

THE

# ABYSS

SURROUNDS US



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Any other morning, I'd dive into Durga's observation bay without hesitation, but this is the day before my life begins. I hang back on the concrete meridian and raise the Tanto strapped to my wrist, jabbing the button that ignites the miniature LED beacon.

As the blue lights glow and a low tone rings out over the water, she rises. Durga's head is the first thing to emerge from the waves, the brutal lines of her reptilian beak fading into the soft wrinkles that wreath her huge, round eyes. She lets out a snort that blasts seawater from all three blowholes lined along the ridge of her skull.

The smell of salt, sea, and carrion washes over me, and I drink it in, letting the familiar aroma drain the nervousness from my body. Everything starts tomorrow, but I have nothing to fear with Durga by my side.

She raises one massive, clawed foreleg out of the water and slams it down, sending up a spray that plows over the meridian, leaving me drenched and sputtering and regretting hanging back on the barrier. Reckoners may be ruthless killing machines, but they're downright cheeky when they know they can get away with it.

When I finish blinking away the brine, I swear I can see a twinkle in her eyes. I snap off the Tanto and pull my respirator up from around my neck, slipping the rubbery mouthpiece between my teeth as I fasten the straps behind my head. My mask comes next, slightly fogged from the warm August air.

Once I'm sure I'll be able to breathe and see, I take a running leap off the meridian and dive headfirst into the water.

The ocean swallows me in a rush. The morning light dances through the waves, shrouding Durga's bulk in glittering beams. With a few short strokes, I draw up to the tip of her beak and grab the edge of her keratin plating.

Durga blinks once, then lifts her head.

I crimp my fingers tighter as she raises me up out of the water. She's horrendously gentle for a beast the size of a football field. Her eyes never leave me.

"Good old girl," I murmur against her plating, then let go. The water engulfs me again, and I immediately lunge forward to grab the keratin covering her chest. I rap my knuckles against it twice. As long as I remind her where I am, Durga will be careful not to crush me.

I dive deeper, running my hands along the knobby, leathery skin between her plates. Most of the other trainers hate getting stuck with morning once-over duty, but it's always been relaxing for me. Checking over Durga is like exploring an alien planet. As I glide along beneath her belly, I map out her ridges and crevices, the tectonics of muscles working beneath her skin, the subtle shifts of coloring that patch her hide. Her primary genes come from snapping turtles, giving her the wide, bulky body and spiny plated shell, but the length of her limbs and the muddled regions of red and green that swath her skin are reminders of the marine iguana DNA woven into her makeup.

She's a big dumb turtle four times the weight of a blue whale, but there's no denying the elegance of her construction.

I'm halfway down her left foreleg when it happens. Something pulses through the water, and it takes me a second to realize that Durga just *shivered*.

Reckoners don't shiver.

I press my palms flat against her leg, the respirator whining in my mouth as it waits for a breath I've yet to release. Five seconds pass, and then another tremor shakes the water around me as the muscle shudders beneath my hands.

I kick for the surface, rapping my knuckles against one of her keratin plates when my head clears the water. Her reptilian eyes fix on me as I roll over and swim for the edge of the bay. My heart flutters, worry creeping up my spine. I need to calm down. I need to breathe.

*It's probably nothing*, I chide myself. I've been around Durga since the day she hatched, and I sometimes forget that she can still surprise me. I spit out the respirator and rip off my mask, tossing them to the side as I haul myself out of the observation bay and onto the divide.

Squinting against the early morning sun, I glance down the row of observation bays to the outcropping where the research facility stands. The building's glass exterior glitters like a jewel on the edge of the NeoPacific, harshly framed against the rocky coastline. Just below it lies the dock where we start bonding training with Reckoner pups and their companion vessels. Eight bays lie between me and the buildings, but only four of them are occupied. The two closest to the facility host two pups, still training to bond with their companion ships.

