



# The Whims of Hate: A Science Fantasy M/M Monster Romance

**Author:** *Mell R. Bright*

**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** A true enemies-to-lovers gay monster romance with forced proximity, set in a post-apocalyptic world with giant monsters.

Oliver is left for dead in the ruins of his underground city. The love of his life has betrayed him and disappeared with his devil. His dark blood slowly flows out of his veins, stripping his electricity away, while a creature of legend destroys his dream. Death cannot come soon enough.

And yet, it's not death that finds him first, but the beautiful man he had taken prisoner just the day before. Jude has a plan to escape the underground city and survive, and he'll let nothing—or no one—stand in his way.

Oliver will be swept away by the hateful young man and dragged to the harsh life in the wastelands once again, where men have turned into monsters and the old gods rule over all.

He will learn that Hate is just Love's jealous companion, and that Jude is a foe he might not want to vanquish.

THE WHIMS OF HATE (Monstrous Whims #2) (18+) is a redemption arc following the first book, THE WHIMS OF GODS.

Trigger warning: violence, sexual abuse, toxic relationships (that become healthy), explicit sex scenes, non-human genitalia, and death.

**Total Pages (Source):** 17

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“In the first year after the Rise, our teams registered strange seismic activities all over the globe as the old gods woke from their deep slumber and broke out to the surface. It helped us find and identify most of them. But one activity in particular caught our attention. That one god might have never been found otherwise. It’s in the remote underwater caves in the mountains of Venezuela that he dwells. Urara can only be described as a giant eel or knifefish. But your imagination would come short of the truth. He’s as long as a train and wider. His viscous skin is harder to pierce than stone. He uses his abilities to see in the underground darkness. The few survivors who came back from the expedition could only describe with shaky vagueness the giant creature who travels with fear-inducing efficiency in the wide underwater caves. And so few came back... Because what makes Urara more fearsome to face than many gods who walk on the surface is the massive electric charge that he releases around him. He will stun—or often, kill—anything or anyone that comes close.

Thankfully, a member of our team brought a few samples back. We have Urara’s DNA in our possession. I can’t wait to see what we can create with it. Or, should I say, who we can create.”

Video transcription of a video log from Dr. Simone Chastain, a scientist who worked on the Revival Project.

I dreamed of the jellyfish again. They floated above me, beautiful and deadly. Their thin tentacles danced in the artificial current of the cylinder tank. I stayed at the bottom, too afraid to even swim to the surface. And yet, I couldn’t tear my eyes away from their beauty. Their bodies, so soft and colorful, invited my touch. But I knew better. I had felt their sting before. So, I watched and feared them.

A slap to my ruined face brings me back to my painful reality.

A man is screaming at me, but I can't understand what he's saying through the buzzing in my ears. One of my eyes is swollen shut, but I can see well enough with the other if I focus.

It's the beautiful man who came with Helios. The ginger. His skin is marred with the fern-like burns I gave him with my electricity a day ago. I didn't hold back; it's quite a feat that he survived.

"Wake up, you motherfucker!" he says, slapping me again.

I grunt from the pain and glare at him. Can't he fucking let me die in peace?

The horned mutant buried his two swords in my gut, and I'm bleeding out. And Helios... Helios left me to die here.

A great boom echoes in the surrounding bunker. Dust rains from the rocky ceiling and the walls. More explosions? Someone is really going at it. I feel a twinge of sadness and regret for my short-lived dream of an underground city. But I find solace in the fact that it'll die with me.

I wish the entire world could die alongside me.

Another slap.

I sneer and reach for the ginger with a weak hand. If only I could burn his insides to a crisp. Cook him alive. But my power is leaking out with my blood, and I can barely move, much less defend myself. The devil's swords pierced the organs that I used to produce electricity.

“How do I start the aircraft below us?” the man asks. “What’s the password?”

So, he found my secret exit. Only a few of my men know about it. He must have torn the information out of one of them. I sent him to the dungeons yesterday, and he escaped. Resourceful, to say the least. Sadly, for him, he’s stuck here with me.

I chuckle faintly. “It’s set to only obey my voice and command...”

The small aircraft was the last resort to save the President of the United States if the bunker fell. But the President and his convoy never reached the bunker, and so the aircraft stayed in the dark for twenty-seven years, accumulating dust. I found the secret exit two years ago and hired a hacker to change its setting to obey my command. I kept it for emergencies.

The ginger slaps me again.

I thought I was too far gone to care, but burning hatred surges to the surface. I want to choke the life out of him. I wish to see his eyes dim as I kill him slowly...

The man disappears from my blurry vision before I can plot fun ways to torture him. He leaves me to die alone, just as Helios did.

Helios...

The little whore left me ten years ago, only to go find himself a new monster. There’s a hole in my chest, and it has nothing to do with the deep wounds his devil gave me. For years, when I thought that Helios had died, I contemplated death in my darkest hours. I imagined that if there was an afterlife, he would be waiting for me on the other side.

But lo and behold, the man is alive, and he has just found himself a new monster to

care for him.

I gasp and dig my nails into my chest. I lie in my growing pool of blood, pondering my short life. I hope there's no afterlife. I'm fucking tired of existing.

The ginger should have finished me off before leaving. Dying is taking me far too long.

A great roar shakes the surrounding mountains. An old god is attacking Bunkertown, I realize. Good. Let it all burn.

I close my eyes. Death can't come soon enough.

It's not death that comes first, but the ginger man. This time, mercifully, he doesn't slap me. There's blood on his clothes and blisters on his face and arms, courtesy of me.

But he looks fierce as he says, "Get on."

He has brought along one of the floating mine carts that we used to clear the rubble in the tunnels. How does he want me to climb on a cart? I'm fucking dying.

He kicks me in the ribs. "Get in!"

I grunt. A few of those ribs might be broken. I hope one pierces my lung, so I can die faster.

I glare at him with all the hate I can muster. "I can't move... you dipshit..."

He kicks me again, this time on my dislocated left shoulder. White light explodes behind my eyelids from the pain.

I might have lost consciousness because when I come back to myself, the ginger is dropping me on the cart. He's stronger than he looks; I must be twice his weight. He leaves me on my side, one leg dragging on the ground, as he pushes me out of the room. I spare one last glance at the large pool of blood on the floor. It looks as dark as oil. A normal human would have died already. But I'm not normal. My mutations make it hard for me to die. Sharing genes with a monster of legend is a blessing and a curse.

Another mighty roar echoes in the mountains, followed by an earthquake. The ginger swears and pushes the cart faster down the stairs and through dark corridors. I almost fall off twice. The emergency lights are our only guides.

"Which god dwells in those mountains?" he asks me.

I say nothing because I don't know. This place was supposed to be secure. No old god was ever seen wandering these parts in more than twenty years.

The tunnels are deadly quiet. Everyone has already evacuated Bunkertown. Not one of my men thought to come and rescue me. So much for loyalty...

We pass a few corpses. All guards. Helios' devil cleaned the place up before reaching my quarters.

My captor finds his way to my secret exit without my help. He must have learned all the twists and turns. There is a small door that looks like a closet. The lock is already broken. He pushes the floating cart inside, walks over disregarded tools and cleaning supplies, and opens the second hidden door. It leads us to a cavernous room under a waterfall, where a state-of-the-art aircraft is waiting for us.

The Firefly was an army prototype before the Rise. It's a slick vessel, painted all black except for the gold lines along the hull. Four aero engines allow it to fly at low

altitude. It can't go high. Its only purpose is to allow fast travel over difficult terrain. It's supposed to be undetectable by other aircraft. Not that it matters nowadays.

The ginger opens the cockpit's vertical door. "Give me full control."

My cheek rests on the side of the cart. I can't move.

"No..." I say.

If he thinks I'm offering him my aircraft on a platter, he's sorely mistaken. He's staying here with me until the underground city caves over our heads.

He pulls out an army knife and angles it under my chin. "Give me control."

I chuckle faintly, blood on my tongue. "Or what...? You're going to kill me? Please, do me the favor..."

He stares me down. Most people would be panicking by now. But he's just... calculating.

He hits me on my dislocated shoulder again with the butt of his knife. I let out a string of insults as pain shoots through my entire body.

He pushes the cart around the cockpit, to the other side, and pulls me over the co-pilot's seat.

"Okay then, you're coming along, Sparky," he says.

For fuck's sake... He really can't let me die in peace. And I hate when people call me stupid names. Some have tried to call me Olive instead of Oliver over the years. They're all dead now.

As he sits on the pilot's chair, the interior lights up, and a male voice says, "Identification, please."

The man turns to me, waiting. I keep my mouth shut.

"You know," he says after a while, a wicked smile on his beautiful face, "if you don't start this aircraft, I'll make sure to keep you alive and let you die slowly. So slowly, you'll curse the day your men captured me and brought me here."

I offer him a weak smile of my own. If he thinks I'm that easy to—

He pulls his army knife out again and stabs toward my dick. I can do nothing but freeze as the blade cuts into my pants, so close to my balls.

"I'll cut your delicate parts off, then make you eat them," he says. "I've heard that mutants like you have monstrous cocks. It'll be difficult to swallow. Then, I'll cauterize the wound with fire to make sure you don't bleed out to death, so I can keep you alive a while longer."

There's a gleam in his dark eyes. He'll enjoy every moment of it, I'm sure.

But he was wrong. I already curse the day my men brought him here.

"Firefly, start the engines," I say quietly.

The aircraft immediately obeys my command, and the engines come alive.

"Hello, Mr. President. Who is sitting in the pilot chair?" the AI asks in a robotic voice.

I hesitate for a moment. I could admit that the ginger is threatening me, and the AI



would refuse to allow him access. The man gives me a pointed look, the blade of his army knife reflecting the artificial light. He must have stolen it from one of my men.

“He’s the one who’ll fly us today...” I say to the Firefly’s intelligence.

There’s no way in hell I’m giving him full command of the aircraft. He’ll just toss me out as soon as I do.

“Very well. Identification, please,” asks the AI.

“Jude,” says the ginger. “I’m Jude.”

Such a cute name for a ruthless creature.

“Nice to meet you, Jude. I’m Fyfe. Where are we going today?”

“Away from this hellhole,” says Jude.

“Would you like to fly manually?” asks Fyfe.

“Fuck no. Just get us out of here. And keep us low. There is something out there that might be waiting for us.”

“Understood.”

The Firefly lurches forward. Water washes away the dust on the windshield as we cross the waterfall.

“Fyfe...” I breathe out. I’m about to pass out from blood loss. “What’s waiting for us is not a human aircraft or human enemies... It’s an animal of a sort. A giant creature...”

“Very well. Re-calibrating evasion protocol,” it says, diving toward the mountainside.

Jude gives me a look.

“Fyfe is a rudimentary AI used in the army back in the day,” I say. “He hasn’t been upgraded since before the Rise. He’s not aware of the world we live in now. He was programmed to defend the President against human threats...”

Jude sighs. “It must have been nice to only fear humans.”

“Not really. We’re the worst threat by far...” I whisper, my eyes drooping.

Humans were the ones who turned lush forests and green pastures into wastelands. Who rendered entire territories too radioactive for life when they dropped their nukes. And they’re the ones who inflicted the worst wounds on my body and soul. Helios, with all his smiles and broken promises, did more damage than any old god on a rampage.

I close my eyes, and I imagine how peaceful death must be.

“Hey, don’t die just yet,” says Jude, slapping me again.

I lurch on my seat, reality sharpening with painful clarity. This man really loves to slap me. A punch, I would understand. But slaps feel so much worse. They bruise one’s ego.

There is a first aid kit open on my lap. I recognize it as the one I kept in the Firefly in case I needed a fast escape. There is also food and water to last us a month. I doubt that I will survive long enough to enjoy it, but Jude certainly will. The fucker.

He pulls out a coagulating shot. This thing costs more than fuel. Without warning, he

stabs me with it in the chest, just above my worst wounds. I wince as the needle pierces the skin. He waits for five seconds for the serum to enter my bloodstream before pulling it out and throwing it behind him. It'll stop the bleeding.

"Why waste it on me?" I ask.

Jude glares. "Dumdumb informed me that if you die, I won't be allowed to fly the aircraft."

"Dumdumb?" I ask.

"Your AI," he explains. "I've encountered a few AIs over the years, but this one wins at being the dumbest and most useless one."

"I am programmed to be of service to the President of the United States," says Fyfe in a toneless voice.

"Yes, yes. Do you know he's not even the President?" Jude retorts, pointing at me. "There are no more United States."

"As long as the President is safe, the nation survives."

Jude groans. "Fucking dumb..."

He pulls out a few tablets of painkillers and other medication, and rams his fingers down my throat. I try to resist, but I'm too weak to do much. Then he shoves a water bottle between my lips and forces me to swallow.

Rage burns my face and eyes. If I survive long enough to regain some strength, I'll fucking kill him. I'll electrocute him until his face melts off his skull.

Jude takes a few steps back, and that's when I notice that we've landed on a rocky path.

"Look at that," he says, pointing to the horizon. "Your underground city is burning." He sounds delighted.

I focus my good eye over the mountains and see the dark smoke rising in the sky. And flying above Bunkertown is a fucking dragon.

I stare, speechless.

"Didn't know that one, either?" Jude asks me, pointing at the faraway dragon. "And I thought I had seen everything." He laughs. "He must have been sleeping in the mountains, and we woke him."

We're really far, but I can still see the leathery wings, long tail, and horns.

Those horns... It looks like my recently acquainted brother—Helios' new lover—was created from the dragon's DNA.

I curse the day when I found that starving kid in the wastelands. The day I opened the door to feelings. Everything would have turned out better if I had really been as heartless as they all say I am.

Something caves in inside me as the dragon breathes fire through the entrance of Bunkertown. That will do it. My home, burning and beyond saving. My shelter. After spending years in the wastelands, I found a place with water, food, and space to grow. People flocked to join my dream. Some even abandoned the Highwaymen to join us. I was building an empire.

Until Helios and his devil brought it all down. And now a fucking dragon is finishing

the job.

I drop my head back on the headrest and close my eyes. I'm fucking tired of seeing the world.

I don't even resist when Jude ties my feet together with one of the shackles we used on our slaves. It feels heavy on my ankles.

I feel a breath on my face, and I can't help but peek at Jude's face just in front of mine.

"Karma's a bitch, huh?" he says with a wicked smile.

His buzzed ginger hair looks soft under the sun. And from this close, I can count the freckles on his cheekbones and nose. The delicate pattern of the burns I gave him took away nothing from his beauty. But his eyes... His eyes are cruel and soulless as he watches me.

It takes all I have not to cringe away from him.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“Mexico City was one of the first major cities to be attacked. We had been monitoring Quetzalcoatl since he emerged from his temple, so we knew where he was heading. We sent our best fighter jets to counter him. All that we managed to do was enrage him. Once he reached the city, he was set on killing and destroying. We called our fighters back. All those civilians... I still hear their screams in my dreams.”

Video transcription of an interview with General Adam McClain, 2046.

“Please, enter a destination,” says Fyfe as soon as Jude is back in the pilot’s chair.

“We’re going to Nevada.”

“Satellite connection not found. Please, check for system errors.”

“You weren’t joking when you said he hasn’t been updated since the Rise,” Jude says to me. “The satellites stopped working decades ago, Dumdumb. Just head north. We’ll do it the good ol’ way. I’ll guide you.”

I would love nothing more than to die in peace, but a question is already burning my lips.

“What’s in Nevada?” I ask in a faint voice.

His answer takes so long to come that I first thought he didn’t hear me.

“We need a hacker to change Dumdumb’s command and give me full control. And I only know one that is skilled enough to hack into a military-grade AI,” he says as the

Firefly's engines come to life.

Hackers are a rare breed. Nowadays, survival is easier if you learn how to hunt, gather, and farm. Technology has been slowly dying out since the Rise. But a few people still try to keep it going with the little means they possess.

And I know only of one place in particular that has a few hackers for hire. That's where I sent for the one who hacked into the Firefly the first time.

"The Traveling Market," I say.

Jude nods. "If we're lucky, it's still in Nevada."

"You have access?" I ask, in awe.

The Traveling Market is one of the most guarded secrets of the Broken States. Twenty years ago, its crazy founders had the idea to build a market on top of three Baggers 301. Before the Rise, they were the biggest vehicles in the world, designed to excavate huge amounts of rubble from mine sites. Three arms as long as a football field—two on top for balance, and one for the excavation wheel—sit on top of the main body that rotates. The bucket wheel alone is as big as a six-story building. Those behemoths—also called the Eiffel Towers on wheels—travel slowly on giant tracks made to reach excavation sites.

I've seen the pictures. They've built bridges to connect the three Baggers together, and platforms to house the market and stalls. People actually live full-time on the Traveling Market.

And as its name indicates, it moves around, making sure that its location constantly changes. Their wide network of traveling merchants informs them of the old gods' movements, allowing them to avoid destruction.

The Traveling Market is the beating heart of our modern trade routes. I've never seen it in person. You need to have access to their radio network to be able to get their coordinates at any given time.

"I do," answers Jude.

"You're not a merchant," I say.

I forbid my men from attacking or putting traveling merchants under slavery. They are vital to all communities. You don't want to be cut off from the trade routes. Without them, there would be no antibiotics, food, tools, messages, fuel... We all need something at some point, and I wasn't stupid enough to ignore it.

They work as a guild, and at its center is the Traveling Market and the King of Merchants. If you save the life of one, the entire guild owes you. And if you hurt one of them... you better hope no one sees you.

"I'm not," says Jude. "But I was... acquainted with one of them. And they gave me access to the market. I don't know where the market is right now, but it's usually either in Nevada or Utah. We need to get close enough to pick up their radio signal. I have a friend in. Now shut the fuck up and try not to die until we reach the market."

I close my eyes, wishing I could die now just to spite him.

The painkillers he gave me are working, and the edge of the pain is dulled enough that I find myself drifting to sleep.

The jellyfish float above me again. I cower at the bottom of the tank, my little arms around my legs and my eyes fixed on the beautiful threats drifting in the tank. It's a small mercy that I don't need to blink underwater.



My younger self thinks that the jellyfish are toying with him. That they're waiting for him to lower his guard so they can attack. But the adult version of me, who knows I'm dreaming, is aware that jellyfish don't think as we do. They are content to follow the current and wait for small prey to be drawn by their colors. Once their victim is in their embrace, their thin tentacles inject them with venom and they get slowly pulled toward their mouth. I keep my eyes wide open, mesmerized and terrified. I expect them to reach for me. One of them drifts to the bottom of the tank. I'm crying, but the tears disappear in the salt water. I try to escape, but the cylinder tank is too narrow to offer much room. The tentacles touch my arms first, then my face. I scream.

My screams, too, are swallowed by the surrounding water.

I jolt awake, gasping for air. The Firefly's cockpit is dark, and I struggle to remember where I am. My ankles are still shackled, and now my hands are tied, too. Jude is sleeping on the pilot's chair. It looks like the Firefly has landed somewhere for the night.

I try to calm my beating heart as memories bubble to the surface of my conscious mind.

I was three years old the first time the scientists dropped me into the tank as punishment. I was so young, my memories could have been constructed.

Except they weren't. I came back to the lab when I was a teenager, and I found the videos. They recorded everything.

The first time they dropped me in, I was delighted. Water was my element, and I loved the feeling of breathing through my gills. I had been watching the jellyfish through the glass for some time. They were so pretty. So, when I finally could touch them, I did. But the pain—oh, the pain—is burned into my memory. They were some of the deadliest jellyfish in the world. I think the scientists had hoped that I would die.

They all hated me. But even as a toddler, my mutations made me extremely resilient. I convulsed at the bottom of the tank for hours, but I lived.

It became their favorite pastime between experiments. Drop the little monster in the tank to have a few hours of peace and quiet.

“A nightmare?” asks Jude in the dark.

I find him watching me. His face is illuminated by the faint light coming from the Firefly’s control panel.

“Yes.”

I don’t know why I’m even answering.

“Good. I hope it keeps you awake all night,” he says before closing his eyes again.

His hatred is strangely casual and familiar, as if it’s something he’s used to. Something he has tamed. Mine has always been a wild thing.

Even my nightmares can’t stop me from falling into a slumber so similar to a coma.

Fyfe’s voice pulls me out of restless sleep a few hours later.

“Unidentified aircraft incoming.”

The sun is rising, and the sky is turning three shades of orange.

“Fuck...” says Jude. “It’s not an aircraft. Dumdumb, turn off all the lights. We need to go dark.” He’s craning his neck to watch the sky.

The AI obeys immediately, and the Firefly turns off entirely. With the morning light, I can see that we landed in the middle of a rocky formation. It hides the aircraft from prying eyes coming from the wasteland, but not the ones in the sky. And it's from the sky that the threat is coming. An old god is flying toward us.

Did the dragon follow us all the way here?

We wait, barely allowing ourselves to breathe, as the giant creature gets closer. Will they notice the slick aircraft among the rocks?

His body is long. It undulates in the sky, like a snake in water. Two large wings carry him swiftly over the wastelands. As he flies above us, I notice the red underbelly. He flies past us in a great swishing noise. In a matter of seconds, he has flown away from us.

"Fuck..." Jude says.

"Was that Quetzalcoatl?" I ask.

What is the feathered serpent from Central Mexico doing so far north?

Jude nods. "He's going north. Maybe the Amazon forest is burning again, and he's looking to relocate."

That's not a comforting thought. We have enough old gods in North America as it is.

While I wonder how the hell I survived the night, Jude rummages through the back of the Firefly. Soon, the smell of coffee and food wafts over me. This food was meant for me, but now it feeds my captor.

At some point, he comes back to the cockpit and drops a plastic plate on my lap.

There is some kind of canned meat and vegetables on it. He places a fork in my palm and unties the rope. I barely have the strength to lift my head, much less my hands.

“Eat,” he says.

“Why?” I ask.

What’s the fucking point of feeding me if it’s to kill me as soon as we reach the Traveling Market?

“Because you need to stay alive long enough to let me reach the hacker. I don’t know how far the market is or how long it’ll take us to find it.”

Fair enough. But I’m not hungry. My organs are a mess. I don’t know how I’m even still alive. I was sure the devil pierced some vital parts.

I say nothing, and I don’t move a finger. Jude’s eyes turn murderous.

“Eat,” he repeats between clenched teeth.

When I fail to obey, he pulls out his army knife again and angles it over my dick. It looks like his favorite move. I must admit, it’s the only threat that could get through most men, myself included.

I close my eyes and try to lift my fork. I’m too fucking weak.

“Gods damn it,” Jude says.

Seconds later, I feel the fork push against my lips. I open my mouth and let him force-feed me. I choose my battles.

Or, more accurately, I'm losing all the battles.

The food tastes like ashes. It takes me all I have to chew and swallow. After three bites, I shake my head faintly to inform him that I can't take another one.

Jude groans and says, "Gods spare me from broken monsters."

I chuckle. Broken monster indeed.

He disappears again, and he comes back with more medication. Like last night, he rams them down my throat. I bite his fingers and he punches me in the face. I groan, but I keep the tablets on my tongue. I'll take anything that can help with the pain.

They taste bitter. Just like my entire life.

Jude pushes the bottle forcefully between my lips and gives me more water that I can swallow. I cough as the liquid runs down my trachea and into my lungs.

"I'll kill you for all of this..." I say once I have regained enough strength.

Jude laughs. "Yeah, right. Start by holding your head first, then we can talk."

Shithead.

He settles on the pilot's chair and we're off again.

The Firefly uses a new generation of solar-powered engines. They are much more efficient than what the rest of the world was using before the Rise. It can recharge while we fly, and keep going for days as long as the sun shines. A true marvel of technology. And now it's in the hands of this little shit.

I need to find a way to crash us before we can reach the Traveling Market.

We fly for hours, and I don't have the strength to move, much less hijack the Firefly.

Traveling in the wastelands has never been so easy. Every hour, Jude checks the radio frequency, sending messages to his friends in the Traveling Market.

The time merges into one long agony filled with nightmares and pain. Jude's voice is strangely comforting as he talks on the radio. It reminds me that I'm still alive and not a prisoner of my dreams for eternity.

Until, at some point around nightfall, a voice answers him.

"Jude, is that you?" says a man. Or it might be a teenager, judging by the tone.

Jude grabs the microphone hurriedly. "Hey, Perri. Yes, it's me."

"You asshole! I've missed you! I thought you were dead."

"Sorry. I was in a bind. The slave trade and all that." At that, he gives me a pointed look.

"Shit. Again? Are you okay?" asks his friend. He sounds genuinely worried.

"Yeah. I was just on my way to see you. I miss you too. And I have a little favor to ask."

"You're... coming to the market?"

"I am. I just need the coordinates."

“Jude. You know it’s not a good idea... Not after the last time. He’ll kill you.”

“He won’t if he doesn’t know I’m here. I’ll come tonight, under the cover of darkness. Tell Stellan to keep the hangar open. I’ll fly in.”

“Fly?”

“You’ll see.”

“Okay... But Stellan will fucking kill you, too.”

“I know. But the grump can get in line.”

It sounds like Jude has many enemies. I can’t say I’m surprised.

As we get closer to the coordinates, Jude asks Fyfe to land in the ruins of a small town called Eureka. He doesn’t try to feed me again. He has no reason to waste food now that we’re reaching the market. It took us less than two days.

“We should seek assistance, Mr. President,” says Fyfe. “Your injuries look serious.”

It’s not the first time since our departure that the AI brought up my health, to Jude’s irritation.

“He deserves it,” says Jude, eyeing me.

I smile to rile him. “Why, holding a grudge for a few burns?”

The fern-like burns—the Lichtenberg figures—on his face and arms, are elegant. I always wondered why my electricity left such pretty scars.

“No. Because you’re a rapey motherfucker, an abuser, and a slaver.” He leans toward me. “And when I have no more use for you, I’ll take great pleasure in killing you for what you did to Helios.” He smiles at that.

I say nothing as his words rattle my bones. Helios told him things about me... Terrible things, it seems.

We spend the next few hours waiting inside the Firefly. Jude doesn’t dare to go far from his new shining toy, and rightly so. An aircraft like this is worth killing for. Maybe I should have left a long time ago with it. I should have spent my life traveling alone instead of trying to build fruitless dreams after dreams. I took the wrong path when I decided to give my heart to a wretched teenager I found in the wastelands. I saw my salvation in Helios. He was so kind and sweet. I thought he saw right through me, to my bones. But ultimately, he only saw the monster.

It’s around four in the morning that Jude flies us to the Traveling Market. He makes sure that Fyfe flies low, informing me that they keep a watchful eye over the sky. They know most of the threats coming from the wastelands thanks to their wide network of radio communications. There are patrols circling around the market for miles, but they are easily avoided with the Firefly’s radar.

