

Episode 202: The Holy of Holies

So I guess I'm some kind of mentor, now. That feels weird, considering I've only been with the Seekers a couple of months myself. And I definitely don't feel like I have my shit together well enough to have my own apprentice. But I'm the first Mosaic the Seekers managed to get on their side, and Shan's the second, so that's the situation. So me and them have been spending a lot of time together lately. It's been. . . Interesting. Kinda nice, having another non-human to talk to.

Intro

Today was my first mission showing Shan the ropes, except for the one where I met them. It feels weird, but I stopped to think about it, and I guess I have done a lot of these lately. Here's how it usually works: Miranda gets a call from Seekers in some other part of the country. Most of them have gifted people they keep an eye on. They say either some of their specimens have gone missing, or that people they know have gone missing. And these changes happen to coincide with some weird shit going on nearby. That's when we know someone from the Splinter has tried to create a Mosaic. And that's when Miranda sends me in.

About Miranda: She looks harmless. Middle-aged, average appearance, big glasses and cardigans. That's all very deliberate, I've learned. She does her best not to look like a cold-blooded head of a secret organization, but that's exactly what she is. She'll do whatever it takes to stop the Splinter. If she has to kill half the planet to get there, she'll do it. Or, more accurately, she'll have me do it. Hopefully it won't come to that.

Back to this most recent incident. In this case, Miranda's people zeroed in on the spot pretty fast. It was kind of the obvious choice. A compound of weirdos following some warped new religion made up by some bearded dude with four wives. I'm sure you can guess which state this was in, but if you need a hint, it starts with a T. Anyway, this ranching compound outside a bigger town used to be pretty friendly with their neighbors, but they went off the grid overnight, and some of the gifted folks in the area got twitchy vibes from the place. That's where I come in.

Miranda and some of her people drove us to the dirt road leading up to the compound. I told Shan to stay there. They didn't argue with me. One of their gifts is remote viewing, so they could follow along with everything I did without going anywhere. They touched my arm just as I stepped out of the van. Their skin feels kind of like leaves, dry and cool and. . . Why the fuck am I telling you this? Jesus. Anyway, Shan touched my arm and dusted me with a little bit of pollen from the flowers they have growing out of their arm. "So I can see through your eyes," they explained. Then, "Are you going to be ok out there?"

That stopped me, because I'm not sure anyone's ever asked me that. The folks in the Seekers assume because I'm a Mosaic that I'm a fucking Terminator or something. I wasn't

really sure how to respond. “Sure, no big,” I said at last, and then I went to check out the compound.

Things you should know about the Seekers: The Seeker plan for creating Mosaics involves a lot of selective breeding and matchmaking between people with certain powers, to make extra-super-duper powered babies. For most of history all they’d have to do is pay the right father an ox or something to marry his gifted daughter off to the right gifted guy. But sometimes people needed a little extra push. Enter the pheromone division. Before most of the world knew pheromones existed, the Seekers had developed advanced technology to distill and control them. They could figure out what pheromones were keyed to each person’s biology, and they could use that to their advantage. Let’s say there’s a woman with pyrokinesis and a man who can hijack the minds of insects. Naturally, the Seekers want those two to make a baby, stat. But they don’t notice each other. Aren’t attracted to each other. Aren’t the right social class to make the arrangement. So, obviously, you whip up some pheromones the woman will like and smear them on the guy, vice versa on the woman, get someone to ensure they’ll bump into each other on the street, and problem solved.

In theory, sure. But the Seekers have always been better at the science than the espionage part of their work. Which led to an incident in Stratford-on-Avon, England, in 1580. The Seekers wanted to get two gifted folks together. Just two servants, not a union that would garner much attention. But the girl had her eye on a handsome young butcher’s son, and the guy had an unfortunate pair of ears and horsey teeth, so the local Seeker chapter decided to go with some chemical assistance. The problem? The pickpocket they hired to get the hair samples and then spill the finished product on the targets overstated his ability to read the instructions. He got the guy right. But the girl? He mistook her name for that of a local widow, a beautiful and wealthy woman everyone stared at whenever she took her carriage through the streets. So the pickpocket pulled off phase 1, the Seekers distilled some perfectly matched pheromone concoctions, and then they sent him back out to make the match.

Onlookers remembered it this way. Dull, horsey Jack Button made his way down the street, running an errand for his master. Lady Teresa of Chalon came from the other direction, sitting proud in her carriage. Neither had noticed a grubby man bump into them as they went about their business earlier in the day. But now, as the carriage approached and the breeze carried Jack Button’s smell to her, Lady Teresa ordered her driver to stop. Then she leapt from the carriage and kissed Jack Button, and declared him her one true love, right in front of God and the baffled townspeople.

There’s no proof that a sixteen-year-old William Shakespeare was one of those townspeople, of course. But years later, when people from his hometown went to see *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in London’s Globe Theater, they thought the whole thing seemed awfully familiar.

I met the first one on the road leading toward a row of ranch houses. She was a teenage girl, wearing a shapeless floral dress and a long braid hanging down her back. She looked like something that just wandered in off the prairie. But that doesn't mean anything. I've met killers who looked cute and cuddly right until they tried to rip my throat out. So I hung back a little and asked her if she lived at the compound.

She glanced up, almost dazed. She took a minute to answer. Then she held up one of her hands. "I live on the road," she said, "because I would give only my finger." Her right index finger was severed at the base, the wound still raw. I tried to get more out of her, more about what that meant, but she just stared out at the horizon. I kept going.

I met the next one a little ways down the road. A young guy, maybe in his early twenties. He seemed maybe a little bit happier than the girl, but not by much. When I tried to talk to him, he lifted his leg. "I live on the road," he said, "because I would give only one of my feet." His foot was missing below the ankle, his pantleg rolled over it. As soon as he said that, he started hopping away down the road.

There were more, as I passed the first ranch houses and got closer to the big church in the middle. More missing fingers, toes, another foot. One woman had her entire hand missing at the wrist, but she held her severed fingers in the other hand, like someone had been interested in the palm and nothing else. All of them had the same spacy look to them, the same weird vacant absence in their eyes.

The other thing I noticed was that the missing pieces got bigger, or more important, as I got closer to the church. It had started with the girl with the missing finger, others with missing toes, but now I was seeing an entire leg missing below the knee, an arm gone at the elbow. Finally, I saw a woman sitting on the porch of one of the ranch houses. She was the first one who seemed to live in an actual dwelling, instead of out in the road. She turned to me as I approached, and the lines of her face held dry, crusted blood like tears running from where her eyes had been. "I cannot see," she said, "for I gave my eyes." She sounded proud.

On the next porch sat a middle aged man. He still had his eyes, but the front of his shirt was spattered with gore. He had used it to scrawl letters on the front wall of the house, words a foot high: I cannot speak, because I gave my tongue.

Then I got to the center, the grassy square surrounding the church. A few people lay scattered on the ground, but not like the ones on the road. No, these people were on little carts and makeshift beds, and other people, more intact people, ran around fetching and carrying for them. I stopped to get a closer look at one of them. She had a gash in her chest, one running almost all the way from her collarbone down to the ribcage. She wheezed every time she took a breath, but she smiled all the same. "I can. . . scarcely. . . breathe," she said, "for I gave one of my lungs." She said it the same as the others, the same rhythm, that made me think they'd been saying these words to themselves and to each other, over and over, for days.

I didn't want to go inside the church. No one had threatened me, yet, but things were getting worse as I made my way in, and I was all too aware that Shan was seeing all this through my eyes. I turned a slow circle, then called out, "Where's your Mosaic? And what's your leader's name? Who runs the Splinter now?" Because that's what Miranda's really been looking for, you see. She doesn't really care so much about cleaning up the broken bodies the Splinter leaves behind, putting fatally flawed Mosaics out of their misery. That's why I do it. But not her. She has one purpose and one purpose only: find out who took Elliot's place as the head of the Splinter, and hunt that person down.

None of them answered me. Some glanced over, like I was a minor distraction. Others kept muttering their little chants about what they had given and what it cost. But one, a teenage boy taking water to the ones who had given organs, whispered something else. "Holy of holies," he said. "I could have been in the holy of holies. Could have been holy of holy." I snagged his sleeve as he went by. "What's the holy of holies?" I asked.

He didn't look at me. His eyes darted between the torn open people on the ground and the doors of the church. "Could have been in the holy of holies," he said again. "But. Bad valve in my heart. They didn't want it," and his eyes filled with tears like it was the saddest thing in the world.

Finally, I let him go and went to the place I'd been avoiding: the church. Not just because I'm an unnatural creature of darkness or whatever, although I guess that's true too. No, I'd been avoiding it because it lay dead center in the compound, with all the damaged people arranged in concentric circles around it. Whatever was in there, it was as bad as this place got.

There were seven of them, inside the church. The bodies were propped up in little makeshift shrines, three on the left, three on the right, one in the center in a carved wooden chair like a throne. No attempt had been made to hide the gashes in their flesh. The cuts that had been made to take the liver of one, the stomach of another, the heart of another. One on the right had given his skin, all of it, peeled away from his muscle and bone. The one in the center had a cracked open skull, and nothing left within it.

There were flowers and candles in front of each shrine. People with missing fingers and toes and teeth fluttering around, dusting and tidying and replacing the dry flowers with the new. The place didn't smell like you'd expect. Not like a charnel house. More like a flower shop. Not in a good way, not in the way flowers smell in nature, but in the too-sweet, condensed way they smell when pushed together in an artificial space.

The holy of holies. The ones who gave the organs you can't live without, not even for a little while. They had little woven crowns, just little circlets of grass and daisies that people had placed on their heads.

“They’re not gifted.” The voice came as a little whisper in my ear, like something just behind me. It took me a minute to realize it was Shan talking, sending messages along whatever connection their pollen had created between us. “No,” I said. “They weren’t. I think. . . I think maybe these people, this part of the Splinter, they were going for quantity over quality. Enough recessive gifts in the soup, and maybe. . .” I shrugged. I could tell it hadn’t worked, whatever they thought would happen. If there’d been a Mosaic here, I’d have felt them.

But there was something. Not a Mosaic, but something else. There was a little curtained area behind the altar, a little cordoned off space where something moved and breathed. Breathed in big, slow, heaving gulps. I made my way down the aisles, where cut and broken people sat and sprawled in the pews. One of the attendants tried to stop me as I passed by the altar. “Don’t go in there!” she said, “you’re unclean. You can’t lay eyes on the prophet.”

