I don't really know. I haven't gone out with them in about a year." *If I had, I wouldn't be talking to you right now,* she thought. She'd be missing, like her brother, or curled up in some oil slicked corner of the garage like her father. Fangs pushing their way out of her gums.

"They never talked about work to you?"

"Clearly you've never talked to any fishermen."

Cline folded his hands. "Ha. Well. Ms. Gonzales, I have to say, you're not being very helpful. Is your father home right now?"

"No," she said, just a little too quickly. "No. He's out right now."

"May I ask where?"

"He's a grown man. How am I supposed to know?"

"What about your brother, then?"

"Come on."

He looked up, eyebrows raised. She wanted to punch him in his coiffed little coil of hair.

"You already know what happened to him."

"Ah," said Cline. "Well."

This boy scout was too dumb to make a mistake like that. Which meant...what? He wanted to watch her say it. "My brother is missing," she said, slowly.

"Right. I'm sorry to have heard about that."

“Don’t worry too much,” she said, full of sudden and venomous cheer. “The Coast Guard doesn’t seem to be.”

Cline sat back in his chair. She could see the scales shifting behind that narrow, pixie face of his. He sighed and put his hands on his knees. “Okay, Marta. I’m going to put my cards on the table here. I’m here looking for Siren.” He paused, then, clearly expecting some sort of reaction.

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?” It sounded a bit familiar, sure, but no more than a line from a movie or show you only half-watched.

“I thought it might, considering that she’s been at the top of half a dozen most wanted lists for weeks now.”

“I usually just toss those in the trash.”

“And,” he said, “considering that she left in a boat, in the same direction your father and brother were last seen leaving, less than an hour after they left. According to surveillance feeds from the marina.”

He reached into his jacket again and produced a few grainy grayscale images. The first was a ship she would have known anywhere, no matter how pixelated--she’d grown up with it. The *Ghost*. She could even make out the miniature figures on board--the one at the helm, leaning slightly forward like a hunting dog, obviously her father. The other, slouched, one hand along the railing, could only be Adrien.

The next photo was a boat she didn’t recognize. A larger one, probably a trawler, and on board were several blurry figures, all dressed in black. One of them, at the prow, was shorter than the others. A head of choppy black hair. A dark coat. That was all Marta could make out.

“Now,” Cline was saying, “I understand it can look pretty bad to be associating with a terrorist. But if you can help us find her, I’d be more than willing to overlook some fraternizing--

especially if she had anything to do with what happened to your brother.”

“Wait,” said Marta, everything starting to pile up. “You think she--what, disappeared him?”

Cline spread his hands. “You tell me, Marta.”

“I thought,” she said, weighing her next words carefully. “I thought whatever happened had something do with the--” End of the World. “The thing out in the water.”

“And what did happen, Marta?”

“I don’t know. My father just said there was a bright flash, and then he doesn’t remember anything after that.”

He let that hang between them for a moment, watching her. Cline dug around in his pocket and handed her a neat white piece of cardstock. On it was a phone number and two lines:

Santander Cline

The Authority

“Okay,” he said. “I believe you. If you think of anything else, please call me. And tell your dad to do the same.”

“Sure.”

“I mean it,” he said. “Just because I believe you, doesn’t mean everyone’s going to. There are going to be people looking into you, Marta. If there’s anything you’re not being honest and forthcoming about, they’re going to find out. And they’re not going to be as nice about it as I’m being.” There was that boy scout smile. She knew he’d be smiling the very same way when he packed her father off in ice.

Cline pushed himself up from the couch, with Marta still staring at the card. “Oh, and I wouldn’t worry about the Offshore Entity, if I were you. Not for a decade or two more at least.”

Marta watched him from the window as he got into a black town-car a little ways down the road. When he had been ten minutes gone, she went into the kitchen and opened her grocery bags. Carefully, precisely, she smashed two sleeping pills with the flat of her knife and rubbed the powder into one of the beef cuts. Marta paused at the counter, fingers still bloody. Should she at least sear it?

She laughed, then, pressing one hand to her mouth, like someone might hear. In the face of it all, she laughed. Her father had always preferred his steaks rare.

Black - Chapter 12 - Ascalon

It was night when they went down, and raining, though no thunderbolt had lit the sky to signal their doom. The lights along the aisle had only flickered once, then again. The captain came on the intercom and said something but it was garbled by interference that seemed to strobe in and out, like a heartbeat. Then the lights flickered off one more time, and stayed off all the way down.

She didn't remember getting out of the plane, only looking around and realizing that she was in the water, and also that she had somehow managed to put on her life jacket. The plane was already gone, somewhere beneath the waves.

All around her the sky and the ocean became one liquid dark mass, indistinguishable from one another. All Oluchi could see were the other survivors, and even then only the blinking green of their locator lights, where they bobbed in the water. Like stars fallen from the sky.

First came shock. It was good that she could just float there a while, because Oluchi could not have kept herself afloat. Below her, that first thought, surfacing from all the numbness: this water should be freezing. It was the Atlantic. It was winter. It didn't matter that they had flown out of Miami international, where the water was still a pale imitation of summer. She should already be slipping into unconsciousness, but she wasn't. Why?

Hand over hand she swam towards the closest locator light. Up close, she saw his red hair, the cut above his eye dribbling blood over the left side of his face. He didn't seem to see her until she grabbed his arm.

"There are others!" She could barely hear herself over the waves and the rain. "Other lights! We have to get the others!"

They swam like this, against a gentle but inexplicable current, to the other lights they could reach; a teenage girl whose milk-maid braids had somehow survived the trauma of impact, then a man in full business attire, shedding individual components (red tie, jacket, one polished shoe) to better swim; an old woman who had broken something vital, so that every gentle wave that passed over made her scrunch up in pain. They held onto each other's arms or vests as they kicked towards the next person, until there was only one remaining, and as they swam towards it the final locator just winked out. Either its owner had turned it off or they had been suddenly yanked under. Both options made Oluchi shiver in a way that the shock and water had not.

In the air, gathering in her mouth with each stroke was a bitter, chemical taste alongside all the brine. Jet fuel, she thought. It must have bled into the water all around them. But she couldn't let herself think about that slow, poisoned death. She knew that to achieve even that, they would need to be very lucky.

There were twelve of them. On a plane that must have carried at least a hundred people, only twelve had survived. Together they formed a ring, arms locked, braced against the swelling dark. The blinking lights on their collars turning them into some vast bioluminescent creature, risen from the abyss below.

Oluchi didn't know how long they floated like this, but morning came suddenly, which meant she must have fallen asleep at some point. The red-headed man, the bleeding one--Simon, he'd told her--was both shaking her and pressing his finger to his lips.

"Don't scream," he said, when she finally focused her eyes on him. Then she looked to her left.

At first she didn't understand what she was seeing. A small island. A rogue iceberg,

making its way south. But even as she began to pick out the individual features of the creature in front of her--the thing that was not a sloping cliff face but instead some kind of head, half-submerged; the mountainous rise that formed not a jutting peak but an arm, five massive and tapering fingers frozen in a reaching pose--her mind demanded that she call it by other names. A drift of supercooled lava. A murdered ocean liner, overgrown with the organic film of life. A mutant sargasso, twisted into an impossible silhouette. But she knew, deep down, that it wasn't any of those things, just like she knew it wasn't as still as it seemed to be. The clearest impression she received was of something they were barely seeing at all, and at once she knew that what was beneath the surface must have been incalculably large compared to what was visible to them.

She had seen the news. She just hadn't thought about it very much. Life had always offered her other, more immediate problems to spend her attention on. Until now.

"It's been here the whole night," she said, knowing at once. Her throat was swollen and red from the salt, each word a burr. Simon just nodded.

Nobody had to discuss their next move. Together, as one organism, they swam away from the creature. Between their injuries and the strange current that seemed to draw them one stroke back for every two they took, progress was slow. The whole time Oluchi focused up, at the clear blue skies overhead, waiting for the chop of helicopters or pontoon-bottomed planes, rescue, any kind of rescue, but there was nothing. They were alone.

She and the others had been swimming for at least several hours when they started to feel it.

"It's getting colder," said Simon. "The further we get from--it--the colder the water becomes."

Which meant that if they swam far enough, they would be entering the deep cold of the Atlantic ocean, and certain hypothermia.

Oluchi looked behind them. It was hard to tell how much distance they had gained. Enough to diminish the creature some, but she still felt within grabbing distance. No one had ever seen it move. It was too slow--that's what she remembered reading, online. But what if it just hadn't had the right motivation yet?

Sunset came as a deep relief. Everyone in their circle was sunburned, even Oluchi. She could feel the sting along her forehead, her bony cheeks, the back of her neck. Even her eyes felt burned. And hours of direct sun had only made them all thirstier. The creature was hidden again from sight by the darkness, though if she shielded her eyes from their locators for a moment she could just make out its faint outline in the starlight.

Despite the pain and the thirst and the hunger and the fear, sleep came to Oluchi easily. Her arms were locked with Simon on one side and the old woman--Meredith--on the other. She was so tired that even Meredith's little mewls of pain could stand in for a lullaby as the ocean, her prisoner, rocked her back and forth like a drowsy child. When she felt something brush past her leg, it barely seemed real.

It wasn't the screams that woke her, it was the sharp jerk down, filling her mouth and nose with a flood of brine and that chemical taste. When her vest yanked her back to the surface, it took whole precious seconds of coughing and sputtering before she realized that Simon was no longer there. At her right was Meredith--to her left, nobody.

She tried to shout for help, but it was drowned out by the screaming coming from across the circle.

It was a man, one of the flight attendants. His little tin badge had been glinting in the sun

all day. Now he was making horrible sounds, raw animal noises, and then he was gone too, pulled under with one savage jerk, and it was quiet.

She didn't sleep any more that night. None of them did. But by morning they were missing another, a college student flying home to visit family. No one had felt him let go, no one had heard anything, but in the morning he was gone.

"Kick for their noses. If one grabs you, stick a finger in their eye," said the businessman the next day. He had been a surfer in his youth. This wasn't the first time he had encountered sharks.

"That wasn't a shark," Meredith said. Her voice came in and out, like a bad phone signal. "It had lights along the sides. Running lights."

Apart from that nobody talked for some time. After the horrors of the night and the holes in their circle left by those who were taken, they seemed to understand for the first time exactly where they were, what the next few days and nights might hold. It had been over twenty-four hours since their plane had gone down. If rescue was going to come, it would have already.

More bad news: they were closer to the creature than they had been the night before. It didn't seem possible that it had traveled so far at that invisible pace, but Oluchi couldn't account for the current that had dragged them back in its direction. That, at least, was the explanation she preferred. The alternative--that it was somehow moving faster when they couldn't see it--felt like an invitation to all sorts of other thoughts.

Oluchi was the one that got them swimming again. They wouldn't have to go the whole day again, even with the strange current underneath them. Just a little further, as far as they could get from it, before leaving the warmer waters of this new sea for the cold Atlantic.

They found the soda cans after about an hour of swimming; one bobbed into Oluchi's

mouth, clacking painfully against her teeth. There were dozens of them, bobbing in the water, aluminum tabs glinting in the sunlight, Coke and Sprite and Canada Dry and those little cans of Minutemaide juice. They must have sprung loose from the beverage cart, still sinking along with their laptops, their professional and casual outfits, and their donut-shaped travel pillows, to the bottom of the ocean. Oluchi and the others all started grabbing the cans out of the waves and tucking them into their life jackets, or popping them open and drinking the syrupy mana as quickly as they could. It was the first bit of luck they'd had since the plane went down. But as the sun descended towards the horizon with meteoric shades of orange and red, the teenager-- Riley--began to cry. "Oh god," she said. "Oh god. My fucking period started today."

Neither of the men she was locking arms with seemed to know what to do with this information, so Oluchi let go of her own neighbors and swam over to her. "Hey. Easy. Hey, it's all right," she said, making the most comforting sounds she could think of.

"He was bleeding," Riley managed between sobs. "When they took him."

Simon, she realized. Riley was thinking of Simon.

"Hey now," said Oluchi. "That doesn't mean anything. It was just bad luck. He wasn't the only one who they got, either. Any one of us could be next."

"They came because he was bleeding," said Riley. "And they're going to come again, because of me."

"You don't know that. They weren't sharks," said Oluchi. She wasn't even sure what she was saying was true, but she knew immediately and instinctively that they couldn't afford to consider the truth of what she was saying. The actions such a truth might compel were unthinkable.

She could already see it forming in the eyes of the men on either side of Riley. One of

them a member of the Peace Corps, the other a sour and bald man whom she knew nothing about. But whether her stare or the watchful eyes of their own better angels cowed them, neither said a word.

It was pointless anyway. Once the sun had set low enough, Riley simply let go and started swimming. Only the bald man had the presence of mind to shout after her; more than anything, he sounded annoyed.

Oluchi let go of the arms on either side of her and started swimming after the girl. Riley hadn't taken off her locator, at least, so in the gathering darkness she could at least follow that blinking yellow star. "Wait!" she tried to call, until a mistimed wave sent a rush of seawater down her throat, and she had to pause her crawl to hack and cough for a minute.

It took a moment to notice the growing cold of the water. Riley had swam straight out from the creature, directly into the Atlantic. Oluchi felt the fingers of cold pushing under her skin, wrapping her muscles. The locator light wasn't far now, and in the gathering darkness it was all she could see. She pushed on, one stroke at a time.

As she got closer Oluchi could see the wrongness from the angle of the locator light. It was lying flat in the water, not at shoulder-height, several inches up. With a few more strokes she saw that there was no shoulder for it to hang on. Riley was gone; her life vest just floated there, another piece of ocean trash.

Oluchi wasn't sure how long she bobbed there. At least until the ache in her muscles turned to warmth, which some distant part of her recognized as a very bad sign. If she didn't get back to the warmer waters around the creature, she knew that she would die.

But every direction looked the same at night. She couldn't see anyone's locator lights; she had swam too far. She couldn't even see the outline of the creature, thanks to a haze of fog

that had dropped the sky about twenty feet overhead.

With nothing else to guide her, Oluchi just picked a direction and started to swim. She had gone maybe fifty feet when she started hearing the screams. The fog distorted the sound so that it seemed to be coming from all around her, seemed not to be the survivors screaming but Riley and Simon and all the countless dead below them. Somewhere to her right there was a pale blue flash of light, and the sound of a great flat splash, and that was how she knew which direction to swim.

Meredith was unconscious when Oluchi found her, slumping down into her life jacket, senseless. Everyone else was gone.

Meredith never described what had happened while Oluchi was out in the fog, and Oluchi never asked. When morning came she put Meredith's arm over her shoulder--three days on the water and it already felt as thin as a knitting needle--and, gently as she could manage, began to kick them back towards the site of the crash. Back towards the creature.

When the sun climbed a little more, burning up the fog, she saw it. Rising ahead, like an island. Faintly glimmering in the morning light from where the fog had settled on its vast and impossible form.

One kick after another, she drove them closer. This time, at least, the current was with them.

For eight days she survived on its back. Trapped in her body, floating somewhere behind her eyes, Black watched her scoop handfuls of rainwater from the little pools across its continental skin. He watched her stalk towards a resting albatross, oblivious to the strangeness of its roost, until she was close enough to grab it. That night, under the startling brightness of a half-

moon, she plucked the feathers from its body and pushed the stringy ropes of bloody meat past Meredith's lips.

Each day she expected the old woman to die and each day the old woman surprised her by living, though by the fifth morning on the creature her eyes had turned a pale and filmy blue, as if she'd gone blind overnight. She stopped what little talking she had been doing. She even stopped those little anguished noises she had been making since the crash--now she simply lay there, hour after hour, collecting sun burns and breathing deep, greedy breaths. Sometimes, she sang, though never with words.

Laying there at night, pressed flat against what she might call the creature's collarbone, was the only time Oluchi thought she could feel movement--and even then, it was as gradual as the turn of the earth, or the widening gyre of her own mind, sanity a little further with each pass. She wondered what her own eyes looked like. What they would look like in another week. In a month.

On the eight day she saw it coming over the horizon, her madness at last given vivid and hallucinatory form. It was a ship, and an old one. The iron siding was bloody with rust. Black clouds poured from a smokestack. An antique vision, sailing out of the past. Idly, without much purpose, she waved as it approached.

From a distance she watched as a small rowboat was lowered into the water from the deck. The day was warm and bright and the sun angled so that the surface of the water had broken into a million flashing mirrors. She couldn't make out the unusual bulk of the protective suit until the man rowing had pulled up nearly alongside the thing. It was crinkled and white, with a domed face-plate and two canisters of oxygen strapped to him like a backpack.

He looked just like an astronaut, Oluchi realized. An astronaut, rowing towards her from

an old steamship. She felt oddly proud. If she was going to finally suffer a psychotic break, perched along the back of an unfathomable monster like a flea, at least her hallucinations had arrived in stunningly original, if nonsensical, form.

Lying in bed, Black pieced together those last shreds of memory. One arm around Meredith, both Oluchi and the astronaut helping her down one gargantuan shoulder and into the boat. Meredith's quiet, toneless singing as they rowed back. The sight of those moth-gray eyes through the glass helmet.

Then it was over. Black knew from the way he curled his fingers against the sheets of his bed and felt the gentle whisper of the fabric. He could move. He could breathe his own breath again. Black could have cried. For *days* he had been trapped, not just in the body of another person but in the most horrific few days she had ever experienced.

He was in his own room, he realized. In his bed. Next to him was an IV, the feed of which led into his arm. Across the room was what looked like the cone of an old gramophone, plugged into a console. The console was ticking irregularly, like a geiger counter, at a frequency that seemed to be slowing. Behind the console was a chair.

His core, animating desire, just then, was to revel for a moment in his own body--the meat suit that he had treated, for so much of his life, like an untrustworthy neighbor. For the first time he could remember he was thankful for the way his feet poked over the edge of the bed, the milky paleness of skin against sheet. He wanted to stay awake, to keep appreciating it all, but he was so tired. All he could hope, before sleep dragged him down, was that he'd wake again in his own body.

When he woke, he wasn't alone. The man with the moth-gray eyes--Observer--was

sitting in the chair dragged out from behind the console. He was holding a clipboard, it seemed.

“Mr. Gorie,” said Observer. “I feel that I must offer you an apology.”

Black tried to gather himself. He tried to remember what he might say, in a situation like this, and when his own voice came out it surprised him. “For which part? The kidnapping or the imprisonment? Or the, whatever that was. Whatever just happened to me.”

“It wasn’t my intention to force you into reliving Ms. Mezu’s contact event. Understand that we’ve done this exercise several times now, with several different patient pairings. These results are entirely new.”

“How exciting,” said Black. He pictured marching over and twisting Observer’s head off his shoulders. The image was vivid and satisfying. Maybe that was the key to getting over this squeamishness--proper motivation. The other man looked to be made out of sticks and nerve. He could do it, if he tried. If his body would listen. The untrustworthy neighbor.

“I understand that this has all been very traumatic,” said Observer. Every now and then he’d glance down at his notes. “I am concerned, as director of the facility, that you will act rashly in the wake of these events.”

“Rashly.”

“Yes. That self-interest--your desire to survive the effects of your own contact--is no longer sufficient motivation for you to continue complying with our tests and treatment, because it will always be balanced against the possibility of further trauma.”

“If you mean I’m never going to let one of your lab nerds touch me again then you’re goddamn right,” said Black.

Observer exhaled through his nose, clearly suppressing some frustration. “Mr. Gorie, I’d like to ask you to reconsider. You’ve seen the face of our enemy, now. You know what we’re up

against. Every day it gets closer, and the only people--the only *scientists*--at all concerned with stopping it are here, in this building. You have a chance to be a part of that.”

He leaned forward, and despite being twice the guy’s size, Black felt an inexplicable desire to move away. “It’s *coming*. The changes warping your body right now, *as we speak*, might be not a curse but a magic bullet. A *spear*. The answer I’ve been looking for. Tell me--have you been dreaming, here? What of?”

With each word Black could feel all the enthusiasm he’d felt for returning to his own flesh and bone vanishing. His skin crawled; he had the momentary, insane desire to scratch at it, to get at the poisoned blood underneath. He felt things crawling beneath the surface and tried hard to tell himself it was just in his head. In one hand, he balled up a palmful of bedsheet. “I’m not going to sit for your goddamn tarot reading bullshit anymore. I’m done.”

Observer seemed to go limp, sagging back in his seat. A moment later, he stood. “Fine,” he said. “I hope you enjoy what remains of your time. I hope everyone does.”

After that, he left. For a long time Black just lay there, tensing and relaxing his muscles, remembering what it was like to have a body. He was interrupted by a knock at his door. In all the time he had been at Jackson Douglas, nobody had ever knocked before.

“Come in?”

It was Oluchi. The last time he had seen her--when he had *been* her--she must have weighed almost half of what she did now. He had saved her; whatever else Observer had done, he had saved her. Black still remembered the relief she felt when she realized the boat was real. It wasn’t until then that he thought to wonder if she had traded places with him. Seen the inside of the Bower house, or something even further back.

“I’m sorry,” he blurted out. “I don’t--jeez--how do you even--”

Black found himself studying the tile grouting underfoot, rather than look right at her. It seemed a violation, though neither of them had asked for it. An intimacy that had been forced upon them both.

“Save it,” she said. “You know everything, so you know nothing you could say would matter. And besides, I don’t want your pity. I want your help.”

“With what?”

She shut the door behind her. “Meredith survived. She’s here. I want your help killing her.”

Chapter 13 - Protect Yourself

The newscaster looks nervous. His helmet of hair, normally sealed tight, has sprung several leaks, and he keeps looking to his right, at some invisible producer or handler. “Are we-- is it--we’re live? Good evening. In light of the recent spate of illnesses, city officials are recommending several measures to protect yourself and your family. While there is no need currently to avoid public spaces such as bars and restaurants, at least thirty seconds of hand washing after returning home is considered the most effective way of staying healthy.”

He glances down at the papers in front of him and nods once, as if to reassure himself. “Should you or a family member start showing symptoms of what some have referred to as “Antillian Flu,” the best thing you can do is keep isolated while consuming plenty of fluids and high-protein meals. Local hospitals are already experiencing a high volume of cases, so see your doctor only as a last resort. Overall, the mayor has emphasized--”

He pauses, here, looking down again at the sheet of paper. He’s sweating, now. His starched collar is visibly wilting. “Emphasized that rumors of this illness being food or water-borne are as of now unsubstantiated. Panic is more likely to hurt the local economy than any mysterious disease--so have a margarita and some fresh-caught seafood, and do your part for the city.”

The screen cuts to the next segment. Later, much later, they will check in on a new rumor regarding the Offshore Entity--something grim and conspiratorial, the failed experiment of a foreign government, things like that. By that time, though, most people would be out for the night--the only ones still watching are the grandparents with insomnia, their houseboats rocked

gently back and forth by the rising tide.

Marta - Chapter 14 - Come Out and See the Movement

Even through the narrow crack in the door allowed by the security chain, Marta could tell that Milosh was surprised to see her.

“Christ,” he said. Her next clue.

“Let me in.”

“How did you get this address?”

“The city’s not that big, man.” And Milosh had brought one too many girlfriends home if he wanted to keep it a secret. “Let me in,” she said again.

He shut the door. She wasn’t so sure it would open again, even a crack. A moment later, though, she heard the chain unlatch.

Milosh Kalfar looked a far cry from the smooth operator he’d been the last time she’d seen him. No nice threads--instead he wore sweatpants and an old jersey with their high school’s mascot, a blue heron with a smug grin. She was used to seeing his long, dark hair swept back with some sort of sharp-smelling gel, but right then, it hung limp and chaotic, like he’d just rolled out of bed. The circles under his eyes told her he hadn’t been doing much sleeping, though. *Well*, she thought, *welcome to the club*.

“Is this a bad time?” she said.

“If I told you yes, would you go away?”

Marta shrugged.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought.”

He turned and wandered further inside. Marta took that as her invitation and stepped in after him, shutting the door. “You’ve been out of touch, Milosh. You don’t call, you don’t text.”

Nothing since she had asked for his help. It had been almost a week.

“And you can’t take a hint,” he said. Marta heard a slosh of liquid from the other room. Milosh returned holding a coffee cup that, from the smell, contained either vodka or nail polish remover.

Clearly this apartment--housed in one of the newer condos along the shore, the ones Beachhead and Caron had so much faith in--had seen better days. She could make out the tall, proud windows by the rectangular cuts of light outlining the blackout curtains. Styrofoam containers of takeout and smoke-stained bongos cluttered the surfaces of glass coffee tables, and ash dusted the expensive leather sofa. On a massive TV screen hanging from the wall, ants swarmed over a massive hercules beetle, searching for the cracks in its armor.

Marta started to speak and Milosh held up a finger. “Did you or did you not have a federal fucking agent come to your door yesterday?”

“Yeah. Asking about--”

“Siren. Right?” said Milosh. In the dim light his eyes looked dead and blank. Fish-like.

“Right.”

“You know who that is?”

She did now. Antillian radical. Formerly a card-carrying member of SPEAR, before she’d left for reasons unknown. Now she pursued a solo-career as an anti-government radical. Marta nodded.

“Unbelievable. You mix me up with a fucking terrorist,” said Milosh, shaking his head. “Look, she’s *here*. She’s in the city somewhere, and they’re looking for her, and I don’t want to get between them.”

“Who’s them?”

“The FBI? The CIA? The men in fucking black, I don’t know. Honestly, Marta, you want my advice? Here it is, free of charge: you stay as far away from this as you can manage. Go back to your normal life. Hold a big, fun wake for your brother and then go back to normal.”

Normal. What kind of normal was she supposed to go back to, exactly? Even if her father wasn’t--whatever he had become. Even if she hadn’t lost her job. Was she just supposed to pretend the End of the World wasn’t out there, getting a little closer every day? “I can’t do that.”

“Then you’re a lot stupider than I thought.” He paused to swig from his mug and grimace at whatever was inside.

“This is going to sound weird, Milosh, but--what exactly did Siren *do*?” Marta had done her reading. Official channels didn’t have much--she broke into a government building a few months ago and stole some hard drives. Cyber-crime via crowbar--not the kind of thing to get your face plastered all over government websites. On the other hand, the less-than-official sources had her responsible for everything from kidnapping the president’s daughter to Area 51-related offenses. “Why is everyone looking for her now?”

Milosh laughed, louder than he probably meant to. He was, she realized, already drunk.

“She didn’t just steal some laptops, Marta. They haven’t told anybody what she stole, because if they knew what a *radical* like Siren had gotten her hands on, there would be riots.”

“What?” said Marta. “What did she steal?”

“A briefcase bomb,” said Milosh. Under his breath, as if he was afraid of waking somebody. “She stole a fucking pocket nuke, Marta.”

A bright flash. That’s what her father had said, before his eyes turned blue. Before he sprouted a mouth full of needles. A bright flash, and then he’d gone into the water.

“Now get the fuck out of my house,” said Milosh with his empty mug. “Consider our

business concluded. And if your spook comes knocking at my door, you better believe I'm pointing him back your way."

She stood up and went for the door, her feet crunching in some kind of chip debris.

Marta could hear the crowds long before she saw them. The city had blocked off half the streets downtown for the demonstration. The onlookers were all bunched up behind police barricades--businessmen in slate-colored suits, little browned fruit-selling women, teenagers cutting school, and, as always, the sunburned tourist, fumbling with their iPhone for a picture. Some looked nervous, some excited, some bored. One figure, in dirty gray robes, hunched under a filthy hood. She couldn't see much of his face, but the hunch and the robes looked familiar--one of the Skrimshanders. *So even the local crazies turned up to see crazy, imported.* Marta found herself scanning the crowd's wrists, looking for that twist of red cloth, but she couldn't see any. Not yet. On the other side of the barrier were cops--the one nearest to Marta with a shaved head, tattoos running up one arm, a pair of mirrored sunglasses over his eyes. Something non-regulation sat in his holster--she could tell by the chrome glint of the slide. It wouldn't be the only piece of ostentatious firepower here for long, though. The Red Bands were coming.

And where the Red Bands were, Marta knew, SPEAR wouldn't be far behind.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She checked it--an automated message from the timesheet app at work. *YOU ARE NOW ONE HOUR AND THIRTY-SEVEN MINUTES LATE. :)* Marta put the phone away and lingered behind the bulk of the crowd, looking for any conspicuous clumps of black, or people in masks. There were plenty of the former, but few of the latter, and no one looked ready to hop the barricade yet.

What exactly was her plan, when she found them? Her father had always been a great

believer in plans. He dwelled in a chaotic world--a world of fickle fish, of sudden, unfair disease. A plan--that was your only defense against the awful randomness that seemed to govern everything else. Marta hadn't gotten farther than finding them, though. Maybe she'd just walk up and ask--Hey, I'm looking for your terrorist fugitive friend. Seen her?

She was hunting for some kind of box to stand on when she heard it--precisely the silence, in a game of hockey, when the puck enters the magnetic field about ten feet outside the goal. That hanging pause, where everyone waits to see what's going to happen. They were here.

In her mind, when she'd heard about the march, Marta had pictured a full *Wehrmacht* parade, ranks upon ranks of goose-stepping neo-nazi idiots. And maybe if they'd been somewhere like Miami, they really could have drummed up a legion. As it was, the Red Bands were dwarfed by the spectators on either side. There were less than a hundred men in the blocked off street--but as to their allegiance, and their belief in *the cause*, there could be no doubt.

Most of them were in red--red wifebeaters showing off stringy, pale arms, red streaks of makeup under the eyes like warpaint, red baseball hats, on one man a flowing red cape. Red sunglasses, reflective like insect eyes. On one man, a red balaclava. Some wore camouflage, too, like they were marching through hostile jungle rather than a city street, but always a slash of red somewhere, and *everywhere* that red tie of cloth.

Some carried flags--the stars and stripes, near the front, but elsewhere ones she didn't recognize, with colors and patterns and crests that must have decoded to some great secret about the world, some wink and nod to anyone else in on the joke. There were circles encasing lightning bolts, skulls in gas masks, a lion draped in gold, blocky alphabets she couldn't read, languages which might have been Greek or Nordic. Some wore helmets--modern, military-type, with the chin-strap forking around the ears and the high seating way up on the skull.

Several carried guns. Not dinky little handguns, either, which could kill maybe a few people at a go, if you were lucky--sleek black rifles with loops of red ribbon tied around the barrel. It must have been illegal for them to carry such things out in the open, but the cops didn't seem to be doing anything about it. Alongside the modern weapons of war, though, were tools that seemed medieval--heavy wooden and steel poles, which clacked along the ground in time with the mob's footsteps, and shields--broad, circular shields, like vikings, inscribed with the same arcane lettering as the flags whipping above.

They didn't seem like a protest march, they seemed like a war party from some apocalypse only they could see blooming around them. She saw how they scanned the crowds as they walked, slow and deliberate--how their hands rested loose on the handles of their rifles, fingers hovering just outside the trigger guard. Of course they were ready for a fight. Why else had they come here? They were looking for SPEAR too.

But Marta spotted them before any of the Red Bands. Not a group, an opposing army of black-clad thugs, but a single figure, stepping out of the crowd. It was hard to tell, under the leather jacket and behind the black mask covering the lower half of her face, but Marta thought it was a woman. Slight, too, and short.

By then, Marta knew Siren's height--short. And her build, too: slight.

The masked woman unslung a shopping bag from her shoulder. The cops hadn't seen her yet. Just then, one of the Red Bands, a man with a hockey mask sprayed red, pointed at her with a baseball bat. Around him, the rifles came up. For a horrible moment, Marta thought they were about to open fire into the crowd, that particular section of which contained at least three kids, their faces smeared toxic green from ninja turtle popsicles. But they hesitated--this wasn't the glorious, vicious street battle they wanted--and the cops finally seemed to catch up, one fumbling

for his own gun, the other turning around in place, searching for whatever everyone else saw. Confusion and indecision, a long moment of both. That was all the masked woman needed.

She pulled a corked glass bottle out of the bag and hucked it overhand at the Red Bands. One in the front caught the bottle on his shield. It shattered, and suddenly the air around them was filled with a heavy white smoke. A moment of fear passed through Marta--what did sarin gas look like?-- until the smell of rotten eggs reached her, potent and awful, and she felt her lunch against the bulge in her throat. The Red Bands started to cough and back up, but not before the masked woman launched another stink bomb, this one landing between the Red Bands and the cop still trying to get the gun out of his holster--he stopped fumbling and started retching.

With one more wind-up, the masked woman tossed the whole shopping bag into the middle of the street. There was the sound of glass breaking, and then the smoke was pouring from the bag, from who knew how many bottles. Among the marchers: chaos. A man with a crimson-dyed beard and a rambo-style headband was shouting at the others to *form ranks*, interrupted every few seconds by a fit of coughing. It wasn't going well; no one was forming ranks. People on both sides began to run from the stink, and the masked woman from everyone else.

Marta swallowed her nausea and hopped over the barricade, tugging her shirt over her nose to catch some of the smell. One of the cops nearby reached for her, but doubled over heaving the next instant, and she slipped out of reach, sprinting across the street. One chance. This was her one chance.

She vaulted over the barricade on the other side. One of the kids was laughing hysterically, clapping even--she shouldered his marshmellowy tourist dad out of the way, his only complaint a surprised *whiff* as she knocked the air out of him. She was through the crowd a

moment later, just in time to see the masked woman turn down an alleyway further up the street.

Behind Marta, someone was calling for everyone to step out of the road--cop or concerned citizen, she couldn't tell, didn't have time to turn around and check. Marta turned into the alley after the woman, running hard--no sight of her anymore, but the alley bent left up ahead, that must have been where she went. She turned the corner, then turned another.

Then she was running straight into a wall of black, a barricade of leather and spikes and muscle that she rebounded off of. Marta slammed into a recycling bin, sprawling out amid a collection of bottles and cans.

"Oh, shit," said the wall she'd collided with. "Sorry. Thought you were Red Band."

Marta looked up. The man wasn't actually much taller than she was, just nearly twice as wide. His leather jacket was peppered with dull metal spikes and his face was wrapped in black cloth. Behind him were three other figures, also in black--and farthest back, breathing hard from the run, the masked woman.

Her hood must have fallen down in the chase, though, and Marta knew at once that this wasn't Siren. Her skin was too dark, her hair too dense and curled--not Antillian.

"Are you okay?" said the man who'd knocked her over. He held out a hand--it looked surprisingly soft.

"Eli, she still *followed me*," said the woman, annoyed.