As we reach the top of a hill, the market appears. At this hour, most of the lights have been turned off, but the structure is still breathtaking. I knew it was huge; I’ve seen the pictures. But knowing is entirely different from seeing it. The nine arms are connected by long rope bridges, swinging in the desert wind. They have built stalls and structures in every free space on the giant vehicles. Some are even hanging from the arms. A beautiful and practical mess.

I’m glad that I can see it before kicking the bucket.



## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“The RWE Bagger was first crowned the largest land vehicle in the world at the end of the twentieth century. The first one ever used was in Germany. A few decades later, the US ordered three of those to be used on their excavation sites. They improved the technology and made them easier to operate. They had been excavating tons of earth for a few years when the Rise happened. They stayed unused for a few more years, until four men had the idea to build the Traveling Market on top of them. Their insane idea, against all odds, has survived for almost twenty years now.”

Extract from *The Traveling Market and its King* by Nolan Sigmond, published in 2062.

Jude guides Fyfe to the open hangar on the lower side of one of the Baggers. There is a huge ramp connecting it to the ground, allowing vehicles to climb. The ramp is held by massive chains, the links as big as a human's head.

The Firefly is stealthy as it gets, and yet a man is standing at the end of the hangar, gun in hand. The artificial light reveals his serious face. As soon as we land, he aims the gun at us.

“Hey now,” says Jude, coming out of the Firefly. “That’s no way to greet an old friend, Stellan.” Fyfe has opened both doors simultaneously.

“You’re not a friend of mine,” says Stellan. “I only tolerate you because of Perri.”

Stellan is tall and well-built, with blonde hair and a sharp jawline. He’s wearing a blue overall tied at the waist. There are other vehicles in the hangar. It looks like they’re being repaired. He must be a mechanic. Another extremely prized skill in the

world after the Rise.

Jude sighs. “I love you, too.”

“You didn’t warn us that you would come accompanied,” Stellan says, gesturing to me with the barrel of his gun.

“Oh, him? He’s a ghost. Or soon to be,” Jude says. “I just needed him to fly the aircraft. As soon as Perri manages to hack into the AI, I’ll kill him myself. He’s too weak to cause trouble.”

I do my best to convey my hatred in my eyes as I glare at the both of them.

“Wait until you’re back in the wastelands before doing it,” says Stellan. “Don’t let Perri know about it. You know how he is.”

“I know.”

Stellan lowers his gun. “Move him inside. I have people coming in the morning to pick up their rover.”

Jude nods. “I’ll need your help. He’s a dead weight.”

Both men carry me inside, and I never wished for my electricity more. I just want to burn their entrails.

Stellan grimaces as they drop me on an old couch. “He smells like death,” he says, eyeing my bloody clothes and the crusty wounds on my chest.

I can’t say he’s wrong. I’m a corpse hanging onto life.

“Jude!” comes a voice from the other room.

It’s the one who answered the radio signal.

A young man appears and throws himself into Jude’s arms. He has long brown hair tied in a messy braid. Perri is small, even compared to Jude’s thin frame. Just like Stellan, he looks to be in his twenties. He has on a long pink shirt and shorts.

“Hey, sweetheart,” says Jude with a bright smile.

I blink. There is no hidden shadow lurking in that smile. None of the usual cruelty that I’ve been used to for the past two days.

“You dickhead,” retorts Perri, holding the other man in a tight embrace. “I was worried sick.”

Stellan watches them with a strange look. Worry, perhaps.

“I’m sorry,” Jude says. “I had to leave fast. I couldn’t say goodbye.” He kisses the top of his head.

Perri tightens his embrace even more. “I forgive you.”

Stellan smiles at last, watching them with something akin to fondness etched on his face.

Envy burns its way through my entire being. Those three share something deep, something I always craved. I thought I had it with Helios years ago, before he ran away from me. I close my eyes.

“Who is that? And why is he tied up?” asks Perri after a moment.

He's watching me, something like shock and pity on his pretty face. It's much worse than Jude's hatred or Stellan's disinterest.

"No one of importance," says Jude, pulling him back to him. "Don't mind him. He's my prisoner."

Perri's eyes widen. "Your prisoner? Why?"

Stellan walks to him and runs his fingers through his hair affectionately. "Go back to bed, love. You can rest for a few more hours before sunrise."

But Perri shakes his head. "I want to catch up with Jude."

"Then let's go eat breakfast."

And the three of them disappear into another room.

I take a moment to observe my new prison. The walls are made of insulated metal to keep the air conditioning inside and survive the desert heat during the day. A traveling merchant once joked that a tornado had ripped the market to pieces a few years ago. In less than three days, it was back to its former glory. The entire market is built to be lightweight and ready to be disassembled on demand.

The room is small but practical. There are two couches, one chair, and cupboards reaching to the ceiling. Everything is bolted to the walls and floor.

If I wasn't on the brink of death, I would explore the Traveling Market to understand how they make it work. How do they manage their waste? And how do they get enough water for all the traveling merchants and inhabitants of the market? Stellan and Perri look like they live here full-time.

I fall asleep before knowing it, and when I open my eyes again, Jude is nudging my face with a fork. The four points dig into my cheek.

I jolt, but the movement cost me. I grunt, as pain radiates through my chest.

“I’ve brought you food,” Jude says.

He has changed clothes since our arrival at the market. He’s no longer in the simple military attire we gave him in Bunkertown. He’s now wearing blue jeans and a black tank top. I think those are Perri’s clothes. They’re very snug.

“Why?” I croak, glaring at him.

“Because Perri and Stellan looked at the Firefly and told me that it will take a few days to hack it. Dumdumb might be stupid, but he’s hard to hack. I need you to stay alive a while longer, little monster.”

I hired a hacker two years ago. It took him a week to get into the Firefly’s core.

“I’ll show you who’s little...” I say, glaring.

I expect Jude to punch me, but he snorts with derision instead. “I would like to see that.”

I grind my teeth. I’ve not felt that powerless since my childhood in the lab.

He offers me a bite of what looks like meat. At first, I try to ignore his attempt at feeding me just to spite him. But he grabs for my throat and squeezes hard enough to cut my airflow. As soon as my vision darkens and my mouth goes a little slack, he pushes the fork between my lips.

Hateful bastard.

Unlike me, he seems like he's enjoying it. It's another kind of torture, to force me while I'm at my most vulnerable. He loves having power over me.

After a few bites, I know that I will just get sick all over the couch if he forces me to eat more, so I ask a question to distract him.

"Is Perri your lover?"

Jude smiles but shakes his head. "Nah. We hooked up once when I first came to the market years ago. We had fun, and I stayed around for a few days. But he's not really my type. He's too sweet. Too fragile. And either way, as soon as I realized Stellan was in the picture, I knew we should just be friends."

"Why? Are they...?"

"Yes, and no. It's complicated," he explains. "They're childhood friends and they fuck, but they're not lovers. They're beyond that, if you ask any of them. Soulmates. They can't be apart from each other. They can't live and be happy without each other, but they still expect to find lovers. They aren't enough to satisfy one another. They're weird, I know. I've learned to navigate around them. Sometimes, they even share partners. But none of their lovers ever stay. They come in a strange package. You can't have one without the other, and you have to accept sharing them for life."

I stare, eyebrows raised. Sharing was never my forte. I understand why no one stuck around.

Jude finishes the plate of food. My eyes fall on his beautiful lips as he licks a drop of sauce. He catches me in the act and snickers.

“In your dreams, little monster,” he says before disappearing into the next room.

Rage rises to the surface. He’s so full of himself. The only reason I would kiss his lips would be to rip them with my teeth. I want to ruin that pretty face of his.

The short exchange with Jude exhausted me, and I let my head drop back on the couch. For an hour, I contemplated how my life went to shit in less than three days. I was a king in my own right. I ruled over my underground city with a tight fist. And yet, here I am. A crusty mutant at the mercy of a little shit.

“What have you done to find yourself in this predicament?” asks someone from the door.

I turn my head and find Perri observing me.

“I was too powerful,” I say.

“That sounds like an oversimplification and a fancy way to say that you were an asshole.”

I frown at him. I should kill him for the disrespect as soon as I’m able to move a finger.

He walks toward me with a metal box and sits at my side, unaware of my murderous thoughts. He pulls out a pair of scissors, and my mind focuses on the possibilities. If I can overpower him now and steal them, I could get a chance at stabbing Jude in the eye.

“Don’t move. I need to cut your clothes to assess your wounds,” Perri says.

My dark fantasies dissipate like smoke. I can only stare as he gently cuts my clothes

to free my chest and arms. I shiver under his touch. The recent days have left me starved for kindness and human touch. Especially after Helios broke my heart irremediably.

Perri grimaces as he sees my wounds.

“Gods... How are you still alive?” he says.

“I’ve been wondering the same thing.”

He goes to the kitchen and comes back with a bowl of clear water and a cloth. He starts washing away the dried blood on my chest, neck, and arms. I tense, knowing where this is going. Knowing what he’s about to realize.

Perri’s hand stops, and his eyes widen as he notices the dark veins all over my body reaching to my neck. They were hidden under all the blood.

“You’re a mutant,” he says after a few seconds.

I’m just glad he didn’t say monster.

I nod. “I am.”

My blood is still red, but it’s thicker, which turns my biggest veins a darker shade than normal humans.

He searches my face, putting the pieces together. I’m half Korean, half American. And very tall. Easily recognizable.

“You’re that mutant from the South. The one who’s at the origin of the slave trade.”



I keep my mouth shut.

His eyes harden. It looks strange on such a kind face. But surprisingly, he starts cleaning my wounds again, in silence this time. He helps me into an old Hawaiian shirt. It's yellow with pink and blue flowers. I balk at the style, but beggars can't be choosers. At least, it's cleaner than the rest of me.

He leaves without a second glance, but says, before disappearing into the other room, "You deserve to be in chains for what you did."

I certainly do. The fact that I'm a monster has never been refuted, even by me.

A few minutes later, Stellan walks into the room with some kind of tool in hand. He does a double take when he sees my shirt and sighs. He walks hurriedly to the other room, and his voice rises over the ruckus of the waking market as he berates Perri for his 'reckless behaviors and stupidly kind heart'.

When he comes back into the room, he points the tool at me and says, "You touch him, or even look at him wrong, and I'll kill you right here and throw your corpse to the coyotes."

I nod. This is the kind of protective streak I can relate to. If Stellan loves Perri as much as I loved Helios, I understand.

He disappears again into the hangar where he started working on vehicles an hour ago. I heard them talk about covering the Firefly with a tarp during the day and working on it at night, so no customer sees it and starts asking unwanted questions.

The day goes by, and I sleep. My rest is plagued by nightmares. The jellyfish are not the only ones to visit my dreams. Helios, too. I see him when he was a teenager, so open and sweet.

But his face morphs into the grown-up man I met five days ago. A man who hates me and wants me dead.

When I wake up some time later, night has fallen. There are no sign of my captors except for the bottle of water and a sandwich on my lap. Made with corn flour, if the color is any indication. Something tells me that it's courtesy of Perri. Jude would have just choked me with it. I manage to bring it to my mouth and take a small bite. Against all odds, it looks like I'm regaining strength. I knew I was resilient, but I didn't expect to survive two swords in the gut. But there is still no trace of my electricity. I don't feel a spark.

My hand drops back on my lap. It's already too much effort.

I chew and make a face. It's a peanut butter sandwich. I fucking hate peanut butter.

It must have been written all over my face because Jude says as he walks in, "Not so fond of peanuts? Good. That's all I'll feed you from now on."

"Fuck you," I say, my voice rough from spending too much time sleeping.

Jude laughs. "In your dreams, Sparky."

I do my best to convey all of my hate in my glare.

He's not cowered one bit and sits on the couch. "Perri started hacking into the Firefly two hours ago. Dumdumb is resisting, but not for long. Perri is the best hacker in the wastelands. So, how do you want to go?"

"What?" I ask. Even though I was ready to ignore him thoroughly. But something about him just always raises my hackles.

“I could throw you from the Firefly and watch you splatter on the ground. Or a bullet in the head, but that would be too quick. What’s the fun in that? I’m personally a big fan of knives. They do the trick nicely, but it tends to be messy. I don’t want to dirty the Firefly.” As he talks, his hateful smile grows. He’s taking so much pleasure in threatening me.

But I’m not easily frightened. The only person who really instilled fear in me was my father.

“Your lack of imagination is not surprising,” I say calmly, holding his stare.

Jude’s smile turns wicked. But right as he’s about to retort something, Stellan rushes into the room.

“You’ve been found,” the mechanic says, out of breath. “The King is coming.”

Jude jumps on his feet in a blink. “Shit.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“The Traveling Market has been ruled for three years now by the King of Merchants. The story goes, he was traded as a toddler to a merchant in the wastelands. The fool brought the child back to the market, caged like an animal. He was eager to show his prize; he possessed a mutant child, after all. The four founders of the Traveling Market were not happy. They followed tight rules of honor and trade. They didn’t dabble in human trafficking. They punished the man and cared for the child. He was raised in the market, and years later became its ruler when the founders died one by one. Do not let his title fool you. He’s far from what you must imagine. He’s not a kind merchant sitting on a throne surrounded by wares. He’s a ruthless ruler who has ensured for years that the market survives against all threats, even before he was crowned. Alastair the First is to be respected and feared.”

Extract from *The Traveling Market and its King* by Nolan Sigmond, published in 2062.

Jude points at me. “Help me get him in the Firefly! We’re leaving.”

Stellan doesn’t hesitate to grab me under the arms while Jude gets my legs. The indignity of being carried like a sack of potatoes almost makes me forget my wounds for a moment. Almost. I grind my teeth as pain shoots through my entire body.

Once we get into the hangar, Perri looks up from his computer screen. They installed a desk for him to work while being plugged into the Firefly.

“What?” he asks, confused by our sudden arrival.

“Unplug everything!” explains Stellan. “The King is coming.”

To his credit, Perri doesn't miss a beat.

"Dang it!" he says, pulling the wires out. "I didn't even get into its core!"

The men throw me irreverently on the passenger's seat.

Jude jumps on the pilot's chair. "Dumdumb, start the engines!"

"Welcome back, Mr. President. Mr Jude," says Fyfe, lighting up.

The engines come to life, and not a second too soon as men pour into the hangar, armed to the teeth.

"Fuck! Dumdumb, go! Go!" shouts Jude, just as the King of Merchants walks in.

My brother is too famous and recognizable. He's Afro-American, with an under-shave and dense white locks. I can't see them from here, but I know he has silver eyes. And those eyes must be stormy as he orders at his men to fire.

Bullets ricochet on the Firefly's windshield and hull as it backs out of the hangar. Thankfully, it's bulletproof.

"Aero engine number four damaged," announces Fyfe as we take to the sky. "Low altitude advised in case of imminent failure."

Jude swears as the Firefly dives toward the ground. We leave a cloud of dust behind us.

"What have you done to anger the King of Merchants?" I can't help but ask.

Jude groans loudly. "Remember when I said I came to the market years ago? Well,

we were lovers for a time, after I hooked up with Perri. And I might have stolen one of his vehicles one night, with food and stuff, and disappeared into the wastelands without a second glance.”

“You stole from the King of Merchants?” I say, dumbfounded.

In the code of merchants, stealing is one of the worst offenses.

“Yeah... Not my brightest idea,” Jude admits.

I’m held prisoner by a fucking moron.

“Will Perri and Stellan be okay?” I ask.

Jude offers me a quizzical look, certainly surprised that I care. To be honest, I couldn’t care less about Stellan, but Perri was kind to me. He reminded me of Helios years ago.

“Yeah. They’ll be fine. They’re the King’s best hacker and mechanic. He needs them.”

“A few vehicles are following us,” Fyfe informs us.

A video feed appears on one of the screens, showing us rovers and cars giving chase.

“Fuck. He was ready for that eventuality,” says Jude, biting his bottom lip. “What are you smiling about?” he says to me when he notices the grin on my face.

“I kind of wish they get us now, just to see what he’ll do to you.”

“And what do you think he’ll do to you?” he retorts. “I’ve heard that encounters

among mutants rarely end well. You're as territorial as the old gods you were created from."

I nod. I have wounds in my gut and chest that attest to that. But at this point, I don't fucking care anymore.

"As long as he lets me watch while he kills you first, I'll die happy," I say.

Jude snorts. "Motherfucker."

The Firefly flies low among the rocks. Alerts light up the screens and control panel as more vehicles join the chase from their hideouts in the wastelands. The Traveling Market's entire defense forces are after us. It must cost an arm in fuel.

"I really pissed him off," Jude muses. He almost sounds proud of himself.

I have to admit, he has balls. It seems that antagonizing mutants like the King of Merchant or me is a past-time for him.

Luckily, the Firefly is faster than the vehicles, thanks to the fact that it's not being slowed by the terrain, even with a damaged aero engine.

As we crest a rocky hill and drop to the other side, the wastelands expand to the horizon. But the horizon is blocked by an armada of military trucks, cars, and rovers. I gape, amazed by the King of Merchants' resources.

"Shit!" shouts Jude. "The Highwaymen!"

I frown. He's right, those are not the King's men. The blood-red flags of the infamous group of nomads, the Highwaymen, fly in the wind on top of most vehicles. I've heard rumors lately that they've been more active. They were always the biggest

threats to traveling merchants, and it looks like they are now in an open war.

I've killed dozens of them over the years myself.

"You need to fly us higher, Dumdumb!" says Jude.

"Impossible. The damaged aero engine might explode and kill the President in the crash," says the AI.

Jude groans. I can't help but laugh.

Behind us, the King's little army crested the hill, still giving chase.

"Dumdumb, do you have weapons?" asks Jude.

"The Firefly was designed to evade and protect the President of the United States. It isn't equipped to bring the President into dangerous situations."

Jude sighs. "Well, we are in a dangerous situation, whether you want it or not."

The Highwaymen open fire toward the King's men, and we stand right in the middle. The Firefly veers to the side and I find myself glued to the chair with the G force and I almost bite my tongue off.

"Please, fasten your seatbelt," Fyfe says. "Evading protocol activated."

Jude swears and helps me put mine on; I still can't raise my arms. It's some kind of harness that goes over the shoulders and chest. We're strapped in just in time for the Firefly to swerve to avoid an honest-to-gods rocket. It explodes on one of the King's trucks behind us. It looks like the Highwaymen have access to military weaponry. It's not a comforting thought.



I grind my teeth against the pain. Every movement hurts.

The two armies clash behind us as Fyfe takes us away, over the rocky hills, deep into the wastelands.

“Will the King survive?” I ask.

Jude sighs. “Oh yes. That man is a freak of nature, just like you.” Freak of nature, and not monster. “The Highwaymen have been attacking the market for a while now. They never got close. And tonight, the market will relocate. And while it moves location, they will eradicate all the Highwaymen they find in the surrounding wastelands.”

It sounds like an awful waste of soldiers and resources.

“Why do the Highwaymen do it?” I say.

“I don’t fucking know. They’ve always been a reckless bunch, but it’s gotten worse lately.”

He watches the horizon, a serious expression on his beautiful face. I wonder if he’s worried about his past lover, the King of Merchant.

Fyfe flies for twenty minutes before announcing, “Safe landing protocol activated. Damage to the aero engine must be inspected.”

Jude sighs as the Firefly lands at the entrance of a wide cave on a small mountain range. I think we’re still in Nevada. The mountains are barren and depressing. I already miss Yosemite.

Jude gets out and inspects the damage to the engine. Then he walks to the cave. He

comes back a moment later.

“Yeah, one of the blades is broken. Dumdumb, I think you can fit inside,” he says, pointing at the cave. “We should spend a few days here, to wait for the Highwaymen to disperse. Then we can find someone to do the repairs.”

The Firefly enters the cave and settles in the shade. We’ll be hidden from eyes in the sky. The smell of water hits me.

The suspicion is confirmed when Jude says, “There’s a river deeper into the cave.”

My genes react to the smell, and happiness bubbles to the surface. There is a reason why I decided to build an underground city, so close to a subterranean river. My mutations crave such an environment. My old god dwells deep into the underwater caves of Venezuela.

I watch as Jude sets up a camp inside the cave. The Firefly is well equipped for survival. There are thermal blankets and sleeping bags. And because the President liked his comfort, even during a mad flight, they also packed folding chairs and a table. Jude could sleep in the aircraft again. There is a bed on top of the cupboards, but it’s close to the roof and a little claustrophobic. I don’t blame him for wanting to sleep on the mossy ground of the wide cave.

“Hey, asshole,” I call out at some point.

Jude’s eyes are cold as he looks up. “Is it me you’re calling an asshole? Me, the kind soul who is feeding you and keeping you alive?”

“I have an urgent need,” I say.

“Hold it.”

“I’ve been holding it for two days. If you don’t help me right now, I’ll soil the seat of your beautiful new aircraft,” I say calmly.

To be honest, the only reason I didn’t need to go sooner was because I sweated out most of the water in my body during the two feverish nights I survived. But I can’t delay bodily functions any longer. Even though I’m still surprised that I can even have bodily functions. It looks like I’m not dying anymore.

Too bad.

Jude sighs. “Spare me from useless monsters...”

He enters the Firefly once again and pulls me out of my chair by the armpits. It takes all I have not to groan from the pain. I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of my suffering.

“Gods, Stellan was right... You smell like death,” he says.

“That’s because I almost died,” I retort.

“Oh, stop whispering sweet nothings to me.”

I glare at him and he laughs.

He half carries me half drags me to the fancy little toilet at the back of the Firefly. The President wasn’t expected to shit in nature.

Surprisingly, he gives me some privacy and goes back outside. I hold on to the metal rails so not to fall headfirst as I pull my torn pants down. Once I have done my business, I let myself slide to the floor. I wait, out of breath, for what feels like an eternity. I know there are weapons in the many cupboards, but Jude wasn’t dumb

enough to let me get access to them. He has locked them up; I've seen the set of keys around his neck.

After a moment, he comes back to check on me. He drags me outside this time. I land heavily on the cave's floor. Before I have time to complain, he pulls me farther into the cave.

"What are you doing?" I ask, panic rising.

"Giving you a bath. I can't stand to share a space with your rotten ass."

He leaves me near a natural pool deeper into the cave. He goes back to the Firefly and brings back a solar lamp, a bar of soap, and a pair of scissors. He takes off the shirt Perri gave me with care, but cuts my pants right off my legs. He doesn't hesitate to cut my underwear, either. He stares at my cock for a moment. I know I'm really big, even when soft. But what caught his attention must be the darker veins that converge to the head of my dick, turning it almost black.

"Are you done ogling?" I say.

"As if you have anything to tempt me."

Without warning, he rolls me to the side, and I plunge into the cold water.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“At the beginning of the Revival Project, we needed not only DNA from the old gods, but also the genetic material to create a human being. So, we looked around for healthy men and women, and took their eggs and spermatozooids. The soldiers who were working to protect us were a good gene pool to use. Of course, we never told any of them which material ended up being used. We grew the embryos in our labs, in tanks. But some of our mutant children looked so familiar, there was no hiding their origins to our teams.”

Testimony from Allan Rickford, a scientist who worked on the Revival Project, 2056.

Panic explodes in my chest as I fall into the cold water. My genes might want me to like dark and humid places, but they're not strong enough to ignore past trauma. I fucking hate being submerged. It reminds me of all the times the scientists dropped me into the jellyfish tank. My arms thrash feebly, but I'm too weak to swim. My gills start working automatically, allowing me to breathe underwater.

Without my electricity, I can't see a thing. But thirty seconds later, Jude joins me in the water. He pulls me to the surface and sits me on a rock, half immersed. I offer him a glare full of hatred.

But my eyes widen when I realize he's naked, too. The solar lamp's blue light outlines his body in artful lines. Water drips from his short ginger hair, then slides down his freckled shoulders and slim body. He's fucking beautiful.

He's similar to the jellyfish who haunt my past and my dreams, I realize. Beautiful but deadly when you get too close.

“Who’s ogling now?” he says with a wicked smile.

I send him a weak punch, and he dodges it easily. He laughs and bends over the side of the natural pool to grab the soap. I get a premium view of his backside. The hateful bastard is gorgeous, and I hate him even more for it as I feel my cock give a happy twinge. It’s certain now, I’m not on death’s door anymore.

Without asking for consent, Jude rubs the soap all over my chest, arms, face, and hair. It stings like a bitch. My eyes are burning.

“Look at us,” he says. “I’m giving you a fucking bath in a cave. Who would have thought?”

I try to bite his hand as it gets close to my face again. He swats me away easily.

He washes me in silence for a while, and I stop resisting. I won’t lie, it feels good to be finally clean.

“Your wounds are closing up. It must be nice to be a mutant. And you’re in luck; I’m taking care of you better than you ever did your slaves,” he says.

His voice has turned cold. Without warning, he pushes my head underwater. I try not to show fear as he rinses my hair. He’s taking longer just to be mean. Now the soap stings my gills. They’re hidden behind my ears. He touches them with his fingers a few times without noticing.

He pulls me up at last, higher on the rock, and slides the soap to my dick. I gasp against my will.

“What?” he asks with a little smile. “You don’t like being touched without consent? Strange. I thought you were into it, considering how you abused Helios for two years

when he was a kid.”

His words echo in the cave, and they bury themselves in my mind like claws.

“He—he told you that?” I whisper.

Helios thinks I abused him sexually. Somehow, somewhere down the line, our experiences of the same events diverged completely. We were both teenagers, but where I remember love and intimacy, he remembers something else entirely...

There’s a buzzing in my ears.

“Oh, yes. I’ve also seen the scars,” he points at his fern-like scars, so similar to the ones I gave Helios a few times.

I always hated myself when I hurt him. I couldn’t control my electricity for years. It burst out of me with some emotions. Rage, jealousy, fear...

“It’s okay... Oliver. I’m okay...” Helios repeated when I cried for forgiveness.

But he never cried when I hurt him. He never complained, called me a monster, or pushed me away. Maybe he should have.

He didn’t just run away because he didn’t love me anymore. He ran away because he hated my touch. He hated me.

I’m the fucking monster in his story.

“Come, now. Tears? Really?” says Jude.

I didn’t realize I was crying. I wish the solar lamp wasn’t so bright. I wish I was back

underwater and that I could drown.

Jude throws the soap at my chest, and I catch it out of reflex. “Clean yourself down there. There’s still crusted blood everywhere.”

He climbs out of the pool and leaves me to fend for myself with the soap. I clean my intimate parts and legs slowly and mechanically, as best as my weak body lets me as my thoughts rage like a hurricane.

I sit in the water for a long time. Jude might expect me to suffer from the cold, but I don’t.

I suffer enough with the harsh reality he has painted around my memories, anyway. My love story—the foundation of my adult life and my reason to live for years—dissipated like smoke under the sun.