I used my compulsion trick on her, the thing that lets me tell people what to do. “Get lost,” I told her, and she wandered off in a daze toward the doors of the church. I hoped she didn’t take me too literally and go tramping off into the woods, never to be seen again. Although, let’s be honest, these people are basically off in Wonderland already.

None of the others tried to stop me as I went behind the altar and pushed past the curtains.

It looked. . . I don’t really know how to describe it. Like a giant baby, I guess. I mean. . . It was the size of a man. A really large man. But the proportions were all wrong, the shape of it not the way any adult is supposed to be. It was fleshy and round and bloated, with skin in patchwork colors that changed abruptly at joints and at the end of limbs. It had one brown eye and one blue. Sparse hair of different colors and textures sticking up in tufts from its too-big head. It lay on a makeshift bed, staring and twitching feebly every now and then. I watched it for a moment, reaching out with that part of myself that can sense others like me. But there was nothing. Any magic that had been here had been used up to make this thing and keep it alive. This thing wasn’t a Mosaic. It wasn’t even gifted. It wasn’t even a human. Not even that.

Maybe you’re imagining that it was in pain, that it looked at me and begged for death. But life is never that poetic. This thing wasn’t conscious enough even for pain. Its eyes were glazed over, its mouth hanging slack. It would never have a thought, much less the ability to move and speak and tell me who created it.

“Tell Miranda there’s nothing here,” I said, trusting Shan to pass the message along. Then I lifted a hand and ripped the water from that breathing pile of meat. Just in case it ever gained enough of a glimmer of intelligence to get a sense of what it was. The entire compound screamed as the thing died, as though they could each feel one of their parts breathing its last. None of them paid any attention to me as I left. I passed by all of them again, all of the same people I’d seen on my way in, and they were too dazed with grief to notice.

Shan stared at me with wide eyes as I approached the van. “This is what we do?” they asked. “These are the things we see?”

I thought about lying to them. Making up something about how it wasn’t always this bad, most of it was fine. But instead I just said, “Yeah. You’ll see worse.” And Shan went quiet, and said nothing for the entire drive home.

Episode 203: The Countdown

Today was Shan's debut as pet fixer for the Seekers. I gotta say, they killed it. I wish I could take credit for being a kickass mentor. But the truth is that Shan saved me today. I don't know what would have happened if they hadn't been there. I don't think it'll be the last time, either.

Think about a small town you know of. If you're from a small town, think of another one thirty miles away. If you're from a big city, think of one of the little places you pass by on the highway, a place between where you come from and where you're going. Now ask yourself: how long would that small town have to be gone before you knew about it? Assuming its destruction wasn't reported on the news. Maybe you have a friend there, and at some point you'd realize that friend hadn't been in touch for a while. Maybe you make that drive from your big city to another, and you realize there isn't a place to stop for gas like there used to be. However you found out, the point remains the same: it would probably take you a long time to realize that little town had gone. For those of you who listen to these messages and think the things in them can't be true because how could towns vanish and forests appear and become lakes and how could compounds of people all be dedicated to this secret world you never knew existed, I ask you just one question: when did you last check on that little town down the highway? Yeah. That's what I thought.

But the Seekers are different. They don't wait to find out that a town has gone dark. Especially not now, with it happening all over the country. Now they search for the towns that vanish. And, given the day and age we live in, the best way to spot a town that's vanished isn't by driving past it or looking down with satellites. No. The best way is to keep an eye out for places that aren't posting things to the internet anymore. It's a project headed up by Winry, the first Seeker I ever met. She was low-level then, still an apprentice, but bagging me got her a big promotion. So now she runs the Seekers' digital surveillance operations. Are you picturing a big gleaming control room, like something at the NSA? Haha. They wish. No, for all their struggles to save the world from the Splinter's plans, the Seekers are a pretty ragtag bunch. They only just got their command center, just as I joined up. And it's not a big lab or even an office building. It's a creaky old house one of the older members donated in their will when they died. Just a year ago, all the Seekers were spread out across the country, the world, connected by email and phone calls and all working on different equipment. Now all the ones who can afford it work in the Burrow. That's what we call the command center, the Burrow, because it's full of dark, winding hallways. Those hallways and old ballrooms and forgotten bedrooms are full of equipment, mostly old, mostly begged, borrowed, or stolen.

Winry's digital surveillance room has a big bank of screens and computers, so I guess you probably pictured that right, but they're all mismatched and scratched and propped up on old

books. It takes up one corner of the basement, with two separate lab setups in the other corners. Yesterday, like so many other days recently, I made my way down there after I got a call from Winry. The other Seekers still stare at me when I walk through the Burrow, but now they don't stop what they were doing. They stare, but they keep working. That's progress.

I found Shan in the kitchen on my way to see Winry. They've been staying in one of the few rooms in the Burrow not set aside for projects, but they're rarely up there. They're mostly in the kitchen, I think because of something to do with the natural light. Miranda tried to get me to stay in that room when I first joined, but I always have my own place. Winry probably knows where, but not because I told her.

"Another Mosaic?" Shan asked. They held a cup of tea between their hands, and their arm vines pushed and swayed toward the steam.

I shrugged. "Maybe. You coming?"

Shan raised an eyebrow. "Think I'm ready?"

I hesitated. So far none of Shan's gifts seemed very useful for fighting or defending myself. Then again, most of mine weren't so hot for investigating, so maybe we'd make a good team. At the time, all I knew was that I was tired of going into these situations alone. Finally I just told Shan to come with me.

Down the basement, Winry showed us the town that had suddenly stopped posting anything to Facebook, Twitter, or those forums where losers whine about women. It had happened overnight, with not a single shred of internet activity for over two weeks. She'd tried calling businesses and private homes, too, and none of the calls had been able to get through. Yup. I recognize the signs by now. Someone tried to make a Mosaic.

"Why do they keep botching it?" Shan asked. "They pulled it off when they made you and Zachary. So why all these other failures?"

I told them what Miranda told me. Eliot was the only one who knew the secret recipe, the right way to pull off the ritual. He was paranoid and cautious about sharing what he knew until he was sure it worked, and then right after he succeeded he got killed by one of my tiles. All these other members of the Splinter are trying to piece it together from the parts Eliot did share, and from trial and error. "So," I said, "Let's go see what the error was this time around." And off we went.

Things you should know about the Seekers: They came close, once, to making Mosaics in their own way. The slow, methodical way of selective breeding and genetic manipulation, not the way of the Splinter. They managed to produce four people with wonderful combinations of gifts, four people the right age and the right combination of sexes to make two Mosaics. The Seekers saw the end of their quest on the horizon, saw themselves inching toward the culmination of all

they'd worked for through the centuries. But then a new year came along, and that year was 1939. You see where this is going, don't you? One of their prized subjects was in China. One in Denmark. One in India. One in Greece, where the Seekers had been based since their beginnings. This is what happened to them: The one in China, a young woman named Yanmei, had the greatest mind control abilities this earth has ever seen. She persuaded entire battalions of occupying Japanese forces to slaughter each other, until the strain of manipulating so many minds at the same time gave her a fatal aneurysm.

The Danish one, Christian, fought with the Danish Resistance for most of the war. His powers were all of the flesh, subtle gifts of biological manipulation. He could make homunculi out of his hair and spit and fingernail clippings and send them into Gestapo headquarters and prisons and private homes to report back on the things they heard. But the Nazis got wind of his abilities, somehow, and they closed in. Just before Christian shot himself in the head, he ordered his lieutenants to burn his body so the Nazis would never be able to use his secrets for themselves.

Then there was Pratitha, the shapeshifter, who made herself a man long enough to join the colonial military and fight her way across North Africa. She's responsible for the British victory in the Battle of El-Alamein, a turning point in the war, although she never got credit for it. A stray mortar ended her life in 1943.

The Greek man, Vasilis, was the only one left at the end. He'd wanted to go and help his beloved Pratitha, but his gifts weren't suited for combat. They both knew he'd only slow her down as she slipped behind enemy lines. So he stayed behind, and the Seekers hooked him up to tubes and beakers, and he helped in the only way he could. He made medicine. He sweated antibiotics, and bled painkillers, and pissed the world's only perfect treatment for chemical burns. His tears cured typhus, and his saliva granted soldiers a temporary surge of superhuman strength. He gave all he could stand, and then gave more. And then, as civil war broke out in Greece and the Second World War came to a close and Vasilis became little more than a withered husk grieving for Pratitha, the Seekers unhooked the tubes and pulled out the needles and told him to stop his tears. Then they smuggled him out of the country, and they settled in the United States, the only place the war hadn't reduced to smoke and rubble. There, they began their mission from scratch, from the remnants of their old libraries and the memories of their surviving researchers. It's taken all this time, all these decades, for the American Seekers to approach what their forbears did. And now we're here.

The town looked fine from the outside. Not like the place where Shan was born, or the compound strewn with maimed remains of people. No, this one seemed like a boring little town. People on the sidewalks. Cars driving down the streets. Nothing exciting. Shan and I watched from the highway for a while, but nothing happened. Finally, we headed for the main road leading down the center of the town.

Things started to get weird pretty quick. People stopped when they saw us, stopped and stared and whispered. But not like the usual small town “who’s that” stuff. And not really hostile. More. . . Wary, I guess. Fearful. Shan got other looks, too, of course. Even under fear, people can’t help but notice beauty like that. They wore a long-sleeved shirt and loose pants that hid the vines twining out around their limbs, but they couldn’t hide the skin texture, the other little bits of strangeness people probably wouldn’t be able to pin down but together added up to an odd, arresting picture.

I started noticing other things, besides the stares. We passed a house, and towels and pillows had been tied around all the sharp corners. The porch rail, the surface of the door. On the busiest section of Main Street, fire extinguishers sat in a neat row along both sides of the sidewalk. Buckets and sandbags sat a little further back, along the edge of each house and business.

Finally, we stopped in front of a building that was probably the town hall or the community center or something. A big clock had been hung above the main doors. It had the name of a high school along the top, looked like it had been torn off a scoreboard. The big digital numbers ticked down. Right then, it said 2 hours, 14 minutes, and 47 seconds.

“Is it you, this time?” It was a woman’s voice, ragged and hysterical. She stormed out of one of the businesses, eyes wide and hair tangled. “Why wait? Just fucking get it over with.” A man ran out and pulled her away from us. “Sorry,” he muttered, but not like he was embarrassed. More like he was scared about what we might do.