As I flash the Tanto to let Durga know she's free to submerge, the third resident bares her teeth and splashes her fluke at me from the pen on the other side of the divide. Fae is a younger cetoid, a plated whale with a bit of a mean streak. I clamber to my feet and stick my tongue out at her.

Fae's in for medical observation. The *Irvine*, her companion, ran afoul of a pirate raiding party, and though the Reckoner did her duty, she took some heavy hits in the fight and came back to the Southern Republic of California in serious condition. Her hide still stinks of smoke where the pirates' rockets hit her, and her keratin plates bear the singe marks to match. She's gotten cranky after an entire week away from the *Irvine*, and I know for certain she'd try to rip off my arm if I got in the water with her now.

Just in case, I switch the Tanto to her signal set and flash a quick burst of light and noise that tells her to leave me alone. She huffs and clicks loud enough that I have to cover my ears. A rumble from below the water on the other side of the divide marks Durga's reply. A mewl rises from the pups' pens, and I start off toward the research facility, letting the noises of my monsters put me at ease.

My mother's lab is on the second floor of the building, fortified by cement walls and a scanner that reads my palm before unbolting the massive steel doors. A blast of warm air hits me as I step inside.

"Mom, something's up with Durga," I call, peeling out of the top half of my wetsuit.

Artificial wombs line the walls of the lab, nearly all of them occupied with incubating Reckoner pups. They float in the canisters, tethered by an umbilical line that supplies them with nutrients. At this stage, they're nothing but little nuggets of flesh and nerve, each ready to develop into a beast capable of ripping a pirate ship to shreds. Some of them are brand new, barely the size of my thumb, with no distinguishing features. Others have already gestated to the point that their type is obvious. My gaze lands on a terrapoid embryo whose forelegs are twitching as if the little turtle-type is already dreaming of the day he sees battle. In the womb next to it, a cephalopoid slumbers with its stumpy tentacles wrapped around itself. Farther down, I spot the familiar knot of a serpentoid embryo's twisting coils. We've developed so many breeds, each uniquely crafted to serve the companies that commission them for their ships.

The gel in the womb gives off a soft glow. It keeps them at a suspended stage of development, curbing them until the day we transfer them to a big, leathery purse and let them grow until they're ready to hatch. Ready to train. Ready to destroy.

Until then, they're all just waiting.

I'm so stuck on the eerie sight of baby Reckoners that it takes me a few seconds to realize my mom's not alone in here. She stands with her back to me, her arms folded as she stares down at a cryo-crate, and Fabian Murphy is at her side. He glances my way and motions for an extra minute.

I nod back to him, a flush building in my cheeks. Murphy is our International Genetically Engineered Organisms Council liaison. One of the biggest figures in the Reckoner business. A man who controls the entire industry. And I definitely shouldn't have traipsed into the lab in nothing but my wetsuit.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Leung," he tells my mother, giving her a consoling pat on the shoulder. He looks worlds out of place in his tailored suit. "I know it reflects poorly to lose so much of your stock, but you've got to remember that by catching unviable embryos early, we minimize the risk of disappointing our investors. Between that and the recent ... security concerns, we need to be taking extra steps for the good of the business. There have been reports of theft, of break-ins at some of our top stables. The new crop of pups has to be stronger than ever."

Mom shakes her head, and I don't need to see her face to know that she's got her lips pursed the way she always does when she's calculating something. Finally she turns to Murphy and offers a hand. "Thank you. Your business is appreciated, as ever."

He grasps her hand and gives it one firm shake, his gray eyes sparkling in the lab's bright lights. "Until next time," he says, wearing the grin of a man who's gotten exactly what he wants. The IGEOC agent grabs the handle of the cryo-crate and begins to drag it toward the massive doors. "Cassandra," he says, nodding to me.

I nod back, folding my arms over my chest.

"Good luck out there tomorrow," he offers, but there's something strange caught in his throat as he says it, and for a moment he looks profoundly uncomfortable.