"You're SPEAR?" asked Marta, pushing herself to her feet without his help.

"That depends," said a skinny man with tattoos poking up from his black collar. "Are you a law enforcement officer?"

"Do I look like a cop to you?"

"We learned pretty early that cops look like whoever they want to. Especially if they're

trying to get friendly,” said the masked woman. “Now, before the armed fascists arrive, could you kindly get the fuck out of here?”

But Marta was looking at the big one. It was hard to tell, under the mask, but he seemed young--he couldn't be much older than her.

Ever since the fighting had started between them and the Red Bands, Marta had heard SPEAR described as dangerous, violent criminals. Her father called them *riot-makers*--Adrien, a simpler *street commies*. But the people in front of her didn't seem violent or dangerous. Mostly they looked scared. Again and again, the skinny man would turn his head to look behind them, like a nervous twitch. Maybe that's why, instead of playing any kind of angle, Marta just blurted it out.

“I'm looking for Siren,” she said. “I need to find her. Do you know where she is?”

The masked woman turned to the others. “Okay, she's definitely a cop.”

“I'm not a cop! Look, ask--” she blanked, searching for a name that might convince them. “Ask Milosh Kalfar. Ask anyone at the docks, or the marina, or--look, my name is Marta Gonzales. My father is Victor Gonzales. He and my brother were involved in some kind of accident. My father got sick and my brother--my brother is gone, and I think Siren knows what happened.

The words came spilling out of her, flopping ungainly in front of the soldiers of Silenced Peoples' Extralegal Action Reserve.

“Help me,” she said, to fill the silence that followed. “Please.”

The masked woman was the first to speak. “Listen: we don't know anything about Siren. She doesn't roll with us. Not our cell, and not SPEAR. Not for years.”

“But--” said Eli. The nice one. Before he could say anything else, the masked woman

jabbed him in the arm, stopping him short. Then she turned back to Marta. “I’m sorry about your family, but we just came here to bust up a parade. Now--”

Whatever she was going to say next was lost to the sound of screaming--screaming, and gunshots, back from the direction of the street. The masked faces around her all flinched at the sound. The guy with the neck tattoos looked ready to bolt.

“Shit,” said the masked woman.

“We didn’t--we didn’t leave anyone behind?” said Eli.

“No,” said the skinny one.

“Then who the fuck are they shooting at?” she said. She turned and took a few steps back the way Marta came--toward the street, and the gunshots. “Hey, Backpack!” she said. The skinny guy looked up sharply.

“You have the fucking tourniquets,” she said. “So let’s go.”

And just like that, the others were jogging after her. Away from Marta.

“Hey!” she said, starting after them. They still hadn’t told her anything. “Wait! Fucking wait!”

When they emerged from the alley, the chaos in the street was deeper and stranger than it had been when she’d left. Clouds of sulphur smoke still drifted through the air. Anyone not already gone was running from what was happening in the street. Or, rather, what had just happened. Two people were lying on the hot asphalt, one of them clearly a Red Band. She had seen him marching, before. Now it wasn’t just the bandana around his head that was dyed red, though--his t-shirt was half-soaked in red, his pants and shoes were spattered with it, the wooden shield he’d carried was smeared and streaked with it. Both hands were pressed to his neck, where the red pumped and pumped through wet, sticky fingers. “He fucking,” she heard him say, in a

voice that sounded wet and thick. “He fucking *bit* me!”

Not far from him stood another marcher, the shoulders of his jacket covered in eldritch military patches. He shuffled a little closer to the bleeding one, then farther, then closer again, like a nervous horse. The rifle he held was trained on the other prone figure--the man in the filthy robes and hood, she realized. The Skrimshander.

He was lying on his back, in the middle of the road. Even from here, she could see the mess the bullets had made of the man’s bare chest--pocked and studded with bloody holes, made like coral. His face, though. His face.

At first she thought it was a mask. There was no human face that could look like that: human bones didn’t grow in ridges or plates, twisting even the shape of the face, the cheekbones, the jaw into something unfamiliar. The mouth was worse, though. Painted in the Red Band’s blood, it hung limp and open--but the jaw seemed to sag out horizontally, spreading rather than dropping. It had split into mandibles, she realized; even at this distance she could make out the crowded and odd delicate features of a crustacean maw. And his eyes, staring listless and empty, were a bright, solid blue.

The others, Eli and the masked woman and Backpack, stopped at the police barricades, frozen for a moment by the bloody scene in the road. But it was only a moment before the masked woman swung herself over the barricade. Then the others were following, running, to help--who? The monster? The fascists? Both?

Marta felt her stomach turn and roll like the tide. The smell of blood and cordite, rotten eggs and panic--it was too much with that alien, lifeless face staring up at her. She turned and ran, back home. Back to her father.

She watched as her father ate his dinner. Always a hand on the garage door, in case he-- what? Lunged for her? He never had, though. Hadn't when she clipped the fuzzy handcuffs on him, chaining him to the tool rack. Sometimes he pulled up against them during his meals, but never in anger or frustration. Sometimes he just forgot they were there.

It was scary, there was no denying that, but she found it hard to look away once he'd started tearing the raw, bloody cuts of beef, ripping away fistfuls of flesh and swallowing them in choked gasps. There was something different, Marta thought now, about his throat--the way it distended and bulged with the effort, purple veins flush against the surface as he ate. He liked his meat raw now. If she didn't splash him with water every few hours, his skin would get dry and tight. He liked to sing, a long and tuneless song that drifted through their thin walls and into the room where she slept. Marta was learning many new things about her father.

Close to the end her mother had become something else, too. Adrien was too young to remember--he'd only ever had blurry snapshots of her, memory-wise--but Marta remembered how tired she always was. Gone was the woman who could hang her kids upside down, dunking their heads in the surf and laughing. She didn't even read anymore. It was too much effort. Though sometimes their father would read from Jack London, her favorite. All those stories of rugged adventure. When she fell asleep, she'd always lie and say she was only resting her eyes. Then she'd ask him to keep going.

Marta could hear the start of the rain on the tin roof of the garage, a thousand tiny hammer-falls. All day she'd been smelling it in the air--a storm out of the gulf. The doorbell rang and she shut the door to the garage.

"Shush," she said, through the door. "Be quiet." There had been a Victor that never would have let her speak to him that way. Maybe that Victor was gone. But he still recognized

her. She knew that, somehow. He wasn't some lunatic cultist, some ravening monster. She had to believe that.

Marta put the rest of the steaks in the fridge and rinsed the blood off her hands. The doorbell rang again--"One second!" she called, in the most ordinary Saturday night voice she could manage.

She pictured Agent Cline, standing out in the wet, and dragged her feet a little longer getting to the door. Would he be in a full hazmat suit this time, instead of the office-charcoal one? Or would he come with questions about the parade? *Witnesses saw you pursuing a member of SPEAR. Care to explain what you wanted to talk about so badly?*

It wasn't Agent Cline on her threshold, though. It was a woman--wrapped in an olive military-style greatcoat that hung almost clownishly on her small frame. Her black hair stuck to her face in clumps, like seaweed. Marta recognized her, from the wanted posters.

Siren.

"You're Marta Gonzales?" she said.

"Holy shit," said Marta.

"Can I come in? I shouldn't be outside for too long."

Marta stepped to the side. The terrorist walked past her, dripping onto the floor.

"Make yourself comfortable," muttered Marta.

Siren looked pretty far from comfortable. She paused a foot into the house and looked at their living room, with its couch and flatscreen TV, like it was the cockpit of some alien spaceship.

"Are you okay?" said Marta, feeling stupid for even asking. Obviously, Siren the terrorist was not okay.

“I’m sorry,” said Siren. “About your family. I really am sorry.”

“Uh. Thanks.”

“May I have a glass of water?”

Marta nodded mutely and stepped into the kitchen. She filled a glass from the tap--*for the terrorist*. She opened one of the drawers, too, and took out her father’s gun, tucking it in the back of her pants and pulling her shirt down over it. For the terrorist.

Siren was sitting in her father’s armchair when she got back, the wet spreading off of her, tanning the beige fabric. She drained half the glass in one go.

“How did you find me?” said Marta.

“It wasn’t hard. Everyone knows you. Local tragedy,” said Siren, as if they were discussing the weather.

“So the others told you. The SPEAR guys.”

“Well, a few of them.” She smiled, then, and Marta saw something she wanted posters hadn’t shown--the crooked set of her jaw, like it had been broken and healed wrong. “There are-- I’ll just say, my particular focus was never officially approved by SPEAR. But there are plenty who are still sympathetic.”

“And what’s your focus?”

“It’s the same as yours.”

“You really think you know me, huh?”

“I know the most important thing that ever happened to you. So, sure.”

“And what happened?” said Marta. “What exactly fucking happened?”

Siren took another gulp of water. The rain drummed on the roof, tapped on the window AC unit. Marta thought she heard something, a faint clattering, coming from the garage.

“On TV,” said Siren. “They call me a terrorist. And that, technically speaking, is true. I want to make people scared. Nobody is scared enough. It’s crazy. *Crazy*. Every day it gets a little closer, and people are still--” she struggled to find the words. “They’re still going for jogs. Or shopping. At the *mall*. They’re just living their stupid little lives. They’re ignoring it.”

Marta thought of Beachhead and Caron. Even the ordinary patrons of the Flask--*change the channel*. “Yes.”

“So, yes. I want to scare them. Sure. But I want something else much more than that,” she said. “I want to *kill it*.”

“They tried that. Ten years ago.” Those videos were all over the forums--the bright orange flashes, the sudden blooms of black smoke against the surface of the creature. That was when they still called it a creature, before people started trying out other stories.

Siren shrugged. “Nobody nuked it. So I figured I’d try.”

“Jesus Christ.” So Milosh had been right. A flash of light. And then--

“I’m sorry,” said Siren, again. “I didn’t think there were any other boats in the blast radius. They keep them out, usually. The Authority does. We only slipped through because of the fog.”

“Did it work?”

Siren had been looking down, at the inch or so of water that remained in her glass, but that made her look up. “What?”

“The bomb. Did it work? Is it dead?”

She seemed to sink a little, into the chair. “No. It didn’t. It’s--it’s still moving.” Invisibly, sure. Slowly. But--Marta couldn’t forget--it *was* moving.

“So everything that’s happened to me--to them--it’s for nothing.”

“Marta, you said your father is sick. What condition is he in?”

Singing nonsense songs in my garage. Eating raw meat. “He’s sick.”

“Can I see him?”

“No.”

Siren set the glass down on the coffee table. “You don’t understand. The creature--it does something to things around it. Some kind of infection in the water, in the air. It makes people dangerous.”

“Do you know where my brother is?”

She paused. “He was on the same boat?”

“And now he’s gone.”

“Well,” she said. “Either he drowned, or the Authority pulled him out of the water. There’s a man they take people too, once they’ve been exposed.”

The word *drowned* hit her harder than it should have. Hadn’t she imagined his body washing up on the beach enough times? Apparently it was different having someone just come out and say it. She sucked in a hasty breath, tried to focus on the other part. If he was alive, they’d have taken him somewhere.

“Where?” she asked.

“Marta, what was your family doing that close to the creature? Was he--Christ, was he *fishing*?”

“You need to tell me where my brother is.”

“How long had he been fishing there? Who was he selling the fish to?”

“I don’t know,” said Marta. “You can ask him yourself.”

She got up carefully, not wanting the gun to slip from her pants, and started for the

garage. Siren stood to follow--dripping water on the places Marta had scrubbed blood from so recently. They paused at the entrance to the garage. "He's--not well. Just to warn you." It wasn't hard to put a tremble into her voice.

"I've seen worse. I promise," said Siren.

Marta opened the door and turned on the light. Victor had been facing away, into the corner--but now he turned towards them, his right arm tugging against the handcuffs, stretching unnaturally long, eyes open and blue, mouth grotesque and gaping and flecked with the gory remains of his meal.

Siren said nothing--she only let a little breath escape in a hiss. She took a step backward, right into the gun Marta had pointed at the small of her back. "Here's what's going to happen next," she said. "You're going to tell me where my brother is. And then, you're going to take me there."

Preamble to Classified Report to the Authority, #41

by **sdfsdfsdf sdfsdfsdfsdfs**

In the absence of military solutions--which, I have tried to emphasize, will not be effective in terminating, injuring, or even slowing the creature--I have been asked to consider measures that might lessen the entity's impact on mainland America. Is there a way to prepare for its arrival, in the same way one might build a levy or a surge barrier in anticipation of difficult weather?

A year ago, or a year before that, I might have said yes. But as destructive as a hurricane might be, it is still operating within parameters we understand. A storm can only ever surprise us with its *intensity*. As for the entity approaching the eastern coast, our best models operate on what I can only call shoddy guesswork, even after years of study. Short of total evacuation, the abandoning of every city in its path, assuming its path won't change, I cannot propose a method of preparedness because we don't know what it will do when it arrives. In fact, I am beginning to believe that our focus on *it*--on the creature, the thing, the *giant monster*--is blinding us to less obvious dangers.

Take, for example, the contamination it spreads to all forms of life that come in contact with it. I have been asked by the Authority to provide an explanation for the emergence of "psychic" capabilities in those contaminated by the entity, in varying levels of potency, in subjects which contamination does not promptly kill. I cannot do this; I am a scientist, a marine biologist, and there is no earthly reason in the field of marine biology that such a change should be possible.

This is true even if you only consider the physical changes, which are both disturbing and extreme, but also *generative*--not symptomatic of bodily failure, past the initial period of

sickness, but of total systemic change. Patients do not develop tumors or cysts, they develop *organs*. New organs. More than one have grown *horns*. Considering that these newfound mental abilities develop somewhere between the onset of sickness and the metamorphosis of the host organism, I would suggest that these abilities are an early expression of some fundamental change in neurochemistry--the same one that, later, produces such inhuman and aggressive behavior.

All this, I must clarify, is pure conjecture. I am not a pathologist, and my requests for a staff member trained in such particulars have been repeatedly denied; I do not pretend to understand what sort of virus could produce such extraordinary changes in its host, and until we secure the additional resources I have requested from the council I don't expect to be able to answer a single one of the many pressing questions that face us.

While I am on the subject, I feel I must question the apparent lack of enthusiasm in the Authority for actually mustering the will, or the resources, to further our understanding of this creature. I understand that, with such a political premium on austerity, any significant expenditure of funds becomes difficult, let alone one destined for facilities the public will never lay eyes on, but the potential rewards seem obvious--not to mention the cost, should we choose to turn a blind eye. There is an unknown creature of unprecedented size gradually approaching the eastern seaboard. I have been told, repeatedly, that the Authority is "aware of the situation" and "taking matters into consideration." I don't mean to speak out of turn, but in my role as scientific policy advisor, I urge you to take stock of the available facts¹ and help us to act before it's too late. Even with the additional technicians we have brought on, we do not have what we need to complete this work. We have already had a taste of what happens when we fail.

¹ Please see report #37 for the most recent and comprehensive summary of available information regarding the Offshore Entity.

One month ago we dispatched a team to Antillia to see what they could recover from the ruins. They were equipped against both contagion and physical attack, if such a difference can be drawn, but our preparations were based primarily on guesswork--we had no way of knowing what they really needed.

Their last report² was nine days ago. I will be sending no more teams to Antillia.

² “All clear so far, and no sign of changed entities. Moving into the capitol today. Senior technical officer has confiscated our dream journals for “security purposes.” I don’t know why, when all I dream about is home, but he said that was the point. Plenty of samples here. More than the Director could ever want.”

Black - Chapter 15 - Lab Rats

One morning, he woke with a new taste in his mouth. Not the usual sour morning breath or, as he'd been fearing ever since the techs stopped coming with their medicine and shots, the taste of bleach. It was a metallic, coppery taste. He ran a finger across his gums. It came back a bright red. Did he have fucking scurvy now?

At breakfast he ate gingerly. Each bite sent little needles of pain up through his jaw. More unpleasant was the feeling of subtle, delicate *shifting* in his mouth, an infinitesimal sliding every time he pressed his teeth to something, like they were loose. The eggs, definitely powdered, went down easy. The potatoes were still frozen in the middle, cold and hard. He let those be.

It was a lonely meal. Oluchi wouldn't sit with him, of course. Not since he'd told her he couldn't help her. Even if he *wanted* to kill an old woman, which he obviously didn't, he couldn't. Not anymore.

Adrien kept his distance, too. He had barely made eye contact with Black ever since he heard he'd been off the medicine. It was absurd, Black thought, stupid--like he wasn't sick with the exact same case of monster flu. All that left was Daclan, the crazy kid, and Black had no desire to sit with him while he babbled on about ghosts that only he could see.

He tried to tell himself he was making the right decision. That these creeps weren't really helping them anyway--just treating them like lab rats. Once, before he joined SPEAR, when Black was running with the ALF, he smashed up one of the research labs at University of Houston. They'd found a whole cage of rats with their eyes apoxyed shut. They were all due to have their spines clipped the next morning. It wasn't a good life, being somebody's lab rat. He knew that. But all morning he kept running his tongue over his gums, tasting copper.

“Hey,” he said, catching a passing tech by the shoulder after breakfast. “Can you guys-- I’m bleeding from the mouth. Can you give me anything for that? Just some--I don’t know, an orange, or some neosporin?”

The opaque face mask was like staring into a dinner plate. “Well, that is concerning, Mr. Gorie,” came the muffled, genderless response. “But I’m afraid I’ve been instructed not to provide you with any treatment. Director’s orders.”

And with that the little hazmat ghost went on their way.

Without the tests, he didn’t have much to do anymore. Mostly he watched the people just outside his window, under the big white canopy tent, the “normal” occupants of the shelter, or else he wandered the school, trying to ignore the occasional footsteps that came from empty corridors. Nobody seemed to care where he went. With the whole day ahead of him, Black found himself in the gym.

It wasn’t much--a basketball court scaled down for children, squeaky lacquered floorboards. It was harder for Observer’s people to tear this place apart, so they’d mostly left it as is. A blue nylon rope still hung from the ceiling, in fact, a relic of some state fitness exam. In prison, Black had spent a lot of time in the weight room. He didn’t need to get any bigger or stronger, but he found he didn’t mind the tightening and hardening, the elimination of all his soft edges. It made him like his bulk a little more.

He tugged on the rope a bit, trying not to think about the taste of blood--still present in his mouth. He was no fifth grader, but it seemed sturdy enough, and thick. With both hands now, Black pulled, but the rope didn’t budge. Was it stupid to climb this thing? Maybe. But fifth graders could do it. Why not him?

He was fine. He didn't feel sick. Not at all.

With a short hop, Black caught hold higher on the rope. The nylon was more slippery than he expected, but his grip was sure, and he passed another hand higher still. He was climbing. Awkwardly, Black kicked off his stupid hospital slippers. His bare feet gave him a better grip anyway.

Black clambered higher and higher. His arms started to burn, but when he looked down he barely seemed halfway there. Wasn't this a gym for fucking children? Why was this thing anchored so high up?

He passed the halfway-mark, then climbed a little higher. He could see now where the knot was secured around a metal hook driven into the ceiling.

Then there was a sound like stretching fabric. Black froze on the rope, swaying gently from side to side. He looked down--couldn't he have dragged a mat under him or something?--just as it snapped.

Black's landing shook the gym, rattling the metal basketball hoops and snapping his jaw together at the impact. It hurt. Lying there, breathless and still, he swore he could already feel the bruise beginning to open, butterfly-like, across his back, and the copper taste in his mouth had gotten worse.

Much worse. He spat to one side, and something besides blood and spit came out.

Black sat up, wincing at the fresh and glowing pain, to look. It was a tooth, slimed and gory. His tooth. Whole and intact--Jesus, he could see the four small, protruding roots. It had just popped right out. Black felt revulsion curl into his stomach, and tried to probe his mouth with his finger. Which one had it knocked out? How obvious would it be?

Black suddenly jerked his finger back. *No. That can't--*

He felt the rest of the room seem to shrink as his heartbeat grew and grew, filling all that space. It couldn't be. Again, cautiously this time, he ran his finger along his upper row of teeth. One of them *was* missing. But in its place was a new one--long and needlelike and sharp.

Nobody ever saw Observer leave the facility and no one saw him arrive. Rumor was he had a sleeping bag stashed somewhere, in one of the hastily constructed labs, or outside on one of the refugee cots, but Black had always had his own guess.

It seemed obvious, really. Academic, sciency type with an inflated opinion of himself. Of course he'd set up in the principal's office.

He caught a tech on his way out and barged past them, through muffled squawks of disapproval. With a few notable exceptions, everything in here seemed more or less unchanged, unlike the rest of the school--at the very least it was still recognizably a principal's office. From one wall hung framed certificates adorned with big, loopy signatures. A bookshelf full of hardcovers was set against the other. A long table, made of some impeccable dark wood, dominated the room.

Observer seemed to have settled over the space, rather than tearing it apart. There was no sleeping bag that Black could see, but papers, files, and folders were strewn everywhere, some on the floor and some on top of the table, next to a bottle of whiskey and three obviously dirty glasses.

And behind the desk, looming over everything, was a photo, blown up to enormous scale and hung like a curtain. He recognized the shape in it at once and for a moment all the anger and panic drained out of him. There it was--as big as an island, he could tell, from the scale of the little curling waves far down, where the rest of its body faded into the water.

From behind the desk, from under the looming figure of the entity, Observer stared at him, surprised. “Mr. Gorie. You’re having some kind of problem. Something about your mouth?”

Black swallowed, rediscovering his fury. He walked up to Observer’s desk and slammed the tooth down onto one of the file folders. “Yes. I am having a problem.”

“Well, that’s a shame,” said Observer, speaking with speed and astonishing coldness. “But I feel I must warn you that as your condition progresses, you should expect similar losses. Don’t worry. You’ll grow new ones.”

“You have to help me.”

“Treatment for this illness is very costly, Mr. Gorie. We simply don’t have the resources to treat everyone. This is the unfortunate truth.” He leaned back in his chair, which creaked unsteadily. “If, perhaps, you were willing to assist us, we could credit this towards your treatment.”

“Fuck you.”

“Ah. Well. You know the way out, then.”

Observer was smaller than him. A lot smaller. The thought flashed through his mind-- how easy it would be to simply *make* this little bird-boned doctor treat him. But even at the image that conjured he felt a familiar wave of dizziness, the shortness of breath.

“One test,” said Black. “Fine. One goddamn test.”

Later that day, he and Oluchi were seated across from each other, determined not to make eye contact. He was pretty sure this room had once been used for some kind of art class. It still smelled like watercolors and elmer’s glue, but around noon the little horizontal window slits

caught the light better than almost anywhere.

“This will be a more controlled test,” said Observer, speaking from behind a pane of glass. They had erected some kind of temporary partition between the techs and the patients, over by the pottery wheels. Black hadn’t been back in that original testing room since passing out, and no one would tell him what had happened in it. The machines in this room, blinking ponderously, seemed newer. The chairs, though, were clearly scavenged from another part of the school, and Black barely fit into his. Both of them had electrodes pressed to their forehead and temples.

“Let’s start with something simple--a fresh memory. Mr. Gorie, why don’t you start by sending Ms. Mezu an image of what you had for breakfast.”

“I don’t know how to ‘send’ anything. It’s not like a fucking text.”

“Think it *at* her. You’re already connected, whether you realize it or not. Just give it a try.”

Grudgingly, Black closed his eyes. He tried to picture, in as clear detail as he could, the bowl of oatmeal he’d eaten a few hours ago: the glossy slime, the uneven lumps, the little dark raisins bloating in the heat like drowning victims. He had thought the raisins might improve it. He’d been wrong.

“Raisins in oatmeal,” said Oluchi. “That’s pretty vile, dude.”

“Hey. Come on.” He was too annoyed to be impressed.

“Okay, your turn, Mezu. Let’s do an abstract image this time--send Gorie your favorite shape.”

“Favorite shape?” she said. “Are we in kindergarten?”

“It was a K through five school, actually,” said one of the technicians in a helpful tone.

She turned back and closed her eyes.

For a moment, Black tried to figure out if the shapes popping randomly into his head--square, triangle, circle--had been transmitted by the woman in front of him. They seemed to flit in and dissolve in no real order.

Then, very suddenly, it was in front of him--a room he recognized, the old library, *his room*, still cleared of books, cleared of everything except a table, a padded table like you'd find in a doctor's office but fitted with straps, and what was on the table was unlike anything he'd seen before. It was shaped like a woman, in some ways, a woman drawn by an unwell child--the limbs all too long, the wrong size, and pulling at the straps with such fury, the joints all bending back as if it might escape by tearing itself apart, and its mouth was open, and it was screaming, and inside the screaming mouth he could see so many teeth, rows of saw-edged teeth like a sharp and thin points like needles, a mouth like every ocean nightmare had conspired together, and her skin was mottled, black in some places and a luminous white in others and if she had once had hair it was gone now and he saw ridges of translucent, watery flesh and eyes of bright detergent-blue and that smell everywhere, the ammonia, and on the floor there was a technician, except his baggy white suit was spattered red and he was holding his arm *Mr. Gorie* and screaming, more people were screaming, someone was shoving past him, into the room, and *Mr. Gorie?*

He blinked, and he was back in the art room with Oluchi. Observer, behind the glass partition, was leaning in. "Mr. Gorie? The shape?"

He looked at Oluchi, who was looking at him with a placid, peaceful expression.

"Triangle," he said, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice.

"Bingo," she said, and smiled.

Afterwards she came to his room, where Black was sitting and looking at his shoes and trying not to think too much. The bed barely creaked under her weight when she sat down next to him.

“So,” he said, finally. “So that’s Meredith.”

“That *was* Meredith,” said Oluchi.

“And she’s in here? With us?”

“They keep her separated, in the old science room.”

“Jesus.” Black tried to think back to fifth grade science. Potato clocks, baking soda volcanoes.

“Now do you get it?” said Oluchi. He could tell, from her tone, that she was trying to be patient, and also that she was failing.

“No, I don’t fucking ‘get it.’ They’ve got it locked up, right? They’re keeping it away from us, thank Christ. We’re safe.”

“Black,” she said, gently. “You’re telling me if you ended up like that, you wouldn’t want someone to put you out of your misery?”

He couldn’t remember ever telling her his preferred name--what he thought of as his real one. But he had suspected for a while that, if he’d been in her head, she’d been in his. Her days on the back of the creature--the *Offshore Entity*, Observer called it--were still vivid, a live current in his mind. The way she had checked Meredith every morning to make sure she was still breathing, or curled up around the old woman’s body to keep her warm at night. He remembered all of it.

“Is that going to happen to me?” he asked. Was that the end point here, the stage four of this particular cancer?

“I don’t know.”

“Was her sickness different? Or is what’s inside us--is it the same?”

“I don’t know.”

“Is it the medicine they give us that keeps us normal? But--but why didn’t it work on her?”

“Black, *I don’t know*. I don’t have any answers. But I know I’m not going to leave Meredith somewhere inside that fucked up, monstrous thing to be some scientist’s lab rat. I need to bring her mercy. Please, please help me.”

She reached over and touched his hand. Black pulled back, expecting another static jolt, like before, but this time there was nothing--just her small, dark hand over his pale, lumbering one.

“I don’t want to hurt people anymore,” said Black. “I told myself I wouldn’t do that again.”

“I’ll do it,” she said, and by the look in her eyes he believed her. “You just have to help get me there.”

Chapter 16 - Friends and Patriots

Denarius is a heavy breather. It's the first sound you hear, when his newest video starts: an exhale, rich and thick and just a little wet. Then his voice--which always, even to a seasoned viewer, sounds uncanny on account of the deepening filters he puts over it. "Friends and patriots," he starts, as he does every video. "Thank you for joining me. Our subject today is one you will be well-acquainted with: *fear*."

In five years of recording, after more than twenty-million views, the room that Denarius records from has never changed. In the back right corner--back left, from his perspective--hangs an American flag. On the other side of the shot you can just make out the corner of the enclosure in which his Israeli Deathstalker Scorpion lives. The Deathstalker is so venomous that Denarius would go into toxic shock if he were ever stung by it; he feeds it with tongs, wearing rubber gloves up to the elbow, keeping it because 'the constant threat of death has always tempered history's greatest men.'

"What is fear?" he begins. "Necessary, surely. As intrinsic to our evolutionary programming as hunger, as biological sex. Fear keeps us out of the lion's mouth. But fear is a sword, and it can be wielded by anyone who picks it up. The communists in the Soviet Union were such expert wielders of fear that they severed people from rationality itself!"

Denarius himself is lit like Satan. The desk lamp behind the camera casts an orange, hellish glow over his square face. His beard, which would normally be a flat brown, appears fiery red. "A great man once said that if we allow our freedoms to be taken from us in exchange for safety, then we deserve neither, Some knew him as the First American. You might know him as Benjamin Franklin.

“There has been, of late, a concerted attack on freedom in the very state which I call my home, Florida. You may have heard the warhorns sounding this attack: they come in the guise of public health warnings. *Stay inside*, they mewl. *Keep your distance*. But above all--”

He seems to lose the thread, for a moment. His eyes flick to the left, the right--a nervous animal. “Above all, they want us to give up the *fish*. Yes, my friends, that’s right--they want us to abandon our restaurants. They want us to surrender this state’s pride, its fine seafood, the sustenance that the ocean has offered us for countless generations. And why? Because they’re ‘worried about us getting sick.’ As if we are *toddlers*. But I’ll tell you this,” he says, finding his rhythm. “I’m not afraid of a little bad seafood.”

Denarius reaches off camera and sets down, in front of him, a plate. On it lies a collection of fileted fish--raw and obviously fresh, descaled and pinkish white. On several, the heads are still attached--their eyes, lidless and staring.

“I refuse to succumb to fear, and I have no intention of letting a hoax by the liberal intelligentsia deprive me of my right to the bounty of the sea. Friends--patriots--I hope that you’ll join me.”

With that, Denarius lifts one of the raw fish and takes a huge bite. It takes him half an hour--with only a couple of gagging breaks, which he edits out--to finish the plate.

Marta - Chapter 17 - Road Trip

The Gonzaleses, a fishing family, had a garage better stocked with coolers than most others on their block. The big plastic bins, which came in every variety of faded primary color, harvested from various overstock stores and yard sales, were from an earlier time in the enterprise, before Victor had surrendered to the same cheap and disposable styrofoam employed by everyone else. They still had their uses; only a few months ago, Adrien might have dug one or two out to go sport fishing with friends. In college, Marta had seen people pour liquor into coolers, from five or six different bottles, before stirring it with a detached broomhandle. On special occasions they added cough syrup.

Marta's goal today was a little different: find a cooler big enough to, if not comfortably, then at least *humanely* fit her father into. She settled on a hefty red one they'd once used for swordfish, wrestling it out of the corner, just next to one of the huge rusting lobster cages Siren had spent the night locked inside.

Meanwhile, the terrorist watched her nervously from a few feet off. She watched her nervously; she chewed the skin around her fingernails nervously; she walked nervously and she stood still nervously too, especially when they went out into the yard so Marta could spray down the cooler with a hose.

"I'm a fucking terrorist," said Siren, as if Marta needed the reminder. "I can't just hang out on your fucking lawn. I'm on America's Most Wanted list."

"Currently, you're my terrorist," said Marta, tapping the hose on the butt of the pistol jammed into her waistband. "So relax. That's an order."

It wasn't inconceivable that someone would recognize her, but Marta thought it was pretty unlikely. She was free now of her coating of dock grime, and they had chopped off most of her clumpy, knotted hair. She looked boyish now, all sharp angles and bristle. Either that or an extremely unwell teenager. The shorn woman in her father's Panthers cap didn't look like Marta's idea of a terrorist. Terrorists lived in caves or backwoods cabins; they had crazy beards and wild, fearless eyes. She remembered seeing, in class once, the mugshot of Timothy McVeigh. Now that was what a terrorist looked like--as if he himself could explode into shrapnel at any minute.

"I don't think you really grasp your own stake in my potential capture," said Siren. "If they take me away, you're never going to find your brother."

Marta turned the hose on her, making Siren sputter and jump away. When she recovered, Marta said, calmly, "And if it weren't for you he wouldn't be in there at all, and I wouldn't be picking out a cooler for my dad."

"Not yet," said Siren. "Not yet you wouldn't."

She looked just like a sprayed street cat might. It was hard to remember that this was the same woman from the TV, the dangerous criminal. The one who'd tried to blow up the End of the World. Marta would have to, though. If she forgot, even for a second, it might be the end of her. Her, and her father, too.

I've had plenty of people think I'm harmless, too, she thought. Her old bullies; Adrien's, too. Too small, too quiet, too female to be any threat at all.

Inside, Marta slit open bag after bag of convenience store ice, dumping them one by one into the cooler while Siren watched from the stairs, a dark look in her eyes. "You want to go break into a government facility, sure. I get that. But bringing *that* is a mistake. What if someone

sees it? What if it attacks somebody? They're dangerous. They're the same as that thing in the water--same genus. Same kind. That's what you're bringing. An unbelievable mistake."

Of course she was right. It was a mistake. Marta wasn't stupid, she knew that. A million things could go wrong. The question was, which mistake would be the worse one--taking him, or leaving him here, alone? To Marta the answer was easy, whether or not it was right.

When the cooler was full up to the sides with ice, a little divot left in the middle, she said "I'm going to need your help lifting him in."

She saw Siren's eyes widen at that. "No. No way. Are you crazy? I'm not touching that thing."

But Marta wasn't listening, just rustling in the closet. She pushed through old coats and sweaters, trying not to pay attention to the sharp and pungent body spray reek that clung to Adrien's old bombers, or the earthy tobacco on her father's jean jacket. That one took her by surprise--it was a smell she hadn't even realized she'd been missing. Now he only smelled like brine, and bleach, and ammonia. Even his smell had been warped by this sick. She fought the temptation to linger there a moment longer.

Finally she found what she was looking for. Marta tossed one of the yellow rubber aprons to Siren, shortly followed by a pair of matching gloves that went up over the elbow. "You can hold your breath."

Siren held him by the ankles--that was the closest she'd come. It wasn't much help, but it was enough for Marta, hands under her father's arms, to swing him out of the bathtub and into the cooler. She'd thought he might complain--hoped he would, actually, because it would have meant a return to the person she knew. Months ago she wouldn't have been able to conceive of a

Victor Gonzales who might allow someone to lift him this way, gingerly, like a child. But he didn't argue or struggle, only kept at the same tuneless, low singing that he'd been doing for hours now.