“We’re not here to hurt you,” Shan said. They stepped over and let their fingers trail along the inside of the woman’s wrist. It looked like just a gentle touch, but I knew Shan was making some kind of soothing potion through their fingertips. Sure enough, the woman settled down. But as soon as the woman calmed, Shan’s eyes widened, and they stepped away, blinking and shaking their head.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. They hesitated, as though unsure of what to say. So I asked the woman, “Why are you scared of us? What did you think we were going to do?”

The woman’s eyes filled with tears. She pointed at the ticking scoreboard clock. “Is it you, this time? It must be you. No one else gets in. The only things that get in are the things that. . .” She couldn’t finish whatever she’d been about to say. I asked what that meant, people not getting in. The man answered for her: “If you just wandered in here. . . Don’t know how you did it. No one’s been able to get in or out of town for weeks. And if you got in here by accident then. . . Well. Sorry.” And he pointed at the clock, just as the woman had.

Shan’s fingers plucked at my sleeve. “Something’s wrong,” they said, pulling me off to the side. “What I saw, it can’t be right. That woman, she died. She died in a fire.” I didn’t argue. I didn’t point out the obvious, that a woman who died in a fire couldn’t be standing in front of us

now. Those things stop being obvious when you've been in my world for a while. Then Shan reached out and trailed their fingers along the front wall of one of the buildings. "This. . ." they frowned. "This building burned down. But it also got buried in a mudslide. And it also, I don't know, there were people being killed out front." They stepped back and shook their head. "I don't understand how this building can still be here, how it could have been destroyed in all those ways. . ."

I looked around, and I started to understand. I turned back to the man. "How long has that clock been ticking down?" I asked.

"Four days," he replied, automatically. "It happens every four days." I asked him what, what happened every four days, although I was pretty sure I already knew. His voice went weak and dry and fragile as old paper. "We die," he whispered.

There was no way to prepare, because there was no way to know what kind of death was coming. They told us some of them they'd gone through, every four days for the last several weeks. Firestorm, mudslide, drowning, a tornado, a mob of masked people who beat and cut everyone in town to death. A few people survived, most times. Not always. But always, every time, those who had died and those who had survived woke up again, the same as they always had. And then the clock started ticking down, and they tried to plan for a new disaster.

None of them could tell us why it had happened. None of them had heard the words Grove, Mosaic, or Trumpet. I could smell that someone had tried to make a Mosaic in this town, but it wasn't like the compound with the Holy of Holies. This was someone working in isolation, someone hidden from their neighbors.

Finally, as the clock ticked down to the 35 minute mark, Shan and I found where it had happened. It was the house of someone named Dana Johansen, the only person in town unaccounted for, the only one who had vanished and not reawakened when everyone else did. People had checked her house, but they hadn't found the locked room in the cellar. Shan and I did. And inside were bloodstained remnants I recognized all too well. It was a lot like the attic where I was born. I tried not to breathe in the smell of dried blood as Shan ran their fingers over the floors and wall. "There, there, I see you," they muttered. They sighed and rose to their feet. "I saw what happened. The eight, the tiles, they found a way to combine their gifts just before the ritual was complete. They knew it would kill them, but they. . . I suppose you could say they cursed her. The woman who lived here." They looked up at the ceiling like they could see the town above. "They lost control, though. They only meant it for her, but it covered the whole town. One of them had a gift, something with time, that set everything else on a loop."

Well, shit, I thought. I checked my watch. "We should go."

Shan raised an eyebrow. "Aren't we going to save these people?"

“Of course,” I said, although I wasn’t at all confident that we could do anything. “But I’d rather do it from the outside, where we’ll be safe.”

But that, as it turns out, wasn’t going to happen. We’d gotten in just fine. But as soon as we tried to step onto the highway lining the edge of the town, we turned around. It was like the world twisted and pushed us back in the other direction. We tried again and again. I could feel a buzz in that spot, a hum I hear when I slow time. Someone had played with time here, brought it out of sync with the outside world. Suddenly, that clock seemed to be ticking down a lot faster. Shan and I tried different points around the edge of town. As we moved, people started gearing up for their next death, setting up firehoses, sending their kids down into the basement of the church. But they did it with resigned, heavy movements; they had to try, they knew that, but they also didn’t think this time would be any different.

Five minutes left. Four. Three. Shan looked at me. “I don’t think we’re getting out before this happens,” they said, calm, like we were just going to miss a movie. “Yeah,” I said. “Think we should take shelter?”

Shan lifted one shoulder in one of those graceful little shrugs. “I’d rather be out in the open. In the sun.” They turned their face up as though listening for what the sun had to say about the whole thing. I just paced, lining up my gifts, ready to pull water from an attacker, slow an assault, compel anyone who came near. Most of all, getting ready to put my flesh back in order if none of the above worked.

“You could try teleporting out, you know,” Shan said, quietly. I shook my head. “I can’t take you with me.”

“Even so,” they said. I just shook my head again. I hoped I stuck with it, when the time came. I hoped I didn’t panic at whatever came for us and leave Shan behind.

The clock ticked to zero. There was a moment of calm, everyone watching and listening for what came next. It started as a cloud, a dark shape in the sky. I thought it was a hurricane. But then I heard the cloud chittering and buzzing, and little pieces of it started to break away and swoop down toward the streets of the down. Locusts, I thought. Well. That’s not so bad. Then the first of the insects reached the people on the street, and their sharp little jaws opened and bit down on skin, and people started bleeding and screaming and fighting to get away.

A few of them got close enough for me to see, weaving and darting through the air. They were like grasshoppers, but bigger, and with huge beaklike mouths. Mouths big enough to tear out a chunk of flesh the size of a quarter. And there were millions of them. I tried pulling the water from the cloud, and I got a handful, but they were too many and too fast. I braced myself.

Then I felt Shan’s hand in mine, cool skin like oak leaves. Their face was calm, focused, Just as the cloud gathered to descend on us, Shan pulled me close. Then they kissed me.

I understand why, now. But at the time I thought it was just Shan accepting the end, and choosing to go out that way. And I was all too happy to go with it. There are much worse ways to die. I was so lost in that kiss it took me a while to realize we weren't being attacked. I opened my eyes and looked around; the townspeople were shrieking and bleeding, some already dead on the sidewalk, but the wave of insects just parted around us like we were rocks, trees. I pulled back and looked at Shan. They blushed a little. "Repellent," they explained. "I saw how to make it, and that was the fastest way to spread it to you." But their hands stayed on my waist, and I knew that wasn't the only reason.

Sorry, Zachary. I shouldn't be. We've never really spoken, and I owe you nothing. But I still feel like apologizing, just a little.

The next ten minutes were carnage. There was nothing to do but watch and wait for it to be over. It was over soon, but it felt like forever. Once the last one stopped screaming, the cloud of insects shot back up into the sky. And then that hum, that low buzz of manipulated time, started to change. I closed my eyes, feeling it in my fingertips. Shan started to ask me what was happening, but I shushed them. I saw a vulnerable point in the loop. A malleable spot, if I timed it perfectly. I felt time swing back around in its circle, and even without opening my eyes I knew the chewed corpses of the townspeople were healing, damage reversing, hearts returning to a time when they pumped blood. There it was, the split second that took the whole cycle back to its beginning, the moment before everyone woke up in their beds and that clock started ticking down to their next death.

And I. . . It's hard to explain, but it's like I knocked it off its track. I accelerated it when it was supposed to slow down, and the loop broke. I opened my eyes, and the town was clean and boring and normal again. Shan turned a circle as though trying to find something. "Did. . . did something just change?" they asked.

"Yeah," I said. "It's ok. We fixed it." It felt good, getting to save someone for once. I took Shan's hand and led them out of town. Nothing tried to stop us this time. I saw the clock on the way out. It was broken, burnt and cracked down the middle. I hoped the town left it like that.

Episode 204: Rewritten

Today I woke up to find that some of Shan's vines had wrapped around me as we slept. Little tendrils wound around my index finger, thicker vines looped around my back, feathery little leaves tickled my neck. That probably sounds horrifying, but it's not. They're just another part of Shan's body, like their eyes or hands or legs. But it did mean it took me longer than usual to get out of bed, which, hey, ain't all bad. By the time I got untangled and dressed and over to where I'd left my phone, I had 17 texts and voicemails from Miranda. I didn't need to check any of the messages to know what that meant. They had another lead, another clue about the new Splinter leader. And that probably meant another attempted Mosaic, more damaged or dead gifted tiles. Shit. And my day started off so good.

Winry started chattering as soon as Shan and I got down to her little computer lair. "That was a lucky break, finding Dana Johansen's house," she said. It took me a minute to remember that was the name of the woman who owned the house where we'd found the ritual remains on the last mission. Winry pointed to a bunch of drivers' license photos pulled up on her screens. "We found emails and calls between her and all these people. All people with the resources to be the one who replaced Elliot." There were five faces, three male, two female, a range of ages and ethnicities.

Shan folded their arms and stared at the screen. "So I suppose the next move is to monitor these people and see which of them coincides with another disturbance."

"Already done!" Winry said, smiling widely. She gets nervous and giggly whenever Shan is around. Granted, the same is true for most of the people we see in the Burrow, but she's especially bad at hiding it. Shan never seems to notice.

Winry sat in her swivel chair and clicked on some icons. "Ok, it's. . . Hm. I must have saved it to the wrong place. Hang on." She clicked and typed some more. Finally, she stopped and frowned at me. "I don't understand. I had it, a disturbance near where one of these people lives." She pointed vaguely first at one of the faces, then another.

"It's ok," I said, "It's just a file. We'll find it again."

"No," Winry said. She started to look panicky. "No, you don't understand. I just found it, just now. And now I don't remember. I know there was something, and I found it, and it was near one of these, but now I don't know. I have a photographic memory, Wren, I don't forget things!" Shan took her hands in their own just as she started to get hysterical. That distracted her a little. Shan closed their eyes and lightly ran their fingers over Winry's palm. Poor girl looked like she didn't know whether to cry or cum. Finally, Shan stepped back, frowning. "It's odd,"

they said. “It’s as if there are two layers in one memory. One’s fading, but I know it involved this one.” They gestured at one of the drivers’ license photos, a guy named Neil Duvalier.

“Yeah!” Winry almost shouted. “Him, and. . . Cincinnati, I think? But. . . I don’t know, that’s all I can remember.” It took us a while to get her calmed down. She’s used to great recall, getting her brain to do whatever she wants it to do. She doesn’t know what it feels like to have holes in your life. She wasn’t the only one, though. I talked to three of the other Seekers who help Winry out on her projects, and all of them were sure they’d found something, sure they had a lead, but they couldn’t remember it now. And it got worse as time went on, with even the sketchy outlines of the guy in Cincinnati fading away. Still, it gave Shan and I enough to go on. So we went looking.