As if I needed another reason to be nervous about what tomorrow holds.

Mom waits to speak until the door's bolted behind him. "How many times do I have to tell you to *change* before coming up here? You're dripping everywhere—did you even towel off?"

"Sorry, it's just—"

"Cas, I've said it before. Think things *through* before charging in."

"Mom, something's wrong with Durga."

That gets her. I see the shift happen in her eyes, her parent-brain batted to the side as scientist-brain takes over. "Symptoms?" she asks, gliding over to the computer and dragging up Durga's records with one elegant swipe of her finger.

"She seemed unsteady when I was checking over. Tremors in her legs."

"That's it?"

I nod.

"No discoloration? No signs that she hasn't been eating?"

I shake my head.

Mom peers closer at the charts. "I've never known her to be unsteady, but there's a first time for everything. Do you think she's fit for duty?"

Mom's asking for my judgment. Durga's in *my* charge. Tomorrow afternoon, she'll ship out with her companion, the *Nereid*, and for the first time in my life I'll be working as her sole trainer. Her life in my hands, and my life in hers. It's my call, and mine alone.

"I'll keep an eye on her, but I think she should be fine. No need to worry the *Nereid*."

Mom smiles, and I feel like I've just passed a test. Like I can be trusted with the monsters she creates. Granted, Durga's probably the easiest charge she can give me. The *Nereid* is a cruise ship, not an important cargo boat like the one Fae escorts. Durga's been with the ship for twelve years, and in that time she's sunk only ten pirate vessels, most of them in her first years on duty. She's an old titan now, and none of the NeoPacific's worst want to tangle with her.

And this is my big opportunity. My chance to show Mom and Dad that I'm ready, that I can be a Reckoner trainer full-time. After seventeen and a half years of waiting for the day I finally become the person I'm meant to be, it's almost here.

Tomorrow, my life begins.

When it comes time to say goodbye, I hug my brother first.

Tom tugs the end of my ponytail, and I thump him on the back in return. “If you never come back, I get your room, right?” he asks when he lets me go.

“If I never come back, you get my morning shift,” I tell him. He flashes me an impish grin and tries to ruffle my hair. Tom’s two years younger than me, but he’s six inches taller and he never lets me forget it.

The dock around us is choked with tourists, some waving to people already on the *Nereid*, others fiddling with their luggage. They’re decked out in the season’s brightest colors, all of them determined to make the last month of summer count. Apparently two weeks on a boat is the best way to do that.

I turn to Mom and Dad, who sweep me into a hug before I can get a word in. “Be safe out there,” Mom mutters in my ear.

“Of course I’ll be safe,” I tell them. “I have Durga.”

She releases me, but Dad holds on tighter. Over his shoulder, I watch Mom shepherd Tom back toward the parking lot, and the anticipation pooled in my stomach swells.

Dad takes a step back, one hand still on my shoulder, and reaches into his pocket. He draws out a little blue capsule, and I feel every molecule in my body screaming at me to run. Dad must catch the panic in my eyes—he squeezes my shoulder and holds out the capsule. “Cas, it’s fine. It’s going to be fine. This is *just in case*.”

Just in case. Just in case the worst happens. The ship falls. Durga fails, I fail, and the knowledge I carry as a Reckoner trainer must be disposed of. That information can’t fall into the wrong hands, into the hands of people who will do anything to take down our beasts.

So this little capsule holds the pill that will kill me if it comes to that.

“It’s waterproof,” Dad continues, pressing it into my hand. “The pocket on the collar of your wetsuit—keep it there. It has to stay with you at all times.”

It won’t happen on this voyage. It’s such a basic mission, gift-wrapped to be easy enough for me to handle on my own. But even holding the pill fills me with revulsion. On all of my training voyages, I’ve never had to carry one of these capsules. That burden only goes to the full-time trainers.

