

Hiraeth

Ash Monroe

Not What She Bargained For

So called prophets claiming they had the keys to the Ruins wasn't anything new. Scraps of knowledge were treated like holy relics these days. Kass had been wandering the Ruins for a long time, at least twenty winters, and had been traveling since she was able to walk. Had to make a living somehow, selling salvage and odd trinkets for food. *Cities*, Maude called them. The old woman that lived in a metal box, back where Kass grew up. She was old enough to remember some things about the Ruins, even though her mind was mostly gone. She'd go off on odd ramblings, saying words no one knew. But, Maude was insistent that the Ruins were once called Cities.

Kass loved that old woman. She herself had grown up an orphan, her mother dying when she was barely a year old, so the community took her in, but it was Maude who housed her. The crazy, eccentric, odd looking old woman with missing fingers and constantly narrowed eyes. Kass knew she was loved in that house, though. Maude used to make the candles for the town, and often got some of the honey harvested from the beehives. She always made something sweet for Kass when that happened. Maude never liked it when Kass went out scavenging either, which is why these trips always reminded her of the old woman. What an earful she'd get, *don't you go to those places girl, they cursed*, and so on.

The Ruin looming before Kass was overgrown, like most of them. Trees, vines, bushes, all kinds of pretty foliage covered what remained of the old stonework. Some mixture Maude called *concrete*, before she passed. The newest prophet that had taken the Holds by storm claimed this place was forbidden to enter because it was dangerous. It probably wasn't and the guy was just trying to hide something. Which means, it could be worth something. Kass procures her knife, cutting away the thick plant life covering what could be an opening. Lo and behold, there was a half bent door, rusted, with the doorway itself half fallen.

Kass kicked open the bent door. It scrapes along the rock floor of the Ruin, and opens into a dark void she couldn't see through. Grabbing her Light, she presses the switch and shone it through. The inside of the Ruin was stable looking. At least enough for her to wander for a bit. It didn't look like anyone had been there in a while. It was rare to find something untouched these days. Kass slipped past the stuck open door, scanning the ceiling and walls. Some cracks, some strange things hanging from them, dust everywhere. Her footsteps had a slight echo to them. She kept her Light forward, revealing another door, probably leading deeper into the Ruin. It opened smoother than the first one when she pushed it.

Stairs led down. Kass remembered from some of the other Elder's stories that stairs leading down meant bad things. Underground could mean anything. It could also mean more valuable salvage. Kass glances at the entry door, then to the stairs, chuckles to herself and begins descending them. It was dark. Her Light flickered a few times, and she kicked small rocks along the steps, making noise. Aside from her presence, Kass didn't see any signs of life. The stairs went down for a long way. She tapped the wall, making sure it remained stable as she kept going down.

When she finally reached the bottom, there was a hallway of doors ahead. All closed, no indication of traps. Kass carefully tested the ground; you never know if there's a hollow spot under it these days. Tapping her shoe against the rock a few times. Satisfied that it wouldn't collapse under her, she approached the nearest door. It opened easily.

Inside she sees light. Natural light, from cracks in the ceiling. Walking over to them, she identifies a rope as well, hanging from a dug hole in the ground above. A trapdoor was way above. Likely what that prophet was trying to hide. They're getting more and more predictable. Kass didn't know the man's name (these false prophets were almost *always* men trying to make a cult). All she knew about him was he talked nice and looked nice. Pretty folks with a smooth voice usually got people to listen without actually listening.

Taking the time to look around the room more, Kass found some compiled books, old papers, some old box with a mirror and buttons on it, and scrap. She is quick to shove the scrap into her pack, fitting as much as she could. Useful things, like metal, those small ropes made of weird colors and thin metal (Maude called them wires), bits of paper, and even 'ducktape' as the label read. Kass would figure out what it was useful for later.

Now with a heavy pack, one that would surely make her back hurt later, Kass walked out of that room. There were several more doors down that hallway. She peered inside them, finding them looted. The first room she went in must've been where they had consolidated their loot. The final door, at the end of the hall, stood alone. It was different, too. It didn't have the hinges that the other doors did. Didn't budge when she tried to force it open, even putting her back against it and pushing with her legs. Kass stopped and took a closer look at the door. Beside it, a section of the wall lit up like her Light. She reeled back while drawing her knife. Eyes locked on the panel. Kass hadn't seen anything like it before. Her instincts told her it was some old trap, probably to keep people out of whatever room this was. She heard stories of scavengers getting maimed, losing limbs, or even worse, dying. All because the people that built these places laid traps. They must have had a lot of thieves back then.