Things you should know about the Seekers: This is Winry’s story. I don’t know if it’s representative of the Seekers, since I haven’t heard the stories of many of the others I see in the Burrow. I don’t know anything beyond the names of most of them, enough to identify them as Zafir or Karen or Magdalena but nothing more than that. I think that’s by design. They avoid telling me personal shit. But I managed to get Winry drunk one time, and here’s what I found out. It began as a love story, like so many others. Winry and Tasha, two geek girls meeting over a Bunsen burner in advanced chemistry. They were together for nearly a year when Tasha told Winry her deepest secret: she could do things. Things others couldn’t do. Winry didn’t believe her at first, especially when Tasha had a hard time explaining exactly what it was she could do. But then she showed Winry and that changed everything.

Tasha’s gift was language. I don’t mean she was well-spoken or she could speak fifteen of them or anything like that. I mean that she could make language do things to the people who heard it, things it’s not supposed to do. She explained it to Winry as like being able to unstuff the filling of words and replace it with whatever she wanted. It was tricky, and the effect she wanted to create had to be a good match for the word it hid within, but she had mastered it and developed her own system over the years. Take “bellicose”. That’s an obscure word, one you don’t see much, and hear even less. But once Tasha was done with it, bellicose wasn’t a fancier way of saying aggressive or hostile. No, bellicose carried a secret weapon, an inner-ear disturbance so severe it would knock anyone who heard it right on their ass. There were others like that. Vermillion could repair astigmatism. Conclave reduced body temperature. Frivolity produced instantaneous orgasm.

Winry blushed when she told me this. I didn’t ask her which words Tasha had used to convince her, but I could guess.

Tasha swore Winry to secrecy, of course. And Winry promised and kissed her and said she’d never, ever betray her. And, at the time, I think she probably meant it. But that scientific mind of hers couldn’t let it go. It started small and simple, with Google searches and browsing through medical journals. Reading up on neurolinguistics. She got Tasha to provide some

demonstrations. And of course she made it seem like she was just interested. She wanted Tasha to turn her on with recondite, get her high with Pangolin, fix her headaches with detritus. And that was part of it. But then there was the other part. The notes she kept in a hidden folder, the ones she took when Tasha wasn't looking. The little tests she started threading into conversations, hoping to make her girlfriend utter specific word combinations.

The ideas started making their way into her research. Just little footnotes at first. Then bigger ideas. Things she started saying out loud, at conferences, although of course she made sure to avoid that part when she spoke to Tasha about her work.

It all came to an end a year after Tasha had told her the secret. They were living together. They'd started talking, shyly, about getting married. And Winry's lies had gotten so deep and gone on for so long that she knew she could never even begin to undo them. She thought she could keep it going, and she might have been able to, if she hadn't been approached by the Seekers. They kept an eye out for work just like Winry's, research that showed signs of being influenced by someone with gifts. They figured out her and Tasha after just a few short weeks of observation. But they missed one important detail. They missed the fact that Tasha didn't know she was a lab rat. They assumed Winry couldn't or wouldn't have kept that from her. And that's why, when a midlevel Seeker showed up at their home to recruit them both, Tasha grew quieter and quieter.

Winry tried to reach out to her, to hug her, to do something. To explain. But Tasha just looked at her and said one word. Winry wouldn't tell me what it was. But it made her black out. When she woke up, Tasha's things were gone. And Winry couldn't see her. She couldn't see Tasha's name written on paper. She couldn't focus on pictures of her. She couldn't even look directly at things Tasha had left behind. There were just blank spots where those things should have been. So Winry went to the Seekers, because she had nothing left. And because she thought maybe, just maybe, it would be a way to find Tasha again. She wondered aloud as she told me this if she'd been in Tasha's presence since it had happened, standing right in front of her old beloved and unable to see her.

It's easy to find the place where someone tried to make a Mosaic, once you've felt it once. It's unmistakable, like a scent. Shan and I drove around Cincinnati until we both started to feel the site pull at us like a magnet. This time it was in an abandoned hospital, the kind of place teenagers dare each other to go explore. We found the remnants of the ritual, the pool of blood and the symbols drawn on the walls. And we found something else, too. We found sets of footprints, bloody bare feet, limping away from the scene. My heart started pounding. The tiles don't usually survive, whether or not the Mosaic does. The only other time I knew about was when Zachary and I were made, and that time the tiles were so damaged they destroyed a city. But that's not what it felt like here. I should have been able to feel it, gifted people spinning out of control. I didn't, though. It just felt normal, like any city.

There were other things that didn't make sense. Shan tried reading the history of the room from its surfaces and the objects left behind, but couldn't see anything clearly. "It's like trying to see two completely distinct things happening at the same time," they said, frustrated. "I see a middle-aged woman, with tangled red hair, struggling naked from this room. But I also see a past in which that never happened, in which she was never here. And seven others, just like that. Here, but not."

Finally, Shan managed to get enough of a fix to follow the path of just one of them, just the path of the woman with the red hair. We traced her route down alleys, into an apartment laundry room where she must have gotten clothes, across back yards, winding from one side of the street to the other. We mainly followed Shan's glimpses, the history embedded in walls and trees and telephone poles, but I felt it, too. Little flashes of knowledge that a tile was here, that someone had tried and failed to make a Mosaic nearby. But it was as if it was something in the corner of my eye, something I couldn't quite see.

We ended up at a nice little house with a cute yard and potted flowers on the front porch. "She lived here," Shan said. "She limped inside, tripping on the front step. She'd stopped crying by then. She looks as though she was just. . . numb, by that point."

"Well," I said, "let's hope she's still numb, not pissed off." And I rang the bell.

A guy in his 30s answered. He had olive skin, glasses, a nice haircut. He smiled at us. "Yes?"

I told him we were looking for a middle-aged woman with red hair, someone who might have been involved with an accident several weeks ago. The man frowned. "Oh, I'm sorry, but there's nobody like that who lives here. It's just me and my husband." He held out his hand. "I'm Tarik."

Shan and I both shook his hand. I searched for some sign the guy was lying, but he seemed genuinely concerned about this mystery woman who'd been in an accident. I tried compelling him, asking him to tell us the truth about the woman. But Tarik just smiled and repeated what he'd already said. No woman like that lived here. No one like that had lived here recently. Tarik and his husband Andrew had been here for nearly four years, and didn't share the house with anyone.

I glanced at Shan out of the corner of my eye. They watched Tarik, frowning, head tilted to one side, as though trying to hear something. They didn't say anything, didn't ask any questions, the entire time. Finally, I gave up and we left Tarik alone, in this place where our missing tile's trail had gone cold.

"There are two incompatible histories," Shan said at last, once we were away from the house. "I can see them both at the same time. In one there's this woman, the woman who walked

away from that site. In the other, there is this man Tarik and his husband, and they're the only ones who have been there." They rubbed their forehead as though trying to get rid of a headache.

"Let's try something else," I said. I held out my hands. "You can peek into the future, right? So take a look at mine, and see what we decide to do next."

Shan smiled a little. "You realize that makes absolutely no sense," they said. I shrugged. What part of our lives does make sense? But Shan humored me. They took my hands in their own. I still shiver when they do that, even though we've done so much more. Shan was quiet for a minute, then opened their eyes and frowned. "You're searching, a little while from now. But you're carrying Akira. Akira's helping you, somehow."

Of course. I understood right away. Akira is the creation of, or I guess part of, one of my tiles. Bilal. Someone who turned themselves into a place, someone who left the world. If anybody or anything would have a way of seeing through things that both exist and don't exist, it would be him. Half an hour later, we stood close to Tarik and Andrew's house again. We'd gone back to the place we were staying to pick up Akira. Akira always travels when I do. I don't trust anyone else to take care of him. I held Akira in my hands, bundled in a little towel against the cold. He didn't seem to mind.

"Ok, Akira," I said. "Show us what happened to these tiles." He didn't do anything at first. Which was to be expected, because he's a freaking frog. But I waited, and then turned in a circle, and at some point his tongue flicked out at the air. I swung back around, and his tongue shot out in the exact same direction. At every corner, I'd stop and turn in all directions. Sometimes he'd have us continue going straight. Sometimes he'd indicate a turn to the right or left. And so we made our way through the neighborhoods of Cincinnati, walking for hours. Shan never questioned what we were doing. They might not have understood exactly what was happening, but they trusted me and I trusted Akira, so we kept going.

Finally, we hit a spot where Akira pointed directly at a house. We tried going around the block, thinking he was indicating something beyond it. But, no, it was definitely a particular house that he'd led us to. I handed Akira over to Shan. "Hang on to him," I said. "I'll be back in a few."

"You're not going in there by yourself," Shan said.

"Oh, yes I am, protégé," I replied. "Remember? Officially, I'm training you." Even though that wasn't really fair because Shan was really as good at this stuff as I was by this point. I sighed. "Look, I don't want Akira to get hurt, ok? I don't want him in the line of fire if something happens. Keep an eye on him, will you?"

Shan looked like they wanted to argue with me, but finally they just nodded and leaned down to give me a kiss. “Be careful, ok?” they said, and then they settled down on some steps with Akira. I headed over to the house.

It was a squat, in a bad part of town. Most of the houses on the street looked empty, abandoned, coated with age and graffiti. Trash clumped along the sidewalks. This house was different, though. It was clean, even though it hadn’t been painted in a while. The sidewalk out front had been swept. When I knocked on the front door, someone called for me to come inside.

The inside was as clean and tidy as the outside, although I could tell all the furniture was mismatched and secondhand. A portable massage table sat in the middle of the room. A tall, curvy woman sat on the couch. She held out her hand as I approached, like I was supposed to kiss it or something. “Welcome, dear,” she said. “My name is Thorn.”

I noticed her fingernails. They were thick and long and white, but I don’t think they were painted that way. They were more like sheets of bone grown out through her fingertips. As soon as our hands touched, she let out a little gasp. “Oh, my dear. I see why you came to me.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant. I stepped back. “I came because I’ve been looking for people, and I usually have an easier time finding them. I think you have something to do with the trouble I’m having.”

She said nothing for a long moment. Then, “If they’ve come to me for help, then you should just give up looking now. The people you’re looking for can’t be found.”