It’s somehow worse to know Helios was right to leave me for his devil. I can’t blame him and pretend he’s just a callous person. He didn’t abandon me. He ran away from me.

At some point, Jude realizes that punishing me is not worth risking my death and losing control of the Firefly, and he pulls me out of the freezing water. He wraps me in a blanket and drags me to the fire he has built. The cave is so wide, the smoke disappears far above our heads. He helps me get into a new pair of cargo pants he brought back from the Firefly—certainly given by Stellan and Perri with the rest of our new supplies—and the Hawaiian shirt.

I lie over the sleeping bag and close my eyes.

Later, when he tries to feed me, I pretend to be asleep, no matter how many times he stabs me in the cheek with a fork.



Two days fly by without us sharing even a word. Jude is content to talk to Fyfe, as fruitless as those exchanges might be. Twice a day, he leaves a plate at my side with food. I don't eat. I'm not hungry. And yet, against my will, my body is slowly healing. I can feel a spark in my chest, a sign that my organs are building electricity anew. I can move again. At least, enough to crawl a little farther away in the cave to relieve myself when needed. Jude watches my every move but doesn't say a word.

It's on the third night that he finally breaks the silence.

"There are faster ways to die than starving yourself," he says over the fire.

I hesitate for a moment, then say, "As if you would let me die."

"You're right. I can't afford to let you die. So, eat. I promise you that as soon as I have full control over the Firefly, I'll bury a bullet in your brain."

"How kind of you." My voice sounds hollow even to my own ears.

I wouldn't kill myself. I'm not such a coward as to give up entirely. Or just not brave enough to end it. I'm just... not hungry. Feelings like hunger, pain, discomfort are overshadowed by the vast emptiness of my life. I've built sandcastles after sandcastles, trying to pretend that all this mess has a meaning.

I'm the little monster that should have never escaped the lab.

"They tried to kill me, you know?" I say.

"Who did? Because I would like a word with them. They obviously failed miserably," Jude jokes.

"The scientists who created me."

That seems to take the wind out of his sails. “When?” he asks after a pause.

“When I was five. Well, they tried before, but with no real intent. But when they announced that the Revival Project had been abandoned, they couldn’t wait to get rid of me. They couldn’t approach me, thanks to my electricity, so they asked one of the soldiers for his gun. Instead, Sergeant Kang killed them all. Then he sedated me and carried me out of the lab, and into the wilds.”

Jude frowns. “Why?”

“Because I was his son. Or at least, partially. He was the only Asian in the lab, and he had been one of the people they had asked for the gene pool. I looked too much like him to be ignored. And he saw some legacy in me. He kept me alive for years.”

Years that hadn’t been much better than the ones in the lab. Sergeant Kang Jae-Sun was another kind of monster. A cold man, with a soul that never saw the light.

“What happened to him?” Jude asks.

“I killed him.”

I never told this to anyone. Especially not Helios. When I found him in the wastelands, starved and alone, he had just lost his mother. I couldn’t tell him that I killed my only parent.

Jude hums. “So, patricide, too. You have quite the set of skills.” When I fail to comment, he continues, “Not that I can blame you. I regret not having done the same for mine. My whole family, to be honest.” I sense a story there, but he’s not inclined to share as he says instead, “Eat. Don’t make me force you. You know I’ll enjoy it.”

But his threat, for once, has no real bite.

I grab the plate he left near my sleeping bag. It contains beans and meat from one of the jars in the Firefly's pantry. I chew slowly and mechanically.

I dream of Sergeant Kang. It was only a matter of time before he invaded my nightmares, like the rest of my demons.

He wasn't scared of me like the scientists. If I lost control of my electricity, he would beat me senseless. But he also taught me how to survive in the new world. He taught me what to expect from people.

'Always expect the worst, and you won't be taken off guard.'

He was the worst.

Nails dig into my arm and I jolt awake. Jude is on the mossy floor. His sleeping bag is tangled around his feet. It looks like he has crawled toward me. He has one finger in front of his lips, urging me to keep quiet.

Real dread replaces the uneasy feeling left behind by my nightmares as I look at where he's pointing, deeper into the cave.

An old god is drinking in the natural pool. The blue light emanating from the solar lamp barely reaches the monstrous creature. They're smaller than most gods, which allowed them to enter the cave. But they're still bigger than the Firefly.

They walk on four legs, their body like one of a giant rodent.

Once the creature has drunk their fill, they walk to us, incredibly quiet for a monster that size. Their feet have long claws, made to dig into hard soil, and their body is covered in golden fur. A scaly snout appears in the light, sniffing us, followed by a face with no eyes. The old god is blind. A giant, nightmarish mole.

As he—or she, you never know with old gods until you’ve tested their DNA—gets closer, I realize that one bite is all it would take to end me. Jude might get a chance to survive, if he can reach the Firefly. But Fyfe won’t start the engines if I’m dead, so his chances at survival are slim.

I dig into all my feeble strength and rise to my feet slowly. My legs almost give out halfway through, but I soldier on. I stand tall as the god smells me. Their giant nostrils flare and their breath warms my clammy skin.

They seem to hesitate for an eternity. But at last, they disappear deeper into the cave. So, they haven’t arrived from outside. They came from the ground. Another god that dwells under our feet.

“Holy shit,” whispers Jude. “How are we still alive?”

I fall to my knees, spent. One of my wounds is oozing fresh blood, as dark as oil.

“Most gods are territorial,” I say, “but others are content to avoid confrontation. I think they could smell that I was a...little different.” I almost said a monster. “That I could mean trouble.”

“For once, I’m glad you mean trouble,” he says. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

I let him haul me inside the Firefly like the rest of our things.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“Most people after the Rise have turned into nomads. They travel the wastelands or the coasts, trying to get by day after day. But others, the smart ones, have built a stable life in the new world. You’ll find merchants, mechanics, hackers, hookers, craftsmen, writers... You just have to find them. They’re the beating heart of humanity. They work their hardest every day to ensure that we do not regress into simple animals.”

Extract of The Wastelands Gazette by Francesca James, 2057.

Luck is on our side, and we encounter no Highwaymen or any of the King’s men as the Firefly flies low over the wastelands. Fyfe exceeds our expectations when he announces, as we reach the ruins of a small town, that he can use inertial navigation. He just requires a starting point to find our way on the map, even without a satellite connection. He informs us that he’ll be able to update his map as we travel, the old-fashioned way.

Jude seems to have a destination in mind. We’re going south of Nevada, near Las Vegas.

He’s inclined to fly non-stop, but the Firefly’s solar panels—as good as they are—can’t keep up. It was built to be entirely recharged after a few days. The solar panels are a secondary source of energy. So, we’re forced to spend the night in the ruins of another small town.

We sleep on our chairs in the cockpit, in silent agreement that we’re safer in here, as claustrophobic as it may be.

And we were right.

It's in the dead of night that Fyfe announces, "Individuals are surrounding the aircraft. Activation of the safety protocol. At your command."

Seconds later, a great noise echoes as someone outside hits the Firefly's hull. Jude swears as more follow. Dirty faces and hollow eyes appear at the windows. Their hands leave prints on the glass. Thankfully, the Firefly is built to resist much more.

Desperate nomads are trying to get in. One even shoots a gun at Jude's window. The bullet ricochets and disappears into the dark.

"Shall I activate the safety protocol?" Fyfe asks.

Jude looks at me. "What's the safety protocol?"

But the AI is the one to answer. "The safety protocol will send a powerful electric charge through the entire hull, killing every human being who has their hands on it, and disabling all technology connected to it. It was designed to protect the aircraft from forced entry."

"Yes," I say. "Do—"

"Don't," Jude cuts me off.

I watch him, brow raised.

"Look at them," he gestures at the men and women outside. "They're just starving nomads."

"They would kill us without hesitation if we stepped outside," I say.

“Yes. Hunger and despair would do that to anyone. Let’s just go. Dumdumb, take us out of here. Find us a new spot.”

The three remaining aero engines come to life and the nomads scatter like mice.

As we fly away, I can’t take my eyes off Jude.

“What?” he asks eventually, annoyed.

“Why?”

He glares at me. “Why what? Why didn’t I just let Dumdumb kill them? I’m a survivor, not a sicko. And we were never in real danger. Don’t put me in the same basket as you. Now just shut the fuck up and let me sleep.” And he faces the other side.

I’m a sicko without a doubt. Because I would have killed every last one of them for even entertaining the idea of attacking us.

It takes us two more days to reach our destination. But at last, the Firefly lands in front of a wide camp in the middle of the desert, surrounded by a fence made from buses and trucks. A fortress of scrap metal. On top of the wide gate can be read Gears and Giggles in hand painted pink letters covered in dust.

A tall woman with arms thicker than mine walks out of a smaller door with a gun aimed at us. She looks to be in her fifties, with blonde hair graying around the temples.

“Looks familiar?” Jude says, snorting.

“Who’s that?” I ask. “What is this place?”

“Stellan’s mothers live here. Margaret and Jess. They’re the best mechanics, only second to their son. They’re the ones who got me in touch with Perri and Stellan, which led me to live for a time on the Traveling Market.”

He opens the door and exits slowly, hands raised. “Margaret, it’s me!” he shouts.

The woman, Margaret, lowers her gun immediately. “You son of a bitch, Jude. Where did you get a beast like that?” She’s talking about the Firefly.

“Long story.”

“Well, get it inside, away from prying eyes, and you can tell us everything over a drink.”

Once we’re landed in the wide courtyard among the other vehicles, the other woman rushes out of one of the mobile homes. Jess, I’m guessing. She’s black, with short hair and a softer countenance than the other woman. Both embrace Jude affectionately. But Margaret’s attention never strays far away from me, still sitting in the Firefly.

They exchange quick words, certainly about me, because moments later, Margaret follows Jude to me.

I raise a hand to stop them. “Let me try to walk.”

I’m fucking tired of being carried like luggage. I jump down from the Firefly and my legs buckle under my weight. My knees hit the ground hard, and I grind my teeth against the pain echoing through my bones. After a pause, I manage to stand again. But two steps later, I have to concede and let them help me inside. The indignity of it all leaves me wanting to kill someone. Possibly Jude. Luckily, I can feel the electricity nesting in my core, ready to burst out at any moment. A little longer, and



I'll be able to burn him to a crisp.

The shackles and chain around my feet drag in the dust, making it impossible to forget that I'm a prisoner. Jess watches me with something akin to pity and disgust, and I hate it.

Two mobile homes and an RV have been put together to create a spacious home. They grow a few plants indoors and the air inside smells so different from the wastelands. Green and fresh.

They drop me on an old chair. My back and ass get swallowed by the cushions. This chair will be a bitch to get up from.

Jess offers a glass of something that looks like beer to Jude, and surprisingly, she gives me one, too. From the way Margaret watches, I think she disapproves. She's obviously Stellan's biological mother. Not only because of her looks, but because she's as grumpy and suspicious as her son.

"Thank you," I say to Jess with a smile.

Jude raises an eyebrow at me, as if surprised I can actually be polite. I glare at him. I'm a killer, not a douchebag.

"How are the boys?" Jude asks. "We had to...leave the market in a hurry again."

Margaret lets out a guffaw. "You have balls to even go back there. If the King got his hands on you..."

Jude shrugs. "To put his hands on me, he needs to catch me first."

She shakes her head.

“The boys are okay,” says Jess. “You know they have the King’s favor. But try not to be the reason why that changes.” She gives him a pointed look.

Jude looks a little ashamed. “I really needed a hacker, and Perri is the only one I trust with this job. I need the aircraft’s AI to obey my command. It’s dumb as fuck and only obeys...him.” He points at me.

A sudden realization hits me.

“What’s my name?” I ask him.

“Sparky?”

He tried to kill me in Bunkertown. Then he dragged me to the aircraft, and we’ve been traveling for almost a week now, and he doesn’t know my name. I’ll fucking kill him.

“Oliver,” I say between clenched teeth. “My name is Oliver.”

Jude grins. “What a boring name for a mutant.”

Margaret and Jess tense. Oh, so he didn’t tell them who I am exactly.

“They named us in alphabetical order,” I say. “I was born to be the letter O, and they couldn’t think of something more original.”

I don’t know why I’m even explaining it...

Jude’s smile widens, holding my gaze.

“So, I’m guessing you’re not here just to say hi,” Jess says, as if sensing I was a

heartbeat away from launching myself at him and cooking his brain in his skull with my electricity.

“One of their aero engines is missing a blade,” provides Margaret. “Bullet impact, judging by the damage.”

She must have noticed it when we landed in the courtyard.

“Courtesy of the Highwaymen,” Jude says.

“They’re still looking for you?” Jess asks.

He shrugs. “I don’t think they’ll ever stop. But this time they didn’t know it was me. They were aiming at the King’s men. We just happened to stand in the middle.”

So, he has beef with the Highwaymen, too. Why doesn’t it surprise me?

“It’s a fairly easy repair,” Margaret says. “It won’t take long. But I—” She stops talking abruptly, and tilts her head, listening. “Hide, now,” she orders.

There is noise coming from outside.

I drop to my knees as Jess urges me to crawl under the table. Jude tries to hide behind a shelf, but too late. A man enters the room, holding a gun. He’s squat, in his late thirties, with dirty ginger hair and a beard.

“Oh, look who’s here,” says the newcomer, smiling at Jude. “My fucking little brother.”

Two more men and a woman enter. They have the look of hardened but healthy travelers. The red patches sewn into their clothes are enough of an explanation.

They're Highwaymen.

And I recall that the group of aggressive nomads are led by a family of six brothers and sisters. Redheads, all of them. I've had skirmishes with one or two during my time in the wastelands.

Jude's family, apparently.

"Malcolm, you don't raise a gun in my house!" bellows Margaret.

The Highwayman, Malcom, retorts, "I do as I fucking please, Mag. Now, you should have called me as soon as my weasel of a brother came back. You know I've missed him very much." A few of his front teeth are broken and his smile looks disturbing.

Jude's eyes are glued on the gun aimed at his forehead.

There is a lot to unpack here, and it gives me a headache.

I rise to my feet slowly from the half-crouch I've been in since they entered. The woman—a dirty-looking thing with a shaved head and piercings—walks to me and kicks the back of my knees without warning. I fall to the floor hard and taste blood as I bite my tongue. I see red.

"Do you know, little Judy," continues Malcolm, "that mom and dad are dead?" From the shock registering on Jude's face, I don't think he knew. "Which means no one will care if I shoot a bullet straight through your pretty face. Oh, I've been dreaming about it for years..." He nudges Jude's nose with the gun. "The others will be so jealous that I'm the one who got so lucky."

I should be enjoying this. If he shoots Jude, my number one problem is gone. They might kill me after, but I would die knowing the little fucker was dead.

I share a glance with Jess from where I'm lying on the floor.

She moves closer to Malcolm and starts talking. "Come on now, boys. You're family. Isn't it past time you stopped hating each other so much?"

While they are all distracted by her pleading gestures, I crawl closer.

"Over my dead body," says Jude.

"That can be arranged..." his brother says.

And right as his finger is about to pull the trigger, I get a hold of his naked leg, just above his boot. I let the little electricity I've been building up cross over from my body to his. It might be a small percentage of what I usually have in store, but it's more than enough to kill a man.

The gunshot echoes in the room, the bullet flying close to Jude's face. Margaret and Jess act before the Highwaymen have time to understand what is happening. Jess uses one of her kitchen knives that had been laying on the kitchen counter to slice two throats, while Margaret crushes the last one's skull with a monkey wrench that somehow ended up in her hand. Those two women didn't survive this long in the new world for no reason.

Malcolm convulses for a moment longer. And when I finally let go, having spent everything I have on him, he crumples to the floor in a smoking heap.

"Jesus fucking Christ," says Margaret. "What a mess."

But she has barely finished her sentence when Jude grabs Malcolm's gun and is pointing it at me.

“Since when have you been able to do that again?” he asks me, face uncharacteristically serious. “Since when have your abilities come back?”

I sigh. “Enough to kill you? A day or two.”

I don’t see the point of lying. He would see right through me.

Jude holds my gaze for a moment that stretches for eternity. His finger is on the trigger. Even if I had some juice left, he would kill me before I could reach him.

But surprisingly, he lowers his gun, never breaking eye contact.

“How long will the repairs take?” he asks Margaret.

“I can finish it tonight. Then you can leave before sunrise.”

“Thank you.”

Jess comes to my rescue and helps me back onto the couch. Her wife watches us warily. As if I would kill the only woman in this room who is showing me basic decency.

“We can get rid of the bodies and their vehicles at night,” Margaret says. “There is a canyon south of here. With some luck, it’ll take them a while to find them. The coyotes will take care of the bodies before that. Come, help me carry the table.”

Jude takes the other side, and they pull the heavy table aside. Margaret rolls the thick carpet, revealing a wide trapdoor.

“Our underground shelter,” Jess explains to us. “We’ve built a reinforced bunker. It helps when an old god walks by and ravages our camp. It happened a few times over

the years.”

Now I understand why they’re still here, standing tall in the middle of the wastelands.

They unlock the trapdoor, and there is a second one below, this one made of metal. They push the bodies down the dark hole. They make a heavy noise as they hit the ground below. Jude kicks his dead brother in the face and spits on him before dropping him. There was really no shared love between them.

Jess sighs. “My poor carpet. I just replaced it.”

There is undeniably a lot of blood on it.

“Sorry,” Jude says.

The woman shakes her head and rolls the carpet with the help of her wife before dropping it into the bunker below with the corpses.

“Come now,” says Margaret to Jude. “We need to move their vehicles and cover them with tarps. In case someone else comes snooping today...”

She makes sure that Jess has a gun pointed at me before leaving.

Jess sits on a chair at a safe distance in front of me. I grab my beer, which, mercifully, has survived the fight. Or, should I say, the execution. I dare say there wasn’t much fighting on their side.

“Are you part of the Highwaymen?” I ask.

Jess shakes her head. “Oh, hell no. But we do work for them from time to time, and so they don’t bother us. We repair their vehicles and find them the parts they need.

They're assholes, but they have their uses. We're dead in the center of their range of action, which means rarely anyone comes here. And they warn us of the old gods' movements as best as they can."

"And Jude?"

"As you have guessed, he's somewhat estranged from his family. They've been hunting him for a while. We've known him since he was a teenager. He found refuge here when he finally managed to escape their clutch. We sent him to the Traveling Market, with our son and his friend Perri, to give him a shot at survival."

I'm not sure why she's offering me Jude's story so easily. I doubt he would like that. Which is exactly why I didn't stop her.

"Love the shirt, by the way," she says with a knowing smile.

My disgust must have been obvious on my face, because she laughs.

They tie me to a bus in the courtyard to keep an eye on me while the three of them work on the Firefly. Margaret was right, the repairs were done in a few hours. By nightfall, we eat a quick dinner before heading out into the wastelands to get rid of the two vehicles and the four bodies. The two women ride in different cars, Jude and I in the other. It takes us an hour to get to the canyon they had in mind. We drive the two vehicles with the corpses down into the dried-out river. They crash below and the noise echoes in the canyon. I hope there isn't an old god lurking in those parts.

We all climb into Jess' truck to get back to Gears and Giggles. Jude and I sit in the back.

We've been driving for an hour in silence when Jude says quietly, "He used to lock me up in the trunk of his car when I was a kid." He's talking about Malcolm. "One



day, he forgot about me. Or maybe he just pretended to have forgotten. I spent an entire night crying in that trunk. When the sun rose in the morning, the heat became unbearable. When my mother found me, I was almost dead. My father thrashed him, and his dislike for me grew into hate. Things got worse after that, but I learned how to watch my back.”

Our childhoods, I realize, might not have been much different. I was the scientists’ plaything; he was his brothers and sisters’.

“I should have made him suffer for longer,” I say.

Jude smiles, his eyes on me. “Yes. You should have.”

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“Here is how the story goes: the McCain couple lived on a boat with their seven kids. They fancied themselves rebels of their time. Then the old gods rose from their slumber, and the McCains were eager to carve their place in the new world. They turned pirates for a time. Until one day, our new reality caught up to them and the Leviathan sank their ship. They ended up stranded on land, with some of their children still too young to even carry a gun. That didn’t stop them. They rallied people around them. People who respected strength and survival above all else, and they slowly conquered parts of the wastelands. Including an oil platform deep in the desert, along with its refinery. It gave them access to fossil fuel, and they became unstoppable. Their followers now count in the hundreds. They chose a name fitting their new lifestyle: the Highwaymen. Listen, if you’re out there in the wastelands like me, avoid the main roads. And if there are tracks in the dust, walk in the other direction.”

Video transcription of a video file shared among survivors, creator unknown, 2058.

Margaret and Jess let us sleep in one of the buses for the night. They have turned it into some kind of guest room for when their son and Perri come over. They tie my chain to the foot of the heavy bed and my hands with heavy handcuffs, ensuring that I have a little room to move, but not enough to try anything. At least Jess insisted on giving me a thin mattress and a blanket, to Jude’s and Margaret’s dismay.

My captor blows out the candles and settles on the large bed above me. And suddenly, an uncomfortable flashback surfaces. Helios used to sleep at the foot of my bunk bed for months before he left me. Many times, I offered to share a bed, but he always said that we were getting too big for that. When, in reality, he was just happy to get away from me at night. He would have preferred to escape my tent altogether.

The realization feels like a knife sliding in a festering wound.

For the better part of an hour, I stare at the dark ceiling. As drained as I am, sleep eludes me. From the rustling I hear on the bed, Jude can't sleep either. All I can see from where I'm lying on the floor is a shapeless form under the comforter.

But at some point, the noise turns...repetitive.

I growl in the dark. "Are you fucking masturbating?"

"So what? I can't sleep," Jude answers. He already sounds breathless.

Lust coils in my lower belly. It's been a while since I released the tension. It's been more than two weeks, to be precise. And I fucking hate what the idea of him pleasuring himself does to me.

"Stop it," I say.

But he speeds up. I can see the comforter rising up and down from where his hand is.

"Why should I stop?" he says. It sounds like a challenge. "Am I shocking you?"

"No. Trust me, it takes more than that to shock me."

It's not entirely the truth. I've had no serious lovers besides Helios, and we were teenagers. I pined after him for years. Since then, all my experiences have been short and fruitless. Only to satisfy my most basic needs. The inhabitants of Bunkertown liked to spin tales about me. Of how I used the slaves to satisfy my darkest desires. It was never true, but I didn't rebuke the rumors. They only contributed to my reputation and the fear I needed in order to be respected.

“Stop it,” I repeat, voice dangerously low.

“Make me,” Jude says in the dark.

I shiver and reach for my own erection. I know I’ll hate myself once this is over, but I can’t find the strength to care right now.

Jude hums his approval. “I see that you’re a slut.”

“I’ll fucking kill you.”

“Oh, yeah?”

He slides out of bed, naked to the waist down, and crawls over me. Before I can make a move, his gun is pointed at my face.

“Be nice, or I’ll blow your brains out,” he says.

But all I can think about is his backside rubbing on my erection, and his naked legs on each side of my waist. And he smells so enticing, like clean sweat and soap. He must have cleaned himself before bed.

He buries the tip of his gun under my chin and starts to jerk himself off on top of me. It’s the most degraded I’ve ever felt, and yet I can’t fucking breathe.

“I’ll kill you,” I repeat.

Because what else can I say? ‘I want to bend you over the bed’? My pride would never let me live it down.

“I love it when you talk dirty to me,” he jokes.

Except it doesn't sound like a joke. Not when he's speeding up. He's getting close to orgasm. And I'm getting close to losing my mind. In this position, I can't touch myself.

Jude moans and says, "Fuck...!" before coming all over my naked chest.

Thankfully, I left my shirt open. His semen drips from my bellybutton to my nipples, warm, wet, and smelling fucking delicious.

Jude composes himself for a moment, then says, "Thank you for your help." And he climbs on his feet, taking the gun with him, and goes back to bed without even cleaning my chest. "Goodnight."

Rage mixed with lust urges me to drag a hand into his semen and unbutton my cargo pants. I use it as a lube to make myself come, hard and fast. Even in the dark, I know that Jude is still watching. He must feel so fucking proud of himself.

When rapture comes, it's not gentle. I arch my back and bite my lip so as not to make a noise and give him satisfaction. I dry my chest and hands with the blanket before throwing it at the end of the bus.

I hear a quiet laugh in the dark.

Sleep, against all odds, finds me this time.

We leave at dawn with a basket of food, courtesy of the two women. In exchange for the repairs, Jude gave them one of the guns he kept locked in the Firefly and a few boxes of ammunition. Fyfe flies us over Gears and Giggles, and then we head north, to coordinates that Jude seems to know by heart.

"Where are we going?" I ask after a minute of flight.

We haven't talked about what happened last night in the dark. I won't be the one to bring it up. At least, until I have a gun over his head.

"To the Highwaymen base. We're going to Hell."

I sigh. Of course, we are. "Why?"

"I know a hacker. She's not as good as Perri, but he'll do. And I also want to know if my brother said the truth, and if my parents are dead."

I watch him, but his eyes are on the horizon. "I thought you wanted them dead."

He frowns. "I do. But I wanted to kill them myself."

He turns toward me, and there is a fire burning in his eyes. This kind of hatred, I know well. It runs deep.

"What did they do to you?" I ask.

"Mind your own fucking business."

"You've made it my fucking business when you started keeping me as a pet and dragging me through the wastelands."

He lets out a humorless laugh and turns back to the horizon. "So, you admit that you're my pet? How delightful. And you know, all of this could be over if you only gave me full command of the Firefly." I glare at him. "No? That's what I thought. Then learn to enjoy your leash."

A spark rises from my skin, the only sign of the storm rising inside.

Jude reaches for the gun I now know he always keeps at his belt, hidden under his shirt. He takes it out swiftly and points it at me.

“Now, now. No need to make things more difficult for the both of us,” he says.

“Mr. President, are you in danger?” asks Fyfe.

Jude gives me a pointed look. “We’re just having fun, aren’t we?”

“Yes. I’m fine, Fyfe,” I say.

The Firefly flies true under the clouds, and I spend the next few hours devising ways to kill Jude.

It’s later in the day, when the sun is dropping behind the horizon, that we notice something walking the desert on six legs. Jude orders Fyfe to land on a rocky mountain top. We both get out of the Firefly to watch. It’s never a good idea to get noticed by an old god.

“Who is it?” Jude asks me, squinting.

“I don’t know.”

I might be a mutant, but my eyesight isn’t better than his. The old god I take my DNA from was blind. He gave me other abilities.

The giant creature disappears behind a cliff, then reappears seconds later. They’re getting closer. They have a green shell, and what looks like wings.

“Oh, it’s the Bug,” Jude says as a matter of fact.