The panel shifted its colors. Dark blue for the outer edges, and a lighter blue taking the shape of a hand. Kass glanced at her own palm then back to the panel. Did this thing want her to put her hand against it? Rather weird, that clearly seems like a trap. What idiot would go around touching random walls that started glowing? Kass looked closely at the door. The seam between it and the wall was small, and looked like it was completely sealed. No air flowed from it. Kass squatted down, staring at the spot where the floor met the door. It didn't look like any of her tools would fit under it. So, no forcing it open.

She stands, looking back at the still glowing panel. Should she try? Would it take her arm? Trap her till she dies from lack of water? Shock her? She'd heard of those traps before. Awful way to go. The panel seemed to stare back at her while she pondered. All the stories

Kass had heard about people like her trying their luck in the Ruins and all of them coming out in worse shape than they went in. Or not coming out at all. She had been lucky enough to keep her limbs this long. A few scars from mishaps here and there, but everyone had those. Kass carefully removed her glove. The people who made these places probably didn't wear them, right? Back then, it wouldn't have been old and decrepit.

She took a breath, clenched her jaw, and placed her hand on the outline, squeezing her eyes shut.

The world seemed to pause.

"Substantial DNA sequence match. Access granted."

The door hissed. Unsealing. It slid upward and revealed more glowing things. Kass stared through the doorway. Watching the room ahead. Trying to take it all in. Cautiously, she stepped through the doorway.

The room smelled clean. Old, but clean. It looked completely different from the Ruins behind her. There was even more blue light in this room. More panels, strange glass sheets with lights on them, and lots and lots of file cabinets. Kass remembered some of the things Maude taught her, before she passed. The language that the people back then used to speak, and what Maude called *math*. She could recognize the numbers and some letters, but none of it really made sense to her.

Looking to her left, Kass saw something she never had before. Rows on rows of containers, large enough to fit a person, glowing blue and frosted over. She walked over, carefully, quietly, to get a closer look. Kass has never seen this much functional technology before. It was a *goldmine*. If she could get any of this back to the markets, she'd be set for life. She walked over to the containers, which looked like fat tubes, and tried to peer in. It was too frosted for her to see through, unfortunately.

Cold. She remembered Maude saying something about the people using cold to preserve things. These days you have no need to preserve things for more than one winter.

Canning did that just fine, along with salting and drying things. What could be so important that they had it specially preserved for however long it's been? Some rare food? Maybe even an animal carcass? Meat was valuable now, maybe it was back then too. She looked around it, trying to force it open at the seam, and found its glowing panel. Another hand. She placed hers on it.

The tube hissed, like the door, and the frosted glass slid away. Kass Peered inside.

A woman. The most beautiful woman Kass has ever seen. Dark skin, curly dark hair that brushed her cheeks, a full figure hugged by some tight white clothing. Her eyes opened, and they were the most exquisite amber color.

Kass was struck with a resounding thought, staring at this gorgeous woman, who seemed to be adjusting to the view of Kass herself. *That's not food.*

Flesh

She rushed to the bathroom. Clawing her shirt off, gasping as she tries to get a view of her back. The pain was growing. She tried to find the source, and saw growing, nasty bruises on her back.

Then the pain hit her spine like a bullet.

It's a tearing of flesh. The kind that produces a sickening noise, similar to ripping wet cardboard. Bone, flesh, nerve, vein, blood, reshaping into something new. The pain is overbearing. A compound fracture that just keeps protruding. Growing. Punching through skin as if it were paper.

She screams.

Blood pours down her back. Thick, hot, stinging. It stains her skin and mats the feathers together. Grotesque tendrils of now dead skin and meat hanging from her new limbs. New joints and nerves and feathers now filthy with her own flesh. Her breathing is heavy. Her tears stain

the floor. Her mind is in overdrive from the adrenaline. She manages to pull herself off the floor, body heavy and aching. The mirror over the sink she's leaning on reveals what she suspected.

Wings.

Massive, black feathered, gory wings.

Growing right out of her fucking back.

She could feel them. Feel the joints and muscles. She knew she could move them, but it would be like a baby moving their arms for the first time. The pain was beginning to subside, the flesh knitting together at the base of these new wings.

Her hands were shaking. Her body was trembling. Blood dripping onto the tiled floor.

What was she going to do?

—

He wasn't an idiot. Most of the time, at least.

He remembered what happened. The flesh of light, the heat that felt like thousands upon thousands of needles, then nothing.

How the hell did they find enough of him to rebuild?