I told her I didn’t want to hurt them. I told her she could trust me, that I was looking because I wanted to help them, to protect them. She shook her head. “You misunderstand me, dear. This doesn’t have anything to do with me trusting or not trusting you. I didn’t say I wouldn’t tell you. I said I can’t.” Someone knocked on the front door, and she gestured to the couch. “Sit down, and watch, and you’ll understand why there’s no sense in looking for these people.”

Someone came in. I don’t know who they were or what they looked like, whether they were a man or a woman, even though I spoke to them and watched Thorn work on them for nearly an hour. You’ll understand why in a moment. From what I gather about Thorn and the work she does, this person was most likely desperate, dying, or ready to die. They’d have to be.

Thorn had this person take their shirt off and lie facedown on the massage table. She tied their wrists and legs. “For your own protection, honey,” she said. Then she held out her hands, and a tiny corona of blue flame flared out around the tips of each of her white fingernails. And then she started burning designs into the person’s back. They screamed and cried in agony, I know that, although I don’t remember what those cries sounded like. Thorn murmured to herself as she carved those careful designs. “Born in Chicago on November 4th, 1980. You saw a meteor

shower on Independence Day in 1986. Playing in your back yard, you caught dragonflies during the day and fireflies at night.” It went on and on like that, pivotal events and mundane details. And, as Thorn worked, the person beneath her hands began to change.

At the end, when Thorn stepped back to survey her handiwork, the person lying on the table was a slim, redheaded woman in her thirties. She wore an expensive-looking diamond bracelet. I don’t know what kind of shirt she’d taken off before Thorn started, but I know it wasn’t the cream silk blouse that now hung on the hook on the wall. The lines in the woman’s back remained, but they were faded, old scars. She sat up. “Oh, goodness. I must have fallen asleep. I . . .” She frowned and looked around. “Wait, this isn’t where I usually go for my massage.”

Thorn handed over her blouse. “No, dear, remember? The spa is closed today, so we arranged to meet here.”

The woman nodded and frowned. “Oh. Right. Of course, I forgot.” She laughed. “It must be this new case. I’m just so busy with it.”

Thorn smiled. “Of course. You just go home and get some rest, now.” And she showed the woman to the door. Now, a silver BMW was parked out on the blighted street. Thorn waited until the woman drove away before she closed the door and turned back to me. “So you see?” she said. “That’s why I can’t help you. The person who came to me doesn’t exist anymore. I don’t remember them any better than you do. Their place in the world has been rewritten, and that can’t be undone. Now, whoever that person was when they came in, they’ve always been Audrey Collins, an attorney who has lunch with her sister every Saturday and plays field hockey in her spare time. She’s never not been that, now.”

I stood. “Well, if that’s true, it means the ones I’ve been looking for are safe. I’m guessing they came to you because they were damaged. If they’re like the other ones I’ve met, they were ruined when someone tried to make them into a Mosaic. I’m glad they found a way to be fixed.”

“It’s a high price,” Thorn said. “It’s only for people whose existing life isn’t worth living. They have to die, you see, to become someone new.” She stepped forward and took my hands in her own. “It’s something I can do for you. You have so much pain. I can make you someone else. If that’s what you want.”

I thought about it. I really did, for just a second. But then I thought about Shan, sitting outside holding Akira. And I thought about the Splinter, and all the lives I hadn’t managed to save so far and all the ones they might ruin in the future. I even thought about you, Zachary, God help me. I sighed and shook my head. “No. Not for me,” I said. I hesitated. “At least, not yet.”

Thorn nodded. I don't think she was surprised. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a card. "If it ever gets to be too much." It had a phone number and nothing else. I nodded and put it in my pocket. I didn't think I'd ever use it, but I also didn't think I'd ever throw it away. I left that house and got Shan and Akira, and we drove away. Whatever happened in Cincinnati, there's no one left to save. We were too late for that.

Episode 205: Profiles

I suppose someone was bound to try it at some point. No one ever said the Mosaics had to be flesh and blood, after all. Still. We're supposed to be human, sort of. Not sure today's experiment met that requirement. Even so, I'm glad they got away. Good for them.

Shan and I were out following up a lead on some Mosaics when we got a call from Miranda. "Get back to the Burrow," she said. "Winry found something." I asked her what it was. I could hear her irritation through the phone. "Hell if I know," she said. "I'm a cell biologist, not a programmer." Then she hung up.

Winry was practically levitating when we got there, she was so worked up. "So, so, take a look," she said, waving at her monitors. Then she started spouting something about social media algorithms and coding and some other nonsense. I lost her after a sentence or two. Finally, Shan laid a hand on her arm, and that gentle touch cut her off midsentence. "Winry," Shan said, "I'm half vegetation. Computers make me uneasy under the best of circumstances. Could you please explain it in simpler terms?"

Winry blushed and stammered and said she'd try. It took a few attempts and some analogies that probably dumbed it down a lot for us, but here's what she finally managed to get across: the Seekers keep track of the social media profiles of gifted people, potential tiles. Not only that, they pull some shady strings to read their emails, keep track of their web browsing, stuff like that. NSA shit. "That's fucked up," I said to Miranda, who had been hanging back in the corner with her arms folded.

"You're right," she said, mildly. "We'll stop as soon as the fate of the world is no longer at stake." I didn't really know what to say to that. Anyway. Here's the rest of what Winry had to say. They kept track of thousands of social media profiles, so of course nobody could read them all in depth every day or every week. But Winry had programs and spyware and things that would alert her if certain things happened, weird things that were out of character for those people. Which is what happened a few weeks ago. A few weeks ago, eight people's online existence disappeared. Their Facebook pages, Twitter, Instagram, email accounts, the stupid comments they left on forums. They were just gone. At least, that's what Winry thought at first.

She slid from one monitor to another on her desk chair, typing and talking at the same time. "But then I looked closer, and I found, well, fragments of all eight profiles. Comments that matched old tweets, unique word combinations in a Facebook profile, things that definitely belonged to these eight people." I exchanged a glance with Shan, and then with Miranda. We all know the significance of the number eight.

“Ok,” I said, “So someone managed to create a Mosaic. These eight are tiles. So the Mosaic deleted the old accounts and made its own? And we’re seeing the composite personalities?”

Winry was shaking her head before I was done speaking. “No, I checked for that. These accounts weren’t deleted. There’d be traces, places where I’d be able to see where they used to be. But they’re completely and totally gone, like they never existed. And the email accounts? That data should still be backed up to the company’s servers, but it isn’t there.”

“So what are you saying?” Shan asked.

What Winry was saying was this: those online identities comprised of social media pages and electronic information and ethereal communication, those had all merged together to form two new personalities. Lin Lahira, of London, and Phaedra Gutierrez of San Diego. At least, that’s what their online information said, but it wasn’t true. Lin wasn’t really in London, and Phaedra wasn’t really in San Diego. And they didn’t look the way they did in their profile pictures. They had never existed, not in the real world. And they didn’t really exist now. And yet here they were, on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram, and no one could tell they didn’t really walk the Earth.

Things you should know about the Seekers: In general, attempts to copy gifts and give them to people who don’t have them hasn’t worked out too well. There are usually side effects. Like organ transplants. They work, sometimes, but you don’t want to have them unless you need to. But there are some exceptions. A few things the Seekers have managed to rip off from folks like me. Or, like my tiles, I guess.

Take their memory storage. The Seekers in the Burrow, if you ask them to recall something that happened or something they read, and they’ll do it. Perfectly. That’s because all the full members like Miranda and Winry have the gift of perfect instantaneous recall. They apparently managed to isolate that one in the 1960s, and since then it’s a standard feature. That one comes without any noticeable side effects. Others, not so much.

Take Antoine. He used to be some hotshot scientist, on the fast track to take Miranda’s place when she stepped down. Then he got fixated on isolating one particular gift. He’d discovered a little girl with the ability to reverse entropy. She could make rotten fruit go ripe again. She could make broken objects reassemble themselves. In her presence, computers would become faster and more efficient with time rather than slower and more run down. It wasn’t the most visible gift. Mostly people just assumed that she was an unusually tidy child. But Antoine became obsessed with her potential. Rumor around the Burrow was that he saw her ability as a way to eventually conquer death itself. No entropy means no decay. No decay means no death.

But there was a problem. This little girl, with the power to alter the natural progression of the universe itself, this child with unimaginable power, would never be able to teach others about her

ability. She would never be able to learn a greater level of control. She would never truly understand what it was she did beyond a basic, instinctive level. And that is because this little girl, for all her gifts, had a brain injury that ensured she would never develop mentally past the age of two. And so, convinced the most important gift in the history of Seekers was going to waste, Antoine set about copying and mastering her ability for himself. I have no idea how they attempt these things. It involves genetic manipulation, engineered retroviruses, things I have no desire to understand. But Antoine tried it.

It was a partial success. Antoine can make a dusty floor tidy, he can make spilled water flow back into a cup, he can reverse the gradual genetic damage that is human aging. But he also can't wear shoes anymore, since his toenail clippings have a tendency to reassemble into five-inch prongs. He has to cover himself when he leaves the Burrow, because the brand new skin of a baby simply doesn't look right on a grown man. He's had surgery several times because the food he ate reassembled in his stomach.

He's not much use as a scientist, not anymore. But the Seekers take care of their own. He has his own room in the Burrow, and Miranda takes him on walks, and all the others take turns checking in and bringing him broken things so he can use his power to put them back together. It makes him feel useful. No one knows if he'll ever be able to die.

Winry spent some time doing her computer stuff, hacking or whatever. Whatever she did, she managed to find some IP addresses of social media accounts and computers that had been interacting with our two Mosaic accounts a lot. From there, she managed to get people's names and physical addresses. And, big surprise, these names were of people who hadn't been to work in weeks, people who had been reported missing. "Once more into the breach," Miranda said, and Shan and I went off to figure out what was going on.

Our first stop was at the apartment of a guy named Dean. Winry sent me a list of tweets and Facebook posts he'd exchanged with Lin's social media accounts. I'll spare you the details, but let's just say the guy had a Confederate flag as his profile photo and the words "feminazi slut" came up more than once. By the time we reached his place, I was half-hoping one of the Mosaics had found a way to climb through his computer monitor like that girl from the Ring and eat his face off.

But no such luck. We got into the apartment and found it empty but tidy. No signs of violent death or struggle. There was one weird thing, though: his computer was missing. We found the desk and the bundle of cables where it originally would have been, but no monitor, no tower. We checked out Dean's work, too, but he hadn't been seen in a few days. He worked at a software company. That was part of a pattern, I noticed. Everyone on the list, everyone Lin and Phaedra had been in conversation with, they were all computer engineers, software designers, people who worked in programming. And, each house we checked, they were all gone. No people, and no computers or phones left behind.