“The Bug?”

I’ve never seen nor heard about an old god called the bug.

“It’s a machine.”

I frown. That can’t be right. It’s a giant beetle. “No...”

“I assure you,” Jude says. “The Highwaymen have been trying to get it for years. It’s inhabited by the Devil of the Wastes. Tough motherfucker. He’s a mutant like you.”

I go deathly still as I realize who that Devil is. And who is with him.

“Helios...” I whisper.

Jude frowns and watches me. “Helios?”

“He’s the Devil’s lover...”

“Oh, shit.” Jude smiles. “Good for him.”

Electricity rises from my skin again, and Jude takes a step back, smile fading. Helios is out there, living in the machine. So close...

“Don’t even think about it,” says Jude. His gun is once again pointed at me. There is no mercy on his face. “I’ll fucking kill you now, the Firefly be damned, if you even glance at Helios the wrong way.”

This overprotective streak... I had it for Helios for years. I understand it well. I know that his threat is serious. My rage deflates, leaving me hollow.



The six-legged machine is nowhere to be found. It has disappeared into thin air.

I walk back to the Firefly without a second glance, hoping that Jude would shoot me in the back.

We land on the rooftop of a three-story high villa in the desert to spend the night. The only way up is by stairs that have been barricaded a long time ago. Tonight, we should be safe from nomads, at least. It used to be a rooftop garden, if the empty planters and rotted chairs are any indication. Below us, a wide pool is filled with dust. I've seen the pictures and movies from before the Rise. It's hard to imagine such a lavish life.

Jude sets camp, and I watch him.

After a moment, he says, "Are you going to fucking help?"

He's my captor, and yet he acts like we're travel buddies. How the hell did that happen?

And yet, strangely, I grab the sleeping bags and place them around the solar lamps. I'm still weak—I wouldn't be able to take off running if I needed to, even without the shackles on—but I can move around a little.

Jude takes out the food that Margaret and Jess gave us and starts filling bowls. We eat in silence. But he keeps eyeing me over his food.

"What?" I ask eventually.

"What's up with your obsession with Helios?"

I still. "I'm not obsessed," I say in a low voice. I don't want to talk about it. Ever.

“Dude, you sent your slavers in the wastelands for months to find all the young blonde men in the hope one would turn out to be Helios. If that’s not an obsession, then I don’t know what is.”

“They weren’t my slavers. As soon as it was known that I was buying able workers to build my underground city, mercenaries just flocked to the opportunity. I just warned them to be on the lookout for someone in particular.”

“How convenient, slavery,” he says with a sneer.

“It is. In our world, you’re either the slave or the master. I just decided some time ago that I would be the master. You’re naive if you think otherwise.”

For years, I was the scientists’ slaves. Their little monster to experiment on and turn into a weapon. Then, I was my father’s. I was a slave to his legacy. A perfect little soldier.

Jude lets out a humorless laugh. “I guess that makes me your master now. Let’s see how you enjoy it.” He rises and pulls his gun out. “Get up,” he says.

He leads me to the Firefly and orders me to drop my sleeping back close to the landing gear. I lie on the bag while he ties me to the aircraft with the heavy handcuffs the women provided last night.

Jude crouches over me as he locks the handcuffs in place, and his smell invades my nostrils. From where I am, I could lick the curve of his throat. I could bite his damn neck and tear it to shreds with my teeth before he could have time to shoot me. He would bleed out to death.

His eyes find mine, and he smiles when he notices me watching him.

“What are you looking at, pet?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

“Oh, really? Then why are you hard?”

We both look down. He’s right. There is an unmistakable bulge in my pants.

“No particular reason,” I lie. “My blood is thicker than normal humans. I get hard more easily.”

“Is it all that talk about me being your master that turned you on? Or have you been thinking about what we did last night?”

I grind my teeth. “I’m not thinking about anything. Now get off me.”

But he only trails a hand down my chest and to the buttons of my cargo pants. “Your blood really is thicker? Is that why your veins are black?”

I sigh and nod.

Jude’s smile turns predatory, and he starts to unbutton my pants and slide them down with his left hand while the other holds the gun.

“Stop it,” I say in a low voice.

But, of course, he doesn’t listen. He frees my cock.

“Gods, it’s huge,” Jude says. “I’ve been wanting to really take a look at it since I bathed you the other day. It’s so...peculiar.”

Shame burns its way to my face and ears. I know I'm peculiar. Black veins snake around my dick, darkening the skin to the head. A few ridges travel from base to end. I have no foreskin. The shape is human-like, but much longer and thicker thanks to the density of the blood pumping through my erection. But the colors make it look almost alien.

I struggle against my restraints, but Jude angles the gun at my face.

"Now, now. Play nice," he says.

He slides the gun over my chest, taking all the buttons off with his free hand. Soon, I'm naked from neck to balls. His gun goes lower still, until I feel the cold metal on my intimate parts.

"I'm going to fucking kill you," I say.

"You've said that before. And yet, here I am, breathing and all that."

My next retort dies on my lips as his free hand touches my cock. He follows the paths of my black veins with his fingertips. I can't help it. I arch into his touch.

I close my eyes to try to block the feel of his hand on me. I dread what will happen any moment now. How my body will react and what will become impossible to hide.

But Jude rubs the gun along my cock, and my eyes shoot open against the sweet depravity of it. And it gets worse. He's watching me intently, and I can't fucking breathe.

Clear liquid starts to bubble generously at the tip of my penis, before dripping along the shaft.

“What...?” Jude says. “What is that? You’re not coming, are you?”

“No,” I growl. There’s no hiding it. “When I’m turned on, I produce a lot of lubricant.”

It’s viscous and makes everything so wet. Too wet.

My focus is on Jude. If he says one fucking humiliating thing about it, I’m going to rip his throat with my teeth. I don’t care if he shoots me. I’ll fucking—

“Oh, fuck. That’s hot,” he says. “And so useful.”

I stare for a heartbeat, at a loss for words, then he slides his thumb into my lubricant, and I groan. He brings the gun back under my chin with his right hand and starts pumping my cock with the other.

Some part of me can’t believe this is happening. I’m being sexually abused by my captor, and I’ve never been so turned on in my entire life.

“Does that mean you can just do it whenever you feel like it?” he says. “Bend someone over and fuck them to oblivion without preparation? I’m so jealous.”

“Yes,” I say, breathless. “Although it still requires some preparation. I’m big...”

“That, you certainly are...”

His hand speeds up. He has a small hand for a man, but his grip is surprisingly strong. It feels...wonderful. In a matter of seconds, my cock and his fingers are covered in clear lubricant. The smoky smell of me overpowers everything else. The wet noises alone are enough to bring me over the edge.

“It’s not so bad, having me as your master, right?” he purrs in my ear.

“Fuck you...”

He laughs. “You wish.”

But his breathing hitches, and I know he’s turned on too. I can smell it on him.

He’s a fucking nightmare. So beautiful and yet dangerous to touch, like the jellyfish that haunt my dreams. I pull on my restraints to lick his throat. Jude lets out a moan of surprise as my tongue leaves a wet trail on his skin. He tastes so enticing. His hand tightens around my cock, and, without warning, I come all over his fingers and on my chest.

My orgasm crashes over me in waves. I can’t remember the last time I came this hard. I’m still reeling from it as Jude crawls on my lap, like he did the previous night.

“I need to come,” he informs me.

“Then you better come.” The words are out of my mouth before I can keep them in check.

Jude pulls his pants down, just enough to free his erection, and he starts to pump his dick. The gun, of course, stays under my chin. At this point, I don’t care anymore. I just want to see him come, too. For a brief moment in time, I forget who we are and how we’re supposed to act.

He buries the tip of his gun deeper into the tender skin under my chin. His eyes are on me, on my still-hard cock, and he looks close already. I want to touch him. I pull on the handcuffs, but the chain is thick; it’s not giving.

Jude comes seconds later, adding to the wet mess that is my chest and stomach. I keep my eyes on him as he goes through it. His eyes shine, and his cheeks have a red tint to them. A drop of sweat glides from his temple to his jaw. So damn beautiful.

Jude brings his free hand to my lips, and I don't even try to resist as he gives me a taste of him and me. It tastes achingly sweet.

Why am I letting him do this to me?

I lick his fingers clean.

Jude rises to his feet and disappears into the Firefly. He comes back seconds later with a bottle of water and a cloth. He cleans my chest and cock dutifully, surprising me with his gentleness.

"There, love, all clean," he says. He sits back on his heels. "So, how does it feel to be my slave? How does it feel to be reduced to an object to satisfy my lust?" His eyes have turned cruel again.

Electricity rises to the surface, and Jude has enough wit to get out of my reach. He laughs as he gets back to his sleeping bag.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“There is a town in Arizona, a few miles east of the Colorado River, that is always on fire. The old gods, it seems, dislike fire like all of Mother Nature’s creations, and they avoid it. Which makes it the perfect place for humans to build a small empire. And so it is where the Highwaymen have their base. Hell is a place on earth, and it’s a town built around an oil rig in the desert. The rig broke during the Rise, and the built-up gas caught fire as it escaped the crevices in the ground. It burns still. That, combined with the three man-made flare stacks over the oil rig, ensured that the name stuck. Welcome to Hell, Arizona.”

Extract from *The Wastelands Gazette* by Francesca James, 2055.

When the sun rises in the morning, my hatred has been simmering all night. But they do say revenge is a dish best served cold, so I’ll bide my time. My wounds are healing, and my power is coming back slowly. Soon, the mere precautions Jude has taken to stay safe from me won’t be enough.

And he knows it if the look we share over breakfast is any guess. It’s only a matter of time before one of us kills the other. He better ensure that we find a hacker to hack into the Firefly quickly so he can put a bullet in my head because his time is running out.

Before leaving the rooftop, he holds me at gunpoint to tie me to the chair in the cockpit. He’s not taking any chances anymore. The way I killed his dear brother Malcolm reminded him that I’m far from the tamed monster he wants me to be.

“Good morning, Mr. President,” says Fyfe. “I have noticed that your movements are restricted. Do you require assistance?”



Jude snorts and answers before I do. “No, Dumdumb. He’s fine. It’s a kink we have.”

He offers me a heated look over his shoulder, and a wink. I glare at him with all my might.

“My data informs me that kinks belong to the register of human intimacy, and that I am not programmed to understand or interfere,” the AI says. “I wish you an enjoyable kink, Mr. President.”

I groan. “You’ve got to be kidding me...”

Jude bursts out laughing. A real laugh this time. The kind of laugh I had yet to hear from him. It takes me by surprise as it echoes in the cockpit.

To my dismay, I forget for a heartbeat why, exactly, I want this man dead.

We fly over the Colorado River for a few hours to reach Hell. We land on a small mountaintop to wait for nightfall. The dark smoke from the town’s eternal fires can be seen on the horizon. I’ve never come to Hell, but I’ve heard the tales. At some point, I even considered attacking and claiming ownership of the place where the old gods never wander. But I hate fire as much as they do.

“It’s strange,” Jude announces after half an hour of surveying the wastelands with military-grade binoculars he found in the Firefly. “The desert should be crawling with trucks and buggies going in and out of Hell. This place is supposed to be worse than a hornet’s nest.”

Then his brother might have told the truth, and something happened to the Highwaymen’s leaders.

“Where is this hacker of yours?” I ask.

Jude sighs. “In a barrack in the center of Hell. She’s one of the Highwaymen’s highly valuable prisoners.”

“I didn’t know they took prisoners. They usually leave dead bodies behind.”

“They do if they serve a purpose. Marika does. She hacks into vehicles for them.”

“Which means we’re going in tonight,” I say.

“You bet.”

I sigh. One of those days, he’ll really get us killed.

Night gives meaning to Hell’s name. Flames escape the ground from the crevices as we fly above the ramshackle town, and it really does look like the gates to hell have been opened.

“Aren’t they afraid it might explode under their feet?” I ask.

Jude shrugs from his pilot’s seat. “It’s been burning for more than twenty years now. At this point, they just all hope it’ll last for twenty more.”

He has been strangely quiet and tense since we took off from the mountaintop.

“You lived here before,” I say. “With your family.”

“With my jailers, you mean. Yeah, I spent my teenage years here. After I tried to escape on the road a few times, they left me here to rot.”

“But you still escaped, eventually.”

“Yes. Five years ago, I stole a buggy, and that time they didn’t catch me. I reached Gears and Giggles, and they hid me for a time. Then they got me in touch with their son, and I lived on the Traveling Market for a while.”

“You got out. And yet, here we are.”

Jude finally deigns to look at me. “They won’t catch me this time, either. Don’t worry, you’re still stuck with me until Marika hacks into the Firefly.”

“One could hope...” I say.

“It’s too quiet,” he says, watching the town below.

Town might be too big a word to describe what looks more like a massive camp. Only two or three real buildings stand at the center of Hell. The oil refinery, I’m guessing. They’re surrounded by chimneys, large pipes, and tanks. The three flare stacks burn like giant candles farther away in the wastelands, over a metal tower. The oil rig. The rest is an ocean of mobile homes, caravans, tents, and all kinds of vehicles. The only ground left uncovered is around the burning crevices.

“Doesn’t it catch fire?” I ask, dumbfounded.

“Oh, all the time. A few rows catch fire, and some cars explode. They find it funny.”

I shake my head in disbelief.

But Jude is right. The place is too quiet. There is no one walking down the messy lanes. There is no light except for the fires of Hell.

We land on the roof of one of the buildings. No one sounds the alarm. By now, we have both realized that Hell has turned into a ghost town.

Jude gestures for me to follow him, and we climb down the stairs leading to the inside of the building. We walk through room after room, which used to be where the controls for the refinery were. Most have been turned into living quarters since. Jude leads me to what he calls the Great Hall.

“My parents picture themselves as great rulers of the wastelands,” Jude explains when he sees my expression. “I swear they should have called it the throne room.”

But the Great Hall is empty too. And it’s a mess. Most of the tables have been upturned, and there is old blood crusted on the floor. A lot of blood. A small battle happened here.

“Well, well, well. Look who’s back,” says a female voice.

Jude tenses, and we both turn. A woman walks out of the shadows on a crutch. She has long ginger hair falling on one side, and a burned scalp on the other. Her right leg is turned at a weird angle under her long skirt.

The resemblance to Jude is undeniable. One of his siblings, then. She doesn’t look older than thirty-five, and even with all the scars, she’s pretty.

“Audrey,” Jude says. “What happened here? Where is everyone?” His hand tightens around his gun.

“Why do you care, lil’ bro?” she says.

“We’ve met Malcolm. He told us that mom and dad are dead.”

Audrey smiles grimly. “Malcolm, heh? How is the fucker?”

“Dead,” I say. “I killed him.”

She sighs. “Well, I guess it’s been a long time coming. And who the fuck are you?”

“Mom and Dad?” Jude snaps with no patience for her short-spanned attention.

Audrey gestures to the end of the hall with her free hand. “She strung their bodies up there.” We both turn. There are two ropes hanging from the ceiling. “I couldn’t move for days.” She gestures at her mangled leg. “So they were left to rot. I only took them down with some help a few weeks ago. I threw their bodies down into the fires. They would have liked that.”

Jude seems to be processing for a moment, then finally says, “Who?”

“The mutant bitch from the east.”

It’s my turn to stand still. My own brothers and sisters have always been a pain in the ass to cross paths with. We’re all as territorial as the old gods we got parts of our DNA from. The few encounters I had over the years ended in bloodshed. The last one plunged two swords into my chest.

“She came alone,” Audrey continues, “and she wanted what we had. An army. Mom and Dad refused. You know how they were.”

“I know,” says Jude. There is a shadow on his face now.

“She killed them and strung them up for all to see. I tried to fight to the bitter end, and she threw me over the hall like a rag doll. She killed Jo. But you know the others. They respect strength. So, as soon as Mom and Dad were dead, they rallied to the bitch. They’re her commanders now. I’m the only one who stayed.”

“Why?” asks Jude.

“My leg...” she explains. “And this is my home. This was our family’s empire.”

“You were always Mom and Dad’s most faithful dog,” Jude says.

“And you were always an ungrateful little weasel,” she retorts. “But I suppose it served you, in the end. You weren’t here to see us fall.”

Jude stays quiet for a moment, then asks, “Where did they go? The others?”

“North. To the Hoover Dam. That’s where she built her base.”

“And Marika?”

“Your little friend had to follow. Louis and Arnold took her.”

Jude swears. Then he says, “Do you have food?”

Audrey limps to a bench and sits. “We’re a few dozen, scattered in Hell. The ones that survived the fight were too wounded to follow. Or didn’t want to. We make do.”

“You should leave this place. Build a new life while you still can.”

Audrey laughs bitterly. “What for? This is my life. I’m not like you, lil’ bro. I don’t run away as soon as it gets difficult. I’ll rebuild our parents’ empire, one brick at a time, if needed. Now fuck off; you’re not welcome here anymore.”

“Very well,” Jude says. “You can stay and burn in Hell for all I care.” And he walks away.

For a moment, I forget that he’s not holding me at gunpoint, and yet I still follow him back to the Firefly. The stairs are still hard for me to climb. My muscles are sore, and

my wounds have barely started to heal. Even though I heal much faster than normal humans. The chain around my feet drags on the floor.

Jude sits on the edge of the roof and watches Hell for a while. His entire body is outlined by the eternal fires burning below. His shoulders droop. I could push him. One movement would be all it takes to send him over. He would die instantly on impact. But what would be the fun in that?

I sit a few feet away from him.

“I thought you hated them,” I say.

Jude sighs. “I did. They were fucking monsters. But I was still their son, and they loved me in their twisted way. One day, they would beat me senseless; the next, they would go to war to get me back from a pedophile who kidnapped me on the road. I don’t think anyone would ever love me as much as they did. And yet, some part of me is still glad they died. They were some of the worst people you’d find in the wastelands.”

“Then stop crying,” I say.

Jude turns toward me, his cheeks wet with tears. But his face is impassive as he points the gun at me. How wrong of me to think he wasn’t holding me at gunpoint, even on our way up. He always has it close to hand.

“I’m not crying,” he says quietly. “It’s raining.”

I laugh. It rains less than once a year in the wastelands.

“Did it hurt when you killed your father?” he asks me.

I shake my head, and yet I say, “Yes.”

“Why did you do it?”

“It’s a long story.”

“We have all the time in the world, don’t we?” he says, gesturing with his gun.

The fires of Hell burn at our feet, warming the air to an almost uncomfortable heat, even at night.

“My father was like yours—twisted,” I say. “But unlike yours, he didn’t love me. He saw me as his legacy. At the end of mankind, as he had known it, I was to be his only way to reach immortality. With his genes in someone powerful, he felt like he was leaving behind his mark on the world. He was a cruel and ruthless soldier. A true survivor, at all costs.”

“And you killed him to be free of him?”

I shake my head. “No. My father was cruel to the rest of the world, but he tolerated me well enough. He kept me alive for years and taught me everything I knew. I couldn’t fathom a world where he wasn’t with me. What would I do without him? But then, when I was fifteen, he left for a week to hunt down some men who had stolen our food. He loved the chase. And he saw me as a hindrance. And while he was gone, I met a woman.”

Jude’s eyebrows climb to his hairline. “A woman?”

Even to this day, more than ten years later, I remember her golden hair in the wind. The little wrinkles at the corners of her eyes when she laughed at her own jokes.



“Yes. But not in the way you think. Aurora was close to forty. She was a scientist who had worked on the Revival Project. When she saw me, she recognized that I’m a mutant. But she...” I swallow. I can’t believe I still can’t talk about it without shaking. I’m a fucking grown man now. “The first thing she said was, ‘Where have you been all this time?’ And ‘Are you okay?’” I laugh. “But when I threatened to kill her if she didn’t leave me alone, she said, ‘Oh, fuck off, young man. I have a son like you. You don’t scare me.’” I had been shocked to learn that there was someone out there like me who had survived. Some kind of brother. “She told me about the lab where she lived and the mutant she had raised. When the Revival Project was abandoned, they refused to leave the kid behind. So, they stayed. They became a family. The scientists who created me tried to kill me. I was burning with jealousy for that kid who had it all. But then she offered to take me in. I could meet my brother and his family...”

“And then?” asks Jude after I kept quiet for a while.

I have no fucking clue why I’m telling him all this. Even Helios never learned of it back in the days. I didn’t want him to know that I had failed to save my first friend in the wastelands.

“We spent a few days together. We became friends. She was out looking for books, of all things. I helped her. Her son’s birthday was coming up. He was turning twelve. Then Sergeant Kang came back. And as soon as he understood who Aurora was and what she offered, he killed her in cold blood. I was too slow to stop it.”

My father was a hard man to predict, even for me. He listened to what Aurora and I had to say, then without warning, he pulled out his gun and shot her in the head.

“And you killed him,” says Jude.

I nod. “Back then, I couldn’t control my electricity. And at that moment, I wanted

him dead. I had no shovel, and the ground was too hard. I had to leave them in the desert.”

Jude nods grimly. “That’s why we burn the bodies.”

We both watch the eternal fires of Hell burn below us.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“You know what I’ve been thinking about? The old gods—maybe they’re just the planet’s guardians. They ensure that life stays within the boundaries of what Earth can carry and manage. Pest control, of a sort. And you know who disappeared from the planet before us, millions of years ago? Dinosaurs. What if? Listen up. What if the dinosaurs weren’t killed by a giant meteorite? What if the old gods rose and managed life on Earth for a few centuries before going back to sleep? Leaving behind only the lifeforms that could adapt. What if mankind was the new pest?”

Video transcription of a video shared among survivors, creator unknown, 2046.

To Jude’s request, Fyfe flies to a place where we can ‘take a dip and get clean’. His map might be outdated, but many natural landmarks haven’t changed since the Rise. And so, we land near the Arizona hot spring, close to the Colorado River. It used to be a trail for hitchhikers, and some of the rusty signs are still up.

But even the prospect of taking a warm bath isn’t enough to chase away the haunting in Jude’s eyes.

“You go first,” he says to me, pointing at the hot spring with his gun. “While I cook. You stink.” He throws a towel he found in the Firefly at my face, followed by the soap.

I grab both and frown. “No, I don’t.”

Jude laughs and starts building a fire. We’re hidden between the canyons, and the light from the flames will be hidden from prying eyes.

I sigh and walk to the hot spring. It's a knee-deep pool. I've never liked to get into water—not since the scientists used to drop me into the jellyfish tank—but I've learned how to keep my fear in check.

I take my clothes off and throw them in the hot spring. They need to be washed, too. The pants might be black, but they're still covered in dried blood. And there's a hole in the crotch area where Jude stabbed me on the first day. I walk into the pool naked.

Jude isn't even trying to hide the fact that he has been watching me take my clothes off. I hold his gaze. There's hunger in those haunted eyes now. I can't remember the last time someone looked at me this way, without fear. Oh, there is hate and disdain, definitely, but no fear. He thinks he has tamed me and that I'm his to use and abuse.

I grab the soap and start washing my clothes first. Once they're clean, I put them on rocks to dry. I dip the back of my head in the water and wash my hair.

The wounds on my chest and stomach, against all odds, have closed already. My mutations saved me once again. The skin is still pink and sore, but the scabs disappear in the hot spring as I wash myself. The damage to my organs will take longer to heal, but judging by the return of my electricity, they're mending.

Meanwhile, I keep an eye on Jude. I get on my feet and rub the soap all over my body, offering him a full view. I don't know what I'm doing—luring my captor and abuser. Poking the tiger, as they say. Or, in this case, the jellyfish.

And it works. Jude rises to his feet and walks to the pool.

“I've changed my mind,” he says. “I need a bath now.”

I do my best to ignore him as he takes his clothes off swiftly, keeping the gun in hand. Then he points it at me as he walks into the hot spring.

“Help me get clean,” he says, coming closer.

The tip of the gun finds its usual spot under my chin.

I slather my hands in soap and start with his slim shoulders. I could send an electric charge right now as we stand in the water and kill him instantly. But all his muscles would lock up and his finger would pull the trigger. I would be dead instantly. So, instead, one of my hands circles his throat and squeezes a little. His eyes flash in warning. And with something else—something dark and lustful.

My eyes drop, and my hands slide lower, over his chest and abs. He’s lean, but his muscles are defined. His waist is quite thin for a man. My hands fit perfectly around it.

He’s already hard and has a nice cock. Average in size but good-looking. It rubs against my inner thigh, and it takes me all I have not to reach for it. I’ve been hard for a while now, since Jude’s eyes fell on me in the pool. My own erection leaks lubricant onto his lower belly. He hasn’t missed that fact, judging by the lazy smile on his face.

My hands get close to his dick, and he arches into my touch.

“I need a distraction,” he says. “Make me come.”

An ugly retort crosses my mind, but I keep it in check. I want to touch him.

I get a hold of his cock with my right hand while grabbing his ass with the other. Jude gasps as I start pumping. The little noises that he makes are like music to my ears. How can someone be so mean all the time and yet so adorable? The duality of him drives me crazy.

One of my soapy fingers finds its way to the tight circle of muscles, and the tip slides inside. Jude moans and thrusts into my hand.

He looks as delicious as sin. I've never wanted to ravage someone more. To bend him over the rocks and break him in half.

I speed up, and suddenly, Jude slips on a rock. He falls backward, surprising us both, and the gun falls to the ground, away from the pool and out of reach. We both look at the gun, then at each other. Our eyes meet, and for the first time, I see fear looking back at me. But there is something else, too. Resignation. He knows I'll kill him, and for a moment, frozen in time, he accepts his fate. His surrender is unexpected and such a turn-on.

I grab him by the throat and kiss him. I devour his gasp as I thrust my tongue between his lips. I must be losing my mind. I should be burning his entrails right now. Kill him. Destroy him. And yet—

Jude struggles for a moment, expecting death, but melts into my arms soon enough. He's craving it as much as I do; there's no denying it. We're two hateful bastards, starved for touch. I'm the monster nobody can love, and he's the jellyfish that stings anyone who gets close.

Thankfully, I'm immune to his venom.

My free hand once again finds its way to his cock, and as I encircle it. I send a small electric shock. It's not enough to hurt, but I know from experience that it tingles as it travels through the nervous system. Jude moans and buries his nails into my chest, right on the sore skin. I groan, grab both his wrists, and twist his arms behind his back, forcing him to face the other way. I push him down until his knees hit the rock bottom, and he swears.

“Let me go,” he orders.

But there is no real bite to his words. There is no strength behind them. Just surrender.

“No,” I say, close to his ear. “You wanted a distraction. Let me oblige, master.”

Jude gasps. His skin is covered in goosebumps.

We both know he’s not my master, and I could just kill him right now, but it makes the game more fun.