The few survivors of his team were around him. Perfect condition. Just like himself. Sergi, Yelenal, Nikolai and Ivan. There used to be twelve, but now there were five, including himself. No words were spoken.

He lifted his arm to stare at his hand. His hand he *knew* was eaten away by that bomb. His hand, his ribs, his legs, his flesh. He should be buried in a shoe box out back. All of them should.

Their own country dropped a damn bomb on them. Then scraped up what remained of them and gave them new, artificial bodies. The country they were drafted (or enlisted) to serve and fight and die for, killed just as many of their own as the proclaimed enemy. Were they really that expendable to the higher ups? Did their lives truly have so little meaning?

He looked for the scar, the jagged little scar on his left wrist, from his first time out scavenging. From the first machine he had dragged home, from the careless action of his little brother, who he missed so deeply it ached in his chest.

Gone.

There was something wrong. Something deeply, deeply wrong. He could feel it in his ribs.

They were dying. He knew that a long time ago, but now it was settling. They were dying and he would die with them. When the last human closed their eyes and no longer drew breath he would lay down beside them and do the same.

Incredible, he thought, that they still had love in their hearts during this. This, end of the world. This world, which he watched grow from empire to empire, gods to god to gods, was now nearly absent of life. No flowers bloomed, the rivers and oceans were black with ash, bodies and bones littered the planet.

He thought back to his early years. When there was such abundance, humans thought it would never end. When they didn't have to worry about pollution, or ecosystem death, or deforestation. They simply lived, fought, died, loved.

He went to them. Silently stood by, watching them hold each other. The last of Humanity, clinging to each other in the cold, saying nothing. Nothing needed to be said.

He was weak now. Like them. He could feel his own life ending. His once strong, attractive form, now reflected the fragility of these last two survivors. These two survivors, who chose to die in each other's arms. Poison of some sort, he wasn't sure.

He watched them. Two women, thin, frail, shivering. There was no warmth left in the world. There was nothing left for them to cling to but each other. Not even hope could find them in this place.

But he wasn't a god of hope. That god was already dead.

No, he was the god of love.

But what was the god of love without humanity?

—

It was going to happen tonight. He knew it. Everyone knew it. They were excited, all of them. Especially the elders. It's all he had been hearing about for the last month. Everyone was so excited, everyone but him. He had seen other transformations. The screams. The gore. The pain. *The first time is always the worst, they tell him. It gets easier.*

He was adorned with silver, moonstone, and blessed oils. The moon was rising. Full. Drums played, there was singing, and everyone was there to watch. He was in the middle of a circle of stones, waiting.

Body tense, hands trembling in their fists.

He was young. Some of the elders argued that he was *too young*.

His father was insistent that he was ready. Ready to shift, ready to meet himself, ready to join the pack. That he would learn to take his father's place, to lead them, to bring them prosperity.

The moon cleared the treeline. The stones around him began to reflect the light, then glow, as if absorbing it. He braced himself.

When it began, it was slow. Like growing pains and a headache. Just some dull ache in his bones. He thought it wasn't too bad, really.

Then his joints shifted out of place. He choked back a whimper.

Bones began snapping. Out of socket, ripping tendons and ligaments, realigning to fit the new body he was forming. His hands hit the ground, body lurching forward. Spine tingling, then snapping.

He finally let out a cry. Tears spilled down his face.

Blood dripped from his nose and hit the soil beneath him. His limbs contorted, bone pushing against flesh, but not breaking it. He sobbed as everyone looked on.

His teeth ached. Elongated and shifted placement. His skull molded like clay. Pain covered his body, filled his pores, nestled in the marrow of his bones. It felt like it would never leave him.

Then, like the grace of the Gods, it began to subside.

His skin still tingled. His eyes were still watery. But the pain was lessening. His breath came out in raggedy puffs, but oxygen hit his brain faster than before. His eyes were keener in the dark, now. He could smell his father clearly through the crowd. As the pain continued to quiet, he could feel the wind brushing against fur on his body. *Fur?*

Yes. He had done it.

He finally met himself, as all lycanthropes do on their first transformation. A massive, hulking black wolf, as his reflection showed in the pond nearby. Bright yellow eyes, pearly white teeth, terrifying maw.

Was this all he was?

She'd been different her entire life. Everyone around her mother claimed she was *Fae*, and her real baby was stolen from her. How could a child be so strange? It was the only explanation. Always wandering off and finding strange things, always watching with an unnerving stare.

She was just a little girl. Seven, when her mother left her.

Dropped her off in a faerie circle and didn't look back. Suppose all those whispers finally got to her.