He was lighter than he should have been, she noticed, and paler too, and almost all the hair on his body had fallen out--from the light down on his chest, to the ferocious curls on his head, to even the bush around his privates. These were, of course, the least dramatic, the most ordinary of his physical changes, but maybe that's why they could still send waves of sadness through her chest, her stomach. After the initial horror, his mouth full of new teeth was hard to even think about, let alone fix with any kind of meaning.

When he was nestled inside, Marta closed the lid. Siren didn't seem able to take her eyes off the cooler, even once Marta secured the latches.

"Is that safe?"

"It's not airtight. He'll be fine."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know."

In her pocket, her phone buzzed again. The timesheet app; she was late, again, for work. This time for good. Idly, not without a little satisfaction, Marta realized she hadn't taught anyone the trick to unjam the copier.

According to Siren, the facility was a day's drive down from the city, to a beach town along the southern tip of Florida. The plan was to get a room in Centre Vista, an even smaller town an hour or so outside of Joyous Beach proper, and set out the next morning.

It was a bright day out, and the rain from earlier in the week had finally cleared.

Everything smelled clean and fresh. Her dad was in a cooler, in the back of his own truck. Little by little, the End of the World advanced. Before they left, she'd need to eat lunch. All these things were true. Sometimes Florida itself seemed a similar contradiction. The prehistoric lizards and glassy, ancient bogs sidled up to the strip malls, the fast food, the highways packed with suburban child tankers blaring showtunes, Disney, Christian rock. None of it seemed compatible, the edges rubbing uncomfortably against one another.

“Do you have a plan for when we actually get there?” said Siren. “Because, you know, they're not exactly going to let you just walk in and take your brother out.”

“I have a plan,” said Marta. Her plan was sitting right next to her, handcuffed to the door panel. She had always been a fine fisherman; her real gift, though, was for bargaining.

The whole way out of the city, Marta's eyes were drawn again and again to her rearview mirror, waiting for the flashing red and blue lights that would mean the end for this road trip before it even really began. Then it would be prison, she guessed, or some kind of blacksite for her, and certainly for Siren. Would they look in the cooler? Would her father be gunned down in the street by a Florida state cop? She wondered what the news would make of his condition, of his skin, his teeth. *Florida man shot after emerging from cooler; methamphetamine abuse suspected.*

They were out past the city limits when it happened, just starting into the stretch of low farmland that came with a little distance from the coast. Suddenly a dull black sedan a few minivans behind them burst into red and blue light, along with the whine of a siren. It pulled to the left and started racing up the breakdown lane, growing in pitch and color as it approached.

Marta was frozen. Both lanes in front of her were full, clogged with inexplicable midday traffic. She looked over at Siren, who was clutching the upholstery. “Uncuff me,” she said, in a

panic. Marta shook her head mutely and Siren just started hauling at the chain, trying to break something.

Ahead of her the brakelights of the minivan went on. They were stopped for emergency vehicles--which hardly mattered. Even on the open road, there was no way she was outrunning anybody in this beat-up old truck. Marta thought about the pistol currently sitting on the shelf of the door, on her side. She took a breath and held it.

And just like that, the undercover car sped by them, vanishing off somewhere ahead.

After that the drive was oddly peaceful. Peaceful for both of them--if Siren wasn't feeling grateful to be alive and un-arrested, she had at least stopped complaining. If they weren't exactly allies, they at least recognized one another as crewmembers in the same lifeboat. When she managed to forget that the woman next to her was a terrorist, that she had packed up her father in the back like a chest of beer, all this almost felt normal. Strange how quickly she could adjust. Not strange, she decided--awful.

Marta turned on the radio. It was already tuned to the classic rock station, her father's favorite, Def Leppard crackling through interference and old speakers.

They stopped at a gas station once they were sufficiently in the middle of nowhere.

"You want anything to eat?" asked Marta.

"This doesn't matter."

Marta could already feel her good mood dissolving. She had guessed wrong, she supposed, about what Siren's silence meant. "Okay, whatever. I'll be back in a second."

"I mean, there's no point to what you're doing," she continued. "Getting your brother back. You're both going to die anyway when it gets to shore. And me, too. And all of them," said

Siren, waving her hand at the line of cars waiting for gas.

“It’s not going to reach us for a long time.”

“Yeah,” said Siren, bitterly. “That’s what everyone thinks.”

“How the fuck do you know? How do you know anything about it?” she asked.

Siren didn’t say anything. But then, the answer was obvious. Marta remembered the reports--anti-government, anti-police, anti-everything. Possible communist, probable socialist. Most importantly: Antillian.

Inside, Marta bought Cokes and peanuts and bags of beef jerky. As she started walking back, though, she noticed the cooler start to shake and jostle--as if, inside, Victor somehow knew she was returning. Nearby, a man pumping fuel into his convertible poked his thumb at the truck.

“You got an alligator in there or something?” he said. Smiling warily.

She had forced out a laugh, then got in and drove them another twenty minutes down the highway before pulling off at a texting stop. She made sure to take the keys and tuck the gun into her pants before she got out, glancing over at Siren, but the other woman didn’t seem to be paying her any attention.

In the bed of the truck, Marta fed the dried teriyaki strips to her father one by one. It was hard to tell, but his toneless humming seemed happier.

Centre Vista, when they finally arrived, seemed like something lost to time, a pocket of air on the bottom of the ocean. The highway exit was the last sign they saw with the town’s name; the last sign of any kind, for that matter, aside from the titleless PAWN SHOP, DINER, and AUTO INSURANCE buildings all huddled around a lone stop sign, as if for warmth. Around them, and flanking the roads, the vegetation grew with a threatening haste, sensing

weakness. The whole town looked like it might be swallowed back into the green at any moment.

The reception there was horror-film spotty, randomly cutting in and out, but eventually Marta managed to put them on the right road, a twisting line of asphalt spidered with cracks. On either side, spiny-tipped ferns with saurian fronds whipped at her side mirrors. Siren continued to sulk, or maybe plot, in silence. Marta, meanwhile, was mostly thinking about the road, and how the speed limit seemed oddly high, right up until she slammed on the brakes just in time to avoid pancaking a line of four children.

She'd have guessed boys--their hair was all cut in varying lengths of "short"--but they were too young and too grimy to say for certain. All had short, scruffy blonde hair and watery blue eyes. Only one turned to look, as they crossed, and the truck seemed no more interesting to him than the bugs splattered across the windshield. Two of them were carrying sport fishing rods that seemed too big for them--stolen, Marta guessed, from their fathers. Something wet and lank hung from one. She pumped at the window crank furiously. "Hey, you little shits!"

They paused, already on the other side of the road. The others turned to look, their fishing poles swinging around with them, giving Marta a look at what dangled from the pole. Whatever curses she had prepared to sling at them next dropped out of her mind completely.

"We have to go," hissed Siren. "What are you doing?"

One by one, the boys lost interest, fading into the green, and Marta watched them go. Numbly, she let up on the break and they kept rolling down the road. The motel was only a little further.

The Lighthouse Motel was comprised, as far as Marta could see, of two boxy, beige buildings on either side of a parking lot, one of which had been painted with a curling wave that had once been blue. Years of southern Florida sun had bleached it a sickly green. A sign above

the main office advertised a pool, free wifi, XXX movies. There was no lighthouse to speak of. Once they had had one, she was told inside. It had collapsed in the most recent category five to strike the state.

“But we’re miles from the coast,” said Marta, only half listening. Still thinking about that fish, those boys. Siren, in the truck, was waiting outside.

“That doesn’t mean anything,” growled the manager, a man with leathery skin and a golden chain dipping under his shirt. “Everyone forgets. Wind is wind no matter where you are.”

Marta got them a room. Together, she and Siren carried the cooler into their room, which smelled like plastic and cheap cleaning fluid. *Bleach*, thought Marta, for one long and horrible second.

“I have to go,” she said.

Her terrorist looked at her with fresh suspicion. “Where?”

“Dinner,” Marta lied. It was the first thing that came to her mind. “I’m going to get us some food. Just stay inside, and don’t hang out by the windows.”

She could run, Marta supposed. But without the keys she’d have to go on foot, or take her chances with the highway. And she’d only be gone a minute.

“You’re leaving me with *that*?” Siren said, pointing accusingly at the cooler.

“He won’t hurt you. And anyway, it’s locked. Keep your voice down. I have to go.”

The whole way back she went over the image in her head with obsessive focus. Were their eyes swedish blue, the blue of little aryan hillbillies? Or was it a more familiar one, the blue of her father’s eyes? And that fish. It stuck in her mind like a granule of glass, grinding and sharp. Had it really been the same shifting, hypnotic pattern she recognized from the Skrimshanders’ bucket? But how was that even possible?

It was hard to say exactly which bend in the road she had nearly killed those kids at. Eventually she found a grouping of fronds that looked familiar, though, and pulled her truck off to the side of the road, rolling over some low and tangled brush. Somewhere a bird hooted strangely. She'd never heard a sound like that before--but then, she'd never been in this part of the state, in these woods. Everything here might sound alien and wrong if it wasn't a pigeon or a seabird.

Eventually Marta found the little path the boys had been using--the direction they came from, the right side of the road. She pushed past trees and brush she couldn't have named, and sure enough heard the trickle of water.

It was only a stream, brown with murk and dirt, maybe ten feet across. A muddy trickle--no coast, no ocean. She wondered just how far inland they were. How many miles, exactly, from the sea. From the End of the World. For one crazy instant Marta wanted to grab a stick and slap at the cloudy, ribboned surface. Then, suddenly, she was; the crazy instant became several, and Marta was slicing at the little nowhere stream like the branch in her hand was a sword, like the muddy curve of water was a throat she could cut. When she paused, sweating and speckled with brown spots, something in the corner of her eye moved.

She looked over, brandishing the stick. A little ways downstream was a deer.

It was brown. That was the extent of what Marta knew about its genus, its species, what particular family it might call its own--she, actually, not it. No horns. You didn't pull it from the ocean, so that was where Marta's knowledge of the animal ended.

She couldn't have guessed why it--she--seemed so unconcerned with Marta's attack on the stream. The deer only watched her, its dark, glossy eyes more serene than she could have believed. A moment later the creature bent down to the stream and started drinking.

“No!” shouted Marta. “Bad!” For good measure, she hucked her branch in the animal’s general direction. At that she finally spooked, bounding off into the trees, slipping quickly from Marta’s sight.

Did I save her, she wondered, or have I become as crazy as Siren?

It didn’t matter one way or another. When the deer got thirsty, she’d be back to drink.

Deer, with glowing nodules covering her back, pulsing in time to her heartbeat. Spined deer. Deer with three eyes, each one detergent blue--deer lapping at the water with her long proboscis, with teeth like jagged glass.

Marta tried, as she drove back, to see the road, and not these ghoulish visions. She succeeded just enough to get back to the hotel without crashing.

Where Siren was waiting for her--hair black and wet, slicked flat on her head, very much outside.

“What the fuck are you doing?” said Marta, slamming the door of the truck. “I told you not to leave the room.”

“He got out,” said Siren. “I was taking a shower--five goddamn minutes, and the cooler was open when I got out. The door, too.”

Something listed to the side in Marta’s body, a ballast releasing. Out. Somewhere, in Centre Vista, was the monster, her father.

Together, they drove the back roads, stopping periodically so Marta could shout his name into any open trailheads or dirt paths they passed. She’d wander a little into the brush, heart pounding, staring at the ground for--what? Tracks? Still careful, in her panic, not to leave the

keys in the car.

They searched for hours. Marta wouldn't have believed you could search for hours in a place like Centre Vista but there seemed to be nearly hundreds of places to slip off into the trees and vanish forever. While they doubled back, winding the length of the county highway yet again, Marta thought back to the last time she had seen him--shaded from the sun by the lid of the cooler, gnawing with all his new teeth at the hunk of teriyaki jerky she had slipped him. He hadn't said anything to her--not since he had eaten the cat--but the way he peered out of the dark of the cooler, his eyes glowing faintly, seemed full of affection. She wondered if that would be the last time she saw him; then, or twenty years from now, in a blurry photograph taken by a farmer on the edge of his property. A strange figure slipping into the trees, two luminous points of blue in the dark, dragging a newborn calf into the woods. The Beast of Centre Vista.

But no--she had to correct herself, had to keep correcting herself. In twenty years, if Siren was right, there would not be farmers in Florida.

"Stop," said Siren, all of a sudden. They were back at the stop sign--the main street, town square and watering hole of Centre Vista all in one. She was pointing at the diner called Diner, towards one of the windows facing them. "In there. I saw him."

Panic crystallized in Marta's stomach. She jerked the truck off to the side of the road, landing one tire in the ditch, not caring. "Stay here," she said. Clearly Siren had no problem with this; she heard the door lock pop shut behind her.

As she took the concrete steps leading to the entrance two at a time, something itched at the back of her mind. Fear of what she'd find, inside? Sure, there was plenty of that, but--something else, apart from the diner, from her father. The particulars of it escaped her, replaced with images of what might be on the other side of that door. It didn't matter. With a shaking

hand, Marta yanked it open.

The waitress, who happened to be passing just as Marta barged in, seemed a bit surprised; she almost dropped the platter of corned beef hash and eggs she'd been carrying. That was the worst of it.

There was no screaming. All she could hear inside were the tinkel of forks on plates, the oily hiss of something on the griddle, in the kitchen. Nobody was talking much; a few people looked up at her with the vacant, passing interest of cattle.

The waitress had recovered. She held up a finger--one?--and, mutely, because she didn't know what to say, Marta nodded.

"Be right with you, sugar." And then she was off, to wherever those eggs belonged.

Her first thought, as she looked over the totally ordinary diner scene, was an obvious one: Siren had lied to her. It seemed more likely than just a mistake. She almost turned around, and then she saw him.

He was sitting in the back by the window, the one overlooking the road. He'd dressed himself in one of her flannel shirts and a pair of her jeans. Once they would have been far too small on him--now, the clothing hung loose on his thin and sinewy frame.

He looked up at her as she slid into the booth across from him, and opened his toothy maw as if to speak. Nothing came out--not even that constant, tuneless humming--and that was fine. Marta had nothing to say, either.

She reached across the table and took his hand, his long and odd fingers intertwining with her own. "Dad," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

Some time later, the waitress brought a tray of potato wedges, loaded with little cubes of bacon and cheese. "Are you two from out of town?" she said, smiling broadly, a small pink

lipstick stain on one of her big front teeth.

“From the city,” Marta murmured, uncertainly.

With a slow, almost childlike curiosity, Victor sank his many teeth into one of the wedges. The waitress barely seemed to notice. “You want to see a menu?”

Marta shook her head and the waitress moved on. She didn’t understand what was happening. Why wasn’t the waitress losing her shit? Why was everyone just--just eating, acting like everything was normal?

The questions kept coming. If they couldn’t see the thing her father had turned into, why could she? Was it because she knew him, before? Was she losing her mind? But then Siren could see him too--not an excellent sign, her sanity bound to that of a nuclear terrorist.

On a television screen behind them, fans with half their bodies painted into color cheered manically for whatever game was incoming. For the first time, Marta stopped wondering if, by the time everyone noticed the End of the World, it would be too late to stop it. Now, she wondered if they’d notice it at all. Even as it smashed through their houses, crushed their lawns underfoot. Even as it blocked out the sun.

When she looked over again, the last of the potato wedges were gone. With one hand, Victor reached into the water glass next to him and scooped out a handful of ice. He extracted his hand with a wet *plop*, soaking the paper placemat in front of him, then rubbed the ice along the side of his face and neck, over the slits on his neck that might be gills. The waitress leaned over in the middle of this and topped off his glass with a little more water and ice.

“Anything else I can get y’all?”

“Just the check,” muttered Marta.

She didn’t realize what she had done until she reached to pay. Her keys. They weren’t

pushing against her wallet or her leg. They were still in the car.

With Siren.

Hurriedly Marta dropped a twenty on the table and ran out, pulling her father by his slick, damp hand, nearly bowling over a waitress balancing three plates of pie up along her arm. She knew, already, what she'd find outside. Her truck gone. Her leverage, her plan for ever getting into the facility where they were keeping her brother--gone, and gone, along with America's most wanted woman. She took the stairs down to the road two at a time, throwing one of Victor's arms around her shoulder, half-dragging, half-carrying him to the road.

Where their truck sat, exactly where it had before. The only difference that Marta could see was that the windows were rolled down. She could distantly hear the classical music station filtering out: the tinkle of a piano, the whine of a violin.

Her father's hand had grown slick and wet in hers. When she turned back to him, the sweat was running off his pale, hairless head in little rivulets. He reminded her of a photo she'd seen online, what felt like a hundred years ago now. *Melting glaciers.*

"Come on, Dad," she said, ignoring the strange feeling inside her that welled up at the word. "Let's get you on ice."

Warily, Marta climbed into the back of the truck, helping Victor up the tailgate. When she raised the lid of the cooler, he climbed in without any prompting, curling up in the ice and closing his milky blue eyes. If any of the hundreds of marlins or snappers he'd caught over the years could see him now, she wondered if they might feel some inkling of satisfaction. But then fish brains didn't really register concepts like revenge. Not as far as she knew, anyway. She doubled-checked the latch this time.

Back in the driver's seat, she shut the door and turned the radio off. Her keys dangled

from the ignition. Siren hadn't run. She could have, but she hadn't. Marta tried to sort the feelings from the facts. Both brawled, in tight formations, in her skull. It barely felt large enough to contain even one.

“You can put it back on the classic rock channel if you want. But I didn't know how long you'd be,” said Siren.

“Is that a joke?”

She didn't say anything to that.

Interlude - Quarantine

Dale had always thought the logo of the Centre Vista Weed Whackers was more gruesome than strictly necessary. The image was dominated by three “weeds,” basically anthropomorphized blades of grass, all of their faces frozen in various states of shock and horror as they were split through the middle. The logo had caught them at the moment of their grisly demise, with the offending machete frozen on one side, having passed through all of them in one stroke.

But he wore the t-shirt anyway. He thought it had been a nice gesture, and he knew that Wilk had paid for the printing out of his own pocket. There was no chance that such a thing might be provided for in the miniscule budget allotted to the Osceola Wildlife Refuge every year. The least he could do was wear it to the weekly meetup.

The first order of business belonged to the girl scouts, who were lined up in the first row of chairs. They were doing an art project, apparently, cutting down and collecting the willowy stalks of silk reeds to weave into baskets or blankets or something. While their scoutmatron whipped them into a creative frenzy, Dale sipped the free coffee, which was acidic and familiar. Eventually they filed out, headed for some deeper part of the refuge, all of them armed with serrated little handsickles. It might have qualified as nightmarish if they weren't all holding them so responsibly.

Without them the room felt a lot emptier. Behind him, Dale knew, was Milo. He blew on his coffee unnecessarily and concentrated on not turning around. In the row ahead of him, two skinny men--Dillon and Rafael, he knew--spoke casually about the merits and downsides of

anarchism. Lexie, with her blanched, yellow hair and acne scars, pecked at her smartphone behind him. On the other side of the room sat the gray-hairs, retirees in various states of decomposition, looking for something to occupy what few days they might have left. Closest to the stage, Keith, king volunteer, tapped at his clipboard with a pen. His badly balding, jet-black hair looked especially wet today. The only other occupants of the room were the eyeless model duck, frozen in flight and dangling from a wire by the window, and a snarling taxidermied bear in the corner that looked like it could have used a good shampooing. From the door, little couplets of recorded birdsong flitted in from the cramped lobby.

Finally, Garrett Wilk joined them: young, bright-eyed, and the only black person in the room. His ranger uniform was neat and pressed, as it always was, and he held a little clicker thing for the projector in his hand. “Folks,” said Wilk, “Who’s ready to whack some weeds?”

One by one, Wilk walked them through this season’s most wanted, the weeds and vines and bugs that they were to be particularly vigilant against. This was their planning meeting; they’d have one four times a year, give or take. In the six months Dale had been doing this, he’d been to two. When he was all done--after approximately ten thousand questions from Keith and the other geezers, who liked to feel important--Wilk moved to his last slide on the projector, their partners for the day. Dale tried to suppress a groan.

If Wilk noticed the change in his demeanor, he showed no sign, his cheerfulness as blunt as a lead pipe. “Folks, let’s get out there and whack some weeds!”

Milo had his own theories for why the world felt so wrong, of course. As they took the path deeper into the refuge, he made sure Dale was well-acquainted with the finer details.

“The country is becoming too crowded. The whole world, really--but we have to start at

home. I guarantee, Dale, I *gua-ran-tee* that's the root of the problem, and everything--every branch and twig and stem--comes out of that solitary seed of trouble."

In Milo's opinion, it was foreigners that were ultimately to blame. That's where the jobs went, he declared, along with the welfare, aid tricked out of a government that couldn't even provide for its native sons and daughters. They brought crimes and violence, weaned on the weak morals of distant, teetering states. They polluted the very *culture*, seizing the wheel of America while the rightful owners sat hostage in the passenger seat.

Dale wasn't so sure. Maybe it was immigrants, like Milo said, and maybe it wasn't. He had a sense it was probably a little more complicated than that. But he'd learned weeks back that there was no arguing with the man, no mutual hashing out of ideas. Milo just liked to talk so he could be talking.

And talk he did, on and on and on. Under such an onslaught it was hard to stay positive, even in the rare coolness of that spring morning.

"The statistics, let me tell you, they are *damning*. There's just not enough room."

"Hm," said Dale. "Mm. Hey, isn't that natalgrass? That's definitely outside where the charts said we could expect to find it."

"You've seen it yourself, haven't you? Terrorists, man. Driftwood terrorists, on our soil!"

Dale cringed at the slur. He bent over, unaided, and started hunting for the root of the weed, pushing his fingers through the dirt.

"Dale, I know you're the right kind of guy. You ever want to *do something* about this, you tell me, all right? I've got friends. Patriots, and they're always looking for more."

Through the thick rubber of his work gloves, Dale felt a resistant little tangle. He pulled up at it, and the soil gave way. Satisfied, he tossed the extracted plant in the trash bag he carried

and swept some earth into the new divot in the ground, patting it down. “Thanks, Milo. You’ll be the first to know.”

Dale knew what he was alluding to, even if Milo’s “people” couldn’t be more than a few disgruntled local teenagers with girl problems. Still, the guy’s facebook was covered with photos of him wearing that red wristband. Holding it proudly at the camera, in fact. He’d shown up wearing it his first day in the Weed Whackers, too, but Wilk, in a rare flexing of genuine authority, had made him take it off.

Whatever sympathies Milo may have held, Dale was pretty sure they were ultimately harmless. The truth of it was that out here, they were cut off from all that. The torchlit marches of the Red Bands, their street brawls with SPEAR--they just saw that shit on the internet. Milo wasn’t “taking back his country,” he was driving to work at the Jiffy Lube three times a week since his hours had been cut in March. Whatever happened in Miami, in the White House, out in the rest of the world, it seemed hard to imagine it ever touching them here. Dale, along with everyone else, was stuck here in a time capsule, a machine made by people he’d never known and never would. Centre Vista, he believed most days, could hold out through the end of the world.

It was nearly lunchtime when they came to a little copse, hidden though it couldn’t have been more than a few dozen yards off the path. In the winter, Dale remembered, it had been dusted with little more than a few patches of brown and yellow grass. Now the copse had come alive with purple--in almost no time at all, a field of Mexican Petunias had taken root.

“Shit,” said Dale, marveling. “Well. We’re not going to get all this done today, but we might as well make a little progress.”

There was so much that even Milo couldn't kick around, waiting for Dale to do the heavy lifting. On their knees, they worked across the field, pulling up handfuls of the flower and tossing it into their bags.

After an hour they had carved a muddy patch into the colorful clearing. They wouldn't be able to finish it today; that was all right. The important thing was to mark it on their report to Wilk, so that he could come back and clear the rest before it had time to recover or spread.

The first protocol of dealing with invasive species was to eliminate the threat altogether; this was almost always impossible. The second was containment, and that, Dale knew, was where the bulk of serious effort went. It was why their reports at the end of each volunteer shift were so necessary--the park was split into zones, and those zones were tracked in the laminated pages of Wilk's binder. Some were green, and that meant they were free, or nearly free, of invasives. Most were splashed with blotches of yellow, indicating areas where one species or another had started to take hold. Some were a solid, emergency-red. In these, the spread of invasives had changed the landscape forever. The only option left to them then was quarantine. Once a month Dale and a few others would trek down to the mouth of zone three and clear out the shrub verbena around the edges, pushing them back for now. It was a battle they'd never win.

Dale pulled up another handful of flowers and paused. They reminded him, for a moment, of the exact shade of curtains his first girlfriend, in high school, had hung in her window. He could still remember them gently moving in the crossbreeze as they fucked and fought. It really was a pretty color.

Sometimes he wondered just what the difference was, at the end of the day, between the native and the non-native. He knew the real answer, of course; he'd heard it, from Wilk, a dozen times by now. One's found a balance with the local ecosystem, its herbivores and pollinators, its

neighbors. The other was mercenary. Cutthroat. Invasive species would take over, unchecked, culling the less competitive members of the ecosystem, taking from them the sunlight and soil they needed to survive. It wasn't enough to just be a pretty color.

But sometimes, looking at a patch of muddy ground turned into beautiful purple, he wasn't so sure. It was living, wasn't it? It was managing that much, and a lot better than some people he could name. *Why not leave it alone*, he thought, uprooting another clump. *What's so bad about a little more color?* The native plants wouldn't be happy, but sometimes it seemed like they were on their way out anyways.

"Hey!" barked Milo. Dale's head snapped up, and he saw immediately what had caught the other man's attention. At the edge of the clearing, no more than twenty feet away, was a fox.

Dale had never seen one in the wild. It was bigger than he expected, not the size of a housecat but of a small dog. It must have been losing its winter coat, as its vivid red fur was patchy and uneven. He stared at the animal and it stared back, fixing him with two amber, inhuman eyes.

"Holy shit," whispered Milo next to him. "What's it got in its mouth?"

Dale hadn't noticed the thing dangling from the fox's jaws--or rather, he'd been so caught up in the whole fox thing he hadn't distinguished it yet from the animal's silhouette. He couldn't quite say what it was--some kind of creature, that much was sure, but the shape had been ruined by the grip of the predator's jaw. It glistened oddly, though, catching the light as if it was wet. From the occasional twitch and spasm he could see a whole collection of limbs.

It was faintly blue, too. He'd never quite seen a blue like that.

A long moment passed before Dale felt something invisible in the air snap, and the fox tore out into the woods. Dale hopped to his feet and ran, on some instinct he couldn't name, to

the edge of the clearing. The weeks of spring rain had made the ground beyond lousy with green, ferns and ivy making a thick and tangled carpet, especially where the earth sloped down, but he could just make out the russet bolt slipping through the undergrowth. When it darted into the reeds at the bottom of the hill, he lost sight of it completely.

Much further and it would hit one of the streams that wound through the refuge, the dozen muddy veins that fed the park, where the deer--there were too many deer this season--drank, where they brought their young. Most would eddy out into ponds, gulches, a literal backwater, a marsh. A few, though, would go further. Even here, at the refuge, they weren't cut off from the sea.

Black - Chapter 18 - Go-Away-Green

They gave him five shots, each right after the last. Two in his arm, one in his ass, one in his eye--that one he was sure would be the worst, until they gave him the one in his spine, and he whimpered like a small dog. When they were done, the techs wheeled the cart of needles out of Observer's office while the man himself looked at Black with evident pleasure.

"Why so many now?" said Black, when he could speak again.

"You'd gone without medication for a long time, Mr. Gorie. If we hadn't given you a somewhat extreme dosage, I was concerned that the changes would only accelerate. Now, about further testing."

"I said one test," said Black. He'd meant to sound tough, but wasn't sure how well it landed. He was still woozy from the shots.

Observer frowned. "Oh? Then this one round of treatment should suffice. Though I feel I must warn you--well, who knows how extreme our *next* reintroduction of medication may be if you go another extended period cold turkey."

"Fine," said Black. He was so tired--was that the drugs, or everything else?

"Perhaps," said Observer, his voice softer now--pleased, maybe, by Black's assent. "It is the clinical nature of the procedures that you disagree with. Would they be bearable if they contained a more personal element?"

"If that means fewer things strapped on or jabbed into me, sure," he said. Though, a moment later, he wondered if he shouldn't be *more* worried about the prospect of a "personal" test, whatever that was.

"Mr. Gorie, you are capable of incredible things. I expect you to put that capability

towards the betterment of all mankind. To defend against things which threaten us all.” From a piece of paperwork on his desk, Observer tore off a corner. Holding it in his palm so Black couldn’t see, he scribbled on it for a moment with his pen. Then, he folded the sheet once and set it down on the table. “What number did I just write on that piece of paper?”

“Eleven.”

“Mr. Gorie.”

“Three hundred and twelve.”

“If you don’t at least *try*, I’ll consider you in breach of our agreement.”

“How am I supposed to know? I didn’t see what you wrote.”

“Ah, and you weren’t technically on flight 3622 when it crashed into the Atlantic ocean, yet you have a fairly good sense of Ms. Mezu’s experiences.”

Black reached across the desk for the little sheet of paper, but Observer was too quick. He snatched it up and popped it into his mouth, chewing twice, then swallowing.

“Now,” said Observer. “What was on the paper?”

He was in that office for two hours before Observer finally let him out--closing his eyes, scrunching up his face, generally trying to look as psychic as possible. Of course he knew what was really wanted of him--Black just wasn’t interested in absorbing any more secondhand trauma than he absolutely had to. With his eyes shut tight, instead, he chose to drift in that black and silent space alone. It was remarkable how the cheap cinderblock walls of the school shut out the world so completely.

By the end of it, Observer just made another ‘appointment.’ “Perhaps you will have better luck tomorrow.”

At dinner he meant to sit alone. Oluchi had said that it was better if they didn't look too friendly, and Black had agreed--plus it meant that he could avoid dwelling on his agreement to kill an old woman. Or, fish monster. Or whatever Meredith was, now. Adrien surprised Black by taking the seat opposite to him, though.

"Big guy," said the kid, nodding to Black. He had, Black noticed, accomplished two seemingly impossible tasks: he had cut the sleeves off his hospital scrubs, and he had found some substance with which to spike his hair. Black could smell something faint and fatty, and wondered for a moment if it wasn't the little pats of butter packed in plastic and set next to the toast trough.

"So I guess you're talking to me again," said Black.

"Come on. Don't be a pussy. You're back on the stuff, though, right?"

Black tried not to wince at the memory. "Yep. I'm taking my medicine."

"Hey, that's great. That's how we get better. Me, I'm already starting to kick this thing. I'll be out of here soon, I'm feeling."

Black looked at him flatly. "Adrien, they're not going to let us out of here."

"Until we're cured. I know, I know. But I told you I'm getting better. Hey--can I talk to you about something?"

"I guess so."

"I've been having these dreams. Of my dad. And they're--" Adrien paused, looking uncertain. "Weird."

"Weird how?"

"Not like sex stuff. But, he's singing?"

"Was your father a singer?"

“No, bro. I’ve literally never heard him sing. He called it ‘poisoning the air quality.’
That’s why it’s so weird.”

“Okay.”

“And I’m having this dream--like, a lot.”

“Okay.

“Like every night.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Adrien opened his mouth, then thought better of whatever he was about to say. “I don’t know, you just seemed like you know about that kind of stuff. Dream stuff. Like what it might mean.”

“Why would you think that?” But it wasn’t the first time he had been asked something like this.

Adrien shrugged. “Just a feeling.”

“It’s the pink eyes, right? And the white hair?”

“No, man,” muttered Adrien. But Black knew it was.

Oluchi greeted him in his room with a finger to her lips. Together, they searched the place for listening devices. It wasn’t hard--there weren’t many places to hide bugs in Black’s barren children’s library. When she was satisfied, they both sat on his bed, for lack of any other good spots. The springs creaked painfully from the weight; it wasn’t really even meant to hold Black.

“Our first problem is just finding the door,” said Oluchi. “It’s painted that color--the one nobody can see.”

“But the guards can see it,” said Black. “They come in and out.”

“He must have some way of inoculating them,” said Oluchi. “Some kind of, I don’t know. A vaccine.”

Great, thought Black. More shots. “It’s not like he’s just going to tell us.”

“Then you’ll have to do some spy shit. When you’re in there, alone with him.”

She looked right at him, and he shifted on the bed, producing a few more agonized creaks. All at once the room seemed very small. He knew what he had to say and do to keep his promise. It was just taking him a while.

“What?” said Oluchi, finally.

“I think,” said Black, “I know a way to get it.”

“Whenever you’re ready, Mr. Gorie,” said Observer. Again they were seated at his desk. Again, Observer carefully wrote his number down on a square of paper. Then he folded it and gingerly placed it in his mouth, staring at Black with those huge gray eyes throughout the whole procedure. Afterwards, he sipped from a glass of water.

“So, how do we--how do we kick this off?” said Black.

“Simply relax. I’m certain you’ll fall into it quite naturally if you allow yourself,” said Observer. If he felt any of the intimate pressure from those words he didn’t show it. “Try not to *dive*, if the metaphor helps. Simply dip a toe in.”

“Right. A toe.” He took a deep breath and tried to relax. Across the desk, Observer continued to watch him with those big gray eyes. Black stared into them, trying not to feel unnerved. He must have had at least a hundred pounds on the man, and yet still he felt like--like a fish, near to the surface. Gulping down bugs while the shadow of an osprey darkened the sun.

He remembered watching it plumb the coastline behind his parent's summer house, brown and white, bird-as-knife. The exact moment it sighted prey was visible: the sudden realignment of muscle and feather, and then the sharp dip downward, towards the water, hitting the surface with triumphant speed. A visitor from another world, reaching in for one bloody instant. The osprey was a being of undeniable power and speed, a god in that instant--so why would the boy feel, suddenly, like the fish?

Nothing in its world had prepared it for that fate. No knowledge, no wisdom, no experience had said death might come from such a place. It taught the boy a powerful lesson.

Black shook his head, clearing the memory like bad fumes. He was already doing it wrong. He was already getting lost.

Observer, too, seemed dazed. The gray eyes had gone cloudy. "Try again," said the scientist, quietly. "Once more. The number."

He took a breath and tried to fix on something in the room. The whiskey glass, then: empty, smudged with faint prints. A weighty bottom of clouded glass--he wondered if Observer had brought it here or rescued it from the former principal of Jackson Douglas Elementary.

He didn't always drink.

Black closed his eyes tightly. Focus on the color. The goddamn color.