I bend him over a large rock, smoothed by the passing of water over centuries. While I keep a hand over his nape, he arches his back, offering me his backside. A few people have offered themselves to me over the years. My heart might have been for Helios, but I still had needs. But no one ever looked so fucking good and decadent as Jude does now.

That same heart, which has been broken by Helios, is now pumping my dark blood through my veins with a heartbeat I know is stronger than that of normal humans. My cock is almost entirely black as my veins swell. It’s leaking a copious amount of lubricant. I swipe a hand in it and use it to insert a finger inside Jude. He shouts as I force his entrance with the tip, then slide my entire digit in.

There is no finesse or beauty in the way that we want each other. It’s raw need, desire, and hate mixed in a dangerous combination. We’re both so angry at each other and at the entire world, yet we crave more.

“More!” Jude says.

I want to fuck him to death, and I’m pretty sure he wants the same. His hands find

their way to my thighs, where he digs his nails into my skin. I add a second finger with more lubricant, and he pushes back on my hand.

“More,” he repeats.

And there’s something strange in his voice. He sounds truly desperate this time. As if the events of today are weighing on him and the need to push it all away takes over.

I’m desperate, too. I keep thinking about Helios, day and night. About the monster I’ve become in his story. I’m the monster who haunts his past. He has now found a lover, and they’re traveling the wastelands together. I’m left behind, to fuck a man who hates me and can’t wait to put a bullet through my brain.

And yet, this man is the only one who wants me on this earth. Even if it’s something as fleeting as lust. For now, it’ll get us through one more day.

I align my cock with his entrance and start pushing in. Jude’s moans turn dirtier. No wonder he managed to worm his way into the King of Merchants’ bed. He’s a siren. I thrust, going deep, and his sweet moans turn into screams. If there is an old god living in those parts, we’re screwed.

I start thrusting hard, with no care to make it last. I can’t control myself. Neither can Jude... After only a few back and forths, he’s coming all over the rock. The smell of his arousal only urges me on, harder and faster. A sob escapes his lips. I pull his body along mine, his back to my chest, and my hand encircles his throat to keep him from escaping.

He’s crying openly now. I know it’s not because of me. The orgasm opened the gates to the flood, and his feelings are pouring out. His tears, strangely enough, turn me on. Not because he’s sad, but because his vulnerability is refreshing. And through all this madness, they’re the only thing that feels real.



Jude, the ruthless survivor, is crying in my arms. And I can't get enough of him.

A few more hip-thrusts and my own orgasm takes me. I don't pull out and come inside him. I lick one of the tears sliding down his cheek. It tastes salty, like the water in the jellyfish tank.

We catch our breath for a moment. His chest rises and falls under my hand. I can feel his heart beating through the thin skin of his throat. Thump-thump, thump-thump. It echoes my own.

Jude tries to push me away, but I get a hold of his hands again.

"Where do you think you're going?" I say in his ear.

He gasps as I turn him swiftly and push his back against the smooth rock. He struggles for a moment, and I send a light electric charge in warning. I pull his legs apart and insert two fingers inside him. He finally stops fighting me. He's so warm and slippery. His body melts over the rock, turning liquid. I fuck him with my hand and kiss my way over his stomach and to his nipples. He moans loudly, and his hands pull on my hair enough to hurt.

"I'm not done with you yet," I tell him when I reach his lips.

"Fuck..." he breathes out, "it's..."

I kiss him again. "Happy to oblige."

His eyes are red, but he's not crying anymore. He's arching his back as I tease that sweet spot inside him.

Oh, yes. I'm far from done with him. I want to fill him with my semen and lubricant.

“You asked for a distraction. Prepare to be distracted,” I say.

His laugh turns into a scream as I bury my fingers even deeper. A courtesan in a small town on the coast taught me how to find the prostate a few years ago. I’m now using that skill to make Jude lose his mind. He squirms under me, and I bite his nipple.

“Fuck... you...” he says. But his hands are still in my hair.

Once I have him begging for more, I open his legs even wider and penetrate him without warning. This time, there is no resistance. His body is getting used to me.

Jude throws his arms over my shoulders and hangs on to dear life as I fuck him.

A god could walk by, and I wouldn’t be able to stop. It feels like I’m the one losing my mind.

The water sloshes around us as I ram into him over and over again.

This is madness. But madness has never felt so good.

Jude scratches my back with his nails before encircling my throat with his right hand, cutting the airflow. It urges me on, and I bite the tender spot between his neck and shoulder. He shouts as he comes. His semen drips down my stomach before disappearing into the water. He goes slack in my arms as I keep on fucking him.

My dark veins swell all over my body, and my electricity comes to life. But I keep it contained.

Jude is lost to rapture; his eyes rolled back. I gently drop him on the rock again. Right as I feel my orgasm rising, I pull out and come all over his chest and cock. I want him

to smell like me. I want my abuser to be covered with evidence of my victory and pleasure.

When I'm finally done, I put both hands on the rock to keep myself upright. My vision is darkening and I close my eyes. I feel faint from the exertion. I'm not as healed as I thought I was. My legs are weak, and it takes me all I have to stay upright.

Jude stays under me for a while, breathing fast. But right as I'm starting to think he has fallen asleep, he slides out of the cage I made with my body.

He walks out of the pool on shaky legs and grabs his gun. I don't try to stop him. My lubricant and semen drip down his inner thighs. I file the image into my memory. He hands me the towel he gave me earlier.

"Come on. It's my turn to wash. Dry yourself and get out," he says, as if I just didn't fuck his brains out.

For once, the gun isn't pointed at me. It hangs loosely in his hand.

I don't try to argue. This is not a fight I want to have right now. I'm too busy sorting through what just happened. What I did.

I dry myself up, grab my clothes, and finish building a fire. This time, I do my best not to look at Jude as he washes himself. First off, because I'm still hard and very much naked myself, and secondly, I don't know how to act now. And if what we just did changes anything.

Apparently, it doesn't.

"That's a lousy fire," Jude says as he walks back to the Firefly a few minutes later.

I offer him a scathing look. “The wood is wet.”

There are no trees around, so everything comes from the river shore.

He laughs. “That’s what he said.”

Jude helps me gather more wood, and as soon as the flames are high enough, we put our wet clothes on the folding chairs close to the fire. We sit on our towels, naked except for the blankets he brought back from the Firefly.

Everything feels so... domestic. As if we were two friends traveling the wastelands and not two enemies who just partook in a hate-fuck.

We stay quiet as our food cooks over the fire. Jude keeps his gun close, but his hand isn’t as tense around it. The silence stretches as we eat, until Jude finally breaks it.

“How long did you stay in the lab?” he asks.

I freeze, my fork halfway to my mouth. “I left when I was five.”

“After your father killed the scientists.”

“Yes.”

“Do you remember it?”

“I do.” Sadly.

“My early childhood is a blur,” he says. “I barely remember living at sea. We owned a boat until it sank. Then we moved around the wastelands a lot. But my teenage years are vivid. They fucking sucked. That’s when I started thinking for myself, and I

realized I was living among monsters. My mom put a gun in my hand when I was eleven and made me kill my first man. He was a traveler who had stolen some of our food during the night, and I caught him. His death was my prize.” He bites his lips. “The worst part is, I’m so used to killing now that it wouldn’t keep me up at night. But I cried myself to sleep for a week after I killed him.”

Why is he telling me all this?

“My first kill was when I was two,” I say. Jude raises an eyebrow at me. “I came back to the lab when I was a teenager. I watched all the footage. They recorded everything. I had electrocuted a few people since birth, but it wasn’t until I was two that the electric charge was strong enough to kill. She was one of the scientists, and she needed to take a sample. She drew blood. She was wearing isolating gloves, but I reached for her with my small hand, and I killed her.”

In the video, my younger self had cried when she fell to the ground with a loud noise. The other scientists rushed to reanimate her, but it was too late. Her heart had stopped beating. In the panic, I cried and I cried, but no one tried to comfort me. I can’t blame them.

After that, their dislike turned into palpable hate.

“What did they do to you?” he asks.

“They locked me up and never touched me again without putting me to sleep first. Then, by my third kill, they dropped me into the jellyfish tank.”

I spent most of my formative years without touch. Without love. So, when I stumbled upon Helios in the desert and he was so sweet and full of smiles, I latched onto him like a leech. I fed on his kindness, his affection, his tolerance...

Jude gapes. “And your father?”

“I don’t think he cared at first. He thought it would only make me stronger.”

“You never electrocuted him before that day with Aurora?”

“I did. A few times. But one time, I got really close to killing him. And when he came back to himself, he shot me in the leg.” I lift the blanket and show him the bullet wound scar on my thigh. “To teach me a lesson.”

“Jesus...” breathes Jude. “And I thought my parents were bad. At least they didn’t try to maim me. But my brothers tied me to a pole in the middle of the wastelands once.”

It’s my turn to raise an eyebrow. “Why?”

He shrugs. “I think they hoped I wouldn’t survive the night. That some old god would find me. Or the coyotes might eat me. Too bad for them; I was still alive by morning.”

“Was Malcolm one of them?” I ask.

Jude sighs. “He was.”

“Then I’m glad I killed him.”

“And I’m glad you made him suffer. It’s just too fucking bad I wasn’t the one to do it.”

“Most of your siblings are still alive, aren’t they?” I say.

Jude smiles. “Indeed, they are.”

Later, Jude ties me to the Firefly again. He knows that I'll still take any chances I get to steal back the aircraft. But this time, he doesn't mock me. He just secures my hands and feet, then throws another blanket over me. He falls asleep near the fire, his back to me.

By morning, our clothes are dry. Jude unlocks the shackles around my feet to allow me to put them on. But instead of locking me up again, he throws the shackles inside the Firefly. For the first time since he dragged me out of Bunkertown, I'm free to move as I please. He says nothing, and I don't either. This truce between us feels fragile.

We drink our coffee around the fire.

When Jude finally breaks the silence, I already know what he's going to say.

"We're going to rescue Marika. She's a friend of mine, and I won't leave her in that mutant's hands. Her life in Hell suited her, but I don't know if she enjoys her stay with her new master. And we need her to hack into the Firefly. Then we can both be free of each other."

My attention catches on to his wording. He said, 'we can be free of each other', and not, 'so I can put a bullet through your brain'.

But for a reason that escapes me, he looks angry.

"To the Hoover Dam," I say.

He nods. "To the Hoover Dam."

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“The mutants aren’t inherently bad, as many people like to think. The King is an example of that. Alastair was raised in the market. He’s the product of his time, definitely. He can seem cruel in his choices, especially when it concerns the safety of his people. But never truly heartless. His love for the kingdom his fathers left to him is what motivates every action. The mutants are powerful, but they’re also inherently humans. Who they have become depends entirely on their upbringing and what life has dealt them. And let’s be honest, their start in life was already a bumpy ride. You throw gifted children to the caprice of the world, and you’re surprised when they turn into monsters. Humanity owes them an apology. Or, at least, a place among us.”

Extract of a handwritten journal, by Thomas MacKoy, 2056.

The Hoover Dam is less than a thirty-minute flight from the hot spring, so we wait for nightfall before leaving. But barely ten minutes into our journey, Jude points to a vehicle making its way through the dark wastelands. It’s a massive RV built on giant wheels, pulling a trailer that was made for livestock before the Rise. And there is someone inside, gesturing frantically to the sky—to us—with a lamp.

A red flag flaps in the dry wind. Highwaymen going back to their new base.

“Dumdumb, land in front of that RV,” says Jude.

I keep the burning questions in check as Jude pulls out his gun. We fly straight to the ground, and the RV swerves to avoid crashing into the Firefly. But a vehicle that size isn’t easily stopped, and it tips to the side. The windows explode with the impact. The trailer is dragged to the ground behind it, leaving a deep trench in the dust.



Jude is immediately out of the aircraft, gun raised. I follow.

A man is trying to pull himself out of the driver's window. Jude pulls the trigger, and he dies instantly. More people scream from inside the RV, but he ignores them as he walks to the trailer. It's upside-down now. An old man with a beard is hanging from the bars. He's covered in dust and grime.

"Gandalf, you old geezer," Jude says. "Are you okay?"

"Jude! You couldn't have thought of a better way to rescue me than almost killing me in a car crash?" retorts the old man.

"Sorry. I didn't know it was you in here."

One bullet is all it takes to break the lock keeping the prisoner inside, and the old man climbs out with Jude's help.

Banging noises and gunshots erupt from the RV. The survivors inside are trying to get out. I walk to the vehicle and put a hand over the frame. I send a strong electric charge through the entire RV. Anyone touching metal will be stunned for a few hours. From the silence that follows, it's safe to say that it worked.

Jude offers me a slight nod.

"How did you end up in that cage?" he asks the old man. Then to me, he says, "Gandalf is an old friend. One of the first traveling merchants of the new world."

"I've been careless," answers Gandalf. "They caught me three days ago in Utah. I'm getting too old."

"Why?"

“Why am I getting too old?”

Jude chuckles. “No. I think I’ve got that figured out. Why did they capture you? Why not just kill you and take your things?”

Gandalf smooths his long beard and shrugs. “They found me near the river in Utah. They couldn’t find my hovercar, so they took me instead. For questioning, they said. They were taking me to their new leader. I’ve heard that your parents are dead. I wish I could say that I’m sorry, boy. But you know I’m not.”

Jude sighs. “Yeah. Don’t waste your breath.”

“Although that new leader seems to be worse than your family,” Gandalf continues, limping away from the wreckage. “The Highwaymen have been hunting us more than ever before. And they’ve now launched a few attacks on the Traveling Market. The King is on edge.”

“I bet he is,” says Jude. “Let’s go. We can get you back to your hovercar in no time.”

He helps the old merchant walk to the Firefly.

“I always liked you, boy. You were always my favorite of your whole family,” jokes Gandalf, patting Jude’s back.

“I clearly don’t understand why,” says Jude with a smile. “My brothers and sisters are a delight.”

Gandalf cackles. “Where did you get this aircraft?” he asks as we help him inside. “What a beauty!”

Jude points at me. “I stole it from him.”

The old merchant finally seems to notice me. He straightens his round glasses—one of the lenses is missing—and stares at me for a long time.

“I haven’t seen you for years, Oliver,” he eventually says. “You’ve grown big. Well, most of you mutants grow like weeds.”

I gape. “Have we met?”

Gandalf sighs as he relaxes on a chair at the back of the Firefly. “Yes. When you were younger. How’s your father?”

“Dead,” I say.

Gandalf nods. “Good. He was a good customer, but I can’t say that I liked the man.” He closes his eyes. Exhaustion is etched on every corner of his wrinkled face.

Jude shares a look with me before rummaging through the aircraft to find a bottle of water for the old merchant.

If Gandalf dealt with my father, it means that we met before I killed him. I was a teenager. I remember seeing a few traveling merchants over the years. Sergeant Kang always found things to trade in exchange for their goods. Once or twice, we even worked as mercenaries to help a few of them trade with difficult communities. I never paid close attention to any of them. They were just a part of the wastelands’ landscape.

My father told me where to go and what to do. I was never allowed to be anything other than a dutiful soldier. I didn’t learn how to think for myself. Not before that fateful day with Aurora.

Before falling asleep, Gandalf gives us the coordinates of where he left his vehicle,

the said hovercar.

“Dumdumb, we’re making a quick detour to the following coordinates,” says Jude, followed by the long string of numbers.

“Understood,” answers Fyfe.

From the frown nestled between Jude’s eyebrows, it’s evident that he’s annoyed by the detour. He just wants to go to the Hoover Dam and learn about his parents’ killer.

“We could leave him with supplies somewhere safe,” I say.

Jude shakes his head. “Gandalf is an old friend and a valuable ally. He’s one of the most respected merchants of the Traveling Market. I want to make sure he gets back to his hovercar safely. The dam will still be there when we come back, and Marika can wait one more day.”

It takes us a few hours to fly to the coordinates. By then, the Firefly’s solar power is almost depleted, and I have to give it juice.

Jude whistles as the gauge indicates a full recharge again.

“That’s why it was kept hidden for me,” I say, “before you stole it. With me on board, it can almost go on forever as long as you feed me.”

Jude snorts. “Aren’t you a handy little monster?”

I glare at him, and he offers me a grin.

The sun rises over the wastelands as Gandalf pulls out the invisible tarp covering his hovercar. I stare in awe, and some long-forgotten memory resurfaces from when I

was younger. I remember an invisible floating car. We must have met when I was no older than ten. Back then, I thought he was a wizard from one of the old books I used to read when my father had his back turned.

We set up camp for the day near the river, hidden at the bottom of the canyon. Gandalf pulls out another tarp, this one paper-thin but larger. We tie it between the Firefly and his hovercar to provide shade. The wind is slightly cooler near the river. The water level is high; it must have rained up north, at the origin of the Colorado.

Once we've set a table and chairs on the sand—Gandalf has quite the equipment in his hovercar—the old merchant pulls out enough food for a feast.

“Let's eat!” he announces.

There is canned meat, pickled vegetables, beans, jerky, and, to our surprise, frozen fruits.

“Where did you get those?” Jude asks, biting into a strawberry.

Gandalf chuckles. “I don't kiss and tell. A good merchant always keeps his best providers a secret.”

I was already impressed that he had a functioning fridge in his hovercar. It's small and fits in a wooden compartment he has built over the passenger's seat.

The two men exchange stories while we eat, and I listen. They've known each other from the time Jude lived on the Traveling Market. After eating, the old merchant pulls out a bottle of whiskey and puts it on the table.

“A thank you gift,” he announces, “for saving me.”

Jude grabs the bottle and takes a sniff of the liquor. “I won’t say no to that.”

Gandalf brings three mugs out of the back of his hovercar.

“I’ve heard that you went back to the market,” he says. “You’re a crazy, boy.” He laughs good-heartedly. “The King is enraged that you managed to slip between his fingers again. He put a price on your head.”

Jude smiles lazily. “Oh, yeah?”

But as soon as the merchant has poured the honey-colored liquid into his mug, he drinks it all.

I prefer to sip my own. I don’t know when I’ll be able to taste good liquor like this one again.

“What’s the price over my head?” Jude asks. “What am I worth?”

“A spot on the Traveling Market,” Gandalf says, pouring him another glass.

The Traveling Market is one of the safest places to live, even with the threat of the Highwaymen. Its dwellers are protected by the guild of merchants, and they’re at the center of the trade routes. They never lack anything.

Jude’s eyes widen. “Oh, shit. He really wants me dead.”

The old merchant nods. “Dead, yes. But he said, ‘preferably alive.’”

Jude snorts. “Or maimed. For the hell of it.”

“And you,” I say to Gandalf. “Don’t you want a spot on the Traveling Market?”

He could have put drugs in the bottle of whiskey and be waiting for us to fall unconscious or dead. Then he could send a radio signal to his little friends in the market.

Gandalf offers me a wrinkled smile. He's missing half his teeth. "I've been a member of the guild since the day it was founded. I always had a spot. But I prefer to be out there." He gestures to the wastelands and beyond. "There's so much to see and explore. The world is beautiful, even now. Especially now."

"The market might be the beating heart of the trade routes," says Jude. "But Gandalf IS the trade routes."

The old merchant cackles. "Well said, boy. Well said."

Shortly after, he announces that he would like to rest and lick his wounds. He retires to his hovercar.

Jude is now on his fourth mug of whiskey. I'm only at my second. The sun is high in the sky, and the wastelands are quiet. Even the animals have found places to hide from the relentless heat.

Jude is playing with his gun. He's trailing the barrel over his calf. His eyes are feverish as he looks over at me. He's drunk.

"Why did you steal from the King of Merchants?" I ask. "You were lovers."

This question has been haunting my mind since our mad flight from the Traveling Market. If he were the King's paramour, he could have had the best life. All the luxuries that can be had in our harsh new world could have been at his request.

Jude smiles lazily. "That's the reason, isn't it? We were lovers. We were getting

close. Too close for comfort. And I panicked. He was asking questions about my life. My past. He was getting impatient to dig deeper. It was only a matter of time before he learned about my family. Even then, the Highwaymen were already a thorn in his side. Alastair is... strong, to say the least. He's leading the guild with a powerful grip. What would he have done to me as soon as he realized I could be working for his enemies?"

"Were you?" I ask.

He chuckles. "Of course not. You know that I hate those fuckers. I was just there for a good time. But I'm a survivor through and through. I know how to fight, and I know when to run. So, I stole a car and food, and I ran before he could catch me unaware." He takes a sip of his whiskey.

"Did you love him?" I ask.

Even though it's none of my business. I shouldn't be asking that. Not to my captor.

Jude's eyes float toward me. "The only love I know is tough love. And no one wants that."

It's not an answer. Annoyance surges through me, taking me by surprise.

Jude gets off his folding chair and drops to his knees in the sand between my legs. The gun is still in his hand, but it's pointed to the ground. He grabs the front of my Hawaiian shirt and pulls me to him. His kiss is urgent and wet. He tastes like spices and smoke. Like whiskey. Need rises from my core, and electricity travels through my veins, ready to lash out.

When he finally stops kissing me long enough to breathe, his lips are red. But his eyes are glassy, and he drops his head over my thigh, sighing deeply.



“You’re dead drunk,” I say.

He doesn’t answer.

I push him off me and lay him down on the sand. He’s already asleep. I could take his gun now and kill him. Be done with all this. I would let the old merchant live. And with some luck, he might even take time to burn Jude’s body.

“All I know is tough love, too,” I tell him, caressing his sweaty ginger hair. “Ask Helios.”

He was the only one who ever loved me, and I hurt him over and over again. I hunted him down and tied him naked to a wall when I finally got my hands on him in Bunkertown. I don’t think it can even be called love, tough or not. I’m as bad as my father.

Jude snores in the sand, and I pour myself a mug of whiskey.

When night finally falls over the wastelands, Gandalf is the first to wake. He finds me sitting on a rock near the river.

“I’ll be going now. Twilight is my favorite time of the day to travel. Tell Jude that I say thank you again,” says the old merchant.

He’s slightly limping. He seems too old to survive the desert, and yet I have no doubt that he will.

“He’s still out cold?” I ask.

Gandalf cackles. “From the empty bottle you left on the table, I dare say he won’t notice my departure.”

“I’ll help you break camp,” I say, rising.

We gather the tarp and roll it. Then put the folded chairs and table back into the hovercar. Meanwhile, Jude sleeps the sleep of the dead in the sand.

Right before climbing inside his hovercar, Gandalf asks me, “Do you miss your father?”

My answer comes quickly enough. “No.”

Why would I? He was a nightmare on Earth; cold and heartless. I would prefer to spend years alone in the wastelands than relive the years I spent with my father.

Gandalf offers me another one of his toothless smiles. “That’s all I needed to hear,” he says. “Take good care of him.” He gestures toward Jude before disappearing inside his hovercar.

I sit near my slumbering captor and wait for him to wake. The gun lies half-buried in the sand.

## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“When we mutated human DNA samples with the ones taken from the titans, we had to choose which attributes and mutations to put forth. We could only change so much of the human genome without turning the subjects into monsters themselves. Choices were made. To some, we gave special abilities. Like electricity, fire, and being able to breathe underwater... Others were blessed with fast healing, brute strength, or speed. Some combinations turned out to be worse than others. We might pay dearly for our experiments.”

Audio description of an interview with Dr. Nolan Max, a scientist who worked on the Revival Project, 2047.

We fly to the Hoover Dam after nightfall. Jude woke up parched and grumpy. He was uncharacteristically quiet for the first hour after waking up.

To the point that Fyfe said, “You look a little pale, Mr. Jude. Do you require assistance?”

Jude’s answer was to flip off the control panel where Fyfe’s sensors were.

Once we reach the Hoover Dam, we land on a neighboring mountain. From up there, we have a decent view of the impressive man-made structure. Four towers stand in the lake in front of the dam itself. Most of the windows have light. The entire place is inhabited.

I’m surprised the dam is still intact. In twenty-seven years, no old god destroyed it.

“We will have to figure out where they’re keeping Marika,” Jude says, lowering his

binoculars.

He has been dangling dangerously close to the edge of the cliff. Again, the thought of pushing him to his death crossed my mind. But it was quickly replaced by another kind of dirty thought as my eyes fell on his ass in his tight jeans.

We have kept all the Firefly's lights off, and there will be no fire tonight. But I doubt that Jude intends on setting up camp, anyway.

I point toward the large parking lot on the side of the dam. It has been turned into a kind of village, with caravans and trucks. Mountains of junk already block some parts of the road. The Highwaymen have taken residency close to their new master.

"We could pick out a few stragglers," I say. "Ask them questions."

Jude nods. "I like how you're thinking."

No, you wouldn't, I think. Because I was thinking about burying your head in the dirt while I fucked you just seconds ago.

It appears that one hate-fuck was far from enough to get him out of my system. I already crave more. He still smells like me. And under it, his arousal is fresh. I wonder if he's thinking the same. If he would love to be fucked in the red dirt.

We hide the Firefly in the canyons surrounding the dam and start our hunt.

There are a few stragglers, but Jude dismisses them as unimportant. Mostly drunk men and women.

"Cannon fodder," he says quietly. "They won't know where Marika is."

Until, finally, he recognizes someone. He gestures toward a man who is leaving the camp to take a piss on the rocks. He's a middle-aged man with a beard and a shaved head.

Jude's smile turns predatory as he walks in the shadows to reach his prey. But I have a feeling that he'll kill the man before we can ask him questions, so I step forward.

The man turns as he hears my footsteps, but he doesn't pull his gun fast enough. My hand finds skin just above the collar of his dirty shirt, and I send a quick but loaded electric shock. He convulses and falls to the ground.

Jude glares at me.

"He's just unconscious," I say.

We drag him to the Firefly and downriver, a good distance away from the dam, where no one will hear his screams.

After an hour, our new friend is still unconscious. Jude gives me a pointed look.

"I might have overdone it a little bit," I say.

Jude chuckles. "You think?"

"I usually aim to kill."

"Yes, I remember," he says. He has fern-like scars that attest to it.

Right on cue, the man stirs. We tied him with the shackles that were used on me previously. He groans and jolts awake when he realizes that he's in chains. Then he focuses his attention on Jude, whose face is illuminated by the pale glow of our solar

lamp.

“You...” he starts.

“Me, the prodigal son. What’s up, Bernie?”

“You can’t do this,” Bernie says.

“Oh, but I can.”

Jude is crouching in front of him, but I’m on my feet behind his back. That seems to make our guest uncomfortable.

“Who’s that?” he asks, eyeing me suspiciously. He smells like bitter fear.

“That is none of your business,” says Jude. “And it’s not him you should be worried about.” He has his army knife in hand.

“I’m not working for your parents anymore,” says Bernie. “They’re not here to protect you. And—”

“Yeah, about that,” Jude cuts him off. “How come you didn’t end up dead like my parents? I thought you were one of my father’s best friends.”