She couldn't remember her name. That wasn't something she was allowed to keep. Her mother hadn't referred to her by name in a long time before leaving her out there. Just a small girl with nothing but the clothes she was wearing. Left, in the old wood, to fend for herself. On the thought that she was some mythical being meant to cause havoc.

Ironically, they were right.

Sixteen years later she was still on her own. Wandering near aimlessly, never settling down in one place for long. The definition of a nomad, belonging nowhere.

But she had some sense of purpose.

Being a Fae meant she had abilities. She could look like anyone. Sound like anyone. While she didn't like to, she could hold people accountable with rules and all that shite, with her Fae blood. She didn't understand how it worked though. If she focused enough, plants would work with her. Even *talk*.

This evening she looked like a typical conservative white man. Infiltrating one of those god awful places where they liked to congregate. She faked the personality, drank the shitty piss-water beer they liked, and waited.

It was some gathering. Nazi uniforms and tattoos, slurs thrown left and right, KKK hoods, the works. She was being diligent. Locking unused doors. Convincing people to stay. Getting them drunker off a stolen credit card.

When they were wasted, not really paying attention, she said she needed to piss, and left. Dumped the building with gasoline. Shifted back to her normal self (A pale Irish girl with emerald eyes and strawberry hair), lit a cigarette with a match, took a drag, then flicked the match into the gas.

Hearing them scream for help was music to her ears. She smoked and watched, until the sirens sounded, to which she then left. If she had the ability to go undiscovered, why not take out the worst of humanity with that?

—

Meeting humans wasn't on his to do list for the day. But, when duty calls, ambassadors must make appearances.

He was waiting for the ship to dock in the spaceport. Human scientists, coming as an annual trade between the planets. A team of his own people's scientists headed to Earth. It was a great way to expand knowledge. They had multiple exchanges in the past, first studying

culture, history, cuisine, government. This was the first exchange to have true scientific study. He figured the humans were antsy for it, as they had dissected hostile alien life forms in the past, within their hidden government places. But they were being polite. His people could overtake the planet any time. They simply chose not to.

The ship docked, and the scientists exited, all very small in comparison to himself. He gave them the usual tour, giving them translators for their languages (German, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, French, Vietnamese and English, he learned), and showing them their homes for the year.

They were excited to get to work. This year, they were biologists, thrilled to study his people and the planet's nature. They were very different from each other. He was lanky, skinny, tall, and disproportionately strong. They were... well, humans.

They were so fragile. Their bones only as strong as their concrete, with no self defense measures like his own people (they have petrifying gazes) and feeble hands with weak fingers. All because their planet's gravity wasn't as strong as his. Plus they weren't a prey species. They didn't change pigmentation based on emotion (most of the time. The red in their faces meaning multiple things is confusing), they showed teeth as a greeting instead of a threat, and they were *loud*.

He looked at himself in the mirror, comparing his own physique to that of a human. Physically, his species was superior. In strength, intelligence, capability. But humans had conquered their entire home planet. Fascinating.

He wondered what it would be like to be human.

The Woman

Getting the woman out of the Ruin was a chore. She was constantly talking, which Kass was getting tired of trying to translate. She could really only understand a few words every time the woman spoke. She seemed horrified by the conditions of the Ruin outside of her weird tube

room, and just stopped and stared, open mouthed, when they got outside. It made Kass wonder how long this girl had been asleep in that weird cold tube. The world was as it should be, how Kass had always known it. Green, full of life, the Ruins covered in plants and vines and color. Pathmarks telling you where to go for what settlement or landmark. She eventually just grabbed the woman by the hand, dragging her to the path they needed to follow.

The trail was well worn from years of use. Trodden down grass and painted waymarker stones guided Kass on a route she knew well. The woman from the tube was right behind her, like a newborn seeing the trees for the first time, wide eyed and mouth agape. Her amber eyes shone with sunlight that made them look like honey; warmed and drizzled over Kass's favorite soft bread that Jami makes.

The woman tapped Kass's shoulder rapidly. She turned and saw her pointing at Wooder. She was speaking in something like the Old Tongue, and Kass could only understand every few words. 'What', 'steel' and 'woodpecker' were the ones Kass could mentally translate.

"Not dangerous," Kass said slowly.

She pointed at the Wooder, which was sitting on a branch of a nearby tree and plucking seeds from the clusters. Wooders did that, dropping tree seeds all over the place, before pecking into the wood and making a hole. Kass never knew *why* they did that, but their smaller parts made good scrap.