It is four years since his posting, five since the discovery of the creature, and he's trying to answer one mystery in particular. Not any of the big, horrible, exciting, brain-shattering questions that loom behind the rote lab work every day--what is it, for example? Where was it, before it came to the surface of the Atlantic? What is it doing here now, and where is it going?

No; right now, he's working on a much smaller question--one that, in some ways, doesn't even center on the creature at all. It is the mystery that, so far, most disturbs him.

Four years ago he was installed to lead one of the largest research task-forces in the history of the secret government branch for which he worked. He did not have a budget; rather, he had desires, and those desires were instantly filled. A thermocycler? Three would be delivered the next morning. An evolutionary microbiologist? They sent him the best professors in the Ivy League. Even their coffee was brewed by a state of the art machine which somehow managed to draw hearts on top of everyone's lattes. Now, his team has been reduced to a few dozen lab techs and a host of researchers that verged from incompetent to outright deranged. For Christ's sake, he'd caught Hayes tasting one of the samples last week. Cast offs from other projects, his dwarfish gossip network within the Authority tells him, the useless ones and the liabilities. There are worse rumors, too; rumors that he might even be losing them soon.

His monthly budgets are now returned with numerous denials--he finds himself needing to campaign for even basic lab equipment. The calls with his Authority supervisor, a career military man he despises, are brief and distracted. In remarkably short order he's gone from national priority to barely tolerated.

He has no illusions about his own charisma. He's always suffered from an inability to render in others the same kind of passions that animated his own work. But that he should be called to, when an inexplicable, enormous creature moves a little closer to shore every day--it's insanity, nothing less.

Is it ordinary denial? In his experience humans have often shown a remarkable capacity to ignore things if they are inconvenient or distant, no matter how great the risk. But then, those old prey instincts were often stimulated to overdrive when it came to hostile life--one only had to look at the shark to see that. Every year we answer seven or eight deaths with one hundred million. In the spectacular nature of its threat, the creature he studies has no equal.

And yet. He rubs his eyes. They ache--too much time staring through the microscope. Too much time staring at screens--screens that, no matter how sharp and clear the picture, eventually start to flicker and tear at the edges, as if the presence of even trace elements of the Offshore Entity is enough to unmake his tools.

It is headed for Antillia. That's what all his projections say--not that it was particularly hard to project a straight line, the only direction it has ever moved. Antillia, an island with three million people. He's recommended evacuation three times in the last month. It's visible from shore now.

And yet, they are still swimming. The beaches are open. Every day there are kids tumbling in the surf, college drunks on spring break, leathery retirees doing laps to the breakers and back. People surfing, people fishing, people lying there, drowsy in the sun, as if a giant fucking monster isn't breaking the line of the horizon. As if it doesn't get a little bigger every day.

This is unnatural. He knows this. As unnatural, maybe, as the field around it--the odd static that fries electronics of sufficient complexity--or as the things they pull from the water near it. Could there be a less obvious effect radiating off of the entity? A kind of psychic camouflage, to render its prey unawares?

He thinks, not for the first time, of the osprey and the fish. One did not even know of the other until it was too late. Every night now he goes to sleep thinking, are we the fish at the surface? Is it already too late?

His breathing, he realizes, is coming faster than it should. Every beat of his heart kicks against the back of his ribs like there's something foreign inside of him, fighting to get out. It's happening again.

He can't think. His medicine. Where is it? He pulls open a drawer with shaking hands, digs through, but finds nothing. He picks up printed papers, notebooks, all the shit piled on top of his desk. Sweeps it violently, then, onto the floor. He hears a glass break--the pills, where are the fucking pills?

He finds them, at least, in his coat pocket. Chokes down two without water and tries to count to ten. Breathe in, out.

He has stopped looking in mirrors. He thinks he never will again. He is afraid of what he might see. What he will see, sooner or later. A hue to his colorless eyes.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Two, three, four.

There was a number he was supposed to find.

Somewhere, there was a number.

When Black came back to himself, Observer had shoved a three ring binder between his teeth. His skin felt damp with fever sweat. The other man was leaning over him, and for a moment Black saw double, *felt* double. He would have enjoyed throwing up, just then.

A moment after he'd made eye contact, Observer removed the binder. When he spoke it was gentle, as if to a kid still surfacing from a nightmare. "The number, Mr. Gorie? The number?"

Black skipped dinner. He was still nauseous, and wasn't sure he could face Oluchi. He could play that conversation out in his head, like the script had already been written. He'd admit that he failed--that the particulars of the color that couldn't be seen had escaped him. She'd ask him to try again, and that would mean another trip inside Observer's head. Another visit to that wasps' nest of terror and anxiety--waking up with the drugstore plastic wedged between his

jaws, to keep him from biting his tongue off. Not for the first time, Black wished he could solve things like he had once done. A judicious application of size, and of force. But then he had gone to prison.

What he had never admitted, before then, was that it felt good to use his size and his force. It always felt good to be stronger than the other guy. There was something primally validating about it, a pleasure that touched his ape brain. Punch bad guy, feel good. Break enemy. Smash.

And he was good at it. Had a knack for the particular angles that could best hurt a man--the torque required to snap a wrist, the timing to land fist to jaw, push jaw into brain nerve, put brain into time-out. Once one of their brawls with the Red Bands had been caught on video, then embedded in countless opinion pieces on the place of civility and discourse in combating an armed fascist uprising. In that video, a little less than a minute in, you could see Black--wearing a mask, yeah, but there was no mistaking that mountainous form or that papery white slip between bandana and baseball cap--as he drove one gloved fist into a Red Band's stomach, the man curling up like a bug on his way to the ground. Black watched that clip over and over again, reveling at the efficiency in the motion, the thoughtless grace that had deserted him in every other context of his life. Then, he had gone to prison.

He didn't like to think about what he'd seen in prison. It wasn't like it was anything special; the same selfishness, the same cruelty as everywhere else, only concentrated. He preferred to keep those memories out of sight. He didn't appreciate, by that token, how often his state-appointed therapist tried to bring it up. If he could just get through it, to the other side, then it would be something that had happened to him, and was over. But apparently this was "a form of denial" and "not actually helpful."

She--the therapist--wanted him to talk about what he had seen. She said that confronting it was important, but that he needed to recognize that he would never be able to go back to the person from before--the Black who had never been to prison. That he had been changed by foreign powers. That he would have to find a way to live with this new version of himself.

But Black was no fan of this new Black. The way he, for instance, woke up in the middle of the night, thrashing like something was eating him alive--that was no good.

Worse, maybe, was the nausea that had begun striking him at the mere thought of violence, however deserved. One day in the yard, he'd rushed to the bathroom after getting between the local chapter of the Atomwaffen and some shrimpy carjacker they insisted had a "jewy smell to him." The carjacker had gotten his ass kicked anyway, and Black had emptied the contents of his stomach right outside the men's room.

Black got good at ignoring what she--the therapist--had said. He became proficient in keeping his head down, in staying out of fights, or any situation that might look like violence was incoming. Always with the understanding that, when he got out, things would go back to the way they had been. But that didn't happen.

He spent a while doing office work at the SPEAR safehouse in Houston after his release. Cleaning up, getting coffee, sending emails, stuff like that. They couldn't put him back in the field, or anywhere close to the Red Bands--not without him yartzing under his mask. So he lurked around, a pale ghost, trying not to feel like one massive waste of space.

When the flood in Florida happened, he was almost excited. A chance to start over somewhere fresh was exactly what he needed. New faces, who didn't look at him like something broken. A town in crisis. And--who knew?--maybe the old Black was waiting for him, somewhere in Joyous Beach.

That night, as Black was receiving his medicine, Observer slipped into the room along with the pills and the shots. Black would have said something, but just then the tech had stuck some kind of beeping metal device into his mouth, so he could only glare across the room at the intruder. When the test was done, he'd forgotten exactly what cutting remark he had intended to deliver.

Observer held out a manila folder. It was thick with papers, and, Black thought, photographs. Observer said, "Mr. Gorie. For your troubles."

Hesitantly, Black reached out and took it. "What's this?"

"The information you requested."

"I didn't request any information."

The corner of Observer's mouth lifted. Involuntary, joyless. "Mr. Gorie, let us be frank. The door you opened goes both ways. I know you were looking for something. This," he said, gesturing at the folder in Black's hand, "is what that something was. Information on the EDP."

Observer felt a crawling sensation go up his skin. It was like coming home to find your apartment ransacked, knowing that the scientist had been poking and prodding through his brain. "Am I supposed to know what that means?"

"Entity-derived pigment. It is--an inexact term, but in this facility we must work with what we have."

"Why are you giving me this?"

"So that you can understand the impossibility of this plan you and Ms. Mezu have concocted. The woman you intend harm on is contained for *everyone's* safety. You'll find, in those notes, the procedures for developing immunity to the EDP require weeks of gradual

exposure to a variety of concentrations. All under careful supervision, with the proper equipment. There is no way to do it yourself.”

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“You don’t. But if you believe I’ve had the time to falsify those documents, you must have a very different impression of the inside of my head than I do.”

Black set the folder on the bed and rubbed his knees. “So I guess you’re going to have your meatheads follow us around now.”

“Mr. Gorie, this is not a *prison*. It is the only organization, public or private, government or otherwise, devoted to observing, studying, and ultimately *destroying* the greatest existential threat our civilization has ever encountered. How exactly can I convince you that, whatever my methods, I am on your side--and the rest of humanity’s as well?”

“Well. You’ve been in my head, so I figure you already know the answer to that.”

“I can’t.”

“That’s right.”

The tech was backing out of the room now, carrying the plastic tub of equipment like if he turned away from his boss, even for an instant, the man would pounce. But Observer didn’t look angry or volatile--he just looked tired. “Mr. Gorie. I tried. You know that as a fact. I petitioned my superiors again and again to *act*--to evacuate the island, before it was too late.”

“You could have done more. Tried something other than polite letters. Go down there with a megaphone. Cram people into a boat yourself. There’s always more you could do.”

“And I suppose you think every starfish we throw back makes a difference.”

“What?”

Observer waved his hand. “Nevermind. Enjoy your reading material. We’ll resume our

sessions when you're eating again."

He closed the door, leaving Black alone with his collection of secret government files. He flipped through them idly, then closed the folder.

That night, Oluchi came to his room and he told her, eyes dropped to the ground, what he had learned. "It's over," he said. "I'm sorry. I tried."

"Hold on," said Oluchi. Standing, she was only just taller than Black seated on the bed. "It's all about exposure, right? Maybe if we can--I don't know, chip the paint on the main door, the one out--"

"We don't know where that door is either," said Black.

Oluchi took the caterpillar book off the shelf and hurled it across the room. Black winced as its spine impacted the plaster.

"Bullshit," she said. "There's got to be a way. We could bribe the staff."

"With what? The eight cigarettes Adrien has left?"

Outside his window, through the grates and the glass, he could hear a loudspeaker--one of the techs, lab gear and all, was making his nightly announcement to the gathered refugees outside:

"Attention! Everything is fine! We hope you're as comfortable as possible in this temporary shelter! If any of your friends or family start to display symptoms of illness, please report them to a staff member immediately so that we can provide help! Dinner tonight will be meatloaf and home fries!"

Oluchi slumped down the wall and laid there, motionless. It was like the desire to kill this old woman had been the only thing animating her.

“Maybe an opportunity will come up. Maybe we just have to wait,” said Black.

“How long,” deadpanned Oluchi, “do you really think we have?”

He couldn't sleep that night. The hours dragged on. He didn't have a clock in here and they'd taken his phone when he showed up, so he had no real way of knowing how much time passed. He counted every turn in bed; twenty-three, and then his side would get tired and he'd turn again, making the cheap springs creak with the effort.

Thirty-two turns into the night, he heard a sound outside his window. There were, of course, plenty of sounds out there. An entire refugee camp's worth, in fact. But this sounded much closer, way outside the perimeter of where the refugees were allowed to go.

Black sat up in bed and looked out the window. From here he could see the white of the refugee tents, bright in the sodium lamps that had been set up by the fence; rows and rows of cots, in open air, with figures huddled under blankets. How many had lost their homes to the water? How many kids were sleeping there tonight?

There was movement in his periphery, and he turned--something was moving in the dark, low to the ground, slow. At first he thought it was a dog. It was about the right size and shape to be one of those rangy, survivalist mutts that had been roaming the streets of Joyous Beach, but the limbs were too long, and seemed splayed out strangely at the sides. There was something hanging off it, too--clothing?

All of a sudden it twisted its head towards him, and he saw the thing's eyes: blue, that pale luminous blue.

It was the kid, he realized. Daclan.

Quick as a spider, then, he scampered back into the dark, vanishing around the side of the

building.

It was Daclan, thought Black, when his racing mind had settled. And then the more important one: *Daclan got out*.

There were no gunshots or fighting or screams that night, and none of the techs, when Black left his room, seemed in any state of trouble. *So either they don't know he's gone, or...* Or he came back.

He tried to find Oluchi first, with no luck. She wasn't at breakfast, and neither was Daclan. Adrien tried to ask him about the oatmeal again--if there was any honey, if it ever got better--and all Black had to tell him was that raisins didn't make it any better.

He looked everywhere he could think of. The gym was empty. In the nurse's office, Adrien was doing some kind of test which involved a candle and several mirrors. He looked in the art room, with its lingering waxy smell, but there was nobody there either. Eventually he found himself in the auditorium, where the rubber soles of his hospital slippers still somehow managed to squeak against the floor, bouncing back to him across the open empty space like echolocation.

"Daclan?" he said, out loud. He'd been wandering around for almost two hours now.

There were eight rows of seats, with about thirty in each row, all of them that miraculous Goldilocks size--too big for children, too small for adults. the wooden part of the seat folded down on springs that Black felt certain he'd destroy if he ever actually sat in them.

Instead he leaned on one of the folding rows of wooden seats warily, resting for a moment. "It's Black. Can we talk?"

In the silence of the auditorium, Black heard something. A clatter--something falling

over. It came from behind the curtain, from backstage.

Black hoisted himself up onto the stage, less than graceful, and pushed aside the curtain.

“Daclan?”

Back there it was dark. He groped for some switch along the wall, but he couldn’t even find a wall in the first place. “Daclan, are you back here?”

In the gloom he could only make out vague shapes--structures of wood and metal piping. In the sliver of light let in by the part in the curtain, he could make out a sloppily-painted sunflower nearly as tall as he was, smiling with manic glee. Some relic of a Jackson Douglas Elementary school play. Hard to imagine those seats filled with bored parents and underpaid teachers now.

He walked a little further in, feeling foolish for the knot of fear that had tied itself to his sternum. Behind him, in the auditorium, there was a metallic bang. Black felt that knot of fear jump into his throat--and then relax, a moment later, as he recognized the same ghostly thump that he’d been hearing since he arrived. He took a look through the curtain, to be sure, but there was no one else in the auditorium.

Something they’re doing with the pipes, Adrien had speculated at him once. Sometimes he would go days without hearing the strange thumps.

When he turned around, two blue discs stared out at him from around the side of the sunflower. Black almost screamed.

“Hey,” he said, quietly, managing to keep the shakes out of his voice. “Hey, Daclan. I’ve been looking for you.”

“The ghosts followed you here.”

“Oh, yeah. Right, I forgot you see ghosts. Listen, Daclan--what else can you see?”

The kid put his finger to his cheek, in a thinking pose. “I see you, and me. And the curtain, and the light, and that box, and that big flower--”

“That’s not what I--listen, kid,” said Black, cutting him off. “Can you see the door out of this place? The one the weathermen use?”

The child blinked once, the milky light of his eyes contracting. “Yeah. They don’t like it when I follow them out. So I go at night, when they can’t see me.”

“Cool. Right. Daclan--Oluchi and I need your help.”

Those blue eyes of his--they were glowing, Black was sure, faintly glowing--they could somehow see through Observer’s coloring trick. Somehow, the disease had done to him what had taken the uninfected weeks of conditioning.

Because they come from the same source, Black realized. The disease and the color. Both byproducts, chemical runoff of--of the thing in the water. The Offshore Entity.

Behind the sunflower, Daclan closed his eyes. When they didn’t reopen a moment later, Black realized he had slipped somewhere further back.

“Wait,” he said, clambering over a wooden platform and banging his calf painfully against a stepladder. When he found Daclan again, the kid was crouching on top of scaffolding, peering down at him with those eyes.

“Look, I don’t have much to offer, but we really need your help. I’ll owe you one--Oluchi, too.”

“She doesn’t look at me,” said Daclan. “She doesn’t like me. I can see it, coming off her. The scared-ness.”

“Kid, in fairness, you live in the darkest place in the building and scuttle around like a creature.”

Daclan laughed. It sounded weirdly normal--the kind of noise that should be a lot more common where they were. "I *am* a creature."

"Please, Daclan. We need to find another door, and I think you're the only one who can help us."

Daclan dropped down from the scaffolding. "I want something."

Black spread his hands, palm open. "Hey, whatever I've got, it's yours."

"A cigarette. One of Adrien's cigarettes."

"What? Why?"

"I've never had one before."

"Fine. Deal."

Daclan did a little dance, his monstrous eyes squeezed tight with glee.

Black told him the plan--there wasn't one--and that they could talk more after dinner, with Oluchi. Daclan shooed him off, then, and told him to "take the ghosts with him."

On his way out, Black paused. "Daclan. Hey. Can I ask you something?"

The kid was already starting to scale the scaffolding again with surprising speed, even in the dark. Maybe those creepy eyes were good for more than just seeing unseeable colors.

"Yeah-huh."

"If you can just leave, and no one notices, why do you come back?"

Daclan blinked. He didn't seem to understand the question. "Where else would I go?"

Marta - Chapter 19 - Roanoke

For the seventh time since they'd stopped, Marta checked her watch, a boxy, intimidating thing covered in buttons she didn't understand how to use. It displayed in a severe digital readout the current hour in military time, and had belonged to her father in what she had increasingly begun to think of as a past life; the watch, the gun, and the truck were all she had left to remind her of the person that the creature in the ice chest had once been.

"What are we doing?" she asked Siren.

"Staying alive," she said. The same thing she'd said every time. Then, she pressed the lens of the little pair of pocket binoculars to her eyes again. They were pointed at the same thing they'd been pointing at for over an hour: the checkpoint.

Siren had spotted it through a miraculous break in the foliage just before they'd come around the bend. *Pull over*, she'd hissed, almost reaching for the steering wheel. They'd left the truck--and the cooler, freshly filled with ice at the last gas station--by the side of the road. From there, Siren had crept into the undergrowth and led Marta to a tangle of azalea, where she'd produced the little pair of binoculars from her pocket and crouched down, on her haunches, to wait, and to watch. The checkpoint didn't look like much. A few orange-striped barricades, book-ended by two collapsible spotlights rigged to a generator. When they got a little closer, she could make out the criss-crossed black metal of a spike strip laid across the road, but that was all. No men in black suits or body armor--no guards, or people, at all.

While Siren watched the checkpoint, Marta watched Siren. The woman who, until very recently, she had thought of as her captive. She'd had every opportunity to escape when Marta had been pulling Victor out of that diner, and instead she'd stayed. They'd kept on going, right

past the Lighthouse Motel, unable to shake the idea of someone in that diner coming to their senses all of a sudden and showing up outside with pitchforks and torches in the middle of the night.

Marta hadn't figured that part out. The idea that this woman--this *terrorist*, Marta reminded herself again--might be acting out of a genuine desire to help seemed ridiculous. A favorite saying of her father's: *the only thing in this world that's really free is the knife it'll stick in your back*. There had to be an angle she wasn't seeing. For now, though, she had no choice but to swallow her paranoia and try not to walk into any obvious traps. "There's nobody there," said Marta.

"That's probably true. But you could be wrong. And if you're wrong, we get detained. In the best possible scenario. And if we get detained, you're never going to find your brother."

"We should go now, while it's empty. There might be a night shift coming."

"Why would they only watch the road at night?"

The answer was obvious, if not exactly comforting: they were trying to keep out something that only moved at night. Or, trying to keep it in. That thought lent a certain urgency to the slow, ruddying descent of the sun westward. Soon, it would be dark.

Siren seemed to come to a similar conclusion. "Fine," she said, reluctance still obvious.

"Let's move the spike strip," said Marta. "Then double back for the truck."

"It would be safer to walk."

"We don't know how much farther it is. And the cooler weighs a lot more when the ice melts."

Siren grimaced. "If we can't be safe, let's at least be quick."

But they encountered no one--not at the checkpoint, and not across the five or six more

miles before they reached the town of Joyous Beach. By then, it had ceased to be a relief; instead, it had taken on the air of an omen.

The road took them in a loop around the outer part of town. Marta drove slowly, hoping the ancient engine would rumble less, while in the passenger seat Siren stared through her little binoculars like a scientist through a microscope.

“See anything?” asked Marta. But Siren didn’t respond.

She could hear, through the windshield, the hundred million insects around them starting up their nightly call. She tried to remember the last time she had been this far down the coast. Had the night sounds always been this looping and alien? Not constant, like the buzzsaw of crickets back in the city, but sounds that seemed to climb and fall, like the insects were all singing with one voice. It made her uneasy.

As the road bent in, taking them towards the main drag, Marta had to weave around fallen tree branches and puddles lined with a pale blue algae. There was some kind of silt covering the pavement that whispered against the tires as she drove. On either side were dark and empty buildings, the windows mostly smashed in. Across the midriff of the stores lining the road was an ugly green-black scar marking the highest point of the flood. Further on, most of the trash had at least been pushed to either side; in the gutters lay moldering dresses from the folksy boutique with the rotten door, laminated menus crusted in filth from the nice Italian restaurant with the gaping hole in its side. One telephone pole had been covered in missing dog posters, which waved weakly in the breeze.

“What are we looking for?” asked Marta. Involuntarily, she found herself speaking in a low voice.

“A school. That’s what it looks like, from the outside. Minus the armed guards and the barbed wire fence.”

Marta didn’t see anything like that. For an odd flash, though--as they passed what seemed to be the bombed out remains of a cafe, sidewalk tables smashed to splinters--she thought for a moment, *I’ve been here before*. It was just the patina of destruction over everything that had kept her from realizing it. Hadn’t she and Adrien been down here with her father, once? Or at least stopped in the coffee shop and pleaded for homemade, plastic-wrapped rice krispie treats. As soon as it came, though, the sensation passed, and she could never be sure whether or not it was genuine. Maybe it was just that this town looked like any other town, really. Or maybe all towns looked the same if the water rose high enough.

The sun had now dropped behind the stand of cypress trees framing the road behind them, and was only visible by a pink, fading glow.

“We need to stop for the night,” said Siren.

“You see any good bed and breakfasts yet?” snapped Marta. She nudged the truck forward, through a thin scum of water spread from sidewalk to sidewalk. Suddenly, there was a sharp *pop*, and the truck slumped low on its left side. Underneath them, something slapped and dragged at the undercarriage as they moved.

“Shit. That sounded like a blown tire.”

Marta threw on the parking break and climbed out of the cab, planting her feet immediately in dirty water. A smell rose off the surface, uncomfortably familiar under the general aroma of damp and rot.

The tire was pancaked, useless already. “There must have been glass or nails under the water,” Marta said.

Siren said, "I think you should get back in the car." She didn't sound threatening or annoyed; she sounded scared.

"There's a spare," said Marta. "I can change it." Though she wasn't eager to kneel down in water that reeked of ammonia. By the time she'd steered the hobbled truck out of the water, though, dark had fallen like an axe.

"We sleep in the cab tonight," said Siren. "Try and find the facility tomorrow. In the daylight."

"Won't that be more dangerous?"

"Everything here is dangerous. We left the possibility of making safe choices ten miles back."

But Marta knew what she meant: Siren wasn't scared of being arrested or shot. She was scared of something else--something that might be asleep in the grime-covered Starbucks down the block, just stirring with the arrival of night.

Siren took the front, curled up on herself in the passenger seat, while Marta stretched out as much as she could in the back row. They talked about backing the truck into an alleyway, but it didn't seem like it would make much difference; the street was lined with cars on both sides. Sodden, covered with scum, like something dredged up from the bottom of a lake. On one, a collection of parking tickets had jellified to the windshield. They hardly stuck out.

So Marta tried to sleep. The circumstances weren't ideal; the cloth covering the cushions in the backseat was scratchy and old, and her legs were crooked up into arches even pressed against the door. Plus there was the destroyed town just outside, and the terrorist of uncertain allegiance sharing the cab with her. But to her surprise, when a sound jerked her awake some time in the night, she realized that she had been deeply, dreamlessly asleep.

At first she couldn't tell whether it was real. The sound--a gentle thump--might just as well have emitted from some place deep in REM as from the flesh and blood world. But then, in that lazy half-wakefulness, it came again: a thump, louder this time. Coming from a spot just to the left of her head.

From the bed of the truck, Marta realized.

There was a complaining sound from the shocks as something tested them. Marta pushed herself upright and looked through the back window, dreading what she might see: the cooler lid flipped open again, another jailbreak attempt from her father. But the lid, stark white in the darkness outside, was still closed. Something else was nudging it.

It wasn't obvious that the thing in the bed of the truck had once been a dog. It was only later, reflecting, that she could pick out the dog-like features: the knees bending backwards, the black gums, the tongue lolling out of its twisted mouth-parts. What kind of dog it had been before, other than a big one, was hard to say now that all of its fur had fallen out.

The thing nudged at the ice chest containing Marta's father; it thumped, again, against the back of the truck, then made an odd noise, a little sing-song sound halfway between a chirp and a whinny. Without taking her eyes off it, Marta fumbled underneath her seat, groping for the gun. Dully, under the panic, some part of her noted stirring from the front seat.

Her hand closed around the pistol just as the thing ducked down to press its face-digits up against the front of the cooler--groping, blindly, for the latch. She raised the gun.

"Wait, Marta!" hissed Siren from behind her. "Don't--"

But there was probably nothing she could have said to stop Marta from pulling that trigger.

The first shot shattered the back window completely, the little glass cubes of safety glass

spilling into her lap, across the truck bed and the cooler. The dog-thing flinched at the noise or the impact--she couldn't tell whether she'd actually hit it. The next shot, though, left a perfect dark hole in its shoulder, and it screamed, all of its mouth flailing and writhing, and she could see that it still had teeth, just not in the right places, so she shot it again, and again, and then one more time. By then it wasn't moving any more.

When her heartbeat quit banging in her ears, Marta realized something: now that the echo of the gunshots had faded, the night outside was utterly quiet. No more insects. Like the whole town was holding its breath.

"Jesus Christ," whispered Siren.

"It's dead," said Marta.

"Give me the keys."

"What? I killed it."

"We have to go. They'll have heard that."

"Who?"

"Everyone. Everything."

In the corner of her eye, Marta saw movement in the darkness of the alleyway. The shifting of a dark pile, something she'd believed to be trash bags moments ago. There was a sound like bones clicking under tissue.

"Give me the keys," said Siren, no longer whispering. The whites of her eyes bulging and visible in the dark.

Marta jammed her hands into her pockets. Something scabbled on concrete at the end of the alleyway--a whinny, answered by another, somewhere to her right. A horrifying thought: dogs moved in packs.

Her fingers brushed metal: she thrust the keys at Siren, who had climbed into the driver's seat. Marta heard the click and scratch as Siren tried to force them in. In the smothering silence all around them, it was all she could hear.

Then the engine rumbled to life, and something started running towards them from farther down the alley, wet and percussive steps. Marta fired randomly into the dark. The cooler, the one that contained her father, rocked back and forth. From inside, Marta could hear a muffled keening. The truck lurched forward; Marta half-expected to wake up then, freed from this uncanny nightmare, but she didn't.

Siren turned onto the street, flat tire slapping the ground angrily, and then they were pulling to the left--the side with the flat. Siren jerked the wheel hard in the other direction but it didn't seem to be taking. Everything was happening with a kind of trickling slowness that Marta couldn't understand.

She didn't actually feel the impact--just knew that they must have crashed, because next to her was her father's truck, the front of it smashed in, smoke pouring from under the hood, and the doors were open, and she was standing in the road.

Marta wasn't sure how she had gotten out of the car so fast; she didn't know where Siren was. She stepped forward, put one foot on the back-right wheel. Her legs felt like jelly, like trying to run in a dream, but she hoisted herself up into the bed of the truck. Almost fell back out, when she saw the dead dog thing lying there, but she covered her mouth and edged around it, trying not to look too closely. When she reached the cooler, she fumbled with the latch. She couldn't carry him out. Not alone. But maybe she could set him loose, give him a better fate than being eaten by mutant dogs or blown up. The truck definitely seemed old enough to be the exploding type.

Behind her, she heard a wet, gurgling whinny. The latch popped open, and Marta was knocked back as her father burst out.

That label--her dad, her father--was the last recognizable thing about him. In the dim light he was all ocean horror, his skin a translucent gray, his eyes solid, toxic blue, mouth overfilled with teeth. He emerged from the cooler singing, singing at the top of his lungs, if he still had lungs: horrible mouth yawning wide open, belting out the tuneless tonal sound as loud as he could.

Marta fell, back into the dead dog-thing, which seemed to sag and collapse like rotten wood at her weight. She was screaming--was she really? It was hard to tell over the singing from the thing in the cooler--and on hands and knees she crawled to the edge of the truck bed, meaning to throw herself out into the street and then, who knows, maybe try and run. But as she pushed herself up and started to throw one leg over, something rose up to meet her. She felt the slap of the second dog-thing's mouth-parts against her hand and she pulled it back. The teeth, at least, had missed; this one was a clumsy eater.

Another leaped up against the tailgate and seemed to be barking, except it didn't remember how to bark very well. Marta patted herself down, searching for the gun, but it wasn't there. Was it in the road? In the back seat? She had no way of knowing, no way of getting it. Behind her, Victor sang and sang.

One of the dog-things threw itself against the side of the truck, rocking it like a rogue wave, and Marta almost lost her balance, but caught herself on reflex, and for one strange moment it seemed like she was somewhere else, standing on the deck of a very different vessel. Her father, speaking from the prow. Marta, cranking back the reel on the longline while Adrien waited next to her with a gaff for whatever poor sucker was coming out of the water next.

“Hey!” someone shouted, pulling Marta back to the nightmarish present. Siren; waving her arms, banging against a grated metal trash can with a decaying plank of wood. “Hey, over here!”

Marta stared dumbly. What the fuck was she doing? She was out in the open--already the dog-things were turning towards her, their motion fluid and unnatural as if unconstrained by skeletal structure. But then that was her plan, Marta realized: get eaten. Buy her time to escape. Stupid fucking plan. Stupid fucking Siren.

With liquid speed, one of the dogs peeled off from the truck, loping towards her in great stretching strides that reminded her horribly of caterpillars collapsing and extending to inch forward. Siren dropped the wood and turned to run, but it was obvious she wouldn't be getting far.

And then a flame, bright against the night sky, arced through the air: it burst against the ground, and suddenly there was a carpet of fire between the dog-thing and Siren, casting shadows up and down the street only half as weird as what was casting them. The dog pulled up short, shrieking and barking, whinnying in frustration. The reek of burning gasoline was everywhere, mingling strangely with the smell of wet and chemicals.

From further up the main road came people. People, wearing respirators and rubber gloves. Some of them were carrying bottles and zippo lighters; another had a hockey stick, which he was spinning around his head furiously. Another carried two cymbals, which he started to smash together, adding to the bizarre chorus, and at the front of the pack was an older woman holding what looked to Marta like an old flintlock pistol, the kind you loaded with a powder horn. A marching band, for the end of the world.

The back of the truck sagged down an inch as a dog-thing put its weight down on the

bumper, climbing with a monkeyish dexterity. The light of the fires seemed to pass right through its skin; under the opalescent tissue Marta could make out the dark fruit of organs, hanging suspended as if in Jello. Its mouth lashed and flailed and whipped all its many parts. It crouched, coiling itself, and then--quite doglike--pounced.

The weight of it knocked her back off the truck. She heard, rather than felt, the crack of her skull hit the pavement, then the dog-thing was leaning over her, dripping pale blue slime as it tried to shove its teeth into her face. Marta reached out blindly, grabbing two of the mouth tendrils and pushed out, away, off. It was bigger than her, and bearing down, but Marta knew that even a moment of weakness meant that its mouth would meet her throat, so she fought. She twisted and pushed with her shoulders, her hips--she felt something cutting into her hands where she gripped the tendrils. Teeth, or something teethoid, biting deep. She didn't care. Marta held on, thrashing underneath it. It was stronger than her, so much stronger, but she had seen fish snap the line. She had seen them beat the odds, and slip free, as long as they fought hard enough.

Somewhere behind her came a deafening bang, and suddenly the dog-thing was off her. She pushed herself up with mangled hands, flinched and gasped at the pain, and watched the figures in black form a semi-circle around her, jabbing at the dog-thing which paced uncertainly just beyond them. They shouted at it like shepherders--*yaaah, git, go away*--while it chortled and yipped and, finally, loped away.

Then, someone was helping her up. The older woman, with the antique gun. "Are you okay? Are you bleeding?"

Mutely, Marta held up her mashed and bloody palms. It was a traditional gesture: don't shoot.

The woman's face broke into a grin, and Marta could see that she was missing her two

front teeth. “Oh, you’ll live through that.”

Ahead of her, someone was shining a little flashlight into Siren’s eyes. It reminded Marta of something--oh, her own burgeoning concussion, yes. Her head had just started to pulse with heat and pain.

“Is this everyone?” said the woman. “Is there anyone else?”

Marta’s tongue felt like putty in her mouth. She realized she was still holding her hands up. How to even explain, if she had the ability to speak? My father. My father-thing. She pointed back at the truck. But when she turned, he was gone.

The woman’s name was Sadie. A month ago, she’d been a house-cleaner, socialist organizer and local tour guide. Now she was a militia leader, she told Marta, back at the shelter that had formerly been the town’s cinema. “My recruits aren’t exactly hardened by combat. Mostly they were gardeners, or janitors, or waitresses in their past lives. But y’know, those jobs have a way of toughening you up too. You don’t see many accountants or regional managers volunteering to take on ocean mutants!”

Marta was seated on an overturned trash can behind the concession stand while Sadie disinfected and wrapped with gauze the raw hamburger of her palms. Yet another hat she wore, here--battlefield medic. Whatever didn’t smell like rubbing alcohol smelled like stale popcorn butter.

“Ow,” hissed Marta at another splash of disinfectant. “You’re not exactly what most people picture when they think of SPEAR.”