The man is smart enough to look sheepish. “Come on, man. Their reign was over. Did you want me to die with them?”

“Yes,” Jude says, his voice cold. “You know my dad would have died for you.”

“Well, I’m not your dad. And I’m still fucking alive.”

“Not for long.”

“You can’t kill me. I’m important!” Bernie shouts. “She made me one of her commanders. She’ll hunt you down. She’ll—”

Jude slaps the man so hard his head snaps to the side. Bernie blinks a few times, taken aback. Having been at the receiving end of his slaps, I know their effect.

“Tell me more about that new master of yours,” says Jude. “She’s a mutant, right?”

Bernie spits to the ground. “Go to hell.”

“Been there, done that.” Jude drags his knife over the man’s dirty shirt before finishing its course over his dick. I know that move, too. “Bernie, there’s no need to make this more unpleasant than it needs to be. I just want to know who your new dictator is and where Marika is. It’s nothing worth losing your life over.”

“And then what? You gut me like a pig?”

“No. I won’t kill you, I promise,” Jude says.

Half-truth, and we all know it. But our friend Bernie doesn’t have much of a choice. Not as he’s shackled to the Firefly.

He sighs. “Maeve is our new master. She’s a mutant that came from the east. She’s powerful.”

“How powerful?”

“She’s strong. Really strong.”

“Okay. Very useful, Bernie,” says Jude. “What about Marika?”

“She lives in the north-west tower, like a queen. She’s the one who manages the electronic repairs around the dam. Maeve wants it to produce electricity once again and build a great city around it. We’ve been gathering supplies for a month.”

“As if that ever works...” Jude grumbles, looking up at me.

I close my eyes to refrain from punching him. My underground city might have thrived if not for Helios and his devil’s intervention.

“Let me go now,” says Bernie. “I answered your questions. For the love we shared for your parents, let me go.”

That was the wrong thing to say. Jude slowly rises and turns to me.

“Do you mind?” he asks me.

“It would be my pleasure,” I say.

Bernie pulls on his chains, the acrid smell of his fear overpowering the air surrounding us. I grab him by the throat and unleash a strong electric charge. His muscles lock up, and his eyes roll in their orbits before outright melting. The Litchenberg figures spread over his arms and face, smoking, then catching fire. And only then do I let go. He’s not coming back from that.

I expect Jude to throw up. Most people do the first time they witness the way I kill when I’m angry. When I ended his brother Malcolm, I just shocked him enough to stop his heart. But this... this is something else. I’ve been told that the smell is the worst part. Humans smell good when cooked. Like pork. And it’s knowledge most people prefer to live without. Especially with the rumors of cannibalism in the



wastelands.

At least, I expect Jude to back away from me. But he doesn't. There's a satisfied smile on his face as he says to the dead man, "That's for the love we shared for my parents. My love might have been ungrateful, but yours was weak."

We throw Bernie's still-smoking corpse into the Colorado. It'll be taken down the river, and no one will be wiser.

We fly back to the Hoover Dam and once again hide the Firefly in the canyon. We wait for the early hours before sunrise to walk to the dam. There are no guards on the road. No patrols around the massive structure. The mutant—Maeve—isn't expecting enemies to sneak in. Or she might be overconfident that no one poses a real threat to her and her new empire. We do meet two men on the first west tower, on their way back to bed. We take them by surprise and drop their bodies in the river, too. Jude has no mercy for the Highwaymen. I don't blame him.

We reach the north-west tower fairly easily. The door isn't even locked. But as we enter quietly, we find a small woman sitting on the bed with a gun aimed at us.

"Chill out, Marika. It's me," says Jude.

"Jude? What the fuck?"

She lowers her gun and reaches for a solar lamp. The yellow glow lights up the room, revealing the small Asian woman on the bed. Marika is over fifty, judging by her graying hair cut in a short bob.

She stares at Jude, then at me. Her eyes grow wide as she surveys me.

"You..." she says.

“Him?” Jude asks. “You know him?”

She shakes her head. “Not personally. But I’ve seen pictures and videos... You’re a mutant. The one from the Sierra Nevada.”

I knew videos of me and what I can do have been traveling through the wastelands. It only makes sense that the Highwaymen hacker knows about me.

“We need to hurry,” I say.

I have no desire to stay for long at the base of another mutant. In my condition, it’s a fight I would certainly not survive. I’m not exactly at the top of my strength.

“We came to rescue you, Marika,” Jude says.

“Rescue me?”

She looks confused. As if she has resigned herself to her new life and never expected to be saved from it.

Jude nods. “And to ask you for a small favor. Once we’re out of here, we’ll need you to hack into an aircraft for us.”

“But where are you taking me?” she asks, wary.

“I don’t know yet. We’ll figure it out once we’re out of here. Oliver is right; we need to hurry. Pack your things. The aircraft isn’t far.”

It feels strange to hear my name coming from his lips. He usually just says, ‘hey, you’. It does something to me that I’d rather not inspect too closely right now.

“If you want me to hack into something, I’ll need my computers. They’re in the main building,” she says.

“Can you get them now?”

Marika nods and gets out of bed as Jude gestures for her to hurry. She leaves us alone in the tower where she has taken residence. I take a seat while Jude rummages through the room. There are computers, laptops, screens, and everything else that a tech-savvy person might need. She must have been doing this before the Rise. I wonder briefly how she learned to cope with the end of the world as she knew it. I’ve never known anything else. It’s difficult to imagine a life where you don’t have to constantly look over your shoulder.

Jude must have been thinking the same thing because he says, “Marika was in her twenties when the Rise happened. She worked as an engineer for NASA. You know, the ones who used to send people into space?”

I chuckle. “We really used to do that?”

“It makes me wonder,” he says, sitting on the bed, “if we had been more advanced, we could have escaped to another planet. Like they do in the movies. Leave the old gods behind.”

“This is our home,” I say.

As dangerous as it is, I can’t imagine leaving behind the wonders of Earth.

“We have to be patient with Marika,” he changes the subject. “She’s soft. Like most people from before the Rise. She survived this long out of sheer luck. She met the right people to keep her alive. The survivors, like my parents.”

“Like you,” I say.

Jude smiles sadly. “What’s funny is that my family always considered me to be too soft. They tried to beat the kindness out of me. To them, it was a weakness.”

“You’re many things, but weak isn’t one.”

Jude meets my eyes, lips parted. And for the first time, I realize that he’s on a bed. If we’re quick enough, we could—

Hurried steps come from outside—too many steps—and right as we jump to our feet, the door crashes open, revealing a small army of men and women with their guns out.

A muscular woman walks in. Her eyes shine yellow in the dark. My mutant sister, Maeve.

“Hello, boys. You should have rung the bell,” she says with a smile.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“Our planet has changed a lot since the last time the old gods were awake. Some of them went to sleep in an entirely different climate and landscape and woke up in a strange place. The great lakes that appeared after the last ice age disappeared over centuries, leaving behind dry land. And some old gods found themselves stranded when they awoke. Long before that, our continent used to be separated by the Western Interior Seaway. But the old gods are not normal creatures. They’re unkillable and immortal. To them, it might just be a temporary inconvenience.”

Extract of A Study of the Old Gods, Albany Seyra, 2048.

Maeve is beautiful, in the way that a tiger is beautiful. Strong and deadly. She’s as tall as me, and almost as wide. She has long, dark hair and brown skin. Her eyes betray her origins. They’re an uncanny shade of yellow.

Marika stands behind her, in the midst of her small army. The hacker betrayed us. Jude’s disdain is palpable as he looks at his old friend.

“Sorry, Jude,” she says. “But this is my home now.”

He spits at her feet.

Maeve’s smile widens. She throws an arm over Marika’s small shoulders. “Marika is an important member of my family now. She’s not going anywhere, boys.” She caresses her cheek possessively.

And I understand how she began her empire. The foundations of mine were always fear and respect. Maeve uses fear, too, but she also aims for adoration. It’s something

I've always failed at. I'm not exactly easy to love, as it has been proven time and time again.

"Come on now," says Maeve, "trying to steal a member of my family in the dead of night isn't very courteous. What should I even call you?"

Jude and I keep quiet.

A man pushes his way to the front of the small crowd of Maeve's minions. He has long ginger hair tied in a ponytail and a nasty scar over his right eye.

"The slim one is my little brother, Jude," he says with a crooked smile. Jude's eyes turn even more murderous as they behold his sibling. And from the look they share, I know that there's no love lost between them. "I don't know about the other one."

"It's Oliver. A mutant from the south," provides Marika. "He takes his DNA from Urara, a god who produces electricity. Don't touch him."

I have to admit, she knows the subject.

Maeve claps her hands. "Oh, family reunion! My brother and your brother are trying to stab us in the back! Delightful." And she does look delighted. This is all fun and games for her. We're the new toys she can play with. She snaps her fingers. "Bring them to the altar."

I don't like the sound of that. I share a glance with Jude. There are enough guns pointed at us that I would be dead in a heartbeat if I so much as produced a spark.

They force us through the door and onto the bridge connecting the two west towers to the rest of the dam. The water level is so high that it almost reaches the bottom of it. A few men and women pull at my limbs and clothes, even with Marika's warning a

few minutes ago. I'm one impulse away from frying them all; consequences be damned.

As Jude walks close to his brother, the man kicks him behind the knees, sending him to the floor. Jude hits the concrete with his hands first. Once he's on the ground, the bastard kicks him in the ribs. My anger takes me by surprise. It rises to the surface like a creature from the abyss. I lurch forward, but Maeve is expecting it. Her gun appears over my forehead.

"Now—now. Let's chill the fuck out," she says with a grin. "We don't want it to get messy."

Jude rises to his feet. His hands are bloody. He gives me a strange look, that is difficult to read.

The creature dives back into the abyss, waiting for a better opportunity to strike. I can learn to tame my hate and rage, just like Jude does all the time. I can be smarter. Even with the smell of his blood threatening to send me into a rage.

They walk us over the bridge and back to the main structure. The sun is rising over the canyon. The night has already come and gone.

The dam curves through the Colorado. And it's in the middle of the wide wall, in the center of the river, that we stop. The altar in question seems to be a wooden catwalk nailed to the concrete, and that goes over the water. There is no mistaking what it's for. I'm not so sure about the two heavy bells hanging from a metal pole.

"Do you like them?" Maeve says, noticing my attention. "I brought them back from a wedding chapel in Las Vegas. They're very loud." When I fail to comment, she continues. "Well, this is what we like to call the altar." She gestures at the catwalk. "It's a joke among us because what we do here is close to religious. You'll

understand shortly. But first, I want to know where you've put your aircraft."

Jude glares at Marika, who is hiding behind her new master.

"It won't fly for you," I say. "It only obeys my command."

Maeve smiles. "Well, then. It's a good thing that I would like to offer you the opportunity to join my little family. It appears that one of my commanders has failed to report lately. We think he might have met his end. Malcolm will be missed. But he leaves behind a spot for the taking. And I've heard about your special set of skills, brother. I wanted to offer another one of our siblings to join too, but he seems to be resisting me. The Devil of the Wastes is quite slippery." I tense up and share a glance with Jude. Maeve's smile turns predatory. "Oh, so you've met him."

Helios...

"He won't join you," I say.

The devil I've met is too strong and wild to obey someone like her. The same can be said for me. We mutants are all as territorial as the old gods we share our DNA with.

"Yeah, that's what I've started to gather," Maeve says. "He has been killing my men for weeks now. But it's okay; his machine will suffice. I want the bug. And I want you and your aircraft. I'm building something great here, and there is room for you."

From the corner of my eye, I notice movement coming from Jude. He tried to step forward, but two men stopped him with a rope around his neck. His face is turning red, but his eyes are on me.

"Don't you dare!" he shouts.



And I don't know whether he's talking to me or to Maeve and her plan to kill the Devil of the Wastes.

"Can we kill him now?" asks Jude's brother, eyes riveted on his struggling sibling. "I've been dreaming about it since we were children." He's the one pulling on the rope. "He's always been a snotty brat."

I can't look away from Jude's angry face, even as it turns purple. I want to pull the rope away and burn his captors to a crisp.

Maeve looks at her commander and nods. "Yes. Let's do a demonstration of what awaits you if you refuse to join my side," she says to me. "A little demonstration of all the power that I wield." She gestures to the bells.

A woman steps forward and rings them. Maeve was right; they're loud. Unease slithers into my body as their song echoes over the river and into the canyon. Our captors turn their attention to the lake, and the feeling of unease turns into outright dread.

There's no way—

Great spikes emerge from the lake and carve the water as the giant creature swims toward us. At this hour, the water is too dark to distinguish what lurks underneath, but a long tail breaks the surface. My brain struggles to remember all the old gods that dwell in North America. Helios used to be fascinated by them. I was happy to just let them be a part of the background of our lives.

"You know what's funny?" says Maeve. "Thanks to climate change, the wastelands are growing larger every day. The desert is gaining ground in the Broken States. So, one would think that the river would soon run dry. But it's actually the opposite." She points toward the side of the canyon. "Since mankind stopped draining the river, the

water level has actually risen. Especially with the recent rain up north. It now flows over the spillways they invented to prevent dangerous floods. And, thanks to the dam holding, Lake Mead is greater than ever. This place was perfect for Altamaha-ha to make his home. Of course, I had to lead him over two states, but we don't regret the journey. The destination was worth it." She smiles widely.

The old god—Altamaha-ha—reaches the dam, and his reptilian head surfaces. He looks like one of those underwater dinosaurs in old books, but scarier. He's the kind of old god that makes you stop swimming in lakes forever.

"You tamed him?" I can't help but ask.

Maeve laughs. "Tamed? Oh, no. He's a wild creature, just like me. But I've found that he's also lazy, and he enjoys when food is brought to him." She nods, and the men holding Jude drag him to the catwalk. "I feed him three to ten people a day, depending on the harvest. It keeps him satisfied. Your friend will be his first meal of the day. It's also a great way to get rid of unwanted visitors." She winks at me. "Of course, you're always welcome, brother mine."

Her efforts at seducing me into submission are lost on me. I can't take my eyes off Jude as they drag him to his death. If I act now, I could kill the men holding him, but then the others would put a bullet through both our brains.

His brother holds him over the void by the collar. "Think of me as you die, little brother," he says before pushing Jude over.

Jude's eyes find me one last time before he disappears below the catwalk and out of sight. I could read anger and fear in them. But also, regret.

Maeve and her men let me run to the edge. I scan the dark water below. The only trace of him are the ripples where he fell in the lake. The old god rears back with his

powerful fins, looking for his breakfast.

“Ah,” says Maeve. “Altamaha-ha missed him on the way down. That’s rare. He likes to catch them.”

But I can’t register her words as I watch the water. This is my worst nightmare: a plunge into deep waters. A childhood trauma that has been built over for years. For a heartbeat, I can almost see the jellyfish floating just under the surface—colorful and deadly.

And yet, I throw myself headfirst into the emptiness beyond the catwalk, taking Jude’s brother along with me. The others shout behind us, but it’s too late. We’re already falling.

I must be going insane, I think as I dive for the water below and to the old god who awaits his next meal. I must be insane to plunge to my death for a man who hates me.

Maeve’s commander screams all the way down.

The water is a cold and brutal embrace as I dive. My gills immediately start working, and I open my eyes. The lake is dark, but I can see a massive body in front of me. Altamaha-ha. His two large fins thread water. But I can’t get distracted by our impending doom.

Jude is still alive, swimming underwater a few meters away from me. His brother is above us. He must have landed badly from the height. He might even be unconscious.

I kick my shoes off and dive. Even without training, I’m a powerful swimmer. It’s in my DNA.

I reach Jude just as Altamaha-ha’s head reaches us, mouth full of teeth. I pull him

under to avoid our instantaneous deaths. Jude's brother isn't as lucky. A cloud of blood spreads in the water as the old god devours him. He might have been a royal douchebag in life, but in death, he finds his use as a distraction.

I pull Jude under. He tries to resist and swim to the surface, but I'm stronger. I drag him around the west tower. He's struggling against my grip, thinking that I must be trying to drown him. Once we are safe, behind the concrete wall, I grab his face and put my mouth over his. He struggles for a moment longer before understanding that I'm breathing air into his lungs. One, two, three breaths. The bubbles escape his nose and float to the surface of the lake.

Above us, his brother is being shredded apart by Altamaha-ha. Jude will be mad that, once again, he wasn't the one to kill his asshole sibling. But I think even he never imagined such a nice way to end him.

But to be mad about it, we have to survive first.

Once I'm sure that he has enough oxygen, I let go and pull him toward the west side of the river. There are no shores in the canyon, and the spillways are our only chance to make it. I look behind us and realize with horror that Altamaha-ha has turned his attention to us. We're to be the main course of his breakfast.

I could use my electricity in a face-off with the old god. After all, that's what I was created for. But Jude is in the water too, and he would be dead instantly.

I kick my legs faster and free my arms. Jude keeps a hold of my Hawaiian shirt. The current is helping us. I reach for the surface. The water is overflowing into the spillway. I don't know what awaits us, but we'll take our chances. The unknown sounds better than being eaten alive by an old god.

Jude realizes what I'm aiming for, and he swims faster, too.

Altamaha-ha lunges, but we fall over the other side of the spillway a second before his jaw closes around us. I pull Jude into my arms as we fall. We slide over a giant concrete waterfall before being sucked through a dark tunnel as wide as the Firefly. We're dragged underwater once again.

For the longest minute of my life, we're taken away by the underground man-made river. All the while, I never let go of Jude. I hope that he had time to take one last breath before we got sucked under. I hold him tight as my back hits the concrete walls more than once.

When the tunnel finally releases us into the river, Jude is motionless in my arms. I swim to the surface as fast as I can to reach the shore. We traveled some distance with the current, leaving behind the structure.

I drag Jude to the rocky shore, where he lies unresponsive.

"Come back," I order him.

When he fails to open his eyes, I slap him. To no avail. His chest doesn't rise and fall.

He's dead. Jude is dead. He has drowned.

"Don't you fucking dare!" I scream. "If you were to die, it would be by my hands!"

I rip his shirt open and place my palm over his chest, focusing. I can't mess this up. Too much, and I could kill him. I send an electric shock to restart his heart. He convulses for a second before opening his eyes. He vomits a copious amount of water to the side.

I feel like I can breathe again, too. I rub his back while he coughs and expels all the water from his lungs. When he finally settles down, I hold him in my arms.

“Did they...push you over...too?” Jude asks between raspy breaths.

“No,” I say.

His eyes find mine. They’re wide and unsettled.

“But—”

“Oh, your brother is dead,” I cut him off. “I might have taken him down with me. The old god made a meal of him.”

Jude’s laugh takes us both by surprise. “Bloody hell... I wanted to kill him even more than Malcolm. He was one of the worst ones growing up.”

“Sorry. Or, not really,” I say. “In the end, he had his use.”

Jude snorts. “So, you can breathe underwater?”

I nod. “I have gills behind my ears.”

“The more you know...” he wheezes.

The dam stands tall behind us, a behemoth of concrete and steel. The river on this side is much lower, and the canyon surrounds us as an insurmountable barrier.

I hold Jude a while longer before announcing, “We need to go before they send search parties. They must have seen us go over the spillway. The river is the best option. We’ll let the current take us.” Jude grimaces. “I’ll keep a hold on you. Don’t worry,” I say.

I was loathe to get back in the water as much as he was. But we’re out of options.

And after our plunge through the dark spillway, the river seems almost easy.

Jude gets up on shaky legs and walks into the river. I pull him over my body, and we both let ourselves float downriver.

I was right. It's fairly easy, which gives us time to relax and catch our breaths. His body fits perfectly in the curve of mine. I bury my nose in the wet hair at the back of his head and breathe in the smell of him mixed with the river.

"Why did you jump after me?" Jude asks at some point. His voice is rough from his close encounter with death.

I'm glad we can't see each other's faces in this position.

"I don't know," I say.

And it's the fucking truth. Why did I risk my life to save my captor? I plunged to an almost certain death for him. I've been losing my mind since the day he dragged me out of Bunkertown.

Jude says nothing, but his hand finds mine in the water, and he squeezes it hard enough to hurt.

We let the Colorado take us far away.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“There is a strange old god who rose in Lake Granby, Colorado. A god that seems to be made for the ocean and yet got stuck in the center of the United States. Maybe from the time when the Western Interior Seaway still existed. He has two large fins in the front and a powerful tail to cleave water. He can walk on land, but with difficulty, which ensured that he stayed stuck in the center of Colorado for a long time. In the first year after the Rise, when the army reached the lake and identified the old god, they named him Altamaha-ha. Altamaha-ha was a legendary monster inhabiting a lake in Georgia. I remember seeing it on TV. They compared him to drawings and even a statue. But I assure you, the old god is much worse than his mythical counterpart, and I’m glad he’s confined to the lake. We have enough monsters in the oceans.”

Video transcription of a video file shared among survivors, creator unknown, 2057.

We float downstream for an hour until Jude starts shaking. We need to find a place to get dry and rest. I point to some kind of shore with trees, hidden at the bottom of the canyon. We swim to the sand and extract ourselves painfully from the river’s embrace.

There appears to be a trail going up through the canyon, only accessible on foot. There’s also a hut made of all kinds of recycled material under the trees. I gesture to Jude to stay there, and I walk to it to check for inhabitants. But the place is empty. And things seem to have been left untouched for months. The blankets are covered by a layer of dust. Someone must have called it a home for a while. Thanks to the Hoover Dam, it survived the floods.

“Let’s stay here for the night,” I announce.



Jude nods. He looks a little pale and is in dire need of a rest. He takes his clothes off and puts them over some rocks to let them dry under the sun. Then he lies on the sand, shivering. I try not to let my eyes linger on his body for too long. Now is not the ideal moment to have a boner.

I grab the abandoned blankets in the ramshackle hut and wash them in the river before hanging them on a tree. It's still early morning; they'll have time to dry before nightfall.

The people who lived here for a time were smart. They built a fire pit under the trees to hide the flames and disperse the smoke. I spend half an hour building a decent fire while keeping an eye on Jude and the river. We're at a safe distance from the dam, but it never hurts to be cautious.

Jude fell asleep on the sand. The sun isn't high enough yet to become dangerous, so I let him be. In the wastelands, exposure can kill as easily as an old god.

I take my clothes off—they're almost dry already—and walk back into the river. I stand knee-deep in the water, motionless, until the fish get used to my presence. I stun the first one that ventures close with an electric charge, then throw it on the beach. I do that for the best part of an hour, until I have five fat fish to cook over the fire pit.

Jude is awake. He's been watching me.

"Do you always fish naked?" he asks. "Not that I mind."

"Do you always sunbathe naked?" I retort.

He nods. "Yes. I like to keep my tan homogeneous," he jokes.

I smile. "Put your clothes back on before you get a heatstroke."

“Am I distracting you?”

“Yes,” I say truthfully.

He seems surprised by my honesty. I don’t know if the red undertone on his skin is from blushing or a slight sunburn. I marvel at the fact that I went from a bloody mess tied to the Firefly to joking with him naked in less than two weeks. What happened to us?

“I’ll help you gut the fish,” Jude says, putting his dry clothes on.

There is sand stuck on his right cheek. When he gets closer, I reach for his face with my hand. Jude backs away, wary, before leaning into my touch. His newborn trust does something to my heart.

“You have sand on your cheek,” I explain, rubbing it off.

“Thanks.”

We both know I could kill him with one touch. But killing is far from my mind right now.

I put my clothes on, and we gut the fish with the knives I found in the hut. There are many useful things inside. From extra clothes, pots, glass bottles... I wonder briefly what happened to the people who lived here for a while. My bet is on a trip to the wastelands that went awry. I find an old kettle and use it to boil water for later. Drinking from the river won’t kill us, but it can make us a little sick. We don’t need to risk it.

We cook the fish over the fire pit and eat them in silence.

Until, at last, Jude breaks it.

“So, we got our asses handed to us.”

I sigh. “Yes. Pretty much.”

“We’re going back,” he says. It’s not a question.

I nod. “We’re going back.”

Anger is simmering under his calm demeanor. His emotions mirror my own. I’ve been remembering the events that happened on the dam over and over again. The heart-wrenching fear that I felt as Jude was thrown into the lake.

“She wants to kill the Devil of the Wastes. And Helios...” he says.

Helios will die with his lover if Maeve gets her hands on them. He might have broken my heart, but the urge to protect him is still overpowering.

“We won’t let her,” I say calmly. Too calmly. “And we’ll get the Firefly back.”

Jude smiles. “Glad we’re on the same page.”

“Tonight, we rest. You drowned. Your body needs to recharge and heal. Tomorrow, we’ll come up with a plan.”

The image of his lifeless body on the rocks still haunts me. He was dead for a moment. It bothers me more than it should. So much more.

Jude nods.

He makes himself a nest in the hut with the dry blankets and falls asleep in the afternoon. I have nothing better to do but watch him and stay in the shade. Luckily, the river lowers the temperatures in the canyons.

Before nightfall, I go into the water again to catch more fish. We'll need all the energy we can get. Our plunge in the lake earlier, followed by our swim in the river, has taken the edge off my fear of water.

As I stand in the current, a memory resurfaces. Helios tried to teach me how to swim when I was sixteen and he was just fourteen. "This might come in handy," he said. Of course, he was right. In our world, your survival often hangs by a thread. Learn everything that can give you the upper hand. His mom had taught him how to swim when he was four.

It didn't go well. I panicked, even though I couldn't drown. I stunned all the fish in a sixty-foot radius around me. They all floated to the surface, bellies up. My fear turned into anger. My memory sharpens enough to cut. I scared Helios that day. And he just stood there, shaking. That night, as I cried in the dark, I told him about the jellyfish tank and my terror of water. He said that he was sorry. So sorry to have made me endure it.

But I never apologized for scaring him.

It's no wonder his affection turned to hate over the years. I would hate me too.

I dive into the river, hoping I could drown. But, of course, I don't.

By the time darkness falls and I cook my catch over the fire pit, Jude rises. He comes out of the hut looking disheveled and still half asleep. I'm not used to seeing him with his guard down. So... vulnerable. And always achingly beautiful. The orange glow from the fire makes his short ginger hair shine.

He comes to stand in front of me.

“I almost expected to find you gone when I woke up,” he says. “That would have been your perfect opportunity to be free. You could even have gotten the Firefly back for yourself. Be rid of me at last.”

I nod. “The idea crossed my mind once or twice.”

“Then why didn’t you?”

“I realized that I didn’t want to be rid of you.”

Jude’s lips part, but he says nothing.

While I mulled over my new predicament this afternoon, I realized that I was craving his twisted attention. Even though he hated me, he still wanted me. And I don’t want it to stop. I want more. His venom is fucking addictive, and I’ll dive into the tank to get more if I have to.