The woman stayed behind Kass, staring at the metal bird. There was a hint of recognition in her eyes, but aside from that she was wary. Had she really never seen one of these before? They were everywhere, and the majority of the forests that Kass saw were made thanks to them. Strange little contraptions from... Well, she didn't actually know where they came from.

Kass simply grabbed the woman's hand and continued down the path, ignoring the vocalizations she made. When they reached the river, Kass sat the woman on a flat rock and

squatted in front of her. Kass removed her pack and procured some dried meat, handing a piece to the woman.

The strange cold-tube-woman hesitantly took the food, and waited for Kass to take a bite of her own first. Kass did, and with that the woman ate her piece. Almost surprised by it, by her expression. Kass ate quickly and stood. The woman followed suit. Her once pristine white clothing, which Kass thought was overly tight on her, was now tainted with dirt. Kass eyed her for a moment, then continued to lead her down the path.

It was at least a few hours before they reached the outskirts of Kass's home town. It was known as *Arco*, as the worn sign above their main trading center read. Kass knew it was from the Old World, but the word had lost its original meaning. She stopped the woman just outside town, tossing her cloak over her shoulders, to hide that weird tight clothing. Kass grasped the woman's hand, pulled her flush against her side, and walked.

Kass was known around Arco. Reliable, tough, smart. You need something fixed? Find Kass. You need some rare flowers from a machine heavy area? Ask Kass. You need someone to leave you alone? Get Kass.

They had to pass through the market to get to Kass's home. It was impossible to get through without being noticed, given how tall she was. Even so, they Kass tried to get through without drawing too much attention. It didn't work.

"Kassandra!"

Kass glanced at Jami, who was waving her over. The woman was short, squat, with a baby slung tight against her back. She had inkings on her lips and hands, like her mother's before she passed. It was the most defining thing about Jami, those marks.

Kass begrudgingly walked over, keeping the tube woman flush against her so she couldn't cause trouble. Hopefully, she wouldn't draw attention to herself. Jami handed Kass a warm loaf of bread, and a sweet bun, both wrapped in clean cloth. Thankfully, there wasn't anyone else at Jami's stall at the moment.

“For the herbs you got me,” Jami said simply.

Kass nodded respectfully, taking the bread. Jami’s eyes flickered to the woman, and she raised an eyebrow at Kass. Not saying anything, just a look.

“A long story. No time right now.” Kass answered, a bit sharp.

Jami had known Kass long enough not to press the matter when her voice took that tone. She just waved the two women off. Kass pulled the woman at her side through the market, ignoring the curious looks from vendors and some children. Her home came into view, a small spot just outside the market, just right for Kass. She ushered the woman inside, then threw a glance over her shoulder before following her in.

Kass shut her door, covered the windows, and looked at the woman, who was shaking off the blanket. She wasn’t as pristine now, hair messier, soft waves of hair frizzing and sticking out at odd places. Her white clothing dirty, with sweat stains forming that can be seen clearly. Kass stared at her for a few moments. The woman’s body language shifted, turning inward and protective.

Kass walked over to her water pump bath and plugged it, then pumped some water into the tub. She waved the woman over, handed her a bar of soap and a washcloth, and drew the privacy curtain. She had no idea what she was going to do with this woman.

Kass decided to make a quick meal, something warm. She opened her cupboards and gathered barley, canned vegetables, and broth from the butcher, Havard. A quick barley soup, with veggies. Perfect. Kass dumped everything into her pot over the fire, stoked said fire, and put the lid on. In the back of her mind she kept listening to the sloshing of the water in the bath, making sure the woman was alright.

When she finally emerged, Kass handed her a rough towel and some clothing. She didn’t much care about nudity, but the woman seemed hell bent on privacy, so Kass averted her gaze. It was quiet while Kass cooked, making sure the veggies were soft all the way through and the barley was done.

She wordlessly handed a bowl to the woman when she approached, along with a hunk of the fresh bread from Jami. The clothes fit her loosely, since they were made for Kass and she was *much* larger than the woman. Taller, wider, thick with muscle and healthy fat. All those years of scavenging and random work around Arco had made her strong. It was amusing to see this woman dwarfed, swimming in her clothing.

Kass sat down and ate her food slowly, watching the woman sniff, then taste the soup. She made a face, but ate quickly. Kass wondered if she had food in her weird cold sleeping tube, or if she had been starving. She was small and thin, after all. She was pretty, though, in the dainty way a daisy is pretty.

When she put down her bowl, she wiped her mouth on the back of her hand then pointed to herself and spoke slowly.

“*Aisha*,” She said, further emphasizing on herself.