“No. I suppose not. To be honest, I’m not much for keeping up-to-date member registries, or taking meeting minutes. And I miss my smashed storefront windows quota most months,

between you and me.” With that gap-toothed smile, Marta wasn’t sure she was joking.

They didn’t generally patrol at night--too dangerous, since the town’s new assortment of predators could see in the dark, or utilize some extra sense none of them could wrap their heads around. But they’d heard Marta’s gunshots, and the car crash.

“The cops, whichever ones stayed, generally hole up in the school, with those government spooks. So whoever’s left in this town has to help each other. No one else is going to.”

It would have been easy to imagine some bitterness behind that line. Marta certainly would have felt resentful. But Sadie seemed terminally cheerful, like she was being asked to organize a church bake sale rather than fight monsters in the street.

“How could things get this bad without anyone knowing?” asked Marta. Just a few miles away, the movie theaters were hosting sequels and prequels, rather than displaced families.

Sadie just shrugged. “I think there was a news story on the TV, a day or two after it happened. I guess people just got bored, or assumed it would work itself out.”

Now that she mentioned it, Marta was pretty sure she had seen some news story on the matter. At the time, she’d had her own problems to deal with. Not like those problems had gone anywhere.

“Is my--” What was Siren to her now? Prisoner? Bargaining chip? “Traveling companion okay?”

There was an infinitesimal change in the pressure of the towel on her wound, then--Marta tried not to flinch at the nip of pain. But Sadie seemed not to notice.

“Siren will be fine. She’s in much better shape than you, actually. This is not going to be fun, so if you need to clench anything, clench it,” she said, shifting her grip on a pair of tweezers.

Marta gasped as Sadie twisted something out of the wound. In the tweezers was a single thorn-like fang.

“There,” said Sadie. “Almost done.”

“And I was just starting to enjoy it,” said Marta. Hoping she didn’t sound as woozy or weak as she felt.

Sadie dropped the tooth in an empty soda cup, where it landed noiselessly, and leaned back to wipe the sweat off her forehead. She finished winding bandages around Marta’s palms, affixed each with a little piece of tape. “Listen, dear. About your friend--”

“We’re not friends.”

“Well, about her anyway,” Sadie went on, then stopped, unclear what order her next words had to come in. Her hands, lined with prominent blue veins, opened and closed, as if searching for handholds. Her brow wrinkled, that gap-toothed smile traded for a set of deep creases. Evidence of a life spent angry.

“I know what I’m doing,” said Marta, cutting her off. They had already come this far. If someone gave her permission to stop, she wasn’t sure she could turn them down. “You don’t need to tell me to be careful.”

Slowly, she nodded. “No,” she said. “I guess I don’t.”

Sadie had left Marta a pillow, plus a sleeping bag that smelled like mold and fabric softener. She did her best to sleep, but when she checked her watch it was past five in the morning. The sun would be up before long, and she didn’t trust herself to find any rest before then.

Instead, she wandered the halls of the theater. The odd colorlessness of the ticket counter,

with no LED showtimes listed on the black screen; movie posters for summer blockbusters that wouldn't now, or ever, be coming to Joyous Beach. The End of the World was still miles offshore, barely visible from the coast, and yet the end of the world had arrived. Almost like such things couldn't be scheduled like a movie release. That there wasn't such a clear line between before and after--maybe the world was in the process of ending everywhere. It was just easier to ignore some places than others.

Marta took off her shoes and socks and scrunched her toes in the lobby carpet. One by one, she padded up to the little porthole in the double doors leading into each theater: in the dark, she could just make out the packaged forms of bodies curled into sleeping bags. Only the last one was playing a movie.

Marta stepped inside. She could see just one person seated in the rows, a familiar choppy black haircut, silhouetted by the glowing screen. In the film was a grimey city; it was raining, there was neon. Someone was flashing a badge. Marta sat down. "I wouldn't have thought you'd go in for police procedurals," she said.

"Even wanted criminals watch movies," said Siren.

"I just mean, rooting for the cops. It doesn't really seem like your style."

Siren raised a hand to point at the screen, where a twenty-foot-tall detective loomed, bloodshot and costumed in rumpled clothes and moody lighting. "That one's an alcoholic. And he's cheating on his wife. Maybe he's the main character, but I don't believe you're supposed to be rooting for him."

The empty buildings and town militia she had taken in stride, more or less. Even the dog-things had made a certain kind of sense in whatever her life had become. But talking out loud, in a movie theater, was almost more than Marta could handle. Like with that one little crack in the

world, the whole dam might come crumbling down. All she wanted was to go back to her old life. To the way things were. But she was finally starting to accept that such a thing was no longer possible. Not for her. Not for a lot of people, soon.

“No good guys or bad guys,” continued Siren, unaware of whatever Marta was feeling. The world, she guessed, had been broken for Siren a lot longer. “Just guys. Fucking up.”

“Thank you, by the way,” said Marta. Trying to talk at a normal volume. Trying to adapt.

“For what?”

“I saw you banging on the trash cans. Trying to pull away the...the dogs.”

“You would have done the same.”

“No. Actually, my plan was to trade you to the secret government lab, for my brother.”

“Oh,” said Siren. “Well, I guess you have your reasons.”

“That’s not my plan anymore, though,” said Marta, though she wasn’t sure why. “I don’t know what my plan is now.”

Siren was quiet for a while. On screen, the detective sulked and drank. She said, “It took me three years to get that bomb. I can’t tell you how many setbacks I had. How many scams and traps I had to sidestep. Three years of work for--it turns out--no reason at all. That thing is still walking towards us. The only thing I accomplished was dooming an innocent town. And,” she said, glancing at Marta, “an innocent family. The world would have been unquestionably better if I had just sat around finger painting, or killed myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sadie told me what happened. When, exactly, the wave hit. It’s my fault. All of this. So I was thinking about going out and getting eaten by some dog monsters tonight.”

“You can’t.”

“Why not? They keep telling me this is a free country.”

“Because I need you to get my brother back.”

“You know, odds are he’s already like your father. Like those dogs.”

Marta tried to swallow the entirety of that feeling: the image of her father, on all fours, running with a pack of somethings through the night. “Brother first. Then we find my--” It was actually difficult to say. She almost couldn’t do it. “Then we find my father.”

“Okay,” said Siren, quietly. “We’ll make the trade.”

“I don’t want to make the trade.”

“I thought you said you didn’t have a plan.”

“I don’t.” Somehow, this was true. All the anger she’d been carrying with her, anger for Siren--that had run off into the night, around the same time her father had. “That’s what I need you for. This can’t be the first time you’ve broken into a government facility.”

Siren seemed thoughtful at that. “No. I guess it isn’t.”

“So what do we--”

“Shh. After the movie.”

A woman draped her arms around the detective’s shoulders on screen, from behind. It was the kind of corny nuclear-family-drama Marta always tuned out for, but Siren was enraptured. The detective watching his kids play in the yard, from the front steps of his porch. At least she was pretty sure they were his kids; honestly she lost the thread a while ago. It seemed like quite a leap to get from all that cop stuff, the murder and the questions, to this. She must have missed a transition somewhere.

Siren turned to face her. It made sense to Marta, somehow, that at some point they’d kiss. She just didn’t expect it to happen so soon.

Chapter 20 - Where is Denarius?

It's the breathing. Denarius has always been a heavy breather, but seasoned viewers will know right away that something has changed--that this is more of a wheeze. This sound, in his latest video, sounds more like air escaping from a wet balloon. This is the first thing fans of Denarius might notice, but it is far from the last.

Irregularities abound. For one: where is Denarius? Not sitting before the camera in his patrician's stoop, waiting to deliver unto his audience the kind of no-nonsense, straight-talking wisdom the modern age seems so utterly devoid of; the chair, a complex engineering feat of angles and cushions designed to protect anyone spending the majority of their day in front of a computer from the ravages of gravity, sits empty before the camera. The overhead light is off. The only illumination comes from the ring light off-screen, behind his monitor, which, alone, casts an eerie white glow over everything. The Israeli Deathstalker enclosure, at least, appears sealed and undamaged.

It goes on like this for almost seven minutes--the breathing, the dark frame, the gamer chair--before something lurches into frame. A familiar bulk, wrapped in blankets, glistening with a sickly, fevered sheen. He stares at the camera like it's food, like it's milk--takes a step closer (and here, even seasoned viewers find themselves instinctively leaning away). There's something wrong with his skin, a ridging pattern, like scales.

He opens his mouth. Here it comes--*friends and patriots*. You can almost hear him say it.

Instead, he makes a toneless, howling sound. It's higher-pitched than anyone expects. For once, there are no filters over his voice.

Black - Chapter 21 - How To Kill an Old Woman

After dark, they waited for Daclan in the school auditorium--Black and Oluchi, sitting in the little fold-out seats like fifth graders. Well, Oluchi sat, anyway. Black sort of *perched*. It was the most his bulk would allow. Already he'd explained to her about the kid's talent for escape artistry.

"And yet he keeps coming back," she said. "Like an abused dog."

"I don't think he sees it that way," said Black. "We could get him to show us, you know."

"Show us what?"

"The way out." Out--there was an interesting prospect. Out from under Observer's thumb, from the needles and machines and tests. But, on the other hand, it was as Daclan had said himself--where would he go? And what would he become, without their medicine?

"Maybe we talk about this after Meredith," said Oluchi.

Ah, right. He would become Meredith. "Right. After we kill the old woman, then."

"I wish you'd stop saying it like that.

"How do you want me to say it?"

She didn't answer that. That very particular auditorium silence filled up the space between them.

"Hey, what did you see?" he asked.

"Excuse me?"

"When you were in my head. I mean, you know what I saw."

He expected it was the Bower house. The basement, the jar, his collapse. He had seen her "exposure event," as Observer had called it. Why shouldn't it work the same way on her end?

But all she said was, “Your mother.”

“Oh,” said Black. He left it there.

He might not have noticed Daclan peering out from behind the curtain if not for those big blue eyes, which seemed to glow ever so slightly in the darkness of the theater. Black waved, and the eyes disappeared. Like they were playing peekaboo.

He pushed himself up, off of the wooden prong digging its way into his oversized ass.

“Daclan? Buddy?” he hissed. “We really gotta get moving.”

“Do you have the goods?” whispered the kid back, from behind the curtain.

Black dug the crumpled box of cigarettes out from his pocket. Only two were left. It had been easy enough to get it; all he’d had to do was fake a palm reading for Adrien. In Houston he’d briefly dated a girl who used to do them all the time. The important thing was to give a vague sense of hope to the client, no matter how dire the facts seemed. “Come and get ‘em.”

He scampered out from under the curtain on all fours and Black did his best not to recoil. That’s just a kid, he told himself. Just a weird, mutant kid. Black held the cigarettes up, just out of reach. “After you help us. Cool?”

“Very cool,” said Daclan, nodding solemnly.

I am, Black took care to remind himself, enlisting a child in the murder of an old woman. A real credit to SPEAR, he was turning out to be. It would be funny if it wasn’t so ghastly. He guessed he’d have to try and see the humor in it.

The halls of the school were mostly empty at night. Even though the techs all looked like automatons behind those faceless reflective visors, Black supposed they still had to sleep.

Observer, on the other hand--one trip into the man’s head, and Black hadn’t been able to

stay under longer than an hour in days. But as long as they stayed far away from his office, he shouldn't be a problem.

Only once did they encounter another staff member: one lonesome tech, pushing a cart of rattling equipment down a hallway. They almost walked right into him, except Black managed to grab Daclan by the collar and throw an arm in front of Oluchi before they could blunder out in front. He waited until the rattle of the cart had passed further down the hallway to let them go. "It's like neither of you have ever broken or entered before," he said under his breath.

In an odd way, it was comforting to feel his heart thunder away in his chest like this; all this, nevermind the context, was a lot closer to his old life than the endless, degrading routines of life as a medical experiment.

"What did you used to do?" Oluchi whispered to him then, as if she could read his mind-- which she couldn't, he was pretty sure. Even if there was some lingering connection. "You don't really strike me as the type to hold down an office job."

"Well, before this I was in prison."

"Cool," said Daclan.

He led them on. By this point Black had wandered every inch of this school; he kept expecting Daclan to take them off the beaten path, through a secret tunnel or a section of the lockers that would swing open. When he finally stopped, though, it looked like any other part of the hall. Which made sense, when Black really thought about it. Why bother hiding something that literally couldn't be seen?

Daclan pointed at a stretch of the wall. "There's the door. They always come in and out and in and out."

There was nothing there, of course. Except--when he did nothing but stand there and

look, he could notice a little hiccup in his perception. A part of the otherwise bare wall that his eyes slid over, off of. Go-Away-Green.

“Good one, Daclan. Could you--could you open the door?”

And what if it was locked? He'd known people in SPEAR who could pick a door by feel alone, but Black had never been one of them. His methodology had always been of the more direct variety. Was that his backup plan? Have the kid direct him where to start kicking?

Then he heard a click, and a door framed by utter nothingness--by the absence of attention--swung open. Daclan walked in like he was going into the kitchen for a snack.

Black looked over at Oluchi. She was too dark to ever really go pale, but Black thought he saw some flicker of fear pass over her face. Doorways into nothing--it was pretty unsettling stuff, sure.

Then, without hesitation, she stepped inside. And it was his turn.

When he was a kid in Houston, there'd been a swimming hole just outside of the city, a place where a rocky ledge overlooked a natural pool. In the summer, when it was too hot to do anything else, kids made a day of climbing that ledge and jumping into the cool deep, again and again. Black never had, though. With his skin, he would have had to wear a full wetsuit or risk outright combustion. Plus the other kids hated him, so. He didn't have much practice.

Nevertheless, he took a deep breath, and stepped over the threshold.

He didn't realize until he walked into the room, but apparently Black had never forgotten the precise smell of his middle school science lab. It was here, that particular mix of formaldehyde and unwashed bodies--in this case underlined by the faintest hint of brine. It was dark inside; the only window was a narrow slit set high along the eastern wall. The front half of the room was a collage of disorienting scales; among miniature sinks and long tables that rose to

thigh level was equipment that seemed both large and very adult. Some were recognizable--the microscopes, for instance--but most were as alien to him as the giant thing in the water. The room was empty, but for some reason he couldn't stop mentally populating it with precocious third graders wearing oversized lab coats and safety goggles.

At the far end of the room was an opaque plastic curtain separating this part of the lab from--something. What they were here for, most likely. Black felt the probing fingers of nausea worming their way up his throat, and swallowed hard against them. Not now.

Oluchi went for the curtain while Daclan made two pieces of fiendishly expensive lab equipment fight each other. It was follow, or stay out here with the monster kid. Black followed.

Behind the curtain was the bare bones of a room. Impossible to tell what it had once been--there had been carpet, he thought, but all that had been ripped up and replaced with pale white tile. The walls were a different color than the lab proper, giving the two rooms a stitched together feeling, a little architectural experiment amidst all the mad science. In several places he could see faded patches on the wall, where posters or drawings might have hung in a past life. The shelves that now lined the right and left sides of the room behind the curtain were clearly new: even the American education system wouldn't install such coldly industrial shelves without at least painting them a funny color. And lining those shelves was a sight Black had almost forgotten about.

The bottles had geometric, flat sides of hard plastic looked at from the top, they'd seem hexagonal. The last time he'd seen one had been in the basement of the Bower house, when he'd been one hundred percent human, instead of the sliding scale he now occupied.

And there, at the back of the room, the other end of that sliding scale. Black wasn't certain how they'd managed to fit a fish tank that size through the door; he realized, as his mind

grappled with this minor physics problem to avoid considering too deeply the thing floating inside, that they had probably brought it in individual components.

Meredith looked entirely different still and suspended in water than she had thrashing around with a chunk of lab assistant in her mouth. Her shape was human only in the barest suggestion of form, yet in her--sleep? Sedation?--she appeared more cetacean than monstrous. Her arms were curled close to her body; her eyelids flickered, revealing thin slivers of pale blue. Tubes connected to a rubber collar around her neck ran out of the tank, into what seemed to be an assemblage of IV drips. He hadn't thought it possible, but pity began to well up in Black's stomach, right alongside the swirling nausea. Oluchi stepped closer to the tank, snared by the sight. Daclan walked in after them both, barely glancing at the fish woman.

There was something else in here, too--a buzzing at the edge of his consciousness. Similar to the static feeling he had near Oluchi, near anyone infected by whatever it was that had infected them all. Like a muscle twitch in his brain, that seemed to rise and fall with Meredith's breathing. It made sense. He was somehow connected, and vulnerable, to all the others. He could look in Observer's mind; he was *drawn into* Oluchi's. And with the old woman so changed--he would, he was sure, be sucked down the whirlpool of her alien consciousness. He could almost see her dreams wafting off the tank like vapor.

To Oluchi, Black said, "How long do you think you'll need?"

It took her a moment to answer. "Not long. They have her on--horse tranquilizers, it looks like. If I increase the dosage enough she'll never even wake up."

"Good," said Black. As peaceful as she looked now, he had no desire to see her wake up.

"Why would they do this?" asked Oluchi. "Just--keep her here. Half-alive, like this."

"Because they can," said Black. People were always so surprised, but it really was that

simple.

“Don’t talk so loud. She’s sleeping,” said Daclan. Then he pointed at one of the bottles on the shelf. “It says something.” The label, Black remembered. His eyes had slid right off of it. But not Daclan’s.

“Can you read it to me?” asked Black. Trying to distract himself from the thing in the fish tank. The *woman* in the fish tank.

“E-D-P,” said Daclan. He shrugged, then, and skipped away.

EDP. Observer had said that. Entity-Derived Pigment. Black felt his hands tighten into fists almost involuntarily. That was what had put him here, then--that was what had doomed him to this fucked up nightmare. If he hadn’t been so afraid of touching it--highly hazardous, filled with contaminant--he might have knocked the whole shelf to the floor. And why should he care about the consequences? He was already contaminated, wasn’t he?

But a small voice in his head told him otherwise. It could always get worse. He had the proof right there, behind a sheet of glass.

Oluchi stepped towards the drip apparatus; he didn’t want to watch. This was why, through the part they’d made in the curtain, Black could see that the door to the lab was open now. He was almost certain they’d closed it. When Daclan tugged at the hem of his shirt, Black nearly jumped out of his skin. “What? What is it?”

It could be hard to tell, sometimes, what Daclan was thinking. The natural dreamy inscrutability all children his age possessed was only made worse by the solid blue of his eyes--the fact that you could never quite track where he was looking, or what he was looking at. But there was no question that Daclan was, all of a sudden, scared.

“We should leave. The ghosts are here,” he hissed.

“We’re not done yet. Soon,” said Black.

“No, no, no, no,” said Daclan now, and he tugged hard at Black’s scrub top.

There was a change to the air, then. Black had never been struck by lightning--the closest was the Houston Police Department’s regulation tasers--but he’d heard that right before it happens, all your hair stands up. You smell ozone--whatever that smelled like. As Daclan hauled back, his little fists balled up in blue cloth, Black felt a prickling sensation emanating from him. He could practically taste Daclan’s panic in the air, and--worse--he wasn’t the only one.

In the fish tank, Meredith’s eyes fluttered once, then again. Her long arms--God, why were they so *long*?--unspooled from her sides. Oluchi, at the IVs, was frozen in something between awe and fear.

“Oluchi,” said Black, snapping her out of whatever state the rising tide of panic had put her into. “Hurry? Please?”

“I’m trying,” she snapped. “My PhD’s in history, not--”

Oluchi interrupted herself by throwing Oluchi, herself, to the ground. But wait--that wasn’t right. The angle, the force of it, was all wrong. Also, that didn’t make sense. Why would she--

Black didn’t have time to complete the thought, because then he was pushing himself, or fighting against Black, who was trying to knock over himself, except--

No. There was something, a pressure, a force, dragging at his right shoulder. Then an explosion of it behind his left knee, and he couldn’t stay upright. He felt it, as he fell to all fours--hands, grabbing him. Trying to drag one big arm behind his back.

There was another jolt in his ribs--a *kick*, that was it--and he was rolling over, and then the force was pressing down, on top of him. Over by the fish tank, Oluchi was squirming, and

fighting with nothing, with herself, with air. Daclan was just screaming--a high, childish panic that was sending shivers of fear through Black's extended awareness.

Force landed heavy on his right arm, pinning it to the ground. Force from the air, from nothing, except that wasn't right. There was something there, something he couldn't see--something his brain would not process as being real.

The realization sunk into him like another kick. With his left arm, his free one, he swung out wildly, eyes shut tight, and felt his fist sink into something meaty. Heard a very human grunt of very human pain, and the pressure on his right arm loosened, and he jerked it free.

It was all around him, after all. Entity Derived Pigment.

In the tank, in the corner of his eye, he saw Meredith fully awake now, thrashing like an alligator, tugging at her collar, beating her hands at the walls of her sarcophagus. Daclan was still screaming--*I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry*--his panic filling up the room, his apologies to nobody in particular.

They all heard the sound of glass cracking. The seconds that followed were heavy and still: Black no longer wrestled with his invisible opponent, who had gone still on top of him. Oluchi, too, had quit moving. Even Daclan was silent, wide-eyed.

The only one still in motion was Meredith--drawing one long arm back, back, back, before smashing it right through the glass.

Marta - Chapter 22 - Breaking, Entering

They spent the day in Sadie's shelter, sorting and counting cans and dried goods. In the afternoon they served a long line of tired-looking strangers out of an industrial-sized pot of rice and beans. Halfway through lunch, a sweaty man in a stained white button-up started pointing and shouting. "That's her! With the wooden spoon! That's the terrorist, from the news!"

Marta could see Siren tense, but she didn't turn or run. When no one tackled her behind the counter or called the now-absent police force, the man let his arm fall, seeming almost embarrassed. After a moment, he got back into line. When Marta looked back, though, Siren was gone--the wooden spoon all but spinning on the table.

It was only the waiting they had to do now. But that seemed to be more difficult for Siren than fighting mutant dogs. She couldn't bear to be around the refugees in any state or number: the filthy ones, fresh and frightened from the streets outside, seemed just as unbearable to her as the families who had long since gotten used to the sink baths and other rhythms of life in the theater. Any time she found herself in a room with them, Siren would quietly leave at the first opportunity. Marta didn't have to ask why. Even if she hadn't outright admitted it to her the previous night, Marta could see her guilt in the way she moved, in the cast to her eyes, haunting her every gesture and glance. They agreed to leave just before it got dark; by the huge third-floor windows of the megaplex, Marta saw Siren just watching the sun creep inch by inch lower. Waiting, she guessed, till night covered her fuck-up for a few hours at least.

Sadie met them both by the front door when it was finally time to leave. She was carrying a set of bolt cutters, which she handed to Marta. "Fresh out of cookie tins," she said, smiling. An interesting old woman, for sure. Not a bad way to end up, if you were going to get old.

Siren was bent over, lacing her boots savagely on the threshold. “Thank you,” she muttered, from her kneel. “Thank you for everything you did for us. It was better than I deserved.”

Sadie’s face was blank, absent of the brief fury Marta had seen the other night. In a way it scared her more. “Everyone deserves food, water, and a place to sleep. Everyone.”

Siren stood, though she still refused to meet the older woman’s gaze head-on. “You won’t see me again. Don’t worry.”

“Well,” said Sadie. “If I do, I’ll have plenty of work for you.”

Siren didn’t seem to know what to say to that. By the time she’d figured it out and opened her mouth to respond, Sadie had already shut the door and, with the help of a few others, dragged something heavy across it.

When the sun started setting, the old woman hugged and kissed them both on the cheek. “Marta,” she said. “Remember what we talked about.”

“What about me?” said Siren.

Sadie turned to her, smiling. “You. You were never really here.”

How would she find her brother? How would she get him out, when she found him? These were important questions, yeah, but both irrelevant if Marta and Siren couldn’t answer the third question of the day--how could they get past the fence?

It was an impressive structure for something thrown up only a month ago, more than just unrolled chain link. Coils of the newest and shiniest barbed wire Marta had ever seen ran along

the top, with metal crossbars reinforcing each section. Armed guards in black body armor walked the perimeter regularly; the sole opening seemed to be a gate that was only unchained long enough to let official vehicles through. To Marta, it seemed impossible. Even Siren obviously didn't like their odds. But somewhere inside was Adrien, if he was anywhere. If he wasn't already at the bottom of the sea.

If it worked, and they got through the fence, Marta knew he would be furious. When she still had a few inches on her brother she'd pull the older kids off him whenever he got into fights. To him this was somehow worse than just getting his face mashed into the playground woodchips. No indignity like being saved by your big sister, apparently. But she would relish the opportunity to deal with that problem, if it came.

The best way to do it, Siren had told her, was always to play things slow. Find out guard rotations, camera positions, shift schedules. Watch the place for days or even weeks at a time. Bribes worked wonders, as did blackmail, but both required that their targets possess lives outside the facility in question. All that left them was observation, and staying in one place for too long in Joyous Beach seemed to carry risks of its own.

Sadie lent them a pair of bolt-cutters--an unusual old lady, that one. They intended to go through the eastern fence, opposite the side where they kept the refugees. Fewer guards, and fewer eyes in general. They set up in the hollowed shell of an arts and crafts store, stepping carefully to not slip on the carpet of beads. Siren pulled her little pair of binoculars and watched, while Marta waited for her to declare it safe.

It was odd, being just the two of them again. Minus the gun, which they'd never found. Marta knew that a late night--well, whatever happened in that theater--didn't mean you could really trust somebody. If college had taught her anything, it had been that. But things felt

different anyway. She knew that Siren *should* be her enemy. Her father had an uncanny ability to hold a grudge. Included in his list of personal enemies: all doctors, most late-night TV hosts, the postal service, and of course a good third of the city's fishing fleet. Marta thought she had inherited that much, at least, but now when she reached for that anger--anger that should, by all accounts, still be fresh and present--there was nothing.

Not nothing. There was something else.

"Something's happening," said Siren.

"What?"

"I don't know. But something."

She handed Marta the binoculars. Through them, in the ambient glow of the floodlights mounted every twenty yards or so, Marta could make out one of the faceless guards that walked the length of the fence every half hour or so. He said something into his radio and started up the hill at a brisk jog, towards the main building of the school.

"We should go now," said Siren. "Before his replacement shows up."

"How do you know he's not just taking a bathroom break?"

Which is when they heard the megaphone booming on the other side of the school:

Hello! Attention! We know it is late--it's just that, you may have heard some noises, or maybe that something is wrong. On behalf of the government, I'm here to tell you that, in fact, nothing is wrong! Please return to sleeping!

"Okay," said Marta. "Get the bolt-cutters."

In two minutes Siren had cut a triangle into the lower part of the chain link, and both of them crawled through, their elbows sinking and sticking. The ground here had once been lawn, but the grass had died weeks ago. Now it was just damp earth reeking of saltwater and rot. When

Marta got to her feet, Siren was already running, crouched low, scanning her head left and right. They were alone, so far, and unseen.

The school rose before them, dark and monolithic. As they came closer, Marta realized that there were bars over all the windows--thin ones, maybe, but certainly thick enough to stop a pair of bolt cutters.

That was where Siren stopped: peering through the barred window, into a darkened room. It was hard to see much out here.

“We can circle around,” said Marta. “Look for a door.”

“No,” said Siren. Hands on the bars, like a kid at the zoo. Appropriate, Marta guessed, for the situation. “Everyone goes through doors.”

From her pocket, Siren produced a piece of black cloth and wrapped it around the top right, farthest bar. She then took hold of it over the cloth, lacing her fingers together, and set her foot against the painted cinderblock wall. “Help me pull.”

“You’re going to rip off iron bars?”

“The bolts on this frame have been oxidizing for what looks like decades. It’s a publicly funded Florida school--I promise you it’s not up to code. Now help me.” she said.

So Marta wrapped her arms around Siren’s midsection, who nodded. “When I pull, you pull.” Just like reeling back a line.

At the first yank it seemed impossible. Marta hauled back, crushing the air out of the petite terrorist in her arms, and the cage around the window didn’t budge. The second tug, though, there was a metallic yawning, and they both froze and listened, waiting for flashlights and barked commands. All they could hear was the faint sound of conversation to the west, on the other side of the school--the members of the refugee camp, she guessed.

They yanked again, and once more, and that time there was a crunch as the bolt snapped in half and the cage bent an inch away from the wall.

“Now the other side,” said Siren.

This one went even faster--on the second yank, the bolt ripped away. Now the bars hung at a forty-five degree angle. Siren reached behind them and smashed the window with her elbow, then used the sleeve of her coat to knock in the rest of the glass. “Careful where you put your hands.” She went first, disappearing into the darkened room. Marta climbed in after, through the gap, holding onto the cocked cage for support as she lowered herself down.

Except for a sliver coming from under a closed door, there was no light inside. Marta could make out low tables and little chairs, splotches on the wall--miniature handprints, she realized with horror, only calming down when Siren’s flashlight revealed them to be green and blue and yellow paint. Schools were always creepy at night. You didn’t have to fill them with government goons to make them feel like prisons.

Siren held a finger to her lips and turned off the flashlight, waiting.

“What do you hear?” said Marta.

“Nothing.”

“Good?”

“We weren’t exactly quiet.”

There was a pounding of boots in the hallway, suddenly, and Marta tensed--Siren too, crouching into a ready stance--but they passed the door, hauling ass somewhere else altogether. When the footsteps were fading and it was safe to breathe again, Siren said, “It shouldn’t have been this easy.”

And she was right. They hadn’t seen a single guard since the one at the fence. Was that

luck, or design? There were no alarms blaring, but there was a kind of animal panic to the air in here. Something was happening.

They came out into a dark hallway, which they followed for a while. The rooms on either side were dark; not much could be seen through the clouded glass windows, and the knobs didn't turn when they tried them. "Where is everybody?" said Marta, feeling worse and worse.

They turned a corner and found themselves, suddenly, in an old cafeteria haunted by the odor of square pizza slices and microwavable veggie medleys. On the other side of the room, about fifteen men in black armor and visored helmets were arrayed in a rough semi-circle facing a pair of double doors. All of them were carrying very serious-looking guns. Behind them, around the room, were a group of--men? Women?--people in white, baggy hazmat suits. Some of them were carrying odd-looking machines; one was strapped into a backpack of some sort, which blinked with orange light occasionally. It was just chance, bad luck, that one of the little hazmat ghosts happened to be facing them as they turned the corner. That he--she? It?--dropped an empty glass vial at the sight of them, which shattered on the floor. That immediately, before they could duck back into the shadowed hallway, the armed men whirled to face them, training those very serious guns on Marta and Siren.

It was chance, too, that this was the exact moment when the doors they had been watching until a moment ago slammed open, spilling forth a number of strange figures. The first was a huge man with straw-colored hair down to his shoulders and the palest skin Marta had ever seen; the second, a woman who seemed almost his polar opposite, dark-skinned and ropey. The only things visually uniting them were the blue hospital clothes they wore, and the looks of terror on their faces. Behind them, continuing the strangeness: a child of about nine or ten, scurrying on all fours.

And behind them, *loping*, was a fourth figure. It made no sense with the reality of what she was seeing--the geometry of limbs, the facts of teeth and skin--all that, she would realize later. But for an inexplicable moment, Marta believed the thing behind them to be an old woman.

Chapter 23 - A List of What is Happening

For a moment everything is like the place that I came from, on the day I left, but I don't like to think about that anymore, so I try to close my eyes and shut my ears and sing. Singing makes me feel better, as long as there are no words; as long as it's just the sounds I hear in my brain. Everything happening is very loud, so I have to sing even louder.

This is a list of what is happening: some of the guards are pointing their guns at Meredith. The rest of them are pointing their guns at two new women who just came into the cafeteria. The technicians are trying to stab Meredith with long poles with needles on the end like they use for shots, but they can't get close enough. Meredith is jumping around the room, knocking over tables. Everybody is shouting. Like I said, it is very loud.

The guards are making the new women get on the ground, on their knees, holding their hands up. One of the new women looks like me. She's the same color, and she reminds me of my sister, who had a short haircut like that and then died, on the island, where I come from.

But I don't want to think about the island where I come from or what happened to it, or what it's like now. Sometimes I see through the eyes of things that aren't me, at night. I start singing even louder, so I'm not thinking about those things.

The ghosts are here too. They're wearing their masks and rubber suits and they smell like cleaning bottles and the ocean. No one's paying attention to them, like usual, but then one of them grabs Oluchi, and she starts screaming. Then I'm screaming too, screaming instead of singing.

Meredith moves so fast. It's hard to even see--one second she's on top of the lunch table, where I eat lunch, and the next second she's knocking over the ghost who grabbed Oluchi and

biting him, and the other ghost is running scared. I'm scared too, even though she was just trying to help, because now the ghost is bleeding. Everyone notices him then, especially Oluchi, who looks like she's going to be sick. Meredith is still on top of him, so big that he's hard to see underneath her, even though he's swinging his arms and kicking his legs and opening and closing his hands.

Then something else happens: that something is the big man, the color of glue, who grabs a long pole from one of the technicians. He jumps in and stabs Meredith in the neck with it, but she doesn't like that, and Meredith is even bigger and stronger than he is, so she knocks him down and goes to bite him, too. I'm so scared, because I like him. His name is Black; it's a joke.

But she stops just over him. He stops fighting, too, and that's how I know they're seeing into each other, that thing which sometimes happens. Everybody gets quiet for a minute. I think they don't understand what's happening.

Maybe it's only because everything's so quiet that I can feel it--like how if it gets quiet enough you can feel the rain in the clouds. Maybe that's why I know that it's looking at us, then--just like Black and Meredith are looking at each other. Except it doesn't *look*, ever, in any other way. It's looking now, though, and I get very still, and I want everyone to just--stand still. Just for a little while. Just until it stops paying attention.

But then there's a very loud sound, because one of the soldiers shoots Meredith. It's messy. There's blood, and also she drops the gun.

That's awful, and I make an awful noise to match. But here is the worst part: it sees. It feels the gunshot. Out in the water. It doesn't really feel anything, remember. But also it does. The words I use when I talk about it aren't good. It's out there, but also it's here. It's in the water, in the air and the rain and also in me, and in Black, and Oluchi, and Meredith.

It isn't like me. It isn't like Meredith. It doesn't want to help us or hurt us. It doesn't *want* anything. But now it sees us. Even though it doesn't see us. Now it's coming, even though it was already here.

Now I'm thinking of my home, the island. Where it came. Where it still is, where it will always be. And I can't sing loud enough, this time, to drown all the thoughts.

Interview - Chapter 24 - Gonzales, M

O: Let's begin with how you got inside.