“Maybe I enjoy having a master,” I say out loud.

Jude’s next breath intake is short of a gasp. He steps forward, closer still. And I have to crane my neck to watch his face. He slides his right hand into my hair at the back of my head and pulls.

“You want to stay at my mercy?” he asks.

“Yes...”

The smell of his arousal in the air is unmistakable.

“And I like having you at my feet,” he says. “What does that make us?”

“Two horny fools.”

He laughs. Then he watches me for a moment and adds, “You jumped in the lake after me.”

It’s not a question.

I shiver as his fingers slide along my scalp. “I did.”

“Why?”

“You don’t want to know why.”

“Oh, but I do,” he says. “I really do.”

I grab his legs and bury my face between his thighs. I don’t want to have this delicate talk right now. I’d rather just ignore it as long as I can and just live in the present. I was supposed to die a few weeks ago at the hands of my ex-lover’s new monster. My underground city burned. I have nothing left but the clothes on my back—an ugly Hawaiian shirt at that—and yet, I haven’t felt so alive in years.

I breathe in, filling my lungs with Jude’s smell. Mercifully, he has dropped the subject. He’s too distracted by the proximity of my face to his groin.

“Oliver...” he says.

I look up. “I love when you say my name.”

He smiles. “Such a simple name for a powerful mutant.”

“They just chose the first name starting with O that came to their minds,” I say.

“Ah, yes, you said that. Lazy fuckers. They could have chosen something like Odin. Octavius, Otto, Oberon...”

I chuckle. “Thank the gods, I’m not an Otto.”

“Alright. Oliver...” he says, pulling at my hair.

I nudge his groin again with my face, and I find him hard. I growl deep in my throat.

“Will you let me touch you, master?” I ask in a teasing tone. I’m trying to hide the fact that I’m terrified he’ll just refuse me now.

“Yes,” he says. “As a matter of fact, I order you to touch me now. Don’t make me get the gun.”

I would laugh if I wasn’t drowning in my desire for him. My hands reach for the elastic band of his pants and pull them down slowly. His erection springs out. I would be lying if I said I haven’t been wanting to get close and personal with his cock since that first night when he jerked off on top of me.

“I’ve wanted to taste you since that night at Gears and Giggles,” I say.

There’s no point in withholding that information. I’ve long given up on my pride as far as it concerns him.

Jude’s voice sounds rough as he says, “Oh, yeah? You should have asked.”

We both know it wasn’t that simple, so I keep quiet.

I lick his cock from base to tip, and he bucks. I get a hold of his ass to keep him in check as I swallow him entirely. He gets a little excited and starts to thrust into my mouth. My eyes water as he hits the back of my throat. I've never let anyone do that to me. Blowjobs? Yes. But I'm usually the one staying in control. But somehow, control is so easy to let go of when it's Jude.

And I realize that Helios, with his kindness and sweet temperament, was the worst thing that could happen to me. With someone like him, I became the worst version of myself. An abuser. A dictator left unchecked. Of course, it wasn't his fault. I'm just fucked up. And he paid the price.

I deserved everything that happened to me in recent weeks. And yet, I feel blessed as Jude fucks my face. Life is unfair. And I'll take it, nonetheless.

"Fuck!" Jude shouts, pulling out with a wet noise. "I don't want to come already..."

I frown, disappointed. "Just come," I breathe out. "I want to taste you..." As if my life depends on it.

The inside of my underwear is already a mess. The side effect of being a horny mutant sharing DNA with an eel-like old god.

I reach for him with my tongue again, but he grabs my chin with two fingers.

"No," he says. "I want to taste you, too. Your... liquid. How does it taste?"

"The lubricant?"

"Fuck yes."

A few of my partners were grossed out by it. They never dared say it out loud, but I



could feel it and smell their anxiousness. I stopped letting them give me blowjobs.

I look up. "Are you sure?"

"I want to come with my face and body wet from you. I want you to dirty me thoroughly," he says.

There is no hesitation or shame on his face. Only lust.

I get to my feet at the speed of light and run to the hut. Jude's laugh follows me inside. I come back out with the blankets and lay them on the sand near the fire.

"Get naked, now," I growl, gesturing to the blankets.

Jude's eyes flash with something close to indignation and a challenge. "Make me," he says.

Very well.

I sweep him off his feet and drop him on the blanket. He resists half-heartedly as I pull his pants all the way down, then his shirt over his head. I'm starting to understand that Jude likes to be in control to a certain degree, just for it to be taken away from him on the first occasion. He loves for sex to be a fight. A clash of wills.

And apparently, it works for me.

I get to my feet and stand above him. I make sure to keep eye-contact as I take my own clothes off. The tip of my cock shines with lubricant. Jude looks beautiful in his eagerness, naked under me.

I get a hold of my erection and jerk it once. A few drops fall on Jude's chest, and he

gasps. The smell of his arousal wafts around us. There is still no trace of anxiety. He digs his nails into my calf, urging me to come closer.

I kneel over him, just as he did that first night. In a heartbeat, he's all over me. Faithful to his earlier declaration, he rubs his face on my cock, smearing lubricant all over his cheeks and lips. He licks a few drops and moans. The contrast of my dark tip against his pink lips plays with my sanity.

“Why the hell does it taste sweet?” he asks, eyes glassy.

To balance with the rest of me, bitter to the core, I almost say. But I don't want to cast a shadow over what we're doing.

My dark veins snake over my entire body, eager to let my iron-thick blood conduct electricity. Some primal part of me—the monster—knows that he could just stun his prey and have his way with him. Thankfully, the human part has enough power over my being to know that it would be too fucked up, even for me. Never in a million years would I want to inflict that on Jude. Not after he's finally trusted me with his body. Not after my history with Helios.

But it doesn't mean I can't play with it.

“Do you know why my blood is so dark?” I ask him, sliding my thumb between his lips.

Jude bites my finger, and I pull out, smiling.

“Tell me,” he says.

“Because it has more iron than normal blood, making it the perfect conduit for my electricity.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Which allows me to do this.”

I slide a hand over his chest, letting less than one percent of my power pass through him. Jude gasps at the tingling sensation. His pupils are blown out, devouring the blue.

“Did it hurt?” I ask. I just need to be sure.

“No... Do it again while I suck you off.”

And he swallows the tip of my cock without warning. My eyes roll back from the pure bliss shooting through my body.

I need to focus to obey his request and reach for his dick with a hand behind my back as I keep on kneeling above him. I get a hold of his balls first and release another small electric charge. Jude moans around my cock. At this rate, I won't be able to last. He looks entirely debauched and wet already. My lubricant is leaking down his chin and neck. He starts thrusting into my hand, and the tip of his cock rubs on my rim. It's an earth-shattering sensation. One that I never dared to explore. Not with just any random partner.

But maybe one day, with Jude... If we both survive the next few days, and he doesn't decide to put a bullet in my brain.

He has already seen me at my most vulnerable. At my lowest. And yet he's willing to be touched by me.

I grab his cock and squeeze it between my hand and rim. And the bliss of it, combined with my electricity, makes him come in generous spurts that slide down my

skin. His tip catches on the ring of muscles and goes in for barely an inch, but it feels so freaking good. Jude groans around my dick and I'm swept away by my own orgasm. I come all over his face.

The waves of pleasure crash over both of us and leave us winded on the sand. I can't remember sex even being this dirty and good. And yet, all we did was jerk and blow each other off.

I drop my forehead over Jude's and close my eyes, with not a care in the world that he's sticky from my semen and lubricant. He doesn't push me away. His breath mingles with my own, so warm and enticing.

"You might need a dip in the river," I say after a while. "You're filthy."

"Later, maybe. But I'm not done with you yet."

I said that only a few days ago at the hot spring.

Jude kisses me deeply. His tongue tastes sweet.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“I watched my son grow for a few years. I was unsure of his potential. He was too human and didn’t show any of the qualities the scientists wanted to accomplish with his mutations— besides his electricity. He was scared of everything, weak, and had no control over his abilities. A failure, more than anything. He had killed a few scientists over the years, but more by accident than design. By then, they started to drop him into the jellyfish tank as punishment. But I began to notice something. His redeeming quality is resilience. No matter how many times they beat him up, tried to snuff him out, he adapted. He learned how to swim by himself to avoid the jellyfish and which parts of their bodies he could touch to avoid their sting. He could learn to become something more. So, on the day when the Revival Project was abandoned and they wanted to drop him in the desert, I shot the scientists and took him with me. He helped me kill three of them, and I saw his potential.”

Extract of a handwritten journal by Sergeant Kang Jae-Sun, a military officer who was hired as security for the scientists working on the Revival Project, 2047.

We spent the night having sex near the fire, until Jude fell asleep in my arms, thoroughly ravaged and exhausted. He’s as insatiable as I am, and he knows what he wants. He ended up sleeping without washing himself in the river, and I spent the rest of the night marveling at the smell of us on his skin.

I will the sun not to rise. But, of course, the star doesn’t obey the whims of men. Even from a half-god like me.

Today, we plan our vendetta against Maeve.

I catch more fish in the river for breakfast while Jude slowly wakes up. As I got

naked, I noticed more than one hickey on my chest and neck, courtesy of the ravenous human I spent my night with.

“I already miss the coffee from the Firefly,” Jude grumbles as he watches me cook the fish over the firepit.

“Used to the standards of a president on the run already?”

“Yeah... We really need to get the Firefly back.”

He said we, and not just I. Does that mean he’ll let me fly with him for a little longer? I don’t dare to ask. If we survive our next encounter with Maeve, I have nowhere else to go. No Plan B or backup dream. And judging by the life I led in the last ten years, I don’t know if I can be trusted to my own devices again.

“And we need weapons,” I say.

Jude smiles. “Lucky for us, these parts are crawling with Highwaymen. They usually carry a lot of weapons. We just have to harvest.”

And kill the ones who didn’t hesitate to turn their backs on his parents. With some luck, we might even cross paths with the rest of his siblings.

“Tonight, we hunt,” I say.

Someone wiser would say that we should stay here forever. Live by the river, hidden from men and gods alike. But neither he nor I are wise. We’re hateful bastards, and we want payback.

We wash up, fill the bottles with water, and take the trail out of the canyon. Before turning a bend, I offer one last glance at the ramshackle hut on the beach, committing

it to memory.

Jude was right; the area around the Hoover Dam is crawling with Maeve's minions. They travel back and forth from the neighboring states, bringing stolen goods and materials to their new master.

At nightfall, we attack a group of six. I kill four of them with my electricity, and Jude, the last two, with a gun he looted from the corpses. It was too easy.

"They don't even watch their backs," I say while I inspect one of their vehicles.

"We're deep into Highwaymen territory," Jude says. "They usually don't have to watch their backs here. They've grown complacent. Lucky for us." He pulls out two guns from the back of a desert buggy and grins.

Some part of me still expects him to shoot me on sight as soon as he gets his hands on a gun. But, miraculously, he doesn't. I marvel at the fact that he doesn't want me dead anymore.

We borrow the red flag of the Highwaymen. Jude puts on a leather jacket with the red rectangle sewn in the back and front. I carry a holster over my Hawaiian shirt with a smaller one on it. If more than half of Jude's parents' army joined Maeve, then they can be counted among the hundreds scattered over a few states. Nobody will find us conspicuous.

We keep the biggest car for ourselves, a nice four-wheel-drive monster of a car. We spend the rest of the night driving the other two down a canyon with the bodies, just as we did with Malcolm and his friends. They might be complacent, but they would still be on alert for killers among them if they found the corpses.

The sun rises over the wastelands, and we drive to a ruin on a hilltop. It used to be a

hotel with a view of Las Vegas on the horizon. We raise the red flag over the ruins, like any good Highwaymen, and find shelter from the smoldering heat in the shade. There is enough food and water in the car to last us a week.

As soon as we're settled inside, Jude pulls me into a wet kiss. With no care that we're in enemy territory, he lets me fuck him against a wall. In a matter of minutes, we both turn into a sweaty mess. Jude moans loud enough to wake the hotel's ghosts. He comes once on the wall, then in my mouth, before I orgasm on his back.

I can't get enough of him, but the heat puts a stop to our lustful madness. We need to save our energy for later. We lie in the shade, naked, until our bodies have cooled down enough to rest. He falls asleep at my side, with his arm thrown carelessly over my chest. No matter how hot it gets, I don't push him away.

Later in the day, we sit on the roof of our four-wheel drive to watch the sun set over the ruins of Las Vegas. Most of the buildings have been trampled by old gods, but the giant Ferris wheel is still standing. It must have been so strange to let a wheel take you to such heights.

"Can you imagine," Jude says, "walking down the streets full of lights and music? Getting drunk in bars, wasting your money on hookers and casinos."

"No," I say.

I still can't fathom how they used digital money for everything. Something that couldn't even be touched ruled their world.

"I would have been one of the hookers," he jokes. "Or a stripper."

I raise an eyebrow. "Why?"



“Have you seen me? I’m too pretty to have worked common jobs.”

I chuckle. “A dominatrix, perhaps.”

“What’s that?”

“Someone wearing leather who is paid to torture their clients sexually and psychologically. More or less.”

Helios and I found a cache of porn when we were teenagers. We watched them on a TV in a villa that was still solar powered at the time. I remember thinking that one must be losing their mind to let themselves be treated that way and enjoy it. Now that I’ve spent time with Jude, I’m starting to understand. Earlier, right before I fucked him against the wall, he slapped me hard enough to make me see red and fuck him harder. Leather would suit him.

“That sounds like fun,” he says. “And you? What would you have been?”

I sigh, watching the sun disappear behind a tall tower broken at the top. “I wouldn’t exist. I was created in a lab for the sole purpose of being a soldier to fight the old gods. I’m a product of this new world. There is no place for me in the old one.”

Jude drops his head on my shoulder. The simple gesture is loaded with intimacy, and my heart skips a beat.

“You might be right,” he says. “But we’re both products of this world. I wouldn’t be me if I had grown up in theirs.”

I keep my mouth shut to avoid saying something that would leave me raw and exposed.

The radio comes to life below us in the car, making us both jump.

“The Bug has been located. I want everyone at the following coordinates tomorrow at noon.” Followed by a series of numbers. “The first ones who help me catch the Bug get a promotion! Come on, ladies and gentlemen! Let the chase begin!”

It’s undeniably Maeve’s voice. She’s using the Highwaymen’s main radio channel to give orders to her little army. Jude and I jump from the car’s roof hurriedly.

“Helios...” I breathe out.

“Oh, fuck no,” says Jude, opening the door. “Did you get the coordinates? I didn’t.”

I shake my head.

Luckily, they get repeated a few times over the next hour, and we locate them on one of the maps we find in the glove compartment. It’s a few hours north-east of Las Vegas, near the Grand Canyon.

“We need to get the Firefly back if we want to have a chance at helping them,” I say.

“And Maeve must have left the dam. It’s the perfect occasion. Let’s go!” He’s already behind the wheel.

We drive at neck-breaking speed through the dark wastelands, the red flag on our roof flapping in the wind. We cross paths with many groups of Highwaymen going in the same direction, their headlights blinding. As expected, they ignore us.

We know where we left the Firefly. And, with some luck, Marika didn’t have time to hack into it. Jude informs me that she isn’t as good as Perri, and it’ll certainly take her a few days to even break into Fyfe’s security.

We find no resistance as we reach the canyon of the Hoover Dam. We park the car and finish the rest of the hike leading to the Firefly on foot.

As expected, Marika is still there, hacking into the aircraft from a laptop balanced on a chair. Three solar lights have been installed around her. They forced one of the doors to get inside. A man is with her—an assigned bodyguard. But he doesn't get much time to guard her, as he falls to a bullet in the head, courtesy of Jude. Marika screams and crawls under the Firefly.

“Don't make us get you!” warns Jude.

There's violence on his face. He almost hopes that she'll make us drag her out of her hideout. He's angry. And with good reason. If given the chance, I will kill her for betraying us. The only thing stopping me is that I don't want to go against Jude's desires. He might be harboring some shreds of feelings for his old friend.

Marika crawls back out, dust clinging to the tears running down her cheeks.

“Jude...I'm sorry...I—” she starts.

“You're only sorry that we survived,” he says coldly.

“You don't understand... I did it to survive... You understand—”

“I don't. Now shut the fuck up, or I'll ask my mutant here to cook your brain until it runs down your nose.” He gestures toward me. “And he'll enjoy it.”

My mutant. I like that. Strangely.

For show, I let electricity rise to my fingertips and create an arc above both of my hands. Marika whimpers again but keeps her mouth shut.

We tie her up, then inspect the Firefly. They stole all the food and guns. But the rest seems to be in order.

“Welcome back, Mr. President,” Fyfe says in his toneless voice as I sit on the pilot’s chair. “I’ve been under siege, but they haven’t managed to break into my core yet.”

“Good job, Fyfe,” I say.

“Are you okay? Do you require assistance?”

“I’m fine. But yes. I need to change your command.”

At that, Jude turns to me.

“Of course, Mr. President,” says Fyfe.

I hold Jude’s gaze as I say, “I would like to appoint my new vice president and give him full control of the Firefly. Same status as me. Jude...”

“Jude MacCain,” says Jude, eyes sparkling.

“Yes. Jude MacCain has full access to the Firefly, even when I’m not around. And if I were to die, he would replace me as sole owner of this aircraft.”

“Understood,” says Fyfe. “Control command modified to include the Vice President, Jude MacCain.”

“Thank you, Dumdumb,” says Jude. But he’s looking at me.

“You’re welcome,” I say.

He laughs. “Now, let’s blow some things up.”

“You have a plan?” I ask him.

“More or less. Maeve won’t want her precious dam to fall into enemies’ hands. If we attack here, it might convince her to turn back and give a chance to the Devil of the Waste and Helios to escape. And we have access to their main channel, and her favorite whore is a hostage.”

By whore, he means Marika, who is now tied to one of the seats at the back of the Firefly.

“Whatever you have in mind, I’m in,” I say.

Jude smiles. “I didn’t tell you, but I found a rocket launcher on the back seat of one of the cars.”

My smile now mirrors his own.

The next morning, the Highwaymen left to guard the dam watch us with curiosity as we fly above the bridge. Some of them might be aware that Marika had been hacking into an aircraft. Fyfe, following our instructions, hovers above the four intake towers. I hold Jude with an arm around his waist as he leans over the edge, the rocket launcher over his shoulder. Without hesitation, he shoots a rocket over the north-west tower, the one where we met with Marika two days ago. It explodes with flourish. Two men who had been on the bridge leading to the other tower fall into the lake below.

“That should get Maeve’s attention,” Jude says as I pull him back inside.

He looks so proud of himself and wicked, I feel like kissing him.

The Highwaymen shoot at the Firefly and a few bullets ricochet over the hull and windows. Luckily, everything is bulletproof. They didn't mess around with the President's safety back in the day.

Fyfe takes us over the mountain top near the dam, at a safe distance from the shooters. We land and watch as Maeve's pet god, Altamaha-ha, devours the men who fell into the lake minutes ago. They didn't get time to reach the spillway.

"Now, we wait," says Jude.

We didn't have to wait long. The radio we brought on the Firefly immediately started relaying angry orders on all the Highwaymen's channels.

Maeve is furious.

Our plan worked. They seem to have entirely forgotten about the Bug and the Devil of the Wastes. Helios is safe for now.

Maeve and her little army arrive an hour before sunrise. The cars and trucks, red flags in the wind, darken the horizon.

"Well, fuck," says Jude. "It looks like she's recruited more people since she took over."

"We stick to the plan?" I ask.

He nods. We still have one rocket left.

We fly over the tall bridge behind the dam, the one they built back in the days to cross over the river. The cars stop on both sides of the canyon.

Jude gets a hold of Marika and opens the shackles around her hands and feet.

“Go back to your master,” he says, before pushing her out.

We’re thirty feet above the bridge. Marika screams and crashes down below. He might have decided not to kill her, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t hold a grudge. From the way she limps away, she certainly broke her ankle. Jude can be kind, but he’s far from soft.

A lone figure gets off a vehicle and walks to the middle of the bridge. Maeve. Marika hobbles to her. But if she expects a warm embrace, she’s sorely mistaken. Maeve kills her with one bullet in the heart. Favorite hacker or not, she’s too angry to care. So much for family.

Jude sighs as his old friend crumples to the floor. “She never adapted to the new world.”

Instead of turning back, Maeve steps over Marika’s corpse and keeps walking to the center of the bridge.

“Is she serious?” Jude asks.

My mutant sister has no fear as she points a finger at us in challenge. She’s dragging something behind her. I realize too late that it’s a long metal spear.

“She’s going to throw it,” I warn.

Jude is already leaning over the edge, the rocket launcher over his shoulder. I get a hold of his belt before he can fall over. He shoots the rocket just as Maeve whips her arm back and throws the spear with a mighty force. The projectile pierces one of our aero engines at the same moment that the rocket hits the bridge, right on Maeve.

Alarms blare in the Firefly as we go down. I have time to pull Jude into my arms as we're getting thrown out of the aircraft.

The breath gets knocked out of me as we land hard on the road below. The bridge is still standing, against all odds, but is broken in the middle.

As soon as I can move, I survey Jude. He's stunned but unharmed. I might have a few broken ribs, but nothing life-threatening. I'll heal. I always do. At least if we survive the next hour. The Highwaymen won't be happy that we killed their new master. We might be able to pull off the same thing we did two days ago. Jump into the river and let the current take us to safety. To the hut. From this height, the water will be like hitting concrete, but I can withstand it, I think.

The Firefly has crashed farther away in the canyon. I doubt that it'll be able to fly. The aero engine is on fire.

As we get to our feet, Jude points to the other side of the bridge. Maeve is alive. She rises from the smoke. Her clothes are in tatters around her body, but she's otherwise in one piece. Some strands of her long hair are on fire. She survived a rocket and is now ready to jump over the broken bridge to reach us.



*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“Our experiences with raising mutants varied from team to team. Some were quite docile, while others were disappointments. But there is one in particular that turned out to be extremely difficult. Maeve couldn’t be punished and submitted to obedience the old-fashioned way. She could endure everything from physical pain to psychological threats. And in the end, the only thing that worked was starvation. We stopped feeding her, and she was forced to follow our rules. But trust me when I say we were happy to be rid of her when the Revival Project was abandoned. We left during the night, and by morning she found herself alone in the deserted lab.”

Extract of an interview with bioengineer Dr. Mark Harvax, 2051.

“You’ve got to be kidding me...” says Jude.

And I remember what Bernie—the man we captured a few days ago—said about Maeve. ‘She’s strong. Really strong.’

We dismissed his comment. After all, all mutants are stronger than normal humans, me included. But I certainly can’t survive a rocket. The Devil of the Wastes has thick skin, but he bled during our fight. There is not one drop of blood on her.

Jude pulls out the gun strapped to my holster and starts shooting. The bullets ricochet over Maeve’s skin. She looks bigger—more muscular—than before as she walks toward us.

“Fuck...” Jude breathes out.

She’s getting closer. And I know from the look on her face and the gleam in her

yellow eyes that if we jump over the bridge and into the river, she'll follow. The fall might render me unable to fight, while leaving her barely stunned. We can't risk it. She'll kill us in the water, like her pet god does its victims.

I look at Jude, then at our surroundings. He can't run to either side of the bridge, where the Highwaymen await. And he can't jump without me; he'll die.

My only choice is to face Maeve if I want to give us a chance to escape. And either way, we have a score to settle.

I take a fighting stance as she walks the remaining distance separating us. I share a glance with Jude, ordering him to step back.

"You think you can take my empire?" Maeve bellows. "I'm the only one strong enough to rule over the wastelands!"

At least, as I was building my underground city, I wasn't under the delusion that I was the better man. I just wanted to carve my place in the world and survive.

In the distance, on the other side of the dam, Altamaha-ha is agitated. His long tail creates waves that crash over the canyon and the spillways. He's frustrated that we stand on this bridge and are not closer to his lake. He's hoping he'll get the leftovers from our fight.

Well, he can go fuck himself.

Maeve rushes at me, forcing me to forget about everything but the incoming fight. I dodge to the side. I've learned my lesson from the Devil of the Wastes. I can't let her get her hands on me, or she'll crush me. Her foot comes down as she pivots, leaving cracks in the asphalt.

“Do you know which god I got my DNA from?” she asks.

“No. And I don’t care,” I say.

My veins turn darker over my body and neck as I prepare my electricity. Sparks rise from my skin. I’ve recovered enough and could set fire to a dry field. I’ve seen it happen before.

Maeve smiles. It’s an ugly smile, edged with madness. “There is an old god in Africa, with horns longer than a man and—”

I don’t give her time to finish; she likes to hear herself talk, and I don’t have time for a villain monologue. I step forward, put both hands on her naked shoulders, and release a heavy electric charge. She screams before punching my hands. I wince as two fingers break. I step back.

Maeve shakes herself and glares at me. “Interesting party trick,” she says.

This attack would have killed a normal human. I’ll just have to up my game. No matter how thick the tiger’s skin is, its insides are still composed of water.

The Highwaymen don’t dare get closer; the bridge seems a little precarious since the rocket hit it. But they cheer their master from both sides.

Maeve jumps back into action, aiming for my head with a wide kick. Once again, I dodge it easily. Her fighting style is crude. She relies too much on her brute force. I regret to say that I learned how to fight with the best teacher: my father. He might have been a terrible father figure and master, but he was a hell of a soldier. Before the Rise, he was a special agent. The kind that the US government sent on difficult missions. A heartless combatant.

Helios taught me kindness. But before that, Sergeant Kang taught me how to be deadly efficient in combat. The only person who ever got the best of me was the Devil of the Wastes.

The next time Maeve comes at me, I pull out the knife I kept hidden in my holster. I stab her in the gut. The blade gets deflected by her thick skin, and I'm taken against my will by the momentum. I hoped that something sharp would be enough. I was wrong. Maeve grabs me into a chokehold, and I barely have time to reach with my arm and stop her from crushing my throat instantly. My arm takes the damage. There is the audible noise of bones breaking, followed by an explosion of pain. I grunt and kick the ground to try to release myself. We fall backward, but she refuses to let me go.

With her strength, I'll be dead in seconds.

Jude—the impossibly beautiful and incredibly stupid man—has pulled out his own army knife, and he appears above us to stab her in the eye with it. Maeve screams as he buries the blade deep. She releases me. I roll away from her deadly embrace. Jude pulls me away by my good arm while I cradle the other to my chest.

Maeve gets to her feet, blood running down her face and her body. The knife didn't get deep enough to kill her, but it was enough to take her eye out.

So, she can bleed, too. Good.