“Ay-Ai-Sha... Aisha.” Kass repeated what she assumed was the woman’s name.

She mimicked the motion of pointing to herself, and spoke:

“Kass.”

The woman, Aisha, smiled. It was the prettiest thing Kass had ever seen.

Death

He kept pace with the other commanding officers beside him. Rifle at the ready, face emotionless. His tags rested under his shirt, beside his brother’s. The march was muscle memory at this point. The enemy knew they were coming. They knew they stood no chance. For a moment, he clutched his brother’s tags alongside his own, before dropping his hand back down to his rifle. The metal was cool, smooth, his to do with what he wished.

He thought of his family. His mother, father, brothers and sister. He is the eldest of four. He couldn’t remember their faces all too well now. All he had were memories from the farm. His father was a level headed man, the quiet column holding up the house. Hardened from the

realities of the world, and his time serving in the army. It cost him most of the nerves in his hands, before the refabrication technology was developed. An honorable discharge, with a few medals, for being a good soldier when the wars began. He had never heard his father talk much about his time in the service, often only telling him humorous stories from the barracks. Even those were few and far between. His mother was a gentle woman, albeit firm with her teachings. *You respect women and girls, Eren*, She would say to him. *You protect your little sister no matter what*. It was her who encouraged him to teach his sister, Sofia, to fight after an incident at school. Her who iced his swelling knuckles after flooring two boys who tried to look up his sister's favorite skirt. The pride he felt when he watched his sister break one boy's nose after he tried to grab her was a feeling he still holds on to. He taught her to fight properly, but as he grew with her, she learned to fight like a true countryside kid. Kicked him in the balls once when she was mad at him, just for one example.

His brothers, Viktor and Aleksander, were a lot like him. Less troublesome, as he took all the trouble when he was born, his mother would say. His youngest brother, Aleksander, as far as he knew, was still at home with his sister. Hopefully helping around the house, and listening to their father's instruction on repairing the tools for the farm. Viktor, the middle brother, was dead. Stolen from home just like his big brother. Placed in a different unit. He had taken Viktor's tags, as it was the only thing he was offered by the commanding officer that told him of his brother's death. *Gunshot*, he was told. *Severed his femoral artery*. His little brother had died painfully. Bleeding out was an awful way to go. Maxim and Ivan were with him when the news broke, and Maxim just about took the commander's head off. He remembered the yelling from his soldier, something about the commander being a stupid shit, and the lack of a medic in that team. Ivan tried to pull him away from the situation, as he knew the jarring feeling of learning someone you loved was dead. His brother was dead. His brother was *dead in a terrible way*. You feel the pain of the injury, and you feel the lightness from the blood loss, then about a minute before you go you realize you aren't going to live, and most men weep. Usually they beg

God through their tears. He's seen a few kill a man before they go. He doesn't remember much of the days that followed, only that he was given grieving time on the base. He remembered hitting a punching bag so often his knuckles split. He remembered the overall loss of appetite, and the concerned looks from his team. He remembered many nights with Sergi in his bunk, coaxing him to sleep and changing the bandages on his hands, melting into a blur. But nothing else. He was consumed with thoughts of his brother, his family, and the fact he wasn't given permission to go home to grieve. *Not a high enough rank. Too valuable a soldier.* He thought it contradictory. High enough rank and respected enough to be used and reused endlessly for their conquests but not high enough rank to go home to grieve the death of his brother. Successful enough to send home more food and water to his family but never given permission to go and visit them. As long as his family got fed, which he knows they do from the letters, he can suffer in the military a bit longer. Having them safe made this worth it.

What would his brother think of him now? Would he still look up at him with that younger adoration? Hope? His little brother had always been fond of him. Would he even look the same in his eyes? He could hardly recognize himself in the mirror these days. Broader. Colder eyes. A certain callousness in his voice that wasn't there when he left—was taken—from home. An exhaustion that settles deep in one's bones, seeping into the marrow, flowing through the flesh and blood, cocooning someone into an endless craving of rest. Something few people truly understood, and oftentimes those people had undergone horrific realities. He could only imagine the scolding his mother would give him for how tired and worn he looked. He wondered what expression his father would give him. He wondered what his siblings would think of him, of his scars, his aversion to loud noises, and his hand linked with Sergi's. That tiredness was just the tip of the iceberg. This exhaustion, he thought, was an unfortunate commonality within the army. Within his unit.