M: We walked in.

O: This is a heavily guarded facility.

M: Well, not at that particular moment, it wasn't.

O: Okay. Putting that aside. Did you come alone?

M: You know I didn't.

O: I mean besides her.

M: My father also.

O: Where is he now?

(There is an infinitesimal stiffening in the subject. Slight increase of heart rate, indicating either deception or emotional distress.)

M: I don't know.

O: You say you came here to rescue your brother, a patient at this facility. But we've spoken to your brother. He has no desire to go with you. He understands that his health depends on his remaining here, in our care.

M: Yeah. I don't care. He was always an idiot.

O: Is your plan to kidnap your own brother, then? Against his will?

M: Well, it is now. Hey--can I ask you a question?

O: That isn't generally how this works.

M: What is it?

O: What is what?

M: You know what I'm talking about.

(Interviewer's gaze drops to his notepad. He begins to scribble in the margins of the otherwise blank page.)

O: We have several theories regarding--

M: Jesus. Jesus Christ. You don't know.

O: We can say with nearly ninety-five percent certainty that it is of terrestrial--

M: You're the secret government lab and you don't know *anything*. My father--you know, he never went to college, he dropped out of high school, actually--my father probably knew more about it than you. At least he would go out there. At least he'd look at it, instead of looking at a fucking, (*subject gestures at the printed photograph hanging behind the desk*) a fucking picture.

O: And where is your father now?

Interview - Chapter 25 - ???, S

(For the first eleven minutes of this recording the interviewer and the subject sit across from each other in silence. Conversation occurred on minute twelve of recording.)

O: We lost a sampling ship, when you detonated that warhead. Along with the eight crew members. All gone--dead, or worse. Its cargo washed up on local beaches, contaminating who knows how many people.

S: That wasn't my intention.

O: What part of an intention can you measure? Does it show up under a microscope?

S: I'm not going to apologize to you.

O: This is the part of the movie where I tell you that, actually, we aren't so different. That, ultimately, our goal is the same. Our *enemy* is the same. Same side, same battlefield. Do you believe that?

S: ...

O: Because I don't. Applying these terms--"enemy," "battle"--to the situation only obfuscates the true nature of the problem. They turn it into that imminently understandable, simple dilemma, a

struggle between good and evil. A war. It doesn't matter whether that war is waged against poverty or drugs or some virulent new disease. Abstract concepts or microscopic lifeforms unaware of the *concept* of battle. That rhetoric all leads to the same place--meatheads trying to bomb or brawl their way through a problem that cannot be fixed with big, flashy gestures. Meatheads like you, like the general you'll meet tomorrow, the one who's going to get the credit for catching you and then transmute that credit, alchemically, into funding for me. In that way, your capture is going to aid the "battle" against this thing more than a thousand bombs could, because this entity is not an *enemy*. It doesn't hate us, it doesn't want us dead. It is no more aware of us than a virus, or the concept of poverty. It cannot be "battled" any more than a hurricane. The longer it takes people like you to understand that, the more lives will be needlessly lost.

S: Is that why you let it walk across Antillia?

O: Excuse me?

S: Is that why you let it kill three million people? Is that why you let it kill my family? To make a point?

O: I recommended evacuation in no uncertain terms. I did everything in my power.

(Interviewer's vitals are elevated. Increased heart rate, pupil dilation. Visible increase in perspiration.)

S: Have you been to Antillia? Have you seen what it did?

O: I have read the reports. I have seen the photos. Believe me, I understand fully the consequences--

(Subject laughs, making interviewer jump.)

S: What a ridiculous person. Just another office manager. You go ahead and file those reports they ignore. Form a subcommittee or two. Someone's bound to listen eventually.

Interview - Chapter 26 - Gorie, J.

O: Mr. Gorie?

J: Hm?

O: You don't look well.

J: Mm.

O: It's understandable. You were attacked. I'm sorry this happened on my watch--but I don't know what you expected, releasing her from the containment tank.

J: Hm.

(Interviewer makes a note of something, here.)

J: She wasn't attacking me.

O: What?

J: She was scared. She didn't know what was going on.

O: Mr. Gorie, I was informed that you--connected--with Mrs. Radler. Surely I don't need to tell you that whatever impressions you received from that alien mind are hardly reliable sources of information. It was, yes, part of the plan to eventually introduce you to the consciousnesses of patients further along the disease's progression, but not until you were more in control of yourself during the connection.

J: She didn't mean to attack me.

O: You are very sensitive, Mr. Gorie. Extremely impressionable.

J: She didn't attack Oluchi in the lab, either. That was your invisible men.

(Interviewer pauses and looks up from his notes.)

J: You were having us followed this whole time.

O: Oh, please. Would you like to file for a civil liberties suit, maybe? I can do what I damn well please, here.

J: You're out of your mind.

O: Please, Mr. Gorie, if we could be--

J: No. I've seen inside your head, remember? You're deranged. That shit in the plastic jars-- that's the pigment, isn't it? That's what you paint the doors with, and the--and the *guards*. It comes straight from the creature. From the thing in the water.

O: It is decanted from samples. Concentrated. As I believe I once told you. In its raw form the EDP is--highly unstable. Understand that it doesn't function like a virus or a bacteria. More like radiation, in truth. A contamination down to the level of DNA. It is--difficult to explain. But we are quite careful with it, I assure you.

J: The basement. The fucking basement.

O: Mr. Gorie?

(Subject has put his head into his hands. He is massaging his eyes. The interviewer allows him this moment of repose. He, too, is tired.)

O: Mr. Gorie, tomorrow morning you will be connecting with another subject. Your success with me means it should pose no real challenge, even though we don't believe her to be contaminated.

J: No.

O: Mr. Gorie, I'm afraid there's no choice in the matter. If you want to keep receiving treatment, it is of the utmost importance that you assist us.

J: No. I won't do it. I'm not going to.

O: I understand that the two of you were--well, colleagues, in a previous line of work. Be that as it may--

J: I'm not going in there again. I'm not--I'm not letting it *see me* again.

O: ...What was that?

J: You have no idea. You don't--have you ever seen clear, dark water go deep enough?

O: I don't--

J: It happened once in the town I'm from. Well, where I lived for a few years. With my mom. A sinkhole opened up on the edge of town. Just swallowed up part of the road one day. Part of the reservoir that nobody knew about, they said. Under our feet all that time. And by the time the sediment and the trash had floated down and left it clear, I'd go to look at it sometimes. There was no bottom to it. Somehow I knew that. I'd drop a pebble in it and watch it sink down, down, out of the light. Getting buried in that cold, clear water.

O: ...

J: That's what it's like.

O: I--I have sometimes felt...

J: It knows that I'm here now. Meredith was--closer to it. She saw me, and it--I was--

O: The pebble. Sinking.

(Thirty-three seconds of silence.)

J: I'm not doing it again.

O: Yes, Black. I'm sorry, but you are.

Chapter 27 - [UNSPECIFIED TRANSCRIPTION]

VOICE 1: I have a theory. Have I told you that?

(a sighing sound, then a cough, as if to cover it. Interference in the recording masks whatever comes next.)

VOICE 1 (annoyed): No, I'm not a doctor. But how many *doctors* are in charge of clandestine divisions of the military? You can't operate in a high-stakes job like this unless you have a certain intuitive sense about things, about I--well, I'm intuiting something here. A gut feeling, let's call it. Which, may I remind you, was right on the money when it came to the whole situation with the nuclear warhead. I said it wouldn't be a big deal, and it wasn't. Detonated out in the ocean, in the middle of nowhere.

(static-filled, apprehensive murmuring)

VOICE 1: Okay, not precisely in the middle of nowhere. Off the coast of some shitty nowhere town in Florida. Yes. But I'd say that's a hell of a lot better than the middle of Times Square.

Now, do you want to hear my theory or not?

(the chatter here is garbled, but there is a clear note of concern)

VOICE 1: Okay, here it is. You understand how human bodies have immune systems? And how they release white blood cells, in times of crisis. So, here it is. The theory, I mean: the Earth. The “ecosystem” [air quotes are audible here]. Kind of like a body, isn’t it? And aren’t we all individual cells in said body?

(cautious assent, amidst the interference)

VOICE 1: So if this--okay, let’s call it what they do. If this entity is really such a threat, then the Earth will deal with it. There will be some kind of natural process. What’s the quote? “Life finds a way.”

(There is static, but for a moment the disruption on the recording clears)

VOICE 2: --assume that the earth has any particular preference for human life, or for fish. When in reality it’s only--it’s things that survive. But what if the “Earth” doesn’t look at this thing like a giant enemy? The dinosaurs didn’t die out because they were morally in the wrong, or because the planet didn’t like them. They died because they couldn’t breathe ash.

VOICE 1: ...

VOICE 2: ...

VOICE 1: Don’t speak to your commanding officer like that, son. Don’t ever. Now, where is that

damn chopper? We have a package to collect.

(Static once again consumes the audio. A distinctly sullen static.)

VOICE 1: Yes, I meant the terrorist. Obviously.

Black - Chapter 28 - Apocalypse Jokes

Colleagues. That was what Observer had called them. In truth, they'd only met once, briefly, at the conference SPEAR held annually in the ruins of an abandoned shopping mall. Between the panels on counter-counter-protest tactics and payroll processing for rioter stipends, they'd both wound up next to the breakfast table, where Siren was verbally dismantling a fledgling anarchist from Des Moines. Black had heard of her, of course, at his chapter's coffee hours: the Florida firebrand who had led her local cell to bust into a federal facility in the middle of the night, carrying out sixteen hard drives in an Ikea bag. She was smaller than he expected, and younger, too. Barely out of those embarrassing teenage years.

"Hey, would you cut the kid a break?" Black had said.

She fixed her stare on him while Des Moines took the opportunity to slink off. Siren's eyes were totally unremarkable--a flat, muddy color--but there was an intensity there that almost drove him a step back. "He suggested that reading was a tool of bourgeois control."

"Well, he also drove like eight hours to get here. I'm just asking you to go easy on him. His heart's in the right place," he said.

She plucked a cheese danish from the breakfast table as savagely as a hawk seizes a rabbit. "I really couldn't care less where his heart is. I've never understood why that mattered."

He crossed paths with her one or two times before the conference was done, and it was never any different. Always tenacious, demanding, smart in a way that made people scared. Nobody was ever doing enough, and she wasn't afraid to tell them. He never met someone who took SPEAR's work as seriously as she did. But you didn't need to be a genius to figure out why that was. Siren had already lost just about everything you could lose. She never talked about it,

and nobody ever asked, but Black thought he could see a little bit of that loss in every movement, every gesture, every word, like an old injury that had permanently changed her gait.

This was all before he'd gone to jail, before she'd split with SPEAR to terrorize the government on her own. The move hadn't surprised him, in the end. You had to be a team player in any group as big as theirs; no amount of hierarchical rearrangement or power diffusion could change that. He hadn't liked her. Few people had. And yet, she had been his comrade. His colleague.

It was Observer, in the end, who came for Black. He could have sent a tech, or a soldier. That surprised him. He wondered what it meant. By then he had almost managed to convince himself that what he had seen--the impossible presence, the unfathomable consciousness fixing on him like a vise--had been psychic feedback, hallucination, some side effect of being connected to someone's mind at the instant of their death. Oluchi, pulling the trigger--he'd seen her as the men in body armor hauled them all away. She was the only one that didn't struggle.

"It's time, Mr. Gorie," said Observer.

"I'm not going to do it. I can't." For a million reasons this was true; he couldn't betray another fighter, someone in the same struggle, even if their paths had forked a long time ago. But more than that, he was afraid. Black was willing to admit that. He had felt that single-minded focus radiating off her like the heat from his mother's kiln, all the anger and pain and fear. He didn't want to immerse himself in that. He'd burn alive.

And what if he saw it? The root of that pain, the wound gaping and raw? The streets of Antillia flooded and filled with monsters, the bridges crumbling, and looming over all of it, that awful, still and yet moving figure--the thing in the water, no longer in the water... "No," he told

Observer. Who only stood there. Waiting, Black guessed, for him to think more carefully. For him to remember Meredith. Her teeth. Her skin. Her alien mind. Weakly, he got to his feet.

There was a new presence in the facility, he noticed, as Observer led him through the halls: soldiers. Not weathermen, the oddly dumpy black-site guards who Black assumed were rejects from a more prized and prioritized secret project. These men wore neat, pressed camouflage; they moved with the self-satisfied air of a coyote pack next to a fresh corpse. A few of them glanced at the odd pair as they passed, though no one gave them any trouble.

Observer led him to the wing of the school used for testing, the arts and crafts studio, with the blast-proof glass wall cutting off a corner of the room. This was where he had first connected with Oluchi. Where he had, for the first time, slipped out of his skin in favor of another. Funny--that had been a fantasy of his for so many years. The reality of it hadn't been much like he'd hoped.

Outside the room were two unfamiliar faces. One was younger looking, kind of babyish, with a neatly-combed arrangement of hair that seemed to fall out of position any time he moved. He was wearing a suit that looked just a little too big for him.

Next to the suit was an older man, festooned in medals that tinkled gently as he moved. He had an odd way of standing--pitched slightly forward, crooked at the waist, as if on the verge of falling on his face at any moment. That, combined with his height, gave him the aura of an emu.

“Director!” barked the bird-like man. To Observer, Black figured. “No doubt you had a fine reason for keeping us waiting. And this is--good God. One of your mutants, then?”

From the way Observer smiled, Black was certain that he utterly despised this man. “This is one of my patients, General.”

“And the transformation has begun? You weren’t kidding around.”

“Uh,” said Black.

“Sir, I believe he’s just an albino,” said the younger man.

“Do you think so, Cline? I’m not so sure. Well. In any case. Very excited, let me tell you! If this works, it’ll be tremendous. Beats the hell out of waterboarding, if what you told me is true. Just dip right in there. Right into the brain, like an ice cream scoop.” He seemed to have forgotten, for a moment, that he was talking to other people at all. When he noticed the other three, it was with some surprise. “In any case! Funding, oh yes, you’ll have funding, Director. You’ll have funding like you’ve never seen. Any little concerns you’ve got, about funding? Thing of the past. Now, let’s get on with it.”

They all followed Observer into the room. At its center, strapped into a chair, was Siren.

He didn’t know if she’d remember him. It was him, though, that had trouble recognizing her. The other night hardly counted, with the chaos and the darkness. Her hair was cut boyish short, now; there seemed to be a different set to her jaw, too, though it was hard to tell under the swelling and the bruises purpling on her skin. Standing in front of her, free of the straps, Black felt sick.

Cline and the general took up their positions behind the safety glass. A few techs bustled around the room, but it was Observer himself pressing the diodes into place--administering, with as much gentleness as was possible, the injections. Readying Black to become--what had the general said? A replacement for waterboarding. A tool for interrogation, for control. All because he was afraid of a few fangs. A little mutation.

And yet he was still afraid. So afraid.

“Oh. Wow,” she said, as he sat down.

“You remember me?”

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re a hard face to forget.”

“Yeah. Did they, uh. Did they already explain this to you?”

“They did,” she said. He couldn’t tell if she nodded or her chin was only drooping out of exhaustion.

“I’m sorry,” said Black. Not bothering to lower his voice. Not caring who heard him. There wasn’t much deeper his shame could grow.

But Siren smiled--bitter, but true. “Me too.”

He looked into her eyes, and then

And then he was her, then, all his slow lumbering power compressed into Siren--into Lani, his colleague, his comrade. Not a terrorist. Not yet. A seventeen year old. A girl.

It was hot, the sun approximately five feet from her head, and in some distant part of him that remained Black, a part that seemed to be disintegrating even then, he thought they must be there; the island. The ruins, before it was ruined. But then he was her, and he knew that they were--somewhere else. A medium-sized city, in Florida. Known for its seafood, and its beaches. A nice place to take the kids, if you could get the time off work.

Not that her father had managed that. Not that he had tried. He’d sent her and her mother here for the summer, away from her school, not that she was doing very well there. Away from her friends, not that she wasn’t fighting with them over--well, she barely even knew. Her sole piece of luck was how her mother, a fragile woman when sober and therefore a rarely sober one, didn’t like to drink alone.

In the afternoons Lani would drag the plush loveseat from their hotel room out onto the balcony. She liked to sit in the sun out there, nursing the half-bottle of pinot grigio her mother

had nodded off with, until her skin started to crinkle and stretch like paper. It was an ugly city, she decided early on. It would be all the same to her if it got washed into the ocean.

Her phone buzzed against her belly; Victoria had sent her a photo. The sweetest of her friends, and the least prone to sudden stretches of coldness or outright treachery, the peacemaker in their unruly gang, was wearing a cloth mask stamped with a pattern of hearts and skulls. Apocalypse fashion, she said next.

Where's your crossbow, said Lani back, smiling. They'd been joking about the end of the world for weeks now. Ever since the thing had drifted--or swam, or walked along the ocean floor, depending on who you asked--within a mile of shore on the southeastern coast. At first they really had been jokes. At least, Lani thought so. But then the blackout had hit. A transformer had blown at a power plant on that side--the southeastern one--plunging half the capital into darkness. There were videos: a static flash, then the light-speckled shape of downtown suddenly winking out. The next day some particulate in the air gave everything a burnt, industrial smell tinged with some kind of cleaning agent. After three days it hadn't gone away, despite meteorological promises of "wind dispersal" and the like, so everyone started wearing cloth masks. Now apocalypse jokes found their way into every conversation. People still laughed, but sometimes it sounded a little too shrill, a wine glass on the edge of snapping.

There was a limit to aimless worry, though. Sooner or later you had to buy new socks, or take the dog out, or whatever. And life seemed to still be happening, despite it all. People still went to work. Her father, a prime example.

He had texted her only once in the last week: Summer classes going well? The online courses he had signed her up for, against her will. Intent on cementing himself as the deepest kind of businessdad stereotype, he'd bought her a new laptop so she could keep up. A misguided

peace offering. She still hadn't responded.

Lani took a swig of the pinot grigio and closed her eyes. Through her lids the sun was a warm patch of color she couldn't quite describe. A dark prism.

When she woke, the sun was almost crashing into the office buildings downtown. The concrete landing radiated all the heat it had spent the day absorbing, but there was a surprising coolness in the air coming off of the sea. A starchy, stinging feeling had spread all over her exposed skin. She stretched and yawned and, forgetting about it altogether, knocked her phone to the ground.

When she picked it up, Lani swore. A hairline crack ran from the top to the bottom of the screen. She worried at it with her nail, noticing only after a moment that she had another text from Victoria.

It's coming out of the water

She read the message again. Her mind still felt sluggish, from the wine and the nap. Her screen, at least, still worked, although some sections seemed more sensitive now than others.

What, was all she could think to write.

She sat there waiting for some kind of response for minutes before it occurred to her to check the news.

The first video she found was of a mall downtown, not far from the city's southern docks. She and her friends had gone there, usually in the summer, when there was nowhere else to go that was kept refrigerator-cool. Now, the water was at least two feet high--a thick brown slurry in which designer dresses, cell phones still locked in plastic, sodden jumbo cups from the food court and tangled bits of unrecognizable organic matter all floated. She could see one person on the stalled escalator, looking down at the water with dumb amazement. Another, thigh-deep,

sloshed through on the ground level, a paper shopping bag held like a baby above her head.

She texted Victoria again: What's happening? Another minute passed with no reply.

Inside, her mother was finely chopping a small, fancy onion. It seemed to be taking absolutely all of her concentration.

"Do you know what's going on right now?"

"Oh, I decided to prepare us something french for supper."

"Have you seen what's happening back home?"

"Yes, very sad. Some kind of tidal wave," she said, not looking up from her intricate knifework. "I imagine it carried off a few intrepid bathing children. Your father has a good view of it all, from his office--it's ruined the beach, apparently. Would you grab me the butter?"

"You aren't worried about this?" said Lani, holding up her phone.

Her mother finally raised her head. She looked annoyed. "Well, of course I am, but there's not much I can do from here. Now if you're going to have one of your moods, perhaps you could do it outside of the hotel room? I could use a few things from the store, for instance."

Somewhere deep inside Lani, Black flinched. But to his surprise, "Siren" didn't even respond. She only turned and walked out the door.

Just a wave. That's all it was--only some water. Hey, it would tear down some homes, maybe kill a few dozen people, but it wasn't like it was the end of the world. It's not like it was the apocalypse, right? What a fucked up thing to have to tell yourself.

She was in the dairy section of the upscale supermarket chain when her phone buzzed again. Lani tucked the small carton of heavy cream she was examining under one arm and dug into her pocket, expecting--hoping--for Victoria.

It wasn't, though. The text was from Rey. The last time Lani had seen Rey, the other girl had spit in her face and called her a slut.

Are you okay? it read. So, a different tone.

Lani fumbled out a reply: I'm in Florida. Do you know what's going on?

No idea. My uncle's coming to pick us up and drive us out of the city. In case of aftershocks.

Aftershocks? Have you heard from Victoria?

No. Why?

By this point Lani was in line. She missed it the first time the woman behind the counter asked her for her credit card--the second time, she only stared blankly. It wasn't until the third time, with the cheer in her voice wearing thin, that Lani managed to hand it over.

She carried the bag of groceries back to the hotel with one hand. In the other, her phone. She watched a grotesque deep-sea shark thrashing on top of a taxi cab as a bellhop held the door open for her; while she waited for the elevator, she watched four people on the streets of Antillia collapse and start to shake, their eyeballs spinning like gag-store gifts, the seizures bizarrely coordinated, weeping something blue and syrupy down their cheeks. All the videos were oddly distorted, with little imperfections all over the picture, static over everything, like a layer of dust.

"You took your time," said her mother. "Did you see a boy while you were out?"

"Mom, something extremely fucked up is happening."

"Why are you always in crisis, Kilani? Your father says the news has made everyone hysterical. The office hasn't closed. It's all very under control. Why don't you open us another bottle and relax?"

Lani opened her mouth to speak. She knew her mother was wrong--it was obvious. But what if, for a second, Lani could pretend she wasn't?

She slept uneasily, waking with a racing heart every few hours so that when morning finally came it seemed like all she did was lie there and think.

Lani rolled over and checked her phone. Have you heard from Victoria? she texted Rey. The response came moments later.

No. But everyone's phones are fucked. All over the city, people were reporting fried cell phones, computers that wouldn't turn on, or that only received garbled static and unsettling echoes when you tried to make a call.

Lani texted Victoria again and checked the news. There was plenty of it and it was all bad. The strange blackouts had reached the hospital, flipping off the lights and life support systems indiscriminately. Elsewhere, a plane supposedly filled with government officials took off, then promptly dropped out of the sky, smashing with awful accuracy into an isolated farmhouse. Antillian musicians and actors living in America uploaded emotional pleas for help on the internet; apparently, there had been a bill on the senate floor to provide aid, but in some act of inscrutable political calculus the majority leader had declared it dead on arrival, citing the demands of "national austerity." He went on to advise Antillians to "look to local leadership," only hours after local leadership had died in a fiery explosion trying to flee the island.

Lani absorbed all of this info, which produced in her the exact sensation of having her emotional processing center slammed in a car door, and then she went into the kitchen, and made coffee, and had a bowl of cereal, and listened to some cats fight in the alley below. Her mother was still asleep--she didn't tend to get up until eleven or noon. The prevailing feeling

coursing through Lani just then was how little sense any of this made. How unreal it still felt, even as it was happening. For a while, she stared off into space. Then it was noon, or something around that, and her mother, in a robe, was taking her large collection of vitamins with a glass of water.

“The situation. May be. More serious. Than we expected,” she said, between pills. “So your father. Is going to. Conclude some business, then join us here.”

“Is he going to fly?”

“Well, he’s certainly not going to swim.”

Chartering a ship. One more meeting here--very important. Take care of your mother, came the text, from her father. You didn’t answer me. How are classes going?

Lani spent the rest of the day trying to reach Victoria. She sent her emails, Facebook messages, Instagram DMs. She commented on her blog posts; she sent Facetime requests. She was confronted, again and again, with the same three or four photos of her best friend--smiling, hair combed and neat, or laughing and holding a cigarette, or smiling again with her eyes closed. She got no response.

By the third day there were still a few people blaming summer storms or planetary alignments or hostile state actors for the devastation spreading throughout the city, but in Antillia, everyone knew that the thing in the water was no longer in the water.

Videos of people running in the streets. Videos of the triage tents, full of evacuated hospital patients and volunteer staff and all the newly, strangely sick, a field of white tarpaulin, a circus of the doomed. The alien keening of fighter jets blurring overhead and the drumbeat of explosions following their passing. Videos, too, of the skyline--and something behind it, sighted

between the narrow alleyway gaps, level with the water towers. Not still, Lani had to remind herself. It was not still. But stories outstripped the video evidence by magnitudes, so that when Lani would wake up and check her phone she could scroll through suffering until noon, until one, until dinner if she didn't flinch first.

I can't find my mother. She has hearing troubles--last seen on the way to the drugstore.

Haven't been outside in days but I keep hearing things from the street and I've never heard sounds like that and I'm scared

I'm an ambulance driver. We don't go home anymore. My partner and I sleep in the cab-- we keep the glove box full of loose energy drinks. They taste like battery acid.

My brother is dead. Fuck this fuck this fuck you

When she was kinder to herself Lani would leave her phone in a desk drawer and go for long, long walks--walks that took her outside the designer neighborhood, with its boutiques and bistros and attractive bars, out to where tall weeds grew from untended lawns and potholes were marked by a singled faded traffic cone. She passed joggers with earbuds socked into ears, high school kids her age tromping through the road in huge groups, box trucks full of oranges and shirtless men selling them for five bucks a bag. Sometimes it all felt temptingly normal. But in everything here--each polished window and new car, each happy family--she saw its potential to be unmade. She wanted to grab

them; she wanted to shake them as hard as she could, to yell in their ears.

On the way back Lani bought a cheap popsicle from a bodega and ate it on a stoop that didn't belong to her. The popsicle was shaped like a videogame character she didn't recognize and tasted like chalk and sugar, with faint notes of rubber. She ate about half and couldn't go any further.

When she came back into the hotel room, her mother looked up at her as if she was a robber. Her eyes were puffy and red.

"Mom?" said Lani.

She wiped at her eyes. "Why are your lips blue?"

It was all happening so slowly. If you weren't looking at it directly, it could be hard to tell it was happening at all.

Three days later. It was still dark when her mother shook her awake. "Kilani, get up. Put your clothes on. Pack your bag."

She had been dreaming of normal things--school, tests, teeth falling out. One by one the awful facts of reality layered themselves on her consciousness as she woke.

"What? Why?"

In the dim light filtering through the hotel window, her mother appeared as just a fraying outline. A woman made of cheap twine. Her hair was arrayed around her head in a thin, translucent halo. "We are going home. We're going back."

Lani felt her stomach plunge. Whether it was the madness of this statement or the fear of being dragged back to that crumbling city, she didn't know. "What are you talking about? Mom, you have to--you have to calm down."

“Kilani, don’t. Do not. We are going home,” she said, her voice breaking at the end. She grabbed Lani’s wrists and dragged her, with surprising strength, to her feet.

“Mom, what happened?” said Lani, almost shouting now.

Her mother tugged at her wrists again, but aimlessly, with no real direction in mind but out, so Lani kept her footing. Then her mother went very still. “Your father has gone missing,” she said, her voice a mask of calm. “And we are going back. To find him.”

“No,” said Lani. Terrified.

Her mother said nothing to that--only made an animal sound and tugged again, hard, at Lani’s wrist.

“Mom, stop. You don’t know what you’re doing,” she said. She tried to grab her mother’s hand, but missed, and the woman flailed and hit Lani, probably by luck, in the nose. The pain was sudden and sharp: Lani’s hands went to her face, and her mother ran, like something hunted, out of the bedroom.

Lani went after her, hands cupped to her face, the warm puddling between them telling her she was bleeding. She was just in time to see the door slam shut.

Many times, after that, Lani would imagine running down after her--taking the hotel stairs two at a time, shouting down, waking up the guests, terrifying the night shift. Following her all the way out into the street, tackling her, maybe, while drunks and early risers looked on, but Lani didn’t do that. Instead, she went into the bathroom, and soaked a washcloth, and pressed it to her nose after cleaning up some of the blood.

Lani dug her phone out of the drawer next to her bed, where she had shut it off so she could sleep without checking, again, the news.

There was no text from her father. No phone calls, no voicemails. Only that last message--Take care of your mother. That, and summer classes. Lani sunk back against the hotel bed, and finally cried.

She would never know, Black could see now, what had happened to her father. Or, what had happened to her mother--the greater mystery of the two, because by that time there were no more flights to Antillia. No more boats, either. Had she persuaded, by money or pity, the pilot of some single seater to attempt the insane journey? She didn't seem like the type to swim.

The sun rose, slowly, then fell even slower, and Lani tried not to think or feel anything. When she felt anything at all it came as a physical sensation, a hot metal weight in her chest, anger and hate and hurt compressed down into a little marble. There would be time for that later.

She had no friends here, and no relatives. She had no money. She had no plan. Lani sat there, in that room, eating the fancy cheeses and shallots and Greek yogurt her mother had bought, eating and drinking everything in the minibar, ordering room service once all that was gone, until the little beige phone in the room rang, and a voice on the other end gently told her the credit card on the account had been declined. After that, she left.

She slept on a park bench that night, because it seemed like the kind of thing you did when you had nowhere else to go. When she woke, it was early, and she was damp with dew, and there was a new text message on her phone, which was almost dead.

hello kilani i miss you are you coming back for me? things have gotten very wet

at home and i didn't bring my swimsuit and i lost my face mask and i don't know where it is and i need to find it before i breathe something in. lani my lani i'm asking maybe would you please help us? i can see that you're very far away but you were always the strong one. do you remember when i fell in the pool? we were kids and i couldn't swim and you jumped in after me and i nearly drowned us both and, oh god, there are so many people dragging me under nobody knows how to swim and lani i'm scared. please help me. please come for me. i was your best friend, when i was still a girl.

Marta - Chapter 29 - Just Past Eight

The next day the hole in the fence was patched up. Marta could see it from the window of the room where they put her; the same window she tried to kick out, ten minutes after they left, until one of the little tech ghosts, apologizing, injected her with a sedative while two soldiers held her down. She didn't try that again.

By the time she woke up it was almost dark again. Outside, she could make out the remains of a playground blacktop. Remains, she thought, because of the weird little pock-marks in the asphalt. At one point something had stood there. Evidence of civilization, like monkey bars. But now the only sight she could see from her window was the blacktop, and the fence, and a slope that led into a dead, abandoned town. Five miles away, there was a strip mall, selling Chinese food and sporting goods and videogames.

Hours passed. The sun went all the way down and the spotlights around the fence came on. Marta thought about trying to sleep again. There was a cot here, at least, and a pillow to go with, but she never seemed to get around to it. Eventually, someone knocked. That came as a surprise. When the tech and the two soldiers had come in, they hadn't knocked. And it was locked from the other side anyway, so she couldn't let them in, even if she wanted to.

She considered. "Go fuck your mother," she landed on, after a minute.

"Marta," came a voice from the other side of the door. One she recognized.

"Adrien," she said. Her voice tightening in her throat.

The door opened. On the other side were two figures. In front, holding a set of keys, was the man who had interviewed her earlier, the gaunt one with the huge gray eyes. Just behind him was her brother.

It had been less than a month since she'd seen him, and yet she might not have recognized him if he hadn't spoken first. His dark hair was limp and loose. A shrimpy mustache curled along his upper lip, along with a few other patches of pubescent fuzz, and he was wearing cheap-looking hospital clothes. More dramatic was the change in how he carried himself; before he'd always had his chest puffed out. He had a way of stomping around no matter what he was doing. If he was going out for a gallon of milk, he looked ready to kick that milk's ass. But when he stepped into her room after the interviewer, he looked hesitant. Twisted his head from side to side, even, as if he was worried about getting ambushed. There was a translucence to him that Marta didn't remember, like oiled paper. And that was to say nothing of his eyes, which were speckled with dots of blue across the iris, the pupil, the white--like raindrops on a pond. But he was alive. Whatever else, he was alive. "Hey," he said.

"Hey."

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"No, dude. I'm sick. That's why I'm here."

"I mean, are they hurting you?"

"They're the only ones trying to help me."

"I'm trying to help you, asshole."

The interviewer cut in here. "I thought it might be easier to accept what I've told you if you heard it from him directly. Our previous conversation, after all, ended in a less than civil manner."

"Can you--" Marta suppressed the urge to say something more in line with that previous conversation. "Could you give us a minute?"

He nodded, the picture of understanding. "I'll be just outside." He shut the door behind

him.

“I can’t believe you’re this stupid,” Marta told her brother.

“I’m stupid? No, no, I’m not the one who broke into a fucking *government facility*. That’s a felony, Marta! Your school’s not going to let you back when you get out of jail, if you’re lucky enough to get put in jail. If those soldiers don’t just throw you in some box outside of the country!”

“What was I supposed to do? I didn’t know where you were or if you were even alive, I didn’t know what was happening to Dad--”

“Dad?”

All the anger dropped out of him, then, and Marta knew immediately that he hadn’t known. Of course he hadn’t.

“Jesus,” he said, sitting down heavily on her cot. “He’s alive.”

She thought back to the last time she had seen him: standing in the cooler, his needle-filled mouth wailing in some toneless, repeating song. “Yes,” she said, tone far from certain.

As she described what had happened to him--the slow changes, adding up to the horrible metamorphosis, she watched the joy drain from his face. What replaced it wasn’t sadness or hurt, it was fear, and recognition. “Where is he now?”

“Out there somewhere.”

“You *lost* him? Come on, Marta!”

“I wasn’t the first one to lose him!”

He flinched away from her, and she sucked in breath to try and wrangle back her temper. That was new, too. The old Adrien had always given as good as he got. “You said they’re making you better. Does that mean there’s a cure?”

“They’re working on it. But right now it’s just--things that stop it from getting worse. For most people.”

\ “Okay. We’ll grab some of that shit on our way out.”

“Out?”

“When we get out of here.”

“They’re not going to let you out, Marta.”

“When we *break* out.”

“And then what? You’re a criminal! And I’m--I’m me, but only as long as I keep taking that shit. Do you know how to make it? Whatever’s in those shots? Did they teach you that in college? Where would we even go? We don’t have a boat, we don’t have jobs--it’s done! We’re fucked! I was already fucked, and then you came and got fucked right alongside me, so thanks for that.”