“Cas.” Dad tilts my chin up, ripping my gaze from the pill. “You were born to do this. I promise you, you’ll forget you even have it.” I suppose he ought to know—he’s been carrying one for two decades.

*It’s just a rite of passage,* I tell myself, and throw my arms around his neck once more.

I board the *Nereid* with a suitcase full of trainer gear trundling behind me, a travel bag slung over my shoulder, and a growing sense of optimism as I spot Durga’s shadow lurking beneath the ship. A trail of bubbles against the hull marks where she rests her snout against the metal, her body pressed up against the keel.

I don’t think it’s possible to love someone as much as a Reckoner loves her companion ship.

Once I reach the main deck, I lean against the rail and watch my family make their way back down the dock. As I look on, Tom turns, shielding his eyes against the afternoon sun as he tries to spot me. I wave my hand once, then tip him a little salute. Tom salutes back, and I can feel the jealousy radiating off him from here. Like me, he’s been waiting his whole life for the day he gets to do this on his own.

A firm hand taps my shoulder, and I turn to find a mountain of a man towering over me. He’s dressed in a smart uniform, but his gut tugs at the waist in a way the jacket clearly wasn’t tailored to handle.

“Miss Leung,” he says, extending a hand as large as my head. “Welcome aboard the *Nereid*. We’re very pleased to have you. I’m Captain Carriel.”

I take his hand and give it the firmest shake that I can manage. “Glad to be of service, sir.” I’m not sure if you’re supposed to call the captain of a cruise ship “sir,” but I figure it can’t hurt since the guy’s paying my salary.

“I have a key for your bunk.” He hands me a card on a lanyard, which I loop around my neck as I gather all my gear back up. “I’m guessing you’ve got it all handled from here though, huh?”

I can’t figure out if he’s joking or if he actually has this much trust in me. It’s difficult to tell when you’ve never seen a person do anything but smile.

The *Nereid* thrums to life as I drag my gear down to the lower decks and find my assigned bunk. It’s cramped, and the dull rumble from the ship’s engines is constant down here, but there’s a tiny window in my room that looks out on the sea. As we undock and turn for the open waters of the Neo Pacific, Durga swims at our side. She lifts from the waves, water sloughing off her back, her forelegs carving through the sea as she keeps the *Nereid*’s pace. She seems much more cheerful now that she’s reunited with her companion vessel, and as I unpack, I feel even more of the worry lift off my shoulders.

Once my phone connects to the ship’s uplink, I post a quick status update to put my parents at ease. Then I gather my gear and make my way through the narrow service hallways to the trainer deck at the ship’s aft. Up above, I can hear the thunder of feet, the shouts and shrieks of the passengers celebrating the start of their vacation. For me, the work is just beginning.

Life at sea moves in a strange rhythm. I wake early in the morning to check on Durga, drawing her up to the trainer deck at the rear of the ship with an LED homing beacon the size of a suitcase. The deck is right above the engines, low enough that she can tap the beacon with the tip of her beak.

Each Reckoner gets trained on a signal set assigned by the IGEOC, a unique collection of lights and sounds that ensure we alone control our beasts. Some are grating, but Durga’s is one of my favorites: a pulse of blue lights and a low humming noise. During the day, Durga tends to wander away from the ship, hunting neocetes and whatever else she can scarf down. I carry a tracker on my belt that lets me know if she strays too far, but of course she never does.

While she’s away, I wander the upper decks and mix with the tourists. They don’t pay much attention to me—my trainer uniform makes me as invisible as the waitstaff. But on the third night of the voyage, that changes.

The old man finds me on the main deck, reclining on one of the pool chairs and staring out at the ridge of Durga's shell, highlighted by the moonlight. At first I don't realize he's there—I've gotten so used to being ignored—but then he clears his throat and says, "You're quite young."