They were tight knit. Brothers and sisters in arms. Sergi, Yelena, Natalia, Ivan, Maxim, Demtiry, Irina, Anna, Polina, Vasilisa, Nikolai and himself. Each had been mentioned at least

once in his letters home. One letter per week, the army dictated, and he was certain they were picky about the replies their soldiers got to see. Nevertheless, he cherished every word he got from his family. Sometimes, even little trinkets got through regulation. His footlocker had a stone shaped like a heart, from Sofia. Around his wrist, a hammered metal band, with the initials of everyone in his family on the inside, made by Aleksander. He had even carved in Sergi's initials. A silent acceptance.

The army crossed what he thought was once a river. A dry bed with steeper sides, rocks, and small bones prodding out of the soil. Almost like a machine, they helped each other and the next climb quickly. The march, it seemed, would never end. He never liked the waiting. Everything between deployment and combat felt numb and mindless. They continued. Had he been paying attention, he would notice the fatigue in his legs. But he wasn't. He had paused, much to the surprise of his soldiers, staring down into the lower of the valley. Something new was up ahead, something unexpected. Yelena and Nikolai glanced at each other, then at him, asking for permission like excited children. He simply nodded and they rushed ahead.

It was a small field of wildflowers. Greenery he had never really seen before, out in the wild of the world. Had he been anytime else, he would have taken a few flowers back to his mother, fresh, and a few more pressed between the pages of his journal back at the base. She loved flowers. One of the first books she read to him was a weathered book about flowers, which was the only reason he knew what they were. Maybe his sister would make herself a crown of them, like the girls from fairy tales. She had always wanted to dress like them. But alas, it was the right place, at the wrong time. A spring, freshwater, bubbling and clear, emerging from the once-desolate ground around them. He walked to the spring in the middle and paused, and his men did the same. Other units proceeded around them. A marching in unison toward their collective destination, like the steady beat of a war drum. The uniformity of their clothing, armor and colors (or lack thereof) made the flowers stand out all the more vibrant. Viktor would

have been in awe, just like him. His family wouldn't believe him when he sent the next letter home.

He knelt into the grass. He had only ever seen grass within the Inner City, in those well kept, pristine parks they had for their leisure time. The largest park even had a lake, which he thought was extinct. Far from the realities of the world, where something found in the wild like this would make a family rich for generations. The grass tickled, like the loose threads from his bed. Free flowing fresh water, plant life, it was more valuable than anything he could imagine. Irina caressed a flower in her hands, with a gentleness he hadn't seen from her before. Anna knelt to feel the water in her hand. He glanced at her, then to the flowers around his knees. Flowers, out in the wild. They looked like foxgloves, cornflowers, and lilies of the valley. Poisonous, ironically. But, perhaps the world was trying to keep them from the death he thought they were destined for. To cling to their power and wealth over resources while everything slowly withered before them. What a fate they had been brought into.

He cupped his hands, filled them from the spring, and drank. It was the cleanest water he had ever tasted. Truly something akin to a miracle. His comrades joined him, reveling in this newfound wonder. It was a moment of peace, of surprising peace, given to them when they were marching to another slaughter. Demitry, Polina and Vasilia dunked their hands into the spring, fascinated by the feeling. His unit congregated around it, all amazed, like small children seeing something shiny. Armed soldiers, toddling around a grass patch full of flowers and water. It was almost amusing. Almost enough to forget their orders.

While he hated why he and his unit were here, along with the numerous others, he knew there was purpose in it. And, it led him to see this. Other units did not dare stray from their commanding officers, their harsh training keeping them blind to all else but their orders. Orders to find, to take, to kill if need be. More often than not killing happened without reason. *Take no prisoners*, their officers always said. *You are there to gather and return, and we don't need any more mouths to feed.* A spot of life in the decay of the world. Color among the endless void of

gray. Perhaps God was giving him another chance, another opportunity to be good, and do good. This was his chance. When was the last time anyone saw this much water? He smiled for the first time in a long time. If he could get back, alert his superiors, then maybe the war would end-

A white horse.

Standing far out into the gray of the rolling hills. Face angled toward him. Eyes facing forward, unnaturally, like a predator. Not unlike the pictures in the books his mother gave him when he was a boy, but not the same.

He froze. He never froze. He was a trained soldier, not some frightened boy. Why was he freezing?

Time seemed to stretch.

It looked like a horse in body. But the eyes, they seemed human. Focused in a way that a hunter watches its prey.

Then he saw its teeth.

Like a human jaw, a perfect, pearly white, aligned smile, unmoving from the horse's face. Like a practiced smile from those unnerving, power hungry politicians, that he knows are always fake. Everything in his instincts screamed for him to flee. To run as fast as he could and find his family. To hide in the basement like they always did during the storms, and cling to his father's shirt like he did when he was small.