“Shut up,” said Marta. Angry, holding back tears. Trying mightily to see any part of his little speech that was wrong.

“There is no going back,” he went on. “Things will never be normal again. Our lives have sprouted fins and teeth and all sorts of weird shit we cannot shake off or run from. Stop pretending otherwise.”

The door opened, and the interviewer leaned in, looking between Adrien and Marta with a blank expression. “Mr. Gonzales. It’s time to get you to your treatment.”

“Yeah. Okay,” he said, and turned from her.

I missed you, Adrien. I thought you were dead. These were things Marta could have said, as he left. But she didn’t. It wasn’t until the door shut and her brother’s footsteps receded down the hallway that she started to regret that.

What was the worst part of your mother dying? In the whole ecosystem of grief, there were plenty of contenders for apex predator. There was, most obviously, the gaping hole in their lives where she should be, but wasn't--the bizarre emptiness of the passenger seat of the family truck, or her place in bed, which she liked to linger in long after Victor's hardwired inner alarm had driven him up and into the world. Marta still remembered the morning, not long after it happened, where she stumbled into her parent's bedroom, still muzzy from sleep and seeking to curl up against something warm, to find an empty and dark bed. She had, for a few minutes, forgotten.

In that contest you couldn't count out the effect on the whole environment, either. Adrien's sudden scholastic freefall, for example. Turning in blank homework and quizzes, knocking kids over on the playground for looking at him. Worse was the effect that mom-shaped vacuum had on Victor, though. She had always been the tar pit to his raging saurian--with her gone, he had no one left to strain against, to exhaust himself with, to finally yield to. His kids couldn't do that for him, but that didn't stop him from yelling at them, arguing with them, *debating* them as if they weren't elementary schoolers deep in the throes of the very same grief and confusion that he was. He became a strange tyrant, plotting their futures without consent. When Adrien dropped out of high school, Marta thought Victor was going to kill him for spoiling all his plans.

Despite the facts of it, the great yawning obviousness of her absence and the ripples it cast into every other part of her life, though, Marta found herself waiting for things to go back to normal. The idea that this was forever--her mother gone, her family changed, the world fractured--couldn't be right. What she didn't know then, what she *still*, in her heart, couldn't

believe, was that what she saw as normal was extinct, never to return. Even now some part of her clung to hope--hope that her father would be magically restored, her brother cured, her city saved, her life set back along the right track. How different was she, then, from Bowl-Cut at Beachhead and Caron, editing the End of the World out of photos? What was this but another form of denial? A different beach where she could bury her head in the sand.

Outside, by the halogen glow of a spotlight, the refugees waited in line as a man in crinkled white plastic and a gas mask handed out blankets. Someone, a woman, was arguing with the man in white, yelling and pointing, obviously pissed. It wasn't until one of the guards moved closer, hand on his weapon, that the shouting woman stepped back into the crowd. Marta wondered what Siren could see, from her window.

The guards came for her early the next morning--two in black, SWAT-ish armor. One was wearing a helmet, the other a bored expression and a developing pattern of horse-shoe balding. "Follow," he said, like speaking in full sentences was too taxing.

They walked her, one in front and one behind, through the school. It was about as far from the eerie, silent hallways she remembered from their break-in as you could get--everywhere there was activity. Excitement, even: the soldiers were rushing around with the little lab assistants, everyone carrying equipment or clipboards, jabbering into radios.

"Where are we going?" asked Marta.

"Outside," said the balding guard.

"What's outside?"

"Something the general wants everyone to see."

The one in front walked up to a wall, then, reached out, and pushed open a door that

Marta hadn't seen a minute ago. Her mouth dropped--but then, behind her, the helmeted one gave her a shove, sending her stumbling through the invisible secret door. She tried turning around, on the other side, but just got another shove for her trouble.

"Come on," said Balding. "We're already late."

Outside, the man they had called the general was already knee-deep in a speech. He appeared stuck in it like a thick mud. Every so often he would double back to try and find some familiar ground. "And the thing is, we couldn't have done it without your tremendous work, and your beautiful facility, because here's--well, the truth is, if you hadn't been such an enticing target, if you hadn't been doing all this excellent work that threatens lowlife terrorist scum like this criminal here, then where would she be now? Somewhere else, I'll tell you that. Not in our custody. Not getting ready to board a one-way flight to federal prison."

Next to him, painted over the blacktop, was a huge white circle. The latest addition to Jackson Douglas Elementary: a helicopter landing pad. On his other side stood Siren.

Marta hadn't seen her since their capture two nights ago. Gone was the greatcoat, replaced by those pale hospital scrubs all the patients here wore. Her face was a map of yellowing, eldritch bruises from where the soldiers had beaten her. Both her hands and ankles were chained together. Standing there, she didn't look like a dangerous criminal mastermind. She looked like an exhausted young woman. She didn't look, as Marta wanted her to, defiant--only resigned to whatever might come next. It broke Marta's heart, in an entirely new way. One she was, somehow, still unfamiliar with.

She could see Adrien, from where she was standing--between two guards, just like her. He looked uncomfortable. Twitchy. Eager, she guessed, to go back to his cell. Nearby were several other figures she recognized--the huge pale man and the black woman from the other

night. The kid, too, who was rubbing his hands together and making a whining, anxious sound that one of the guards kept trying to slap out of him. The interviewer was present, looking about as impatient to be done with whatever was going on as Adrien. Also there: a dozen techs in identical white hazmat suits who golf-clapped at every pause in the general's speech, a preposterous number of uniformed soldiers, and a small crowd of refugees who seemed confused to find themselves filling out the proverbial bleachers. Marta checked her father's watch. It was just past eight in the morning.

The general's speech had wandered again: now he seemed to be telling a story about war, about how, in a foreign desert, he had held off a whole platoon of bloodthirsty guerilla fighters single-handedly, or maybe that he *would* have, if he had been present--it was unclear. What was clear was that he had won at least three medals as a result of his possible presence in this unnamed desert, and that everyone awarding him the medals had been very impressed. Occasionally he would mime firing a machine gun, making the noises with his mouth.

In the distance Marta could see a black dot in the sky. As the speech went on, it drew closer, and she could make out the suggestion of a black helicopter, its blades blurring like a heat shimmer. That would be for Siren, then.

Next to her, Balding's radio began to crackle. He swore under his breath and grabbed it, squeezing buttons, shaking and slapping it. Nothing seemed to help. From her other side, there was a hiss and a sputter as Helmet's radio started spewing white noise as well.

Around the asphalt, she could see the guards in black and the soldiers all messing with their radios, while the patients and the refugees looked around in rising alarm. The static was rising over the whole crowd now, like fog. The only one who seemed unaware was the general, whose wet announcements had lost all clarity against the hiss.

The crackling got louder; next to her, Balding pulled at the cord of his radio, trying to tear it loose. Under the white noise and the confused chatter, though, under the general now bellowing to be heard, Marta thought she could hear something else. A distortion, under the distortion: a low, inhuman note, bent into an octave that glided beneath the static like a shadow under the waves. It did not sound like any singing she had known, but she knew it was a song.

Marta looked down at her father's watch again--the bomb-proof, solar-powered, practically immortal device. The screen had gone blank. Dead.

When she looked back up, the helicopter had gotten much closer. It was difficult to tell the exact moment that the engine failed. The blades kept spinning, carried on their own momentum, even if they were slowing with every rotation until, very soon, they weren't spinning fast enough to keep everything aloft. It happened gradually, almost lazily: the nose began to droop, the tail rising into a playful point as a new, and final, course was charted. It didn't drop out of the sky, like she would have thought--it was dragged down, slowly, inexorably, by a hook it had been precisely engineered to avoid. The crowd, watching the helicopter fall, had gone silent--no sound but for the eerie noise rising from a hundred radios, even from the general, who had gone pale and silent. Then it dipped below the treeline with a crunch that shook Marta's fillings, even from here--a crunch, and then a bloom of fire and smoke.

Immediately, the crowd burst into panic. The refugees scattered like squirrels, while the guards on brute instinct started grabbing and clubbing them. Soldiers shouted into their useless radios, demanding status reports and getting only crackling whale-song back. Siren, next to the sputtering, gasping general, didn't move. Marta, though--Marta turned and ran.

"Hey!" shouted Balding, next to her, swiping for her arm and missing. Marta didn't stop; she wasn't running for the fence, or the gate. She was running for the school. They hadn't put

handcuffs on her, hadn't seen her as enough of a threat, so she was able to grab hold of a drain pipe and, using the metal brackets as footholds, climb hand over hand. She pulled herself up, onto the roof, and turned wildly in place.

And there it was, in the water, just offshore: the End of the World.

Marta had only ever seen photographs of it--photographs that, because of the aura currently destroying every active electronic device within a mile, had to be taken from very far away. But even if she'd had better than grainy, distant pictures, they wouldn't have prepared her for this. Nothing could have.

Impossible to judge how far the creature rose from the water--meaningless. A scale she didn't understand. It was bigger than anything she had ever seen, bigger than the colossal glass office buildings that had conquered her city's downtown, and this was only the part she could see--the part out of the water. No longer were the colossal shapes of its form obscured by the waves that crashed and curled minutely around it--the End of the World was *standing* now, a vast and horribly familiar silhouette against the flat blue sky. Below, the waves slapped and curled against what must, she supposed, be called legs. Forming their own tidal patterns, like islands.

It was not any one color but a hundred shades of black and gray and green and blue, though in places it was shot through with a translucent white that reminded Marta not of any color but the absence altogether. All those colors seemed to glow and shimmer in the morning sun as rivers of water ran over that vast and featureless face, off its flanks, down those arms that seemed to stretch down to the endless depths, boiling the ocean below and sending up mist and spray as the water crashed from an unfathomable height, and somehow it was getting *bigger*, growing before her eyes--no, she realized, with lurching horror. It was, inch by inch,

straightening. Standing up, along the continental shelf.

It was moving. She was *seeing it move*.

Which is when the rooftop sniper tackled her from behind, driving her head into the corner of the roof, and everything in Marta's world went dark.

Preamble to Classified Report to the Authority, #1

by **sdfsdfsdf sdfsdfsdfsdfs**

I know, now, how Oppenheimer felt when he looked into the heat of a star and whispered *I am death, destroyer of worlds*. It was not only that he felt the impending possibility of catastrophe; this wasn't, as some would have you believe, an expression of guilt for the superweapon he had created. It was an expression of awe. A recognition of the sublime. He knew he was witnessing something that would leave the world forever changed. How else to describe what we are witnessing in the Atlantic ocean right now?

Perhaps the atomic bomb is the wrong comparison to make. After all, the unidentified entity--such an exciting phrase!--currently seen moving through the Atlantic can hardly be said to put the entire world, the entire earthly biosphere, at risk. We aren't staring down the barrel of another nuclear winter. As gargantuan and remarkable as the creature is, it is still a *creature*. Dangerous or not, it has been a long time since mankind feared for its place among the wolves and lions of the world.

I have no doubt that mankind, that greatest destroyer, could dispatch this creature, should it come to that. But the entity's destruction should only be considered a last resort. There are too many questions that require answers, first.

We can only speculate, for example, about the glacial pace at which it moves, and what evolutionary function it might serve. Perhaps it is simply to conserve energy--that would seem a pressing concern for a creature of this size--but as of now, nobody has seen it eat. Its size, at bare minimum, is a mystery for which we have no answer. How does its skeleton, if it *has* a skeleton, not collapse under its own weight? How does it maintain any sort of consistent core body temperature, if it has anything we might call that?

Considering our unique difficulties getting our more delicate equipment within range, ordinary methods of studying this creature won't suffice. As of now, our only sample is thanks to the efforts of the crew of the *Demeter*. It is some sort of shed pod or scale that they managed to fish out of the water as they were fleeing their slowly sinking ship. My sincerest gratitude is extended to these men. I heard that many of them are still undergoing routine quarantine procedure, and I wish them well.

While further analysis is required, early lab reports show that the creature is carbon-based. Those who assume some sort of "extraterrestrial" origin for this being are conspiracists and crackpots: we must assume not that it fell from space, but that it has always been here, that it has somehow escaped our notice all these years. As to why it has chosen to surface now--well, this is one of the many questions which science demands we must ask.

I count myself lucky to live in such thrilling times, an observer to the birth of a new era. With every corner of the globe mapped and all but the smallest organisms named and filed away--with the dissolution of our ecosystems, the steady loss of megafauna, the melting of the ice caps--it is difficult not to see this as an extraordinary discovery, and as a sign of what extraordinary things might yet await us in the enduring mystery of the deep seas.

Black - Chapter 30 - The End

The booming sounds every hour or so were not, he was told, footsteps. Not in the technical sense. It still moved too slowly to make an audible impact, no matter how big it was. No; The deep, seismic events that shook the facility every half hour or so were nothing more than the cracking of bedrock as its full weight settled in one spot. It happened twice at breakfast, twice at lunch. By some quirk of timing only once at dinner, right in the middle. He had slept even worse than usual--the dreams of a deep ocean, a pale cavern with a ceiling vanishing into darkness above, were interrupted by the tremors. In the mornings, the evening, all hours of the day, they'd ripple the oily surface of his terrible and necessary coffee, the last thing keeping him moving.

Black knew he should have felt afraid. There was a giant creature moving slowly and steadily towards him--towards all of them--and if Antillia was any teacher, they would not be better off for its passing. It should have consumed him, the worry over it. The constant, booming reminders should have pinned it, permanently, to the frontal lobe of his brain, and yet it came more often than not as an afterthought. Faced with the threat of it, Black found that he no longer cared whether he lived or died.

Of course he used to joke about exactly that. Corner store out of his brand of cigarette? *Fucking kill me.* What did he want for breakfast after a night of drinking? *A bullet in the skull, thanks.* In SPEAR they all joked about it, because what else could you do? One month they'd be joking about it, the next they'd be brain-dead from a rubber bullet to the eye fired by some sadistic riot cop, or bleeding out from a real one to the lung when some Red Band lost his cool and sprayed a crowd of protestors. You had to be willing to die to put on that black mask. It's not

that he wasn't scared--which was maybe the problem, ultimately. It was one thing to joke about death, another to embrace it. The latter required conviction.

Which he lacked. That much was obvious. Why else would he help a government that had only ever battered and imprisoned him? How else to explain what he had done to Siren, climbing through her eyes, into her past, like a robber. He was a coward. He had betrayed every principle he'd ever held, just to cling to this body he'd always hated anyway. Just to keep his mouth full of blunted human teeth, his eyes a rattish pink instead of milky blue. And now, at the end of it all, he found he didn't care whether he lived or died. Whether, one night, he'd be awoken by the collapsing of the roof above him by the slow descent of an impossible footfall, come to crush him against the bedrock underneath Joyous Beach.

They weren't running tests anymore, and he wasn't called in for any more "interrogations." No more wanderings, either; their rooms were locked outside of meal-times. In the morning he'd wake up and lie there in bed until the techs came with his pills and shots. They seemed nervous, not inclined to chat--possibly because of the soldiers waiting just outside.

Almost overnight, the ecosystem of Jackson Douglas Elementary had undergone a seismic shift. It wasn't just the obvious changes, like the dead electric lights around the perimeter being replaced with old-timey gas lamps pulled from some storage basement. Soldiers were everywhere now, no longer leaning against walls or gathering in little gangs but standing at attention, the techs hurrying under their watchful stares like citizens of occupied territory. The changes seemed to have gone all the way to the top; Black hardly ever saw the man he called Observer anymore. His office door, those few occasions that Black had to walk past it, was closed.

The only time Black saw him was at the general's daily assemblies, where he oscillated

unpredictably between fraudulent war stories and new proclamations for the management of the facility. At this most recent one, he had demanded that everyone in the school try to keep their “thought volume” down, so as not to attract as much attention from the Offshore Entity. “Every individual has a responsibility to do their part!” he declared from the same auditorium stage where, last year, the PTA of Jackson Douglas had put on *The Wizard of Oz*. To his right and back a few feet stood Observer, hands folded behind his back, eyes fixed on the floor.

He kept waiting for trucks and buses to arrive. Would they take him and the others, when they left for whatever bunker or mountain fortress government-types went to in times like this? Or would they just leave them locked in the school, victim to whatever would happen when it finally reached them? No buses ever showed up, though. There was no grand evacuation. They seemed, for all intents and purposes, to be sitting there, waiting. In bed, Black waited, too. It was almost time for another footstep. A few hours ago he had decided to start counting them. He was up to five.

There, waiting for the sound of the monster getting a little bit closer, he noticed a different one: metal scraping on metal. Someone fumbling with the lock. A moment later his door opened, and Observer lurched in. The man seemed to have some trouble finding his footing, like the pale purple carpet was rocking wildly back and forth. When he looked up, Black saw exactly the same expression of surprise and confusion that he imagined on his own face just then.

“This,” said Observer, after a moment, “is not my office.”

“It is not,” said Black.

“I suppose it will have to do. In the interim.” With that, he clumsily lowered himself to sit cross-legged on the floor, eerily like a first grader might have done a little over a month ago.

Black wasn’t sure if it was a lingering psychic connection or simply the whiskey fumes

rising from the man, but he was feeling just a little drunk himself. “Man, you can’t be here.”

“Why the hell not? It’s my facility. I’m the director. I am conducting an interview, for scientific purposes.” He seemed to be on the verge of saying something else when a bubbling sob interrupted him. Observer lowered his head into his hands, those big gray eyes streaming helplessly. He looked so pathetic, Black almost offered him the bed.

“Hey. Come on now. It’s,” said Black, mentally filing through platitudes, looking for something that might get this man out of his room. “It’s going to be all right.”

That succeeded in making the man stop crying; instead, Observer looked up at him, gray eyes illuminated with rage. “That is a goddamn *lie* and you know it. Please, tell me I’m a bootlicker or a fascist--at least those would paint a more accurate picture of my successes and failures. But don’t lie to me. Don’t tell me everything’s going to work out.”

“Okay,” said Black. “It’s not.”

Observer wiped at a line of snot creeping down towards his lip. “There was a world in which we stopped this. It just isn’t this one. I failed. It will be here in a matter of days, and then--who knows where it will turn, then. If I had to guess, likely towards the nearest population center. Up the coast, or westward--the course of empire.” He threw his hands up. “It won’t be my concern any more, at least.”

“You’re not on the first bus out of here?”

“No. I intend to go down with the ship. Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell’s heart I stab at thee; for hate’s sake I spit my last breath at thee. As it were.”

“That’s stupid.”

“The world is stupid. It is past time that I caught up.”

They sat there in silence, for a minute. Observer no longer sobbed, but he would wipe at his face now and then, or sniffle loudly. Black had no reason to try and comfort this man. Observer had kept him prisoner; he'd withheld medicine unless Black had agreed to play by his rules. He was, by absolutely any metric, a motherfucker, one who probably deserved to get stepped on by a giant monster. But Black had been inside his head--literally behind those great gray eyes as panic had seized him at the knowledge of what he was up against, what the stakes would be if he failed. He had not been truly alone--not like Siren, one woman against the world--but it was a heavy weight, and Observer didn't seem to be made of as strong stuff. All this time it had been crushing him. Finally, he was starting to collapse.

Black had never been one to make peace with his enemies. He wouldn't call this peace. But he rested one big, white hand on the man's back anyway, and Observer didn't flinch away.

"Those were pretty long odds," said Black. Fighting a fight you knew you couldn't win; that, at least, was something Black could respect. He was an old hand at taking on behemoths, leviathans--concentrations of power and people that could, if they ever really chose to, break him. It was what he'd lived for. What he'd betrayed. "Listen--there are a lot of people here who shouldn't be involved in this. You can still help them."

Observer laughed bitterly. "I'm afraid you overestimate my influence, Mr. Gorie. If I ever had the ability to sway the policies of my superiors, I've certainly lost it now."

Well, it had been worth a try. "How's Oluchi?" Black asked, after a moment. She hadn't been at any of the general's speeches--he hadn't seen her since they'd been dragged away.

"She's stopped taking her medicine," said Observer.

"What?"

"We offered. I even tried to talk her into it. But she--well, it seems she's made up her

mind on the issue.” He glanced at Black for a moment, a strange look in his eye. “Do you want me to describe the changes?”

Oluchi, sprouting rows and rows of sharp teeth; Oluchi’s limbs extending, growing longer and longer. “No,” he said quickly. After everything they’d gone through. Everything he had done to remain *him*.. He couldn’t understand it. He could barely think about it. “And Siren? What’s going to happen to her now?” he said, changing the subject.

“I suppose the same thing that’s going to happen to all of us,” he said. Distracted, clearly, by his own misery. “She hates me more than anyone, you know. And I suppose I can’t blame her.”

“It’s not personal,” said Black. “I know it’s just catching up to you now, but her world ended a long time ago.”

“You knew her?”

“Well,” said Black. “We were on a few video calls together, I guess.” Both members of the same encrypted chatrooms, along with ten thousand other SPEAR members. Had he known her? No, not really.

Just then, there was a distant thrum, like a vast heartbeat. Black’s bare metal cot frame rattled against its parts and pieces. Observer grabbed two fistfuls of the carpet, like a startled cat. A moment after its passing, the window still vibrated with a low hum.

Six.

When Black woke, Observer was gone. He might have blamed his odd night on a dream, if his room hadn’t reeked of whiskey. He had sat up, was rolling his head from left to right, when the soldiers opened his door. A minute later, he was standing in the gym, which had gotten

militarized since his last visit.

The rope still dangled from its place in the center of the ceiling. Around it were racks of weapons, radio equipment that seemed to be off or broken, and a set of dust-colored hum-vees which they had somehow gotten inside. Nearby, on a pole meant for a volleyball net, someone had hung a map of Joyous Beach, with a few areas circled in menacing red. In the middle of it all--tugging, occasionally, at the rope--was the general.

“Ah!” he said, flinching away from Black in obvious fear as he noticed him. In a moment he had composed himself. “Jonathan! What brings you to the command center?”

“Your soldiers?”

“Of course, of course.” He looked thoughtful, now that the unpleasant surprise of Black’s hugeness and paleness had passed. “You’ve been here a while now. Tell me, Jonathan--what was your opinion of the *old leadership*?”

Black felt something in his stomach knot up. So he knew--that was why he’d dragged Black out here. What kind of punishment would he receive for Observer’s drunken visit? In his head, he lobbed every curse he could imagine at the man, hoping that any lingering connection between their minds might pass one along.

“Can’t say I had much opinion at all,” said Black, trying to tread carefully. Subtlety had never been his area of expertise.

“Sure. Honestly the man’s about as charismatic as old milk. Brilliant mind, I’ve been told, but sometimes a brilliant *gut* is just as important. Or more important, really. And I don’t mean to brag, but my gut? It’s got to be in the top ten, in terms of brilliance.”

The tension in Black’s limbs was starting to drain. It was hard to brace himself for punishment when he was having trouble following the thread of accusations.

“The problem with brain-types like the old director,” the general went on, “is that they get hung up in the theory of a thing. They let that distract them from what really matters-- action.”

Strangely enough, Black found himself agreeing with the sentiment. The general was obviously no longer speaking for Black’s benefit, though. No; he was following the gentle, winding path of his own notions, rolling around each sentence in his mouth like expensive liquor. “And let me tell you--the days of *theory* are over. The glorious season of action has arrived! So, Jonathan, what do you think of that?”

“Uh. Sure. That sounds good to me.”

“Tremendous. Glad to have you on board. Now,” he said, putting a hand on his shoulder and guiding him over to the map of Joyous Beach. “I’m told you’re familiar with a local group of insurgents. Anti-government, anti-law-and-order types, hiding in private property like rats. Honestly? Disgraceful that they’ve been allowed to operate so close to this facility for so long.”

When you’re hit hard enough, you don’t always feel pain--just a sudden realignment of the world. One minute you’re standing up, the next you’re on your back. “Sadie?” said Black, struck stupid by the idea.

“Is that the name of their onsite commander? Cline, write that down!” he barked. Over at a folding table, the boyish agent dutifully scribbled away.

“Listen,” said Black, trying to force out the next word: “*Sir*. That thing, in the water--it’s very much *not* in the water anymore. You can see it when you go outside. You can see it moving. With your own eyes. That’s the threat, that’s the enemy. Not the people in that theater.”

But the general simply shook his head. He looked almost sad. “Son, I was hoping you wouldn’t buy into such alarmist rhetoric, what with all the common ground we’ve been finding. I

have been informed by trusted sources that the Offshore Entity is nothing to be worried about.”

“By who?” said Black, desperately. “The director?”

“No, no. If the director had told me that, he might still be running this shithole. The source of this information is my most trusted advisors--my gut and my instinct,” he said, grinning proudly. Black could only stare at him, helpless, as he went on: “Now, the individuals holed up in that cineplex--every day they continue to trespass on private property is another day we look foolish and weak. I bet you already know that they have ties to the very same terrorist group that this “Siren” character once belonged to?”

He could see, from the way Cline looked up, then back down at his notes, that the general had only skimmed Black’s file before calling him in.

“The important thing now is to hit them fast and to hit them hard. The most terrible weapons we can muster! The most fearsome displays of force. Tanks. Tear gas. I’m told there will be dogs,” he said, smiling at the thought. “If you are so concerned about that whatever in the ocean, I would recommend you simply follow the guidelines already offered.”

“Think quietly,” said Black, at a whisper.

“Exactly. Now--what kind of weapons have these agitators stockpiled?”

Black told them the truth--that they *didn't* have any weapons, as far as he knew. That they were mainly “defended” by mailmen, waiters, gardeners, house cleaners--whoever was willing to lend a hand. He did this because he had already betrayed them in every other way. At least, with this betrayal, he might keep them from being firebombed. Information of their defenselessness seemed to only inflame the general, though--“This will be easy!” he declared by the end, laughing. When they were done with him, the same soldiers that had brought him to the

gym led him here. They looked young, Black thought. Younger than he was, anyway. “Can I use the bathroom before you lock me in again?” There was some grumbling and groaning, but eventually they relented, taking up positions on either side of the door while Black went in.

Everywhere in the school, even the rooms that had been somewhat reconfigured, had an uncanny scale to it. Nowhere was this effect as pronounced as the bathroom, with its doll-sized urinals and dick-height sinks. The only thing designed to be out of child-reach was the lone window, a narrow rectangle set almost against the ceiling.

He’d been in here a hundred times, of course, but he still had to come face to face with that thin slit of sunlight to admit that there was no way, absolutely no way he was going to fit through. How else could he get out? How else could he warn them? Daclan could show him the way, but he had no idea where they were keeping him.

There was another way. A simpler way to develop those blue eyes that saw so much.

Black checked the window again. He was probing, blind, feeling for a latch of some kind, when he heard the whispering.

It was coming from one of the stalls. At first Black flinched away from the windows, busying himself with washing his hands or checking his hair--anything that would look less suspicious. But that was before he noticed the fevered, desperate quality of the whispered speech, like a prayer at the gallows. This wasn’t some spy or informant, ankles drawn up on the toilet seat. Slowly, he approached the stall that the soft pleas were filtering out from, and pushing open the swinging door.

There were two of them--techs, crouched on either side of the toilet, their baggy plastic suits creased and folded with their weird crouching posture. Neither wore the hood and mask. One had high cheekbones and sleek black hair--the other, a short cut that was already beginning

to grow into curls. Both stared at Black out of solid blue eyes. It would have been odd to see their faces, even if their faces were entirely normal. Which they weren't.

Between them--each had a hand on it--was one of the hexagonal plastic jars, from the hidden room. The lid was off; the one with the cheekbones had his hand poised over it, two fingers curled outwards, a thin tendril of impossibly colored slime dripping from them back into the container.

Behind them, on the toilet tank, was what he could only think of as a shrine. Three misshapen candles, molded from some gray putty-like substance and topped with flickering blue flames, were carefully arranged around a statue made from the same material. It looked, appropriately enough, like a kindergartner's rendition of a person: the arms too long, the back ridged and strange--the face a featureless mash of thumbprints. A reek rose from the altar, the stall, that Black had blamed before on overzealous cleaning staff: bleach, brine, a toxic waft of ammonia.

Black didn't want to look any closer. Honestly, truly, *he didn't want to know*. Knowing more and more had done nothing at all to help him so far. And yet he still saw the streaks of nothing on their faces--the patterns he could only discern by their absence, by the pink flesh around them. Swirls of oblivion, like war paint.

He almost expected one of them to burst forth with an empty tech-ism--"Our first and fiercest weapon is knowledge! We must understand our enemy before we can defeat them! Put your problems under a microscope!" But they only stared at him.

The curly-haired one's jaw had slipped open. And open, and open--stretching almost cartoonishly long, swaying and bouncing slightly as if held by bungee cords rather than ligaments. The other's, thankfully, remained in place--though with lurching horror, Black

realized he could see something moving just behind the dark-haired man's teeth, a wriggling presence he refused to examine too closely.

Slowly, so slowly, the dark-haired one extended his two dripping fingers towards Black, who found that he could not move. That he was frozen there, as the fingers got closer and closer. He could smell the chemical stench of what was on them. His head throbbed and buzzed, alive with insects.

He was shaken from his trance when the door to the bathroom slammed open, and one of the soldiers leaned in. "How long does it take you to shit, man?"

Black shut the stall. The techs, on the other side, didn't say a word. "Coming," he said, at a whisper.

Two things happened that night. Two changes, both a long time coming, both suppressed, squeezed until they were ready to burst. The first: Black, when he looked in the mirror for the first time in hours, found that his eyes had turned entirely blue. No dotting, like Oluchi's--no slow spreading out from the iris. They were blue, that solid, unnatural, refinery-spill blue.

The second was that the refugee camp rioted.

If Black had actually been in the camp, among the masses of displaced Joyous Beach residents that had accepted the governmental aid when the flood first hit, he would have seen the riot coming. He had been in enough of them to develop a sixth sense; like some old folks claimed to feel a storm in their joints long before it actually arrived, Black could feel a riot in the air days before it finally burst to life. He would have known, if he'd been out there, that this one was a long time coming.

It was a matter of physics, in the end. Push people for long enough, raise the heat degree

by degree, and you build up a monumental amount of potential energy, all built of frustration, of anger. Sooner or later, when there's nowhere else for that energy to go--it pops. So, while it may have seemed to both the guards and soldiers that the hundreds of civilians they had kept here, imprisoned, had gone from meek acceptance to utter fury in the space of an hour, it was as predictable as any chemical reaction.

From his window, Black watched as a line of weathermen in body armor were pushed back one step at a time by a crowd armed with soup cans, half-full water bottles, here and there a baton that had been liberated from a guard. It was hard to make out details in the torchlight, but he saw one woman snare an armed soldier with a thermal blanket wrapped tight around his neck--she couldn't have been a day younger than seventy.

He didn't know what had been the spark that had set them off--whether they had finally noticed the creature on its way to end civilization or whether one of the guards had beaten a particularly beloved member of whatever desperate community they'd managed to build under those white tents, but it hardly mattered. He found himself smiling as he watched them surge together against the reinforced fence, making it tremble and shake in silver shimmers. It warmed his heart to see them chant, charge, as one great body. It always had.

Distantly, he knew he should be in the throes of panic--the change he had put off for so long, with pills and shots and stranger medicines, had arrived. And he was frightened, sure. The fear of it sat just below his ribcage, a yawning emptiness that wanted nothing more than to swallow him whole. But it couldn't seem to penetrate the icy calm--the relief, he almost thought--because the end of the world was here. It was marching towards them all, rioters and guards, doctors and patients, SPEAR and Red Band. It was beginning in Joyous Beach, but he knew it wouldn't end there. So Black took solace in one of the things he had always found

beautiful: people, together.

He was so absorbed in this, he didn't hear the lock on his door unlatch. It wasn't until Observer cleared his throat that Black noticed him.

"Mr. Gorie."

"Oh. Are you drunk again?"

"No, I'm not," he snapped. "Mr. Gorie, if you'll--if you'd just come with me."

Black turned, looked, turned back to the window. "Nah. I'm good."

"Of all the times to be stubborn, now is not the one." He was wearing something odd--not his usual overstretched, untucked dress shirts, but a gray rain slicker and a backpack.

"Where are we going?" asked Black.

"Out of here. Away. Before that--before *it* reaches us. The entity," he said, speaking the last words more quietly, as if it might hear him.

So there it was. His evacuation. A little more life to cling to--a few more months as an experiment in some bunker. Some commandeered school in the Rocky Mountains, packed with Important People.

"I'll pass," said Black, turning back to the riot outside. It felt good to say it, and to mean it.

"I'm trying to help you, you fucking idiot!" hissed Observer. "You, and the others! I'm trying to *let you out of here*, but we don't have much time before they notice I'm gone."

Black took a moment to process that. He turned all the way now--and saw the way Observer flinched, looked away from his eyes. His new ones.

"I've taken as many doses of the treatment as I could carry, but it will run out, and I won't be able to manufacture more. You should know that," he said.

“You’re breaking us out? You? Why?”

The floor, the ceiling, the window where the mob still screamed and shouted--Observer seemed to look everywhere but at Black. “I am throwing back the starfish.”

“*What?*”

“It is too late for Antillia. And I can’t save the world. So I am,” he paused, grinding his teeth. Chewing on some mighty emotion. “I am doing what I can. Now. Please.”

Certainly not how he thought his apocalypse would go. “Okay. I guess we should hurry, huh?”

They were almost to the next room when the guards turned a corner--four of them, all toting rifles. Black thought the look on Observer’s face alone would be enough to get them shot. But they barely glanced at the pair as they jogged by, clip-clopping in their heavy combat boots, tearing ass for the chance to beat some refugees outside.

Daclan’s was the first room they got to. Black expected to find him crawling on the walls or something, but the kid was just sitting cross-legged on his bed, a tendril of smoke curling from one of the cigarettes they had given him. How he had managed to light one, Black had no idea. “Daclan, time to go,” he said.

“Go where?”

“To a,” Black paused. Observer stared at him, useless. “A *big adventure.*”

Daclan looked suspicious, but he slid over the edge of the bed and passed towards them.

“Don’t you have shoes?” said Black.

“I didn’t like them, so I threw them away.”

“Sure. Okay.”

The girl was next closest--the one who had come in with Siren. She needed no convincing--only spat at Observer's feet as they were leaving. Black thought that was fair enough.

After her, Adrien. This was going to be a hard sell. The whole time Black had been here, he'd watched Adrien scrupulously follow every rule the facility could dream up like they were offerings on the altar, charms that would keep his body whole and healthy. He even showed up to meals precisely on time. Black would have bet he was in there, just trying to think more quietly. Observer, their renegade authority figure, would be some help. He wasn't sure it would be enough.