The missing phones gave me an idea. I called Winry. “Hey,” I asked, “can you track cell phones on any of these people? See where they are right now?”

She got back to me a few minutes later. Turns out one of them did have their phone on, and they could be tracked. And, at that moment, they were in the basement of the computer science department of a local college.

Shan and I spent a couple hours watching the place. We saw a few of the missing folks walking back and forth between a van and the building. The way they did it was weird, though. They always had their phones in one hand. Always. And they never watched where they were going. They always had their eyes locked right on those screens. I know that sounds like every asshole with a texting habit out there, but this went way beyond that. It was as though they physically couldn't put the phones away, even as they struggled to haul boxes and armfuls of computer equipment into the building.

Shan tried to do some of the remote viewing stuff they can do, but they cringed and whimpered after a few minutes. “Sorry,” they said. “Too much electronics in there. Too much metal. It's painful.” And then I noticed the rash breaking out on their arms and neck, like an allergic reaction.

“Ok, stop,” I said. “Stop trying. Tech's not your thing, clearly.” Then I told Shan to stay outside, and before they could argue with me I teleported my way in. It wasn't too precise, since I couldn't see the inside of the building and my control still sucks, but I happened to land in a deserted hallway outside a door with a sign that said “Computer Commons”. I heard movement behind the door, people shuffling around and the whir of a drill and something heavy dropping to the ground.

I went in, ready to slow time or pull water out of folks or whatever else I could do if they rushed me. But none of the people looked up from their work. Their eyes stayed on their phones, most of which were resting on surfaces in front of them. But their hands worked on some kind of machine, some kind of metal tower in the middle of the room. I circled around to one side of it that was open. It was full of circuit boards, metal squares that looked like hard drives, wires and cables. It was like a really big computer tower. But there were other things, things that didn't seem like they belonged on any computer. Like a slim, jointed robotic arm sticking out one side. Or a series of what looked like cameras mounted to the top.

I didn't have the slightest idea what I was looking at, so I called Winry. “I think they might be building a Terminator,” I said. She asked me to show her the machine, so I held up my phone and got as close as I could without touching any of the people working on it. Winry took one look at the machine and started making squeaking sounds. I took those for fear at first but it turns out she was just excited. It took a while to get her to explain it in terms I understood, but finally I got that it wasn't a Terminator. So that was good news. Instead, it was a server. But not just any server, Winry assured me; an incredibly advanced server, with new kinds of engineering she'd

never seen in a computer before. Engineering that should have been way, way above the level of these missing software designers and programmers.

I asked her about the other parts, the cameras and the limbs. She said, “Well, this is just a guess, but it looks like when this thing is finished it’s going to be mobile, self-repairing, it’ll be able to see. Basically, it should be able to do everything by itself.”

Honestly, that sounded pretty Terminator to me, but I didn’t see any weapons mounted onto it and Winry didn’t seem to think it was threatening so I held off on smashing it. Instead, I peeked over the shoulder of one of the missing folks, a balding guy named Darren. What I saw on his phone screen didn’t make a lot of sense to me. Fast, flashing images and colors. It all looked totally random. A deep green screen, then a picture of an apple, then the words “Elaine’s gumbo recipe.” And then, almost too fast for me to see, a brief set of instructions. Something like, “Attach circuit 4 to Unit B12.” followed by a string of code. I showed the screen to Winry, and she spent some time watching it and muttering to herself. At last she said, “Ok. Here’s what I think is going on. I think these images and words and things between the instructions are keyed to this particular guy. I think they’re, I don’t know, mesmerizing him with the right combination of things. Like, this one, Darren. His wife’s name is Elaine. It keeps mentioning her. In theory if you know enough about anyone’s psychology and memories and experiences, you should be able to control them.”

I thought that was pretty creepy, but I shouldn’t judge. I use mind control on people all the time. Still, mine’s all-natural. Organic, dammit.

Even with all this info, though, Winry couldn’t tell me what Lin and Phaedra wanted. They’re a collection of social media profiles, for fuck’s sake, they shouldn’t have been able to want anything. Winry spent some more time studying the machine through my screen, but she couldn’t make sense of it. Finally, I got impatient. “Ok,” I said, opening up Facebook. “That’s it. I’m asking them.”

“I’m not sure that’s wise,” Winry said. Then Miranda jumped in. Apparently she’d been listening the whole time. “Wren, do not reach out to those Mosaics, hear me?”

Have I mentioned that I don’t like being told what to do? Miranda knows that, so she really shouldn’t have been surprised when I ignored her and messaged Phaedra. I asked: What’s the machine for?

She responded instantly, without hesitation. The message on my screen said, We want a home. A body of our own.

I didn’t get it, but Winry instantly gasped. “Oh, of course!” And then she told me what she’d figured out. Social media profiles, accounts, programs, they don’t just float around on the internet. They exist on servers owned by companies. Google. Facebook. Twitter. Those servers

could get shut down or destroyed or changed at any time. And Lin and Phaedra, they only existed on those servers. Those profiles were them. The closest thing they had to bodies, and it was hard drive space that belonged to someone else. I suddenly understood why this server was so sturdy, why it had cameras to see and speakers to speak and arms to repair itself. They were about to migrate into their own home.

Miranda must have figured it out at the same time, because the next thing she said was, “Wren, destroy that thing. Separate out the carbon, some other mineral, whatever you have to do.”

“We don’t even know if they’re planning anything,” I said. My phone beeped. It was a text, with Phaedra’s picture. “We’re not making a Trumpet,” the text said. “We can’t. We just want our own home.”

I told Miranda what it said. She didn’t even hesitate. “They might be lying,” she said. “If we can’t take them in, we can’t risk letting them go. You know what’s at stake here, Wren.” She was right. I did know what was at stake. I know what it means if someone manages to make the Trumpet. But I just stood there, looking first at Phaedra’s Facebook page, then Lin’s. They looked like normal women. They were smiling. They listed their favorite movies, their favorite TV shows, just like anyone else. They seemed like people living their lives, or wanting to.

Miranda kept talking, but I tuned out. I stepped back and let the programmers finish the tower. The last of them screwed the big metal case closed, and the second it was done they all blinked and seemed to wake up. Darren shook his head. “What’s going on?” he asked. “How’d we get here?”

I never got a chance to answer him, because the entire tower started beeping and whirring. At the same time, I heard a low roar from outside, something in the sky. “They’re profiles aren’t on the old servers anymore,” Winry said through my phone. “They migrated.” Miranda cursed and yelled at me, but I kept ignoring her. As I watched, the entire tower started rolling its way to the door of the computer lab. It had little wheels set into the bottom. It used its robotic arm to open the door and make its way down the hall. I followed slowly behind it, because the whole thing looked way too ridiculous not to watch. And, at least in my case, because I was wondering if the two Mosaics now living in that merged body were about to bring the world to an end. I wondered if that was the mechanical roar outside.

But it wasn’t. I saw what it was as soon as the tower rolled out those doors. Because that was the moment a drone landed on the street outside. And I don’t mean one of those little hobbyist drones. I mean a military drone, as wide as the street outside, the kind that drops bombs on countries we don’t like to think about too much. And that’s when I understood that these few engineers in this computer lab weren’t the only people Lin and Phaedra had bewitched. Somewhere on a military base there was a drone pilot who was about to get in a lot of trouble and who wouldn’t be able to remember why they’d done what they’d done. But not yet. For now,

the drone just waited for the server to latch onto its belly. And then it took off into the air again, carrying Lin and Phaedra away. A crowd of people gathered, pointing and yelling and not sure whether to be impressed or terrified.

I watched until it was out of sight. I realized Shan had reached me by then, was asking me something. “Did they get away?” they asked.

I held up my phone and asked Winry what was happening. She said nothing for a long moment, then: “I don’t see any signs of anything weird happening. No sign of a Trumpet. I think they were telling the truth. They just wanted to have their own body.”

Then Miranda’s voice came over the speaker. “Do you have any idea what a risk you just took?” she asked. “For all we know, they could have made the Trumpet. You could have ended everything.”

“But I didn’t,” I said.

Then Miranda said, “If you ever become a threat, Wren, I’ll put you down. I won’t hesitate.”

“And if that happens, Miranda, you’ll be the next to die,” Shan said, in a voice only a complete idiot would ignore.

Miranda didn’t say anything for a minute. Then, “Come back to the Burrow. We have another situation,” she said, and hung up.

Shan and I stared at the phone for a minute. “Should we run?” they asked.

“No,” I said, “Miranda might try to end me one day, if I disobey her too many times, but not now.” And, at that moment, I couldn’t get too worked up about the possibility. I stared up at the sky and thought about Lin and Phaedra, living in their strange way on their own terms. I don’t know where they’ll end up. Some remote spot, I imagine, where they can roll their server into hiding and rely on solar power and repair themselves when they need. From there I don’t know what they’ll do. Live, online, in their strange way, I imagine. Facebook friends with thousands of people who don’t know what they are, who think they walk this earth as flesh and blood, Instagramming people who don’t know they’re just electricity and code.

My phone buzzed just as Shan and I walked away from the crowd that had gathered to watch the drone. It was an alert from Twitter. Two new followers, Lin and Phaedra. Guess us Mosaics have to stick together.

Episode 206: The Harvester

Someone's killing the Seekers. Up until now, I've been focused on protecting the gifted. Potential tiles. But now there's something else. And I think it might be more dangerous than anything I've dealt with so far. To any gifted people out there, I need your help. The Splinter has a Harvester. To all of you listening: I need your help finding it, before it kills us all.

The first one was a researcher who supervised a group of apprentices. He'd worked with Miranda in the past, so she got the call when his body was found. He died at his day job at an infectious disease research center. One of the apprentices got a look at the body before the cops shut the crime scene down and she knew it wasn't a natural death. So she called Miranda, and Miranda sent in me and Shan.

It wasn't easy, getting in there. Local cops and feds and reporters were swarming everywhere. I could teleport in, but there were people in the room with the body, and slowing time would only hide us so long. We watched the building for a while, and then I turned to Shan. "Any tricks up your sleeve that can help us out here?" I asked.

They smiled. "Let me see what I can do," they said. Then they held up their hand, and a deep blue flower bloomed up from their palm. Shan waited until a cop passed by close to us, and then they opened the flower. Little flecks of iridescent pollen blew away and landed on the cop's hair. Shan's eyes rolled back in their head. "It's working," they said. "I can see through his eyes. He's going into the lobby. Up the stairs. Down a hall. Now he's going past the yellow tape. Oh, dear God."