"Captain?" Sergi questioned him.

He hadn't felt fear like this since he saw his father cry when he was four.

This wasn't a horse.

"Eren?" Sergi said again, with more urgency.

He could feel Sergi's hand grasp his shoulder. He wanted to turn and look into Sergi's eyes, those pretty brown eyes, but he couldn't look away from this... omen.

A blinding light hit his eyes. A few blinks, and the horse is gone. Behind where it stood, smoke, becoming a familiar mushroom cloud, and a wave of fire cascading toward him. The “enemy” didn’t have that kind of firepower. He knew that. He felt his eyes burn, rejecting the immense light, probably damaging the nerves. Vasillia and Irina both did not look away fast enough, crying out in pain.

Had his own country dropped this on their soldiers? Were they really that expendable?

The units continued marching.

His own unit watched, unmoving, like himself. They knew there was no outrunning a bomb of this magnitude. Nikolai prayed. Yelena kept her eyes glued to the flowers. Ivan drank more of the water. Anna let herself weep. Demitry and Polina tore up fistfuls of the grass. He clenched his fists. Sergi slung an arm around his shoulders, watching the incoming Hell. What a way to die.

Sergi cupped his face in both hands and looked into his eyes.

“Eren, I lov-”

The fire hit like millions of needles and everything went black.

You’re Alive

The slow hiss of the depressurization was what really kicked her brain into action. In the cryo-sleep muddled mess of her mind, she remembered the protocol: move the smaller appendages, then the limbs, then get up. She mechanically moved her fingers and toes, wiggling till she felt substantial blood flow. Then she began bending her knees and elbows, opening her eyes in the process. She wasn’t expecting what was waiting for her.

Aisha was baffled.

Her pod was opened by some random scavenger, dressed all raggedy. She had messy, curly black hair, light-ish skin, and deep yellow eyes. She looked unhoused. Gruff.

Cryo-sickness hit Aisha hard. Dizziness, nausea, weakness and poor balance. She braced on the side of the pod, squeezing her eyes shut and monitoring her breathing. How long was she out? Was this woman even supposed to be here? Were the others awake?

Aisha knew her cortisol levels were rising quickly. She needed to calm down or the cryo-sickness would last longer. Taking deep, even breaths, she slowly opened her eyes to the view of the strange woman in front of her.

The woman spoke a language Aisha had never heard before. It sounded like a mix of English and Spanish, which makes sense to her, given the cryostasis facility was in Texas. Had she been asleep so long that language had evolved into something new? How long did that even take? Her head was already spinning from coming out of long term, scientifically induced sleep, and this certainly wasn't helping.

Aisha carefully stepped out of the pod, and the raggedy woman jumped back, keeping a respectable distance. Aisha glanced at the other pods, seeing they were still closed. What the hell was happening?

"Who are you?" Aisha spoke slowly.

The woman simply tilted her head and gave her a funny look.

Okay, theory confirmed, Aisha was asleep long enough for language to evolve past her understanding. She sat down, back against her pod, and rubbed her face, taking deep breaths. She needed to calm down and focus on immediate next steps. Find a radio, get in contact with Headquarters, and get to the nearest living facility. This woman finding her must have been some sort of fluke, the systems probably degraded, or the walls simply lost their structural integrity. That had to be the case.

Aisha made herself stand, and stumbled over to the computers. Thankfully they were still functional. She placed her hand on the identity scanner, which the raggedy woman watched her do from afar. Inching toward the door, Aisha noted.

The computer opened to the main screen, and Aisha checked the readings for the other pods. All normal, all alive. She breathed a sigh of relief, glad that there hadn't been any malfunctions. Which brought her to a new question; if there were no malfunctions with the pods, how did this woman open hers? Aisha turned to the woman.

She looked familiar, in a way. Some of her more subtle features reminded Aisha of a person she could not quite remember, or picture in her mind. She chalked it up to post sleep amnesia. Perhaps they would return to her, given time.

The woman came up and lightly poked her arm. Aisha looked at her, seeing that completely bewildered expression, directed at the computers. Right, these people probably aren't technologically advanced like humanity used to be; the chances of them being the same or *more* advanced were almost zero. Had they discovered the bunkers? Were they aware of their own histories? She had so many questions that she couldn't even properly convey to this person because of a damn language barrier. She knew eleven languages, but she couldn't understand this hybrid one from however long she was asleep. Aisha was desperate for answers. To see what the world had become outside. God, did anything look the same?

There was no way her cortisol levels were going down any time soon.