He was already on his feet when they came in. Tense, ramrod straight.

"Mr. Gonzales," said Observer. "We don't have much time. Come with us."

He looked from face to face, the torchlight outside stitching shadows across his features.

"What is this?"

"We're going, Adrien," said Black.

"Going?" Black could see the real meaning of that sinking in, and the fear with it. "I--I don't--"

Outside, the sounds of chanting and fighting droned on. The hollow *thump* of tear gas canisters--the sharper pops of rubber bullets. The concrete-shaking rumble of not-technically-a-footstep.

"Mr. Gonzales, the people here have no interest in helping you any longer. You need to come with us," said Observer. Hardening his voice into a familiar and commanding tone.

"I can't," said Adrien. Sitting back on the bed. "I just--I can't."

Which is when the girl walked up to him and smacked him on the head. He flinched and

scowled back at her, pissed. “Bitch!”

“Shut up and get moving, stupid.”

“Marta--”

She smacked him again, igniting whatever fight was still in him. He exploded off the bed towards her, grabbing her shoulders and swinging her into the wall. She bounced right back, grabbing him in a headlock somehow despite being at least two weight classes below him, and he snarled and bucked like an animal, trying mightily to keep his footing. Finally, Black recovered from his surprise enough to step forward, meaning to separate them, but Observer put an arm across his chest. Adrien had sunk to his knees by then, and the headlock didn't look so severe anymore. It almost looked like they were hugging.

“Okay?” said Marta.

“Okay,” said Adrien. And he got up, to come with.

Marta - Chapter 31 - Reunion

Marta wanted to find Siren crouched on the other side of the door, hairpin lockpick in hand, already halfway through the escape. This was the same woman who had fought mutant dogs, stole a nuclear bomb, broke iron with her bare hands. But she looked scared, when the interviewer finally got the door open.

They'd put her in a janitor's closet. There were no windows in here, no bed--no shelves, even, or mops, or cleaning supplies. It was dark and bare, save for the heating pipes, which folded against the walls of the room like blunt organs. She blinked and held a hand to her face, disoriented even by the faint light coming from the hallway.

"Come on," Marta found herself saying. "We're getting out of here."

"I don't understand."

"You don't have to. Just get up." Marta reached out and grabbed her hand, pulling her to her feet. Siren took a wobbly step out, into the hall.

"See?" said Marta. "You're fine." And, as she said it, she knew that she needed it to be true. Not because she loved Siren--she didn't, she didn't even particularly like her--and not because of what had happened in the theater. But Siren, as fucked up as she may have been, was evidence of survival. Her world had ended and she found a way to keep punching. Marta had to believe that was possible.

"You should have left me here. It wasn't worth the risk," said Siren. Her voice ashy, swollen. Marta pressed a bottle of water into her hands.

"Just keep quiet and follow the big guy." He'd said his name was Black. Funny, for a guy who looked like that.

“This is everyone,” said the interviewer. “We need to hurry, now.”

“What about Oluchi?” said Black.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Gorie. The changes progressed too quickly. Her initial exposure, remember, was just as severe as Mrs. Radler’s. Frankly, it’s a miracle the treatments were able to keep them at bay this long.”

“That doesn’t mean--”

“She wouldn’t recognize us, Black,” said the interviewer. Not unkindly, thought Marta.

It was hard to tell what feeling passed over the big man’s face, considering the blue eyes.

The interviewer led them out through a fire escape door in the main stairwell. She’d seen the rioting crowd from her windows and heard the chanting almost clear enough to make out the words, but outside she was in the heat of it--like the chaos of that parade, in the city, mutated into something wilder and stranger.

There was a gap between the refugees and the soldiers of about twenty feet, a no-man’s-land crossed only by hissing grenades and gouts of pepper spray, along with a humble rock or two. The refugees were helplessly outgunned, the soldiers all equipped like medieval knights, helms and plastic shields locked into a phalanx, but any time they tried to push forward they were forced back by the sheer mass and boiling anger of the crowd. Marta saw one soldier pull the pin on a flash-bang and huck it towards the mass of bodies, only to have it swatted back at him by a teen with a two-by-four and a little league hat. Behind the line of soldiers, a tech in full hazmat gear was speaking into a microphone: *Please return to your assigned sleeping positions! In the morning, we can discuss equitable changes to our quarantine policy!* Over the roar of the crowd, it was almost impossible to hear him.

And behind them all--it was hard to make out, in the darkness. The moon was out, only a

sliver; the town of Joyous Beach had been without light or power for a long time; but Marta thought she saw movement, outlined in the canopy of stars. A silhouette blocking out the sky.

Marta was awed by the scene, compelled like iron to a magnet. She might have stepped closer, been absorbed into that mighty body, if Adrien hadn't caught her by the shoulder. "Come on," he hissed, jerking her towards the rest of the group, where they were trotting down the path, towards the gate.

Further down the hill, it was dark and quiet. Nobody spoke. The stretch from school to gate had taken her and Siren less than a minute to cross, when they'd crossed it the first time; now it felt like traversing an ocean.

They were almost to the gate when there was a metallic click ahead of them. Quiet, easy to miss--but Black and Siren both froze. Now that she thought about it, the sound had been very gun-like.

"Identify yourselves," came a voice from ahead. The kind of voice people have when they're pointing a loaded weapon your way.

The interviewer stepped forward. Marta heard him suck in a shaky breath, swallow, before speaking. "My identity is your fucking *boss*," he said. "Now open that gate."

"Actually, I'm his boss," came another voice. One Marta had grown very accustomed to these last few days.

As her eyes adjusted to the dark, she began to make out the sliding gate, faintly silver in the dirty light. Several figures stood in front of it, their silhouettes all deformed by bulky armor and helmets except for the man in the back. She couldn't make out his face, but that odd stooping posture was unmistakable.

"General," said the interviewer. Marta could hear the strain in his voice as he tried to

keep an even tone. “What are you doing here?”

“My father--who was a great man, and also a good one. A rare combo, great and good. My father, he raised us in California, and in the event of earthquakes, he made sure we knew to get in the doorway. I’ve been told there are, well, architectural reasons for this, but most of my life I’ve been following that advice through any sort of crisis. Get in the doorway. Stand at the exit. Block the fire escape. You could call it a credo. But, you know, I could ask you the same thing, Director. Why are you out here? More importantly, why are *they* out here? Cline, I could be mistaken here, it’s happened before, but: don’t we lock the rooms they’re kept in now?”

“Yes, sir,” said one of the silhouetted, misshapen figures. So, the boy scout had traded his suit for combat gear. She couldn’t imagine it fit him any better.

“Well, that is very interesting,” said the general. “And, in case there was any lack of clarity, I meant bad. That is very bad.”

Marta waited for the director to at least attempt a lie, but nothing came. Out ahead, in the dark, she heard the general sigh. “Director, I’ll be honest: I’ve always held a deep distrust of your kind. The brain-types. Something about the way you people swing about your “facts” and “statistics” always struck me as, I suppose, what’s the word, elitist. Like you think you’re better than average people, without all those fancy degrees. I was ready to count you an exception, though! Okay, a bit of a loser, but we could have worked with that. I thought you had what it took to make the hard decisions. But I guess it will always take a soldier for that.”

“You’ve never seen combat,” said the director, the words dropping out like his grip on them had slipped.

“What?”

“I looked up your record,” said the director. “State-side postings your whole career. You

oversaw some black-ops work in the Middle-East, but you never left your hotel room.”

The general paused to consider this. “Arrest them all. And don’t be too gentle, eh?”

Next to her, Marta felt Siren pull back, torn between flight and freeze. On her other side, Adrien had grabbed her arm, squeezing hard, as if the answer to all this might be buried down in her soft tissue. There were four of them, Marta saw. Outnumbered, but by no means outgunned.

They’d come close enough for her to make out their faces--young, bored--when Black stepped in front of her. One of them raised the muzzle of his rifle at the huge man; he responded by raising his hands in response. The soldier seemed to relax for just a moment. Then, with quickness she wouldn’t have thought possible for a man his size, Black slapped the gun barrel aside with one hand--with the other, he somehow twisted the soldier back around, to face his comrades, one huge pale arm around his neck. The assault rifle still hung from its strap around his chest, but now Black had the barrel stuck under the soldier’s chin.

Now every gun was pointed at him--or, rather, at the man struggling feebly against him. It might have been Cline. Hard to tell, with how quickly it had happened.

“Put down your weapons,” said Black. He was clearly trying for a growl, but his voice had the froggish quality of someone holding in breath or vomit. Quick as he may have been, Marta could see those big hands shaking.

“Absolutely do nothing of the kind!” shouted the general. “That brave patriot is ready and willing to die for his country. Aren’t you, son?”

In response, the soldier gargled helplessly.

It was doomed. Marta could see that clearly enough. The big man, in the end, couldn’t beat them; nothing he did would amount to anything more than token resistance. A moral act, rather than an effective one. But for a moment, at least--this one moment--he held them all in

place. The soldiers frozen between the words of their commander and their desire not to see their buddy's brains splattered all over the driveway of Jackson Douglas Elementary.

In the distance, over the sounds of the riot behind them, there was a boom. It shouldn't have come as a surprise--they had, after all, been coming regularly for days--yet the tremor just then, in the middle of the stalemate, seemed a red moon, a hawk seizing a dove, an omen. Which, Marta guessed, it was.

Behind the soldiers and the general, something moved on the fence. The particular form, she couldn't make out through the darkness--but the way the chain link shook and bent couldn't be accounted for in any other way. Something was climbing it, from the other side.

She saw it clear the top and adopt a gargoylish perch, like the barbed-wire might make as good a nest as anything else. Meanwhile, the soldiers edged forward, testing their luck, seeing how merciless the albino giant really was. One of them had found a blind spot; they'd gone far enough to the left, shuffling in little side-steps, that Black couldn't watch him and watch the others at the same time.

Marta heard Adrien shout her name too late--the soldier, lunging, grabbed her by the arm and yanked her towards him. She was stronger than he gave her credit for, though, and dug her heels in, putting him off balance. She yelled--no words, just a savage animal noise--scaring the man into stepping back. A moment later, his rifle came up to point at her.

In the corner of her eye, Marta saw the thing on the fence leap.

It must have been fifteen feet between her and the chain link. The creature exploded off its perch with elastic grace, clearing that with ease, and landing behind the soldier with nothing but the faint slap of feet on pavement. The soldier was too busy shouting at Marta to see what was behind him; he never saw it, even as it sunk its teeth into his neck and ripped outwards.

The other soldiers--they noticed that. Hard to miss, with the screaming and the blood. They swung their guns in his direction and started shooting. In the deafening patter and flash of muzzle fire, Marta could make out the creature in front of her more clearly now.

What had at one point been amorphous and jellied had hardened into clearer lines of form and function--slopes of flesh along the outer arms tapered back into knife-like fins. Over his chest were thick ridges, overlapping like massive scales, with slits along the side that made the fisherman in her think at once of gills. His fingers were long and strong and tapered into little silvery points--and her father's mouth, which had once seemed barely large enough to contain all the horrors it had sprouted, had grown the heft and muscle of a shark's. Now, when his lips pulled back, she saw the needle-teeth socketed cleanly into gum.

When he moved, dropping suddenly low, zig-zagging left and right, as nimble as a mackerel, Marta felt something unusual--not fear or revulsion, but pride. He was sure and strong and, she was guessing, about eight feet tall. Her father was protecting them.

The bullets zinged overhead and struck the asphalt, throwing up sparks. None of them found Victor, who swept the first soldier off his feet with a lash of one long arm. The other was lining up a shot when Black shoved his hostage into him, tangling them both up and knocking both soldiers over. Then Victor was on the whole pile, ripping and tearing while Black threw up a few feet off and everyone else watched in some mixture of terror and awe. Behind them, distantly, the sound of the riot rose with all the clamor of a battle from the dark age.

There was a flash in the darkness--the clap of a gunshot, and Victor howled in agony that needed no translation. He twisted off the man he was mauling, clutching with one clawed hand at the new hole in his side leaking fluorescent blue goop. With the other, he tried to push himself to standing, but couldn't seem to find his footing.

“This is a military installation,” screamed the general, holding out a handgun, stalking over to where her father’s enormous form was trying to right itself. “Those are American soldiers you’re attacking! Who do you work for? The Antillians? The Russians? Or are you one of those *disgusting* home-grown terrorists?”

Forcing her body to move, Marta broke into a run. Thinking, for no reason she could name, of her mother. Of herself, a nine-year-old-girl. Of her total powerlessness watching the most important person in the world die. She saw, in minute detail, what she meant to do now--the angle of the gun, the curled form of her transformed father. How, with a little momentum, a little will, she could put herself between the two.

But as the gun went off, someone beat her to it: the director. Who stepped in front of the gun with an almost happy expression; who looked down at his chest, his stomach, his midsection; she could not make out, against his gray rain slicker, where the bullet had hit him. She only knew, from the look on his face, that it had.

Then she was on top of the general, knocking him to the ground. He was taller and bigger than she was, but she had fought bigger and won. The world shrank, for a moment, and it was just the two of them. His desperate, hissing breaths in her ear, his old man cologne and his sweat, the arm with the pistol straining against hers, looking for an angle, a shot. He let out a gasp of pain as a heavy boot stomped down on his wrist--Siren. She picked up the gun from his broken hand, and Marta pushed off of him.

The general looked up between Siren and Marta, holding his wrist, breathing heavily. He looked like he was working himself up to begging when Siren shot him in the head.

Marta couldn’t help but whimper--her hands went to her mouth. Not that he hadn’t deserved it. Only that, until just then, she hadn’t seen a man die. Just like that, it was over. She

looked over at Siren, who hadn't let go of the gun.

"You heard him enough times. I'm a terrorist," she said. Sounding calm, even as her hands shook uncontrollably around the pistol.

Marta let a breath hiss through her fingers. In the quiet and stillness, horror had finally caught up with her. Her eyes were nearly drawn to where the soldiers lay sprawled out--the men her father had killed. Her father. She could only take these things one step at a time.

She ran to her father, crouching down next to him. His breathing was short and shallow, lifting the mighty ridges of his chest--but he *was* breathing.

"Dead," said Siren behind her, over where the director lay very still. "Why would he do that?"

"He was just doing what he could," muttered Black, wiping his mouth. Finished, it seemed, emptying the contents of his stomach. "Can't imagine he was thinking much beyond that."

With the gunfire and the screaming done, a heavy quiet had settled over the road. Even the sounds of the refugees clashing with the soldiers further up the hill had died down.

"Is it over?" asked Daclan. He was standing behind Black, gripping the big man's pant leg. Black glanced back--at the shape blocking out the stars, Marta realized. The thing still coming. "Yeah," said Black, gently. "Yep, all done."

"Adrien," said Marta, bending over her father, trying to get one long arm around her shoulder. "Come help me."

Her brother had been standing nearby, frozen throughout the brief and horrible violence. Her sharp tone roused him just enough to stare at her uncomprehendingly.

"Adrien," she said more slowly, resting a hand on her father's bony flank. "I can't carry

him alone.”

She watched the realization pass through his body in a ripple, a wave. He took a step back. “Oh, God.”

“Adrien, it’s still him,” she said. Believing it a little more, as the words left her. Not him, maybe, as she remembered him--not the father she had known, once. But her father, still.

He only shook his head, refusing to see what she could. Refusing to believe it because he knew what it would mean for him, if he did. What it would mean in not too long.

“He saved us, goddammit!” she said, her voice straining. “You’re his son. I’m his daughter. That’s not going to change.” Not even in a world where everything else had. Marta knew that was still true.

She watched Adrien swallow and tremble and nod. Then he stepped forward and took Victor’s arm.

One long and cold arm around each shoulder, Marta and Adrien carried him to the gate. The kid was there, along with Black, who was working his fingers around the chainlink, trying to find some way it opened. “Looks like it used to be electric. No clue how they’ve been opening it since the power went out.”

“Siren!” Marta called back. The woman had stopped shaking--she was staring behind her, now, at the silhouette framing everything. The school, the beach. The ocean, the world. The pistol dangled loosely in her hands. “He could have sent boats. To Antillia,” she said. But Marta didn’t know which of the dead men she was talking about.

“Got it,” said Black. With a grunt of effort, he managed to pull the gate about a foot apart. One by one, they climbed through the gap, Siren last, with a look back. Then, Black released the gate, which slammed shut--leaving him on the other side.

“Hey,” said Siren. “What are you doing?”

There was a funny look in Black’s eyes. For the first time since Marta had met the man, he seemed at ease.

“Let’s go, big guy,” said Siren. “What are you doing?”

“The only thing I’ve ever been able to do.”

Further up the hill, the sounds of the riot had died down. She could see the orange flicker of torches at the top of the hill--they were coming down. It was only a matter of time before their little group, and all the dead soldiers, were discovered. She didn’t think they’d bother with handcuffs, next time.

Her father’s labored breathing hissed in her ear. Her left side, pressed against him, was growing damp and glowing as he continued to bleed. “We have to go,” hissed Marta. Grabbing Siren’s hand and squeezing. The woman turned to her, face full of uncertainty--which was fine with Marta. She had no certainty about goddamn anything. “I can’t carry you, too,” she said.

Reluctantly, Siren let go of the gate. With Marta and Adrien, with their monstrous father, with Daclan. They made a strange family, walking back into the strange darkness of the place that had once been called Joyous Beach--the world that was no longer the one they knew.

Black - Chapter 32 - Let's Go, Big Guy

For once in his life--the first time he could really remember, if he was being honest-- Black got lucky. As he watched the others flee into the darkness of the empty town ahead, he had steeled himself to run the opposite way, past the torch-wielding figures, back into the school, dodging bean bag rounds and tasers and tear gas just as he always had. But as they got a little closer, he saw their ragged, dirty clothes and absence of helmets or body armor. They were refugees. The rioters had, somehow, won.

“Holy shit,” hissed one of them, an older man with graying locks hanging down his back, as he found the bodies strewn everywhere--the soldiers, the general, Observer. “What in the hell happened here?”

“A miracle,” said Black.

That earned him a couple looks. Behind the older man, one of the refugees stepped back, nervous. “Okay,” said the first one. He sounded too tired to be scared. “Well, listen. I can tell by your clothes you’re not one of them. We’re getting out of here.”

At his side hung one of the blocky, tubular guns the cops used for their less-than-exactly lethal munitions. The master’s house would never be dismantled with the master’s tools, Black had read once. But sometimes you had to choose between the wrong tool and your bare hands, and that wasn’t a choice at all. “I have to go get something from inside the school,” he said.

“It’s not safe,” said the man. “There could still be soldiers in there.”

Black simply nodded. It was true. That didn’t change things, though.

A miracle. There was no other word for it. Not in the sense of the actual divine--Black

had never been raised any kind of religious--but in the sense of the word his mother had used, in her better moods. A bolt of inspiration, a bright light shining down from somewhere outside yourself. She'd come out of her garage-studio sometimes with a look on her face like she'd been flash-banged--he'd ask her what had happened, what was wrong, and she'd smile and tell him, "A miracle, kiddo."

It had struck him twice, like lightning's never supposed to: first, their savior, the monster from beyond the fence. The very thing he had betrayed every moral principle he'd ever held to avoid becoming. But how it moved--so fast and lithe, so sure. He had watched it sail through the air effortlessly, joyfully, mightily while he held a man at gunpoint and hoped he wouldn't be called on to pull the trigger. It was frightening, in all the ways a tiger might be--but it was beautiful in the same ways, too. It was not an abomination, not in that moment. It was exactly what they needed to survive.

The second miracle, the second bolt, had been Observer stepping in front of that bullet. He had not been a good man and he had not been a fighter, but somehow he had died the right way. What had been the calculus there? Had he meant to die, saving that monster? Had he regretted what had been done to Meredith, to Oluchi, to who knows how many others, all in his name? Or had it been no more complicated than a snap-decision: a bullet meant for someone else, one he intended to take.

And just like that, Black knew what he had to do.

He wasn't sure he could fight. He wasn't sure his body would allow that ever again--his little gamble with the soldiers still had him feeling unsteady on his feet. But he could do as Observer had done: he could put his body in the way. He had never known how to do anything else.

It wasn't hard, once he was inside the school, to find his way back to the lab Daclan had led him to. No matter how much things had changed--no matter how much *he* had--he'd been there only days ago. This time, he could see the door for himself. He was almost disappointed to find that it looked like nothing special. Neither did the jars--printed, in that invisible ink, with a simple and clear font: E-D-P. Material taken from the Offshore Entity and boiled down, concentrated, distilled.

Just being in the same room as one of the empty jars had done this to him. Here, dozens of them lined the shelves. Enough to turn a town, a city, into--whatever he was now. Whatever Oluchi was. There hadn't been another giant fish tank lying around, it seemed. Not after Meredith broke the last one. Instead, they had Oluchi lying in a bathtub, the IV tubes floating along the surface like reeds.

She was beautiful, he saw, in ways that he never could have recognized or accepted so much as an hour ago. Her skin still purple-dark, but now strangely translucent--and under it, arrayed like stars in the night, were little nodes of blue light. Her breasts had sunk down into her body, rendering her sleek and androgynous. At her elbows, her scalp, the nape of her neck, her hips and her knees, cilia ran down into the bathwater, tangling lazily with the IVs, drifting as if in a current no one else could see.

Carefully, Black removed the IVs and, submerging his arms in around her, lifted her from the bathwater. He half-expected to seize and collapse on touching the jellyfish-like tendrils, but all he felt was a sudden resonance between them, their minds humming in close contact even as she slowly blinked herself awake.

"Oluchi," he said, gently. "Hey. It's time to go."

He couldn't be sure if she understood him. She gave no sign, said no words--only stared at him with those blue, blue eyes. He could almost feel himself sinking into them, like a pebble. Farther and farther from the surface world, the one he knew. But he had work to do.

She didn't run. So, still Oluchi--she had never done what he told her to. Only sat there, on the edge of the tub, as he got the first jar off of the shelf, unscrewed the lid, and dumped it on his head. It was viscous and slick, not dousing him so much as coating his hair, his head, his shoulders. The smell of bleach and salt-water was overpowering, along with the turpentine reek of paint beneath it all, and at once he felt that buzzing in the back of his consciousness rise in pitch and tone, resolving into crystalline, almost musical intensity. He didn't slow down; he couldn't, or he might lose his nerve altogether. He ripped the lid off the second jar, lifted it to his lips, and drank.

He had been worried about the taste, about the rebuke from his stomach, proven yet again to be weak, out of his control. But it was the burning that stopped him. Immediate and blinding, horrific, like drinking lava; the pain clung to his throat and coated his mouth. He dropped the jar. What was left spilled out onto the floor, onto his shoes. From the edge of the bathtub, seated naked, Oluchi watched him stumble, retch, reach for another jar.

Black could feel the room start to twist and buck under his feet, like a massive animal, as he choked down another few swallows. The burning had not only spread--from the points of white-hot agony in his mouth and throat, into his limbs, his organs, lighting up every nerve in his body with searing pain--it had begun to morph into a new sensation. Bubbling. Churning. An unsteady quality just under the surface. He had heard once that caterpillars do not slowly transform into butterflies, piece by piece, in their cocoon--they melt into goo, a kind of formless protoplasm wrapped in a hard shell. His skin felt like a shell now. Just below it was a change he,

like the caterpillar, could neither fathom nor survive. And still he drank in great swallows, some part of him realizing he would not have much longer to think, to make decisions, at least not in any sense he recognized.

Black felt the last of the pigment slide down his throat and dropped the jar. He reached for another, but felt his knees--his knees, what was wrong with them, why did they seem to crack, to bend the wrong way?--give out from under him. He fell forward, trying to catch himself on the shelf and only snapping whatever connected it to the wall. The jars tumbled down on top of him. Lying there, it seemed that Black was no longer on fire but that the whole world was--everything burning, changing, being made anew. Against the back of his teeth probed teeth not his own; against his mind pushed something else. He saw it plainly, saw it rise beyond the walls of the school, the chain link, the town--he saw it towering over everything he was, everything he had ever been or known, a tidal wave that would crush him, swallow him, push him to the deepest parts of the sea. What use was purpose, in the face of that? What could he cling to, what notions or beliefs, what plans? *What is it?* asked part of him, and he understood the question immediately to be petty, to be small, containable in ways that the thing before him could never be. It was offshore. It was coming. That was all they could ever know. Black's final thought--as the man that could be called Black, as the cognitive pattern that could be called thought--was that he had made a mistake.

The changes after that were utterly consuming. No more could he isolate them to his teeth, his knees, his mind--they were everything, all of him, the entirety. He felt the room shrinking around him, crushing him, the walls pressing against his naked, vast, colorless bulk--his spine, if you could still call it that, splintering the fluorescent light panels overhead to glittering shards.

He did not notice Oluchi approaching him. Did not notice in any conscious way, no more than we notice radiation. It was only when she pressed her cilia against the endless expanse of his flesh, connecting him with her--with a mind somewhere between what he was now and what he had been--that he became aware of her. Into the seething morass of his consciousness, the deep and primordial mire, she placed a memory. Something she had seen, once, through his eyes.

In the other room, he can hear his mother crying; the kind of wracking, awful sobs that frighten him. He doesn't know what to do. He never does, when this happens, but he has been waiting on the other side of the kitchen door and he can't wait any more.

It isn't the first time he's been scared of his mother. She has never hit him, but when these moods take her she destroys everything she can reach. The kitchen is littered with fallout from this meltdown. He tip-toes between shattered plates, splinters of wood and glass. She is curled over herself, limbs held close, like a dead spider. His mother looks up at him with swollen eyes, and behind them are things he can guess at but never wants to.

"It's you and me, kiddo. You know that, right?" she says. "When the chips are down, that's it. Fuck the rest of the world. Fuck every other human being. Every soul. It's only you, and me," she says, winding her way towards gentleness. But even at ten, even though he wants to make her happy again, the words scare him. His mother wants to go live in the desert. She wants to move to Antarctica. The world is shit, she tells him again and again. He's just too young to realize it. And he's terrified that she's right. But there is a part of Black--a hopeful splinter--that he's never been able to pry loose. He isn't ready, at ten, to turn his back on the world.

He still isn't.

It breaches from the school as if from the surface of a pond--jutting out, pale as bone leaving skin. From far, far below, there are screams--the refugees, just clear of the fence, escaping one leviathan just to see another born. Slowly, so slowly, it stands, pushing itself off bedrock, straightening to an incomprehensible height, and yet it is still growing. Still swelling, changing.

When the last chunk of rubble--a hunk of rock the size of a car--slides off and lands with a colossal crash, there is a strange silence that settles over the facility, the refugees, the town. Everything seems to lean in and pay attention.

Then there is a boom, deep and thrumming. Not a footstep, technically. Only something moving closer.

They are, in truth, still miles apart, but such scales no longer matter to these creatures, these entities, these leviathans that live outside of time and space as we understand them. The elder, the first: a hundred colors, a body like a foreign world, riven with lunar scars, pocked with barnacles and coral twisted into lattices, alien chainmail. A halo of seabirds circling its waist, a thousand wings of feather and stretched skin and stranger material still, calling and calling, heralding its arrival.

And in the ruination of the school, the new. It's surface colorless, white, albino--it looks almost soft to the touch. No followers, no domains. Smaller, even if it's still growing. The odds are not in its favor. Anyone can see that.

And yet it steps forward--that first footfall shaking the earth, forcing people to their knees, shaking loose the remaining glass in window-panes ten miles away. Moving with all the ponderous menace of a thunderstorm, a tsunami, it steps towards its foe, and then again, and again, compacting the limestone underneath, each footfall roaring like thunder, like the

apocalypse, like the end of the world.

When it collides with the elder, pale limbs wrapping around it, the laws of physics seem for a moment suspended as that unimaginable mass floats, teeters--and starts to fall.

And fall, and fall, and fall. It seems to fall forever. It makes the long journey it took to get here, its ten-year crossing, seem quick. Down it goes, down, down: the new on top of the old, crashing together into the sea. They land with a sound unfamiliar to this world, a crashing which will be mistaken by seismological equipment across the country as the briefest, most severe earthquake to ever strike the state of Florida. It will split a fault line below the earth, here, deliver a wound almost to the core. The echoes of this phenomenal sound will cover, for a time, the hiss of the water.

The size of the wave that sweeps through Joyous Beach hardly matters now: one million, two million, ten million gallons of water. The scales don't make a difference anymore. It rushes into the streets, carries off cars, batters houses to rubble. Boats moored along the pier rush to land in a suicidal charge, slamming into trees, street signs, storefronts. The water rises and swirls, monstrous all itself, reeking of bleach, of ammonia, of the sea, and under the churning brown tide that fills the town with blue lights. Inside the drowning Starbucks, the surface of the water writhes with shapes new to Joyous Beach, to Florida, to Earth.

The wave doesn't stop until it reaches the woods parting the highway from the town proper, where it sinks into the soil, into the roots. The trees there--melaleucas, mostly, a few sabal palms, a couple poincianas--take it all, the good and the bad, strange and stranger, foreign and native. Something in their bones, now, that will be there forever.

Epilogue

Marta never went back to school, but if she had, she imagined she would have been cramming for finals just then. Possibly searching the library stacks for references on a paper she had started too late. Maybe--it was certainly possible--she'd be putting off all those things in order to cradle a massive hangover following an end-of-term party. Leaving on some heartwarming comedy series while facing the painted concrete of her dorm wall.

Instead, she was sitting on a hill overgrown with yellow grasses, watching her boat bob against the traffic light where she'd tied it off, wood thumping dully against metal. Her grandfather, in another life, had fished the Gulf in a boat like that. One of the old timers, the traditionalists. He'd go out with a string around his finger. Tied himself to the catch and waited for it to tire. That was back in a different world, she thought. You would never see such a thing now. Not far off, a lone mallard drifted by along the water, lazily paddling by two blooms of pale-blue algae. It was getting late in the day. Sooner or later, she'd have to go up and get him. Again.

Behind her, farther up the hill: the school, atop the hill that had become an island amid the flooded streets of downtown. Or the ruins of it, at least. They were not the only people who lived in the Exclusion Zone--plenty had decided to stay, for one reason or another--but they were the only ones willing to come here. Zoners blamed that collection of broken cinderblocks and twisted girders for everything; in a way, they were right. But the blue luminescence that lit up the new waters of Joyous Beach at night didn't leak, like some chemical spill, from the school. They didn't write the unearthly songs that rose above the mangroves north, where the sea spilled over the coast into a marsh. The school was no longer a player in this game. Marta knew that. It

hadn't been since the night of the riots. Since the thing that stopped the End of the World had hatched from it, like an egg. Still, she left the searching to her brother. It was safer, in the end. Less exposure. However relative such terms were, here.

If she walked a little ways up the hill, she could see them. Still lying along the coast, cutting beach from ocean, forming a bay all themselves. The pale one on top of the first, vast arms disappearing below the waves, pinning the End of the World to the sea floor. Someone had told Marta they were still moving. Still fighting, but now across a time-scale where nobody could expect to crown a victor in their lifetimes.

This time of day, the canal that Main street had become caught the sun as it tipped down westward. They lit up, Main and Hoover and Santa Rosa, all going a white gold color. Moments like this always made her think of Siren. Lani, she had told Marta, the last night they had spent together. Her name was Lani.

She hadn't stayed, though. Couldn't have, really; even as she looked after Daclan, back at camp, or helped Sadie rebuild in the fine houses on the higher ground that seemed suddenly spacious enough for any who wanted to stay, Joyous Beach was haunted for her. The specter of what she had done to it--and then, the specter of Antillia, too. She couldn't stay, and yet she couldn't go anywhere else, either. Still a terrorist. Still a wanted criminal. Now more than ever, with a general dead by her hand. She decided, in the end, to face at least one of her demons. She resolved to find a way back to Antillia. To see, for herself, what had become of her home.

It would never be what she remembered. Marta knew that, and Lani probably did too. She wouldn't have chosen this strange and fearsome world, but nobody had given either of them a choice. All that was left was to live with what they had: the birds, in all their colors. The reptiles,

sunning on the rocks. The fish just beneath the surface. The swooping, man-sized shadows in the sky--the glowing drifters in the deep places. Not all of it was life she recognized or understood. Sometimes it was life she feared, but always, there was life. No empty shoals here.

When the waters that came never receded--when the riots won, and the military broke--when news of it all reached the civilized areas beyond the roadblocks and the barricades, the government washed their hands of Joyous Beach. There had been, they said, some kind of terrible industrial accident. The water, the air, even the earth was now contaminated. A law was passed; wrists were slapped; corporations were told to *ask*, next time they wanted to move hazardous materials through a unique and precious coastal biosphere; and the Exclusion Zone was created. One thousand square miles, give or take, surrendered. Verboten. Excluded.

What a ridiculous word. What a ridiculous thought--that you could really separate anything in this world from the rest. That any membrane you threw up would not be porous. Nobody crossed the barricades--not anymore. The people who lived in the Exclusion Zone, for whatever reason, wanted to be here. But the birds didn't recognize government notices. It was almost winter in Florida; soon they'd be visited by the loons, the grebles, the bitterns on their way further south. They'd eat the berries and the bugs and the fish. They'd carry it with them. There was no way to stop it. Even the water would evaporate, turn to steam and clouds; would blow on, west, to rain on Louisiana, on Georgia, on Alabama. The End of the World wasn't coming anymore. It was here.

And yet. And yet, she was watching her brother trudge down the hill. That particular odd lope he'd always had. The way he frowned at the ground--a new habit. The sun was out. One of those fall days anyone outside of the state might label a perfect summer one.

"Anything?" she called out.

He shook his head, face all screwed up. No more medicine. The backpack that the director had brought with them the night they broke out had finally run out of pills and syringes. They both knew what that meant. Already, the blue circles dotting Adrien's eyes had begun to widen.

How long before her own eyes would turn blue? What would she look like, when the changes took her? There was no way to say. Maybe that should have scared her, but it didn't. They couldn't go back to the old world anyway. They had to make do with this one, whatever form it might take.

She nodded. "Alright." There wasn't much more to say.

A splashing sound behind her made Marta turn. There, in the water, just breaking the surface: her father. Returning from a long swim out, past the tidal flats that had once been beach, the beach that had once been a glossy photo in a Powerpoint somewhere. The overlapping ridges across his torso marred by a small scar, faded, the lightest blue color. In his teeth was a pompano. Huge, struggling, the life already running out down his neck and chest, out of his toothy grin. Her father, the fisherman.