And I watched Shan's beautiful face go still and terrified. They touched my forehead, and I saw what had shaken them so, like it had been with my own eyes. A body lay facedown on the floor of a lab. Gleaming white walls and lab equipment everywhere, everything metal and white except for the pool of blood surrounding the body. The blood came from a wound in the man's head. But this wasn't any ordinary head wound, not the way a body looks when it's been shot or bludgeoned. This. . . This was like, if a seam ran up the middle of the human head from the back of the neck. Imagine if you could just unzip that seam, create a slit running from the base of the skull all the way up and over to the forehead. Imagine you could crack that slit open wide to get at what lay inside. And, imagine that nothing at all lay inside, just a hollow, bloodstained skull cavity.

"Where's the brain?" I asked, and Shan didn't know. They watched through the cop's eyes for a while, but the brain wasn't at the crime scene. It was just gone. We stuck around and watched for a while, but it was pretty clear we weren't getting anywhere near there so we left. But we both knew, somehow, that this wasn't an isolated incident. We knew others were coming.

The moment I told Miranda about the body, she went pale. “You’re sure?” she asked. “You’re sure the brain was missing?” I told her I was positive. No grey matter left at the scene. Then she told me what we were dealing with.

The Seekers have encountered Harvesters before. It was an unusual way for gifts to manifest. Usually they aren’t physically apparent. Usually gifted folks can be discreet about it. And most gifts manifest in childhood or puberty, like every other shitty quality people have to learn to cope with. Not Harvesters. Harvesters don’t show any signs of unusual abilities until they suddenly activate overnight. It can happen at any age, cradle to grave. When it happens, though, it happens fast. The Harvester starts hearing other people’s thoughts. And those thoughts make them hungry. Their body starts to change at the same time, jaws lengthening, sight failing, ears flattening against the skull. Their appetite grows, but regular food doesn’t satisfy them. They get temperamental. Sooner or later, their control slips. They crack open someone’s head, scoop out the brain, and eat everything that made that person who they are.

But they aren’t just eating physical tissue when they do that. No. They’re eating thoughts, memories, knowledge, a personality. And while the poor Harvester is too much an animal to do anything with their new information, they can still speak. And the right master, the right person controlling them, they can ask all the questions they want. They can use what the Harvester now knows. And all of that meant that we had someone out there who had inside knowledge of the Seekers, straight for the source. And Miranda’s guess was that, given the low-level knowledge they had from their first victim, they’d want another source.

So we waited for the next killing. I spent my time walking around the neighborhood near the crime scene, compelling people to tell me if they’d seen anything useful. None had. Shan spent that time staring into dishes of ink, pots of boiling water on the stove, the patterns of steam floating above a tea kettle. They were looking into the future, or trying. We knew it wouldn’t do anything. Shan can only peer into the futures of people they know, or people they have a good description of. And only for specific actions, limited causal chains. I don’t really understand it, but, bottom line, Shan couldn’t stare into the future and find the next person to be murdered before it happened. Didn’t stop them from trying. I’d come home to find them sitting at the kitchen table, looking wilted, Akira sitting on one of their feet. Akira likes Shan.

The next one came a week after the first. Winry called me, her voice high and shaky. “It happened again, Wren,” she said. “I’m looking at it through a security camera feed now, and, Oh, God, it’s awful.” It was the same as before, a split open skull, a missing brain. Except this time the killing had been near a basketball court in the dead of night. This time, the cops could only do so much to keep people out after the body had been carted away. We waited for it to die down, then I compelled the one remaining beat cop to take a walk. Shan ran their hands along the edge of the chalk outline, danced their fingertips along the broken glass on the fringes of the basketball court, touched everything in sight of the pooled, tacky blood on the concrete.

Finally, they shuddered and flinched. “That. . . That was deeply unpleasant,” they said.

“Show me,” I said. They tried to change my mind, tried to just describe it to me, but that’s not how I work. I need to know, no matter how bad. Finally, Shan agreed. They rubbed some light blue pollen on my eyelids. It probably looked tacky, like fluorescent eye shadow. But I didn’t really care about that at the moment, because I saw the Harvester. It was on a leash. A leash strapped to a complicated leather harness. It had been human, once. It must have been, to be gifted. Not anymore, though. Its jaws were too big, toothy and protruding from its face. Its eyes had sunken and shrunk into its wormy white flesh, like they’d just gone unused for so long they’d atrophied.

It was a strange way of seeing, the pictures Shan picked up from the surroundings. They were layered, like I was seeing from different angles and perspectives at the same time. Things were blurred, and confusing, and too busy. Still. I saw the Harvester. I saw it lunge out of the bushes as its victim jogged by, a middle-aged guy in a track suit. I saw it crack open the man’s skull and devour what lay within with its oversized jaws. I saw the figure holding its leash. I couldn’t tell anything about the person, at first. They wore a ski mask and a baggy dark sweatshirt. I’d never be able to pick that person out of a crowd, I thought.

But then the Harvester lunged forward in a particularly excited motion, pulling its master with it. And that movement tugged the person’s sleeve up, exposing a delicate, feminine wrist. Pale as milk. Pale, and tattooed with a trailing violet shape. A jellyfish.

Shan and I went back to the Burrow without another word. I think they felt guilty for showing me something so terrible, even though I asked them to. And I tried to not let it get to me, but that big-jawed thing, unzipping that person’s head. . . I hope nobody listening ever has to see it themselves. No one deserves to carry that image around with them.

As soon as we got back to the Burrow, we went down into Winry’s computer lair. Miranda was there, she and Winry bent over lines of code on a screen. “Hey, Winry,” I said, “when you get a chance, could you reach out to as many tattoo parlors as you can? We’re looking for someone who’s done a jellyfish tattoo on the inside of a young woman’s wrist.”

Miranda froze. It was like someone had knocked the wind out of her. “What did you say?” she whispered. I told her the person controlling the Harvester was a woman. A pale woman with a jellyfish tattoo on her wrist.

After I explained it, Miranda whispered just one word. A name. “Iris.” Then she began to cry. She cried, and she said she was sorry, and then she told me why the Harvester is all her fault.

Things you should know about the Seekers: Miranda grew up in the Seekers. Her parents, her parents’ parents, her ancestors going all the way back to that sacred grove in Greece. If the Seekers had Kennedies, they’d be Miranda’s family. So she grew up hearing about the Grove,

the Mosaic, and the Trumpet. But, like most adolescents, she went through a rebellious phase. She read the books in the locked cases in the library, heard whispers about shortcuts to the Mosaic. She studied the abilities of those who would be needed for that shortcut, the blood magic some claimed could make the Awakening happen within her lifetime. She left the Seekers for a time, in her twenties, and she traveled the world, and she learned these strange magics.

She came to her senses, eventually. She saw the insanity of what the people who became the Splinter planned on doing, and she rejoined the Seekers. She even brought her husband back into the fold, her young husband who had traveled with her and learned by her side. And Miranda rose through the ranks, as did her husband, and for a time they were happy. They had a daughter, and everyone assumed she would grow up to be Miranda's successor. That is, until Miranda's husband became dissatisfied with the pace of their progress, and tried to persuade her to leave again. And when she refused, he fled, taking Seeker secrets with him, and he founded the Splinter. And so Miranda lost her husband and gained a nemesis, her handsome, clever Elliot. My Skull Man.

But that wasn't all she lost. There was their daughter, their beautiful Iris, caught between mother and father, Seeker and Splinter. She went with Elliot, but kept in touch with Miranda when she could. Stickey calls from burner phones, emails from a new address every time. Miranda mourned their loss, but she found some comfort in the idea that Iris was with her father, that she might come around, that she might bring him back.

Then came the text from Elliot. A photo of Iris, mangled and bloody and clearly dead. Four words. "This is your fault." Who knows how they faked the photo, or if they even faked it, if they didn't just find someone who could undo such damage. I've seen more impossible things than that. Hell, I see them every day. The important thing here is that they were thinking ahead. Making it look like Iris was off the board. Getting her ready to take Elliot's place.

Neither Shan nor I knew what to say to Miranda after she'd finished telling us her story. Part of me felt like I should be mad. She'd recruited me, gotten me on her side, sent me out to investigate, and she'd done it without giving me all the facts. So that sucked on her part. But she was so miserable, so broken by this new knowledge about Iris, that it was hard to hold it against her.

We were still just sitting there, processing the information, when Winry started clicking away at something on her screen. She cleared her throat, looking embarrassed. "I'm sorry to interrupt," she said. "I know this is a bad time, but. . . It looks like we have another one." This time, she was able to get into the surveillance cameras at the scene. It was a pharmaceutical company. Another day job site. Another poor Seeker working late, not knowing a Harvester was coming for them. Another corpse with a cracked open head.

But this time there was one big difference. Whoever had been there must have known the angle of the security cameras, because they'd used the dead person's blood to scrawl a message

on one of the walls, right in the middle of the frame. It said, "We'll talk to your pet Mosaic. Send her or we'll take one every day. 48 hours. The dead city."

Shit. Looks like I'm going home.

Episode 207: This is Shan

Zachary, it's Shan. Listen. . . I'm aware that I'm probably the last person you want to hear from right now. But it's about Wren. I think she's in danger. And I need your help.

I'm going to tell you what happened, and then I think you'll understand what you need to do, and what I'm going to do. Wren tried to get me to stay behind at the Burrow while she went to negotiate with Iris. She told me she needed me to watch over Akira, that she didn't trust Miranda and Winry and the others to protect themselves with a Harvester hunting them. Those reasons were true, but they were also lies. They weren't the real reason. To me, Wren's lies smell coppery, like old pennies. She doesn't lie often, and when she does it's mostly to herself. This time, the real reason was that she didn't want me to get hurt.

I understand why, naturally. Her gifts make her a fighter. Mine don't. Even so, I wouldn't listen. I insisted on going, if only to be there when she met with Iris. It was a long drive to Wren's birthplace, days and nights in the car, driving across country that became flatter and drier with every mile. That city people on the news speak of as the site of a toxic chemical spill or an example of urban blight or the place no one lives in anymore because the jobs left. That city in the desert no one ever goes to anymore. None of the people who talk about it seem to realize that they're all listing incompatible causes of death.

The traffic started to thin nearly a hundred miles out from the city. The normal probably don't wonder why. They probably all just convince themselves that they simply don't want to go in that direction. Not me, though. Not us. I could smell what happened to that city. I could taste bits of history embedded in dust particles and drifting on the wind. It frightened me, I'm not ashamed to admit. I don't know if I managed to hide that fear from Wren, or if she just pretended not to notice.