I bristle at that, and not just because he's quite old, his face cracked with lines, his hair barely a wisp. "First time," I tell him as he settles on the chair next to me.

"Big responsibility," he says, nodding toward the Reckoner, then remembers to introduce himself. "Hiro Kagawa. I was a Senator in the Southern States of America back in the day—I was actually on one of the subcommittees that authorized Reckoner justice in our waters."

It takes me a second to connect the dots. The Southern States began the Reckoner trade long before the Southern Republic of California did, their hand forced by the swollen Gulf that was already choked with pirate strongholds. They had started raising monsters within years of the Schism. Which means ...

"You lived in the United States, huh?" I ask.

"I was elected right after the Schism," Mr. Kagawa says, his eyes sparkling in the low light. "But I lived through the worst of it, right before the world started to split."

I figure it's only fair to let him do what old men do best. "What do you remember?"

He sighs, rolling his head back toward the stars. "Oh, mostly rhetoric. 'Smaller Governments, Bigger Hearts,' all those catchy phrases being tossed around. Names too. Midwestern Republic. Southern States of America. Things with heft that people could get behind and trust to look after them. The seas were swelling, the floodwalls—" His voice cracks, and he blinks. "Well, you know the rest."

I know enough. I know that one by one, the world governments started divvying up their lands, running algorithms, optimizing the care they could provide for their citizens, until the lines had been redrawn. No more United States, no more China, no more India, no more accounting for thousands of miles and billions of people under the rule of a single power.

It was so long ago that the world had already gotten used to it by the time I was born.

Mr. Kagawa blinks again, his gaze dropping to Durga's distant form. "The floodwalls. That's my story, that's the best one I can tell." He bows his head. "I lived in ... well, you know them as the drowned cities. New Orleans was one of them. The floodwalls had stood for years, but that didn't matter in the end. I was eight years old the night it happened, and I've never forgotten a moment of it. The screaming, the roar of the skiffs as they rushed up the canal streets and under the supports of the apartments. My mother grabbed me and my sisters and threw us into our boat. But my father wouldn't budge. He'd lived his whole life in the shadows of those floodwalls, and I guess in the end he decided to die with them."

He runs one hand absently over what's left of his hair. "My mother knew him well enough to let him. We were three miles out when the walls came down."

The sea is still tonight, and the decks are silent. "I'm sorry," I tell Mr. Kagawa, meaning it wholeheartedly. He came on this ship to relax, not to relive the memories that haunt him.

But he waves off my apology, a tense smile cracking over his face. "It's one of the greatest gifts you can give someone, knowing their stories."

Off in the black, Durga's blowholes release a long-held blast of air, sending up a spray of saltwater cut by moonlight.

Durga's tremors are getting worse. On the first days of the voyage, I barely noticed them, but now her legs shudder like the engines beneath my feet. She's begun to lag behind the ship, forcing the *Nereid* to slow. I spend an entire afternoon sitting on her back, scouring her plating for any sign of an infected wound that would explain her worsening condition. There's nothing but old scars. Reckoners don't get sick—they get injured, but it's been months since the last time she fought off a pirate attack.

The stench of carrion hangs heavily in the air around her, and it lingers on my clothes as I make my way to the *Nereid*'s navigation tower.

Captain Carriel's face goes taut when I step through the door. "Miss Leung," he says, turning away from the ship's instrumentation panel.

“I’m sorry—” I start, but he raises his hand to cut me off. He already knows exactly what I’ve come for.

“We need to make it to our first island by tomorrow evening. If we slow the ship any more, we’ll be putting this whole voyage drastically behind schedule.”

My face flushes, and I find myself stammering for my next words. No Reckoner should be a burden to her companion ship. “Sir, I’m sorry,” I manage. “But something’s wrong. I don’t know what’s happening, and I’m severely concerned for Durga’s health.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You’ve never seen anything like this?”