"I'm going to make sure to keep you alive while I cut parts off you to feed to Altamaha-ha," she says to Jude.

"Not if I take your other eye out first," he says, smiling.

This man loves to play with fire.

Maeve rushes at him. And the fear that surged through me two days ago when she ordered Jude to be thrown over the dam is nothing compared to the one I feel now. If she gets her hands on him, she'll break him. Irrevocably. He's only human.

Anything but that. I'm only alive because of him, in many aspects. If he's gone... I just don't want to imagine it. I haven't felt so alive since the day Helios left me, years ago. Jude has taken the broken monster that I was and brought him back to life.

He steps back, barely avoiding her rage. The bridge shakes as she lands.

But as Maeve readies her next attack, I jump on her back and release everything I have. All the electricity stored in my organs. It courses through my dark veins, thanks to the iron-thick blood pumped by my mending heart. My body starts overheating in a matter of seconds. And yet, I don't let go. At first, she screams loud enough to make my eardrums bleed. She claws at my face with her fingers and nails, almost taking my eye out, too. But eventually, she stops struggling. She stops making any noise. And still, I refuse to let go. She needs to be dead when I pull back. I can't let her walk away from this. Or even crawl.

At some point, I'm forced to let go as my vision darkens. I've spent all that I have, to the point of fading. Maeve falls heavily to the ground, and I tilt back. Jude catches me before my head can hit the asphalt.

"Fuck. You're burning up," he says, placing my head on his lap.

Worry shines in his blue eyes as he surveys me. It's something I could get used to. I reach for his face with my hand and startle when I notice the purple bruises around my veins. I'm covered in them. I've pushed my body to its limits.

"You look like shit," Jude says with a little smile.

“Thanks. And you look stunning, as always,” I retort.

“Of course, I do.”

I laugh. “We need to go before they get out of their stupor and decide to kill us.” I gesture with my good arm to the Highwaymen waiting on both sides of the bridge. They might figure that the one to kill us will be their new leader. I’m surprised they haven’t started shooting already.

“Where to?” Jude asks. “We’re kind of limited in our escape options.”

“The river.” I try to get to my feet, but I fail miserably.

Jude sighs. “I doubt we’ll survive it.”

“You might, if I use my body to protect yours from the fall.”

He snorts. “Out of the question.”

“What? You were ready to put a bullet in my head less than a week ago.”

“Yes. And that was then, and this is now. I say we go out swinging.” He pulls out the gun he took from my holster earlier, plus the one strapped to his belt. “With some luck, some of my remaining siblings will be casualties before we go down.”

We’re about to die, and he’s smiling. I can’t help but smile, too. I was supposed to die a few weeks ago when the Devil of the Wastes pierced me with his swords. And before that, Jude almost died at my hands. Our lives took such an unexpected turn. And yet, I regret nothing. We had a good run. Together, against all odds.

“Give me my gun and help me up,” I say.

He obeys without a snarky remark, for once. My broken arm hangs limply on my side, but I can still shoot with the other one.

Some of the Highwaymen are arguing and already making their way toward us. They leave their cars behind; the bridge might not hold them. Jude slides an arm around me to help me stay up.

But right as we're about to start shooting, a large shadow falls over the bridge. We both drop to a crouch instinctively. Something coming from the sky is never good news. The Firefly might have been the last aircraft to fly, and it has crashed over the canyon.

Quetzalcoatl has appeared from beyond the mountains. The feathered serpent swoops down west of the bridge and carries two Highwaymen away in his talons. They have no time to scream as the giant creature eats them whole. His long body undulates in the sky, his red and green scales reflecting the sun. His large wings raise clouds of dust over the wastelands.

Pandemonium ensues. The crowds disperse, fleeing the old god set on feasting on them. Jude and I, standing in the middle of the bridge alone, are far below his notice.

"How about that..." says Jude, smiling.

I have no words as Quetzalcoatl carries a car in his talons and drops it into the river below. It crashes with a great noise. On the other side of the dam, Altamaha-ha appears at the surface of the lake and lets out a deafening roar.

After that, things happen fast. The new god turns his attention to the one calling Lake Mead his home. The old gods are extremely territorial, and the clash of titans left entire cities in ruin during the Rise. Nowadays, encounters are rarer, as most of them have found their bearings. But it appears that Quetzalcoatl has been looking to

relocate.

“Fuck...” says Jude, just as Quetzalcoatl dives toward Altamaha-ha, talons first.

The two old gods clash in a fury of rocks and water.

“Time to go,” I say as the bridge shakes under our feet.

This is our chance. The Highwaymen are all scattering like mice chased by the smell of a cat. If we can find a truck, we might have a chance of getting out of their territory.

I limp to the end of the bridge with Jude’s help. The two immortal creatures fight with ferocity I have never witnessed. Quetzalcoatl’s talons created deep gashes along Altamaha-ha’s back and tail, turning the lake a deep red.

“I’ve never seen an old god bleed,” Jude whispers, in shock.

“Me neither,” I admit.

It’s been a long time since humans had the capacity to even scratch a god.

Altamaha-ha stretches his reptilian neck and manages to close his jaw around the serpent’s long body. Quetzalcoatl thrashes and fights back, losing a few dozen giant feathers. The two gods fall into the water and hit the dam. The massive concrete wall shakes and cracks.

“Oh, shit...” says Jude.

One more hit, and the Hoover Dam breaks. The giant concrete wall explodes under the pressure, destroying the rest of the structure on the other side. The massive wave



pulls the old gods to the river below, and they crash at the bottom. The earthquake must have been felt for miles.

We're lucky to be standing on the bridge that they built over the canyon. Jude and I watch with horror as Lake Mead empties itself with devastating force, taking over the Colorado River. The land beyond will be flooded for miles. The water will kill everything and everyone in its path. The hut where we spent the night might already be gone.

Jude's arm shakes around my back. I get a hold of his hand and squeeze.

"Let's go," I say.

We're some of the lucky ones. Let's not waste that luck.

In the panic, someone left a desert buggy at the end of the bridge. Jude straps me to the passenger's seat before sitting behind the wheel.

Before leaving, I spare one last glance at the Firefly that has crashed over the canyon. The aircraft appears to be whole, but the aero engine is still smoking. I wonder if Fyfe can feel abandonment and loneliness. Even rudimentary AIs can surprise us sometimes.

"We'll come back for him," Jude says, following my gaze. "With some luck, Margaret will be able to patch him up."

I nod.

We drive away from the ruins of the Hoover Dam, the roars of the fighting old gods echoing over the wastelands.

My arm has its own heartbeat. The bones have been broken by Maeve in a few different places. Once we're at a safe distance from the dam, Jude parks in the ruins of a small town.

"We need to set your arm," he says to me. "It'll hurt less if it's set right. Also, from what I've seen of your healing speed, they might already be mending wrong."

I nod.

Jude digs into the wooden chest at the back of the buggy. He announces that we have food, water, and extra fuel. And, surprisingly, pain medication. The Highwaymen must have stolen them from traveling merchants.

He offers me water in a dented mug and a tablet. I stare at it in the center of his palm with a strange mixture of affection and wonder. Two weeks ago, he used to ram them down my throat.

"How far we've come," Jude whispers, watching me.

There's a fond smile on his face and a blush that might not come from the sun.

I lean forward and kiss him. He slides a hand into my sweaty hair and pulls, dragging a growl out of me. My broken arm stops me from pulling him over my lap, and I have to be content with my good hand on his ass.

"It looks like you're at my mercy again," he says close to my lips.

"It looks like it. Take good care of me, master."

He shudders and bites my bottom lip.

I swallow a scream as he sets my arm and puts it in a splint. But the tender way he soothes my pain with a hand on my brow makes it all worth it. I would break my arm over and over again just to have him touch me with such care and affection. I've been starving for touch for years. He's offering a gulp of fresh water after crossing the desert.

We drive for a few hours until we reach Gears and Giggles. Margaret welcomes us with a gun carelessly hanging over her shoulder and a frown.

"I've heard some strange tales," she says. "Something about a mutant killing another one with his pet, Quetzalcoatl."

Jude laughs. "I wish it was that cool. But we almost got our asses handed to us by two angry old gods. Sorry to bother you again, but we need time to heal and have nowhere else to go. The Firefly crashed."

Margaret watches us as Jude helps me out of the buggy. "You know you're always welcome here, Jude. And, apparently, you too," she says, giving us a pointed look. Jude's hand rests on my lower back.

Jess takes care of our wounds as we tell them our story. The two women are happy that we put an end to Maeve's rising tyranny. Without a leader, the Highwaymen have scattered to the wind. They send a signal to their son to warn the Traveling Market and its king that the mutant queen has been killed and her minions are ripe for the picking. They make sure to talk about Jude's involvement. With some luck, the King will let bygones be bygones.

They let us stay for two weeks while my arm heals. They give us the bus to sleep in at night. Meanwhile, we help them as best as we can to earn our keep. As it turns out, I'm a valuable asset for mechanics. I can recharge batteries and feel whether a circuit is in working order or not. Jude is also very skilled with his hands. He grew up

working on his parents' cars and trucks.

I've come to love the two women. They treat me like an overgrown teenager and not a powerful mutant. On the first days, their teasing and orders used to raise my hackles. But Jude was there to put me in my place in his usual manner, with seduction and threats.

It's still a learning process for me to become a decent person. I doubt I'll ever excel at it, but I'm willing to try.

In the third week, we scout the wastelands around the Hoover Dam. We find no trace of Quetzalcoatl in the sky. The old god must have moved on to more lush parts of North America. And from the radio signals we intercepted, Altamaha-ha has followed the river farther south to lick his wounds.

The Highwaymen have not returned to the dam, now a wet ruin. But the Firefly is still hanging from the mountainside.

As we reach the cockpit, Fyfe opens the door and welcomes us with "Hello, Mr. President. Mr. Vice President. I'm afraid I'm out of order."

"It's okay, Fyfe. We'll patch you up. You'll fly again," says Jude.

It's the first time he hasn't called him Dumdumb.

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*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“I found the perfect place to start a new life. There is food, water, and shelter. It’s an abandoned bunker that has been left untouched since before the Rise. A few survivors had been trying to get in for weeks, but there wasn’t enough juice left in the structure to open the gate. All it took was my electricity, but it opened. Finally, I found a place where I could have kept Helios safe. But he’s already gone. I have failed him. It all seems meaningless now. But I keep going. Because what else am I supposed to do? Life finds a way, whether I want it or not.”

Extract of a handwritten journal, by Oliver Kang, 2060.

Margaret comes to help us tow the Firefly back to Gears and Giggles. The area surrounding the dam has been completely abandoned by men and gods alike.

It takes a good part of another week to repair the broken aero engine and the damage to the hull. We also rearrange the inside of the Firefly to fit a normal-sized bed for two by getting rid of all the extra chairs and cupboards.

To our surprise, Stellan and Perri appear one evening. They traveled from the market to visit the women. Apparently, the King let them leave, knowing that Jude was here. We take it as a good sign. And word has spread that we saved Gandalf from the Highwaymen. Maybe next time we encounter the King, he won’t try to kill us. That’s a fight I’d rather avoid.

Stellan watches me for a long time after embracing his mothers. Until, at last, he offers me a handshake. He tries his best to crush my fingers, but there is a little smile at the corner of his mouth. I think I won his approval by getting rid of the threat that hung over all their heads. Perri’s smile is brighter as he jumps into Jude’s arms.

We stay for another three days while Perri hacks into the Firefly to improve the AI by merging it with another incomplete Intelligence he had in his computer for years. By the time he's done, Fyfe has a British accent that Jude finds endearing. He still calls us Mr. President and Mr. Vice President for the hell of it.

On the last night before our departure, Perri walks to me with a bag in his arms. I've been working on finishing the Firefly's new look. We're covering every surface except the solar panels with reflective sheets to divert sunlight and help fight heat in the desert during the day.

"Here," he says, dropping the bag at my feet. "I brought you some clothes from the market."

I raise a brow. "For me?"

"Yes. When I talked to Jude on the radio before leaving, he told me that you still wore the Hawaiian shirt I gave you. He said it suited your bright personality. So, I brought you more."

I try to keep my face neutral as I open the bag and pull out colorful shirts one after the other. One even has flamingos with sunglasses on it. Bright pink flamingos.

By the time I find it in me to thank him, Perri has a shit-eating grin on his face. The little fucker knows what he's doing.

"You have to wear them all," he tells me. "Take it as your rehabilitation therapy. They'll turn you into a better person. You can't be mean with those shirts on."

That's debatable. I killed a few people while wearing the first one he gave me. I think that would qualify as being mean. At least to the people who are dead now.

“Very well,” I say fondly. I would wear them every day if it made Jude happy. “Even though I think the things I’ve done over the years won’t be erased by a few flamingos and flowers.”

Perri nods. “You’re right. It’ll take a lot more than that. But it’s a start.”

He pulls out two bottles of beer from his back pockets and hands me one. Stellan appears in the mobile-home door frame. He watches us for a moment before disappearing inside again. Funnily enough, he now trusts that I’m not a threat to Perri.

We sit on upside-down crates and open the bottles. The Highwaymen used to provide those beers and much more to Margaret and Jess. Now that they’re scattered to the wind, they’ll find themselves lacking. But, thankfully, the traveling merchants should come back to the area. They’ll be fine.

“What will it take,” I ask Perri, coming back to our conversation, “for me to erase all the things that I’ve done?”

“Start by understanding that you can’t erase them,” he says, clinking our bottles together. “All you can do, I think, is balance them out with good things. It’s your job to figure it out.”

“You’re so wise for a teenager,” I say.

Perri scowls. “I’m twenty-one!”

I laugh. I knew it, but Jude’s teasing is rubbing on me. It’s so easy to get a rise out of him.

We drink our beers, and he tells me about his life and the market until Jude and

Stellan come sit with us.

Later that night, Jude joins me in bed for our last night at Gears and Giggles. The Firefly is ready, and so are we. He takes all his clothes off, and his lithe body slides over mine. I can never get enough of the feel of his skin on mine. So warm and soft.

Tomorrow, we leave together.

I still think that I don't deserve any of it. I don't deserve him.

Jude nuzzles my neck, and I feel his tongue leave a wet trail up to my ear. I shiver.

"Don't move," he whispers.

My fist tightens over the blanket, but I obey. He likes to use me as his plaything. Most of his life, people have tried to use and abuse him for his beauty. But that never worked for him. He wants to be the one to take. At least, until the time is right, and he can't control his needs anymore. Only then does he want me to fuck him into oblivion. But, meanwhile, I can be his plaything all he wants. I crave it.

He pulls the blanket off my body and closes his hand around my cock. Blood rushes through my veins, and electricity sparks under my skin. Jude's short hair floats above his head, as if caught in an electric storm. I can never hide what he does to me, and he loves that.

He slowly starts to jerk me off, and lubricant pours out of my black tip. His hand makes a wet noise as it goes up and down.

"Do you hear that?" he purrs. "I freaking love it."

My hands twitch as I fight the urge to tackle him on the bed. His breath tickles my



neck, and his erection rubs on my hip.

“I want to try something,” he says.

“What?” I whisper.

“I want to fuck you.”

My head turns too fast to be casual, and my eyes find his. He’s deadly serious, even though there is a wicked smile on his lips. He loves to see me flustered. My cock twitches in response to the offer. The lubricant pours generously and slides down my balls and into my crack.

“Will you let me fuck you, Oliver?” he asks.

How could I say no to that? I’ve been wanting it for weeks. But I’m too afraid to say yes out loud.

All I manage to say is, “My body is yours entirely.”

Jude’s hand tightens around my cock, and his pupils dilate. He pumps me twice, then slides his slippery hand down to my entrance. I spread my legs wider. My heart is hammering against my ribs like a caged bird eager to take flight. He nudges the circle of muscles with the tip of his finger while his left hand encircles my cock once again. He starts jerking me off again as he fingers me. The dual stimulation is overwhelming, and I almost come here and now. Jude gasps as electricity crosses from my skin to his. It doesn’t hurt him. Never again would I let my powers hurt someone I love. But it’s still a part of me. One that he’s not afraid of.

His finger goes deeper, and I wince from the alien sensation. Jude’s face appears above mine. He’s watching me intently. I have to fight the urge to hide my face.

“I love watching you go through all the stages of surrender,” he says.

My pride shudders. After years of being the one in control, it has been trained to give ground to the rest. To lust, happiness, and love. Only when it was done did I realize that pride and ego were my heaviest shackles. They pulled me down and ensured that I stepped over everything and everyone on my way through life.

But only to Jude would I surrender wholly.

The alien sensation is slowly replaced by something incredible. I can't stop the little moans and gasps from escaping my lips.

Jude looks ravenous as he watches me. He opens his mouth, and his tongue peeks out. A drop of saliva stretches toward me, and I open my own to welcome it. Our kiss is sloppy and urgent. My nerves are on fire. I need him to do something more, now!

“What are you waiting for?” I say between gasps. “Fuck me already...”

The effect on Jude is immediate. He pulls his fingers out and appears between my legs. He swipes a hand in the lubricant, slathers his cock with it, and keeps his eyes on me as he slowly pushes in. My eyes widen, surprised by the feeling. I already feel stretched to the maximum. I'm much bigger than he is. How can he take me daily and not die?

I bite my lip not to cry out.

“Fuck, baby... I can't stop now...” Jude says between rasps. “If you want me to stop, you'll have to kick me off.”

The fact that he just called me baby almost ends me. Nobody ever called me that. I had no mother, my father was a monster, and the scientists all hated me.

Helios was too scared of me to call me endearing names. And I can't blame him.

But Jude says it so naturally. With him, everything always seems so easy.

I encircle his back with my legs, making sure that even if he wanted to, he wouldn't be able to pull out.

"Don't you dare stop..." I say.

His eyes find mine, and they're stormy. He pushes deeper, until he's all the way in. He starts thrusting hard and fast. The discomfort is soon replaced by an earth-shattering pleasure.

My stomach is slick from the lubricant pouring out of my tip. He hits that sweet spot with every hip thrust.

"Shit... I need to pull out or..." he says, breathless.

I get a hold of the back of his head and pull him into a kiss.

"Don't," I whisper close to his lips. "Keep going until I forget my fucking name."

Jude turns his face and sucks on my thumb before biting it. Pleasure and pain mix in an explosive combination. He reaches for my cock and jerks me off in sync with his movements. My head hits the wall of the bus repetitively, and I'm pretty sure we're waking up the entire camp. I don't care.

In a heartbeat, I'm coming in generous spurts over my chest. Jude keeps going for a while longer, and my eyes roll in their orbits. I've already orgasmed, but the sensation deep inside me is overwhelming. I hang on to him for dear life as he takes his pleasure.

I could spend my life here, under him.

At last, Jude digs his nails into my waist as he comes. Warmth spreads inside me and between my legs. We kiss deeply.

He relaxes on top of me and buries his face in my neck. I can read the electric current going through our bodies. The energy we create together has a different flavor; one I'm already addicted to.

I trail my fingers through his sweaty hair, which has already grown longer. He asked Jess to buzz the sides with clippers. There is a beginning of lush ginger locks. He'll be unstoppable once it's back to his favorite haircut. The most beautiful man to ever walk the wastelands.

Jude rolls his hips. Once, twice. Until there is no mistaking what he's doing. He hasn't even pulled out yet, but he's already going again. I can feel him harden inside me.

"You still haven't forgotten your name," he tells me as our eyes meet. A wicked smile pulls at his lips.

One more hip thrust, and my cock is leaking lubricant again. I drag him down for a kiss.

After thoroughly ravaging me, Jude cleans us with a wet rag, and we lie in bed. I caress his elegant shoulders, tracing the fern-like scars with my fingertips.

"I'm sorry about the burns," I say, recalling that fateful night when I almost killed him.

I would have if Helios hadn't stopped me. I shudder just thinking about it. I almost

killed Jude before our story even began. I would be dead now, buried under the ruins of my underground city. Maybe it would have been a mercy.

“I love them,” he says. “They’re cool, don’t you think?”

I frown and kiss him. “You’re impossible.”

When we finally say goodbye to our friends the next day—I’m still marveling at the fact that I can call them my friends—a month has passed since our fight with Maeve.

As we sit in the cockpit, Jude offers me his hand.

“Where to?” he asks.

“Wherever you want,” I say. “It doesn’t matter. I’ll follow you.” I drop a kiss on top of his hand.

Jude offers the most beautiful smile I’ve ever seen, and I thank life for being so sweet.

*Source Creation Date: July 17, 2025, 7:41 am*

“In our new world, myths walk the earth and cross oceans. So, it’s not a surprise that new legends are born from rumors and whispers shared over campfires. They travel great distances thanks to the songs and reports of explorers and survivors alike. That’s how the stories of the Devil of the Wastes and his giant Beetle came to be. Different names and stories, all originating from the same mutant. A man with horns and red eyes. But, surprisingly, all those tales don’t speak of the kind of devil that strikes fear into the hearts of the people he encounters. Quite the contrary. The Devil of the Wastes is known to appear out of nowhere and provide help in life-threatening situations. I would know. I met him a few years ago on a fateful day when I found myself dying from thirst in Colorado after my truck had broken down. By then, the dehydration had made me hallucinate. So, when the Devil walked up to me with a cup of water, I thought him a creation of my raving mind. But the water that he poured down my parched throat was real. I would have cried if I could. He nursed me back to health for a day and gave me enough supplies to keep going. Then he climbed back into his giant beetle machine and they both disappeared, as if swallowed by the wastelands.

Weary travelers, do not fear the Devil of the Wastes and his machine, for if you come to cross paths with him when in need, you’re one of the lucky ones.”

Extract of Tales of the Traveling Merchant, by Megan Stoaks, 2059.

Five months later.

“I see them,” says Jude.

My hands shake as he offers me the binoculars. I’ve been expecting and yet dreading

this moment for months. The Bug is standing on a small mountaintop, a good distance away. We noticed the giant beetle from the sky and landed on the desert's ground.

And from the way the six-legged machine is poised, they have noticed us too.

One moment, it's standing there, its hull shining under the sun like the scales of an old god, and then the next, it's gone. It disappeared like a mirage.

We've been expecting it. The Bug has a reputation for vanishing into thin air, thanks to an unknown technology.

Jude pulls out a white flag with Helios' name painted on it. It's the only thing he could think of to get his friend's attention. They haven't seen each other since Bunkertown.

It must be working because moments later the Bug reappears on the mountaintop.

"Stay here," Jude tells me.

I get a hold of his hand, unsure. What if Helios doesn't have good control over his new lover? What if the Devil of the Wastes smells me on Jude and kills him on sight? Or decides to get revenge for the hurt I did to Helios?

I can't lose Jude. I just can't.

"If he touches you..." I start.

"I'll be fine," Jude says, smiling. "The Devil has been known to rescue slaves for years. And Helios has told me so much about him during that short time when we were together. I'll be fine." He squeezes my hand, and I have to let him go.

Jude steps away from the Firefly and raises his arms above his head. He walks for a good minute on the desert ground before the Bug finally makes a move. It climbs down the mountaintop.

They meet halfway, a few hundred feet from my position. The Bug dwarfs Jude. It truly does look like a man-made old god. I pace in front of the Firefly, keeping the urge to run to him in check.

A hatch opens from the side of the Bug, and a man jumps out with ease. Even from a distance, I would recognize that man anywhere. He's the one who owned my heart and soul for years. Who made me believe in love in the first place. And yet, I never loved him the right way. Helios throws himself into Jude's arms. My new lover spins him round and round.

I tremble as I watch my ex-lover and my new one reunite. Both men should want me dead.

The Devil of the Wastes steps out of the Bug. He's much taller than Jude and Helios, and twice as wide. My mutant brother is unnaturally still as we observe the reunion. Even from a distance, I can make out the two horns rising above his head. They seem smaller than they were during our fight.

Jude and Helios turn to him, and Jude shakes hands with the Devil. They start talking, and I have never wished more to be able to hear in the wind.

At some point, the Devil takes a quick step forward, and Helios puts himself in his way. This is it. He might come and fight me here and now. I have decided that if he does, I'll let him kill me this time. There can't be a fight with Jude and Helios involved. It would have to be over quickly. This conflict will have to end, one way or another. And if my death is the price, so be it.

Jude would try to avenge me, but Helios will make sure he stays alive. From what



I've witnessed since I captured him half a year ago, he hasn't changed. Helios has a heart bigger than the whole world.

But the Devil doesn't come running. He stands still as the two men talk to him. A statue in all aspects. Except his horns already look longer. They curve above his head. A stark reminder of the old god he shares his DNA with.

I start pacing around the Firefly. This was a terrible idea. What if they convince Jude to walk away with them? And he would be right to do it. I've spent my life fucking things up. It's about time I paid the bill.

Maybe I should have taken the craven way out of this. We could have moved to the south or farther north. To the lands where the Bug is rarely seen.

I shake my head. This is not what Jude wanted. He needed to see his friend again, and I needed to be able to move on, one way or another.

They talk for an eternity, and I'm losing my mind.

Until, at last, Jude hugs Helios one last time and walks back to the Firefly. I hold my breath as he crosses the desert back to me.

Jude laughs as he sees my face. "You look a little pale," he jokes.

"What did they say?" I ask.

"They don't forgive you, but they consider that the debt is paid since you almost gave your life to protect them from Maeve. They heard rumors of a fight between two mutants at the Hoover Dam six months ago. Well, Griffin—the Devil—still wants you dead, but Helios seems to have a good sway over him, and he won't kill you because it would mean going against Helios' will. As long as you don't bother them, they'll be happy to let you live. I can still hang out with Helios from time to time.

We've decided on a channel to contact each other. The Bug is actually called the Beetle. Figured."

"Helios...agreed to let me live?" I ask.

Jude nods.

"But why?"

"I think he was relieved to learn that you survived. Even after everything you did, he still has affection for you."

It feels like my heart is being crushed under a rock. A rock as big as a mountain.

Jude must have seen the devastation on my face, because he comes closer and puts a hand on my cheek. I close my eyes. The world is too bright.

"I also told them that I had you on a tight leash, and they didn't need to worry about you," he says. There's mirth in his voice.

I laugh. "That's entirely true."

I drop to my knees in the dust and hug his thighs. I don't care if the entire world sees me like this. They could make a painting of me at Jude's feet, and I would pay good money to put it up for all to see.

"I love you. You know that, right?" I say to him, my face hidden against his body. "More than anything."

Those are the words that we usually utter in the dark, when we're raw and the night shelters us from reality.

But the sun is bright right now, and my heart is swelling to the point of bursting.

Jude's hand tightens around the back of my neck. "I know," he says.

And he drops to his knees too and kisses me.

On the horizon behind him, the Beetle disappears behind a rocky hill.

The End.

Stellan and Perri will come back in book three!