I shake my head. “I’ve been talking to my pa—the other trainers on the uplink, and they don’t have any theories. As far as we know, nothing like this has happened to a Reckoner before.” The last time I spoke to my mother, we’d both been crying. Me from concern for Durga and her from the frustration of being unable to figure out why one of her monsters has suddenly fallen ill.

From somewhere behind us, a keening groan rings out. Durga rarely vocalizes, but today she’s been making all sorts of noises.

Captain Carriel runs a hand over his beard, his eyes darkening. “Give it one more night. We’ll drop anchor for her scheduled rest, and in the morning we’ll make a judgment call.”

I don’t know what that kind of call would entail, but I nod along. The captain claps me on the shoulder, steers me out the door, and leaves me in the hall, stewing in the ever-present smell of rotted flesh.

That night, I can’t sleep.

The next morning, the entire ship awakens before dawn to Durga’s unearthly screams.

I spring out of bed and struggle into my wetsuit as fast as I can. My heart aches inside my chest as I sprint for the trainer deck. I've been hearing Reckoner noises all my life, but never like this. This isn't a groan of discomfort, a roar of fury. No, this is a shriek of pure agony.

I burst onto the trainer deck and snap on the LED beacon. It flashes her homing signal into the dark, and immediately she surfaces, her shadow looming against the glow on the horizon. I grab a spotlight and shine it on her as she approaches.

A wave of nausea threatens to overtake me, and I have to fight to keep the spotlight pointed at her as she draws near.

Durga is bleeding all over. The sickening stench of her blood washes over me as if it clots the air. Sores dot her back, some of them burst and ragged-looking, and I realize with a jolt that several of her keratin plates have fallen off. She groans again, the noise causing the deck underneath me to shudder, and I watch, horrified, as the plate protecting the top of her head slides forward, pulling free with a meaty *snap*. It plunges into the NeoPacific, sending up a spray of salty, gory water in its wake.

I know I should call Mom and Dad immediately, but I can't leave her side when she's like this. "It's gonna be okay, girl," I call out to her. It's a lie.

"Miss Leung!" A deckhand stumbles out onto the trainer deck, his uniform askew. "Carriel wants to know what's going on."

My lips struggle to find words that aren't there. Nothing in my training has prepared me for this. This voyage was supposed to be effortless. Easy. And now Durga is dying, and I can't do anything to stop it. "I ... " I start, but can't

finish. She's hurting so much. The water that surrounds her is clouded with blood, and I don't have the tools to put her out of her misery.

The ship's all-call crackles on. "Ladies and gentlemen," Captain Carriel says, a slight tremor in his gravelly voice.

*No.*

"Our radar has picked up a pirate vessel heading our way."

*Not now.*

"We ask that you please stay calm and remain inside your cabins until an all-clear is given. Locks will be engaging on the doors in five minutes."

*Any time but now.*

"In the meantime, the ship's companion will see to the threat."

A chill starts at the base of my spine and works its way up until I feel like my brain's been plunged into ice water. Durga can't fight. Not like this. I spin, running my hands through my hair as I scan the trainer deck for something, *anything* to end her suffering. But Reckoners were made to be nigh impossible to kill, and there's no humane way of ending the life of a beast this size.

I'm suddenly acutely aware of the pill in the collar of my wetsuit.

When I turn back to Durga, they're on the horizon.

The boat comes screaming in from the East, the rising sun at its back as it swings wide around the *Nereid*. It carves the water like a butcher's knife and looks like it's been cobbled together from bits of yachts and warships, the unholy bastard of some pirate colony junkyard. Its upper decks bristle with weaponry.

I've let everyone on this boat down. Without Durga, we're dead in the water against this sort of artillery. We'll be boarded, looted, and killed, and it's all my fault.

Which is what I'm still stuck on when Durga wheels, swinging her snout toward the pirate ship. Her blowholes flare, her tail thrashes, and she launches herself toward the boat, the sea churning around her.

*Shit.*

She's not strong enough to do this, but she also can't suppress the instinct ingrained in her. Durga is bonded to the *Nereid*. Reckoner imprinting behavior ties them to their companion ships, and she'll fight to the death to protect hers. But in her condition, there's no way she'll succeed. She's already dying. It'll only be more painful if the pirates have a say in it.

And she's only going to piss them off more. She's going to give them a reason to kill every soul aboard this ship if she goes after them.

I've got to stop her. I've got to do something.

I hoist the homing beacon onto my back and take off, back down the ship's tunnels, just as the gunfire starts. The deckhand runs after me, but I tune out the words he's yelling—I can't afford to think about anything but drawing Durga back to the ship. An explosion rocks the back of the *Nereid* and the floor lurches beneath my feet as the engines stop. We're dead in the water.

I round a corner and haul open a hatch, stumbling out onto the lowest deck on the ship where a foldout platform lies waiting. I yank the lever that extends it and leap on as the platform unfurls, landing on the ocean's surface with a wet slap. It rolls out in front of me, nearly fifty feet in length, and I sprint for the end of it, my fingers fumbling on the homing beacon as I go.

The LEDs snap on, nearly blinding me, and I slip, falling flat on my ass. I hold the beacon up, point it at Durga, and scream as loud as my lungs will allow, my voice harmonizing with the hum of her signal.

The pirate ship has already outmaneuvered her and docked with us, the crew swarming the *Nereid* like flies on a corpse. Durga's attention flickers to me, and she draws up short. The Reckoner shakes her head, letting out a deafening roar as she wavers between heeding my call and doing the very thing she was bred to do.

Maybe it's my familiarity, maybe it's just a merit of her training, but Durga turns again and surges for the platform, her beak pointed squarely at the homing beacon.

"That's right," I rasp, dropping to my knees. "Good girl. Come here. It's okay. It's all going to be over soon."

Then the pirate ship opens fire.

They aim for her eyes. The bullets riddle Durga, and blood sprays from her already-ragged flesh. She roars again, the sound rippling the ocean's surface, and turns on the ship. Smoke from the artillery pours out over the waves until all I can see is her looming shadow and the outline of the *Nereid*. Somewhere in the haze, her beak snaps shut, the sound rolling over the ocean like a thunderclap. I stumble back down the platform, still holding the beacon high, my eyes running. I can't tell if it's the smoke burning my eyes, or if I'm just crying.

A wave lifts the platform, knocking my feet out from under me, and I plunge into the water. My hold on the homing beacon slips, and it sinks away into the vast dark of the ocean below. Lungs burning, I kick for the surface and come up clinging to the platform. I choke in a breath as I feel the water around me thicken.

A shadow crosses me. Someone has strode out onto the platform, a wide-brimmed hat shading her features and a rocket launcher hoisted over her shoulder. She takes aim at Durga, braces herself, and squeezes the trigger. The whole platform vibrates from the recoil and I almost lose my grip.

The rocket explodes into Durga's side. She screams, her leathery skin rippling as she wheels to face the pirate, who only frowns, takes aim, and shoots again.

I haul myself out of the water and lunge for her, but a pair of arms grabs me from behind and holds me back. The second rocket strikes Durga's shoulder, taking out a chunk of flesh so large that her foreleg goes limp instantly. I struggle against my captor, but it's no use. I'm not a fighter.

Durga's the fighter, and she lunges for the woman with the rocket launcher even as a third shell barrels into her chest, right where her keratin plates should be. The sickening stench of Reckoner blood and decaying flesh fills the air with an increasing inevitability, overpowering the smoke of the guns.

The fourth rocket hits her head.

And ...

I'm five years old and sharing a kiddie pool with a newly hatched Reckoner pup. I'm eight, standing on her back for the first time. I'm thirteen, and the only refuge from my first breakup is in floating alongside her, holding onto the ridge above her eye where my hand fits perfectly.

I'm seventeen years old, and I can do nothing but watch as Durga's thick blood paints the sea.

Now I'm sure it's not just the smoke. Tears roll down my cheeks, and I go limp in the grip of whoever's restrained me. They can kill me now. They can do whatever they like. Everything's gone still, and even though I can hear the chaos of the pirates taking the *Nereid* behind me, it sounds like it's on the other side of a glass wall.

I've failed.

The grip on me loosens, and I can finally twist around and look my captor in the face. She's about my age. Her blonde hair is desperately trying to recover from a sideshave, and she's got a feral grin on her lips. "Boss," she says, and the woman with the rocket launcher turns. "I think we're going to want to bring this one along."

The girl keeps my hands twisted behind my back as she hustles me toward the pirate ship, forcing me to step over the bodies that litter the hallways. Their uniforms mark them as the *Nereid*'s crew, and the guns in their hands mark them as the ones who put up a fight.

Her captain leads the way, the rocket launcher stowed in favor of a submachine gun that she cradles like a newborn child. In the early August heat, her brown skin is dappled with sweat, and she has her wildly curly hair bound back underneath her hat.

I don't know what's going on. All I know is that yesterday I'd never seen death up close and now I'm surrounded by it.

"Lock her in one of the closets. We'll deal with her later," the captain says. Gunfire rings out from somewhere down the hall, and she rolls her eyes. "Sounds like this bucket's putting up more of a fight than anticipated. I'll go see what needs shooting." She pivots and strides back into the depths of the ship, her coat flapping behind her.

The girl shrugs, then pushes me forward again, gentler than when the captain was watching. We come to a ladder hooked onto one of the lower decks and she nudges me onto it ahead of her. Her hand drops to the pistol in her waistband, just in case I'm thinking of making a break through the gap between the two ships' hulls.

I'm not. I descend onto the pirate ship, my hands shaking on the cold metal rungs, and the girl follows me.

"Why?" I ask as my captor jumps from the ladder, landing slightly off-balance on the ship's deck. She just grabs me by the wrist again and tugs me toward another hatch, another ladder. Once again, I go first.

The ship's interior is more well-lit than I expected. I'd call it homey if it weren't for the bullet holes in the walls and the pirate girl marching me through it. Probably has something to do with the strips of wood plastered to the walls in a halfhearted attempt at paneling.

We come to a heavy steel door at the end of the narrow corridor, which she twists open and shoves me through without another word. My head cracks against a low shelf and I yelp loud enough that she pauses. We make eye contact—her in her sleek body armor with a gun tucked in her pants, and me in my soaking wetsuit.

“You're going to be useful,” she says, and no more than that. She slams the door behind her, leaving me with a throbbing head in what I'm just now realizing is a janitorial closet.

And the pill is still in my collar.

She didn't bind my hands. I reach up with shaking fingers and tug the zipper, flaying open the hidden pocket. The little blue capsule tumbles into my palm, and I sink to my knees in the tangle of mops and cleaning solvents.

My heart is thundering, and I feel as if every inch of my being is rearing away from the promise of death that sits nestled in my hand.

*Do it now. Do it fast.*

My whole arm is shaking.

How can I know for sure that this pill is the only solution? What if I could escape? What if the pirates aren't after trade secrets? My mind runs wild with possibilities, with options so much better than a quick death.

I tug at the ends of my limp, damp hair, trying to rein in my thoughts. The things I know for sure form such a short list. The *Nereid* is taken. Durga is dead. I've been captured by pirates. My name is Cas Leung. I smell like Reckoner blood.

And there's so much I'm not sure of. They might be sinking the ship right now, killing all of the people onboard. They might be stripping it and leaving it disabled in the middle of the NeoPacific. I wonder if Mr. Kagawa is still alive. I wonder what usefulness the pirate captain has planned for me.

I wonder if I'll ever see my family again.

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