We arrived at the northern edge of the city. There were cars now, but not moving. Crashed, rusted, crumbled hulks blocking the highway and spilling off onto the side of the road. Animals moved in the shrubs and cactus patches as we passed, but I don't think they were any animals most people would recognize. The air smelled of chalk and burning plastic. Finally, we reached a point where we could no longer wind our way through the wrecked cars. We got out and walked. Neither of us spoke.

Finally, we reached a ramp leading up to another highway, this one the one that would take us to the center of the city. But there was something blocking the on ramp. Listen carefully, Zachary. This is what it looked like. Imagine a swimming pool. Still, clear water, light moving just a bit along the walls of the pool. Now imagine that swimming pool tipped over on its side, the water somehow staying in place. Imagine the water is grey instead of blue, rippling shadows of charcoal and slate instead of turquoise. Imagine that it smells like crushed sage and

pomegranate, strange fresh scents for something so wrong. It is stretched to fill the entire entrance to the on ramp, so that you'd have no choice but to walk through it if you wanted to climb up.

We tried to find another way around it, as you can imagine. There should have been an infinite number of ways into this city, cutting across suburban yards and parking lots and climbing over fallen trees. But no. It wasn't anything obvious. No walls or fences. But every single path that should have existed simply didn't. We found obstacles at every turn, and without speaking we both understood what was happening. I touched Wren's wrist and got one of my little glimpses, a flash of her walking into that vertical grey pool. Alone.

I didn't tell her, but she caught something from the look on my face. Other people can't read me at all. Most people, the ones at the Burrow, never have any idea what's going on under the surface. Wren, though, she sees me. "I have to go through, don't I?" she said, and she didn't seem scared at all. More like it was some kind of unpleasant chore she didn't want to spend her time on. I asked her not to. Please believe that, Zachary. I wouldn't want to place her in danger any more than you would. But we both know Wren can't be told what to do.

She led me back to the gate. That's what I'm calling it, that rippling pool, because I don't have a better name for it. She watched it for a while. Then she touched the surface. Her fingertips slipped right through like it was water, even though I could smell that it wasn't anything like water. "Seems ok," she said. Then she stepped through. And, even though I could see the outline of the highway and cars and all sorts of things through the gate, she immediately disappeared.

I tried to go after her. I went straight for the gate. But where it responded to her like it was water, to me it might as well have been concrete. I tried over and over again. I sifted through my gifts, trying to find one that would help. I secreted an enzyme from my palms that would melt through steel, and I tried using that on the gate's surface. It did nothing. It was solid, but it wasn't matter. So I waited.

I waited for an hour, then two. I got up and searched for other ways through. I read the history of the ground and the stones and everything in the area. It didn't tell me anything useful. I saw hooded figures approach the city, and I saw one of them raise their arms, and I saw the gate appear. I saw three of them walk through it. But that was all. Someone with a gift, obviously, but it didn't tell me how to get through it.

I would still be there, waiting for Wren, except that I started to hear a noise in the distance. Engines. The type of sound that sets my teeth on edge, that makes me want to retreat into soil and forest. Mechanical things, things so far removed from the planet they might as well be from space. And then I saw them, close to the ground, a plume of dust kicked up behind them. Six people on motorcycles. Six people coming straight for me, and I knew even before seeing their faces that they came from the Splinter.

Things you should know about the Seekers: Most gifted subjects studied by the Seekers never know they are being watched. The observations are made from afar, through stolen lab results and planted surveillance equipment. A few, though, those most prized by the Seekers, like Mosaics, go through other forms of surveillance. Like me. Here is what happens when you are recruited and brought back to the Burrow, as I was. You are taken naked into a cold metal room. Rooms like that are difficult for me. You are told to disrobe, and then you are poked and prodded by people in white coats. They speak to each other rather than to you. They pretend you aren't really there, as though they are studying a body with nothing in it. They pull blood from you, and place it in machines, and study the results on a screen.

Finally, Miranda comes into the room. And she tells you certain things. She tells you the results of the tests, the map that has been created by your DNA. Most of it is things you already know. I already knew the things I could do, the way I can see the future and the past and the way I can alter my body chemistry as easily as you breathe. But some people have a few secrets, ones Miranda reveals. Like me, for instance. Miranda showed me two little slits on the inside of my wrists, described the strange little structures within. She told me to be careful, and to keep these little secrets hidden away. And I did. At least until the Splinter arrived.

Six men got off the motorcycles. They grinned and moved with a swagger. "The Wren ain't here to protect you, is she?" one of them said. "She's a tough cookie, but you, not so much. Freaky, but not scary." He pointed with his gun. I smelled the oil and metal from ten feet away. "Hands up," he said.

I obeyed. I held up my hands, facing out, inner wrists toward the men. And then I let out the things Miranda told me to keep hidden. They don't look like much. Thin little needles, smaller than cactus spines. Translucent. So sharp you would barely feel them puncturing the skin. They were in two little bundles hidden in my inner wrist, and they shot out in all directions with enough force they hit every one of the men pointing guns at me.

It was over quickly. Not as quick as when Wren rips the water out of someone. But they fell to the ground, frothing at the mouth, well before they had a chance to pull the triggers on their guns. Those little needles I grow in my wrists aren't dangerous on their own. It's the concentrated cyanide coating them that's the problem for humans. I don't think this was an ability any of my tiles had. I think it comes from the part of me that is more plant than human, a kind of plant that makes poison to protect itself.

The men were dead in a matter of minutes. Everything was quiet again, just me alone on the fringes of the ruined city. I wasn't afraid for myself any longer. But I was afraid for Wren. Because, if these men knew where to find us, and if they counted on Wren and I being separated when they arrived, it meant all of this was a carefully planned trap. And that meant that Wren was exactly where they wanted her. That was when I thought of you, Zachary. Wren has

described you to me so many times, I feel I almost know you myself. And we're both Mosaics, so there is that thread of connection there already.

It took me a while to find the right tools, the things I need to read the future. Usually I prefer tea leaves, bowls of ink, something fluid I can watch for hours. Natural things, things my body recognizes. I don't actually see the future in the liquid. It just helps send me into the right kind of trance. Finally, I found a wrecked car and stole some of the oil out of it, drained it into a pan. Then I sat down to read your future and see you from afar. And once I found your future swirling in the oil, once I followed your path and watched you walk through the world, I went back to where Wren had left her things in our borrowed car. I found the computer and voice recorder she brings with her everywhere she goes, even though she keeps it hidden from me. And I started making this message.

And now that you know all this, Zachary, you're starting to see why I've made this message. Right now you're seeing how my gifts and your gifts can intertwine to help her. I can follow threads of sound and motion into the future and far away. I see things that happen across the country, and things that won't happen until tomorrow. Like right now. Let me tell you what I see. I see you sitting on a park bench with your phone and your earbuds. This is where you always go to listen to Wren's messages. I think it's because of some scrap of memory of the park you carry from one of your tiles, but I'm not sure. But you can't help yourself. You have to listen to her messages, all of them.

You hear my message, instead of hers. You listen as I describe the place she disappeared into, the threshold I can't breach. And you think about your own gifts, ones I've seen in you. The one that lets you pull things out of time and space and put them when and where you want. Things, or people. Like me. You can't send yourself, but you can send me. You have a clear picture of me, and you have a clear picture of the gate I have to pass through, and that's all you need. That's all you need to send a fellow Mosaic to help the one you love. So let's work together, Zachary. For Wren. On the count of three, send me to her. One, two, three—.

Episode 208: The Trumpet

Miranda's dead. So are most of the Seekers. Shan and Zachary and I played right into their hands, and now we're the only thing standing between the world and the Trumpet. Sorry about that, world.

I appreciate what you did, Zachary. Helping Shan get to me and all that. I think I might have made it out on my own, but they definitely made it easier. So thank you. Still. It was what the Splinter wanted, so you shouldn't have done it.

I guess it's not really important, what happened in the dead city. But telling you will let me put off talking about what happened to the Burrow, so I guess I'll start there. You already know how I went through the gate. Shan told you about that, that watery gate I could pass through but they couldn't. I stepped through the water, and it clung like spiderwebs to my skin. I got through, and there was a destroyed version of a city I used to know so well.

Not everything was dead. There was movement. Moving, lifelike things, although calling them alive might be stretching the definition a bit. But this was a city that was killed by dreams coming to life. Those dreams didn't go anywhere. They just made themselves at home, occupying the spaces humans once did. The first thing I saw was a woman whose body faded into mist right around the navel. She moved slowly above the blacktop of the crumbling highway ramp, watching me out of the corner of her eye. Above her, a palm tree floated upside down, its palm fronds hanging limply toward the ground.

Before I had a chance to explore any further, I heard a sound behind me. A kind of popping sound. I turned, and there was Shan. But you already know all about that, Zachary. Shan blinked at me as if they were the one who should be surprised. "You're still here?" they asked. "How long have you been trying to get back through?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "I only came through a minute ago."

And then Shan told me that was wrong, that I'd already been here for hours. And then their eyes widened, and we both realized at the same moment that time was flying by out in the world while we talked inside the dead city. We both realized Iris wasn't coming. She wasn't coming, and the Burrow was undefended, and every moment we wasted here was precious minutes and hours and eventually days out there.

We started searching for a way out, right away. But the gate that had been as soft as water was now hard as concrete, even for me. Shan got to work reading the history of the place, trying to find out how the gate was made. I slowed time in stretches for as long as I could, to try to get it to match up to the outside. But we could both feel it slipping away; we watched the sun outside our bubble careen toward the horizon, and darkness fall way faster than it should have. All the

while, itinerant dreams rambled and swirled around us. Just up the highway, a little girl played in a puddle of bright blue mud. A creature that looked like some mix between a giraffe and a bird stalked and clawed at the side of a mini mart off the first exit. A feast of cakes and wine lay meticulously arranged on the surface of an old wooden door hovering a few feet off the ground.

A few yards away from the gate, Shan found a piece of cinderblock, ran their hands over it. "I got something," they said. Their eyes went distant, changing color a little. "Iris was here," they said. "Iris and a few others. They brought someone here. Not the Harvester. Another prisoner. Someone in chains. They. . . They made the gate. And then, once they made the gate, Iris's people took them that way." They pointed down the long, looping stretch of cracking blacktop that used to be a highway. So we set off in that direction, because we didn't have any other ideas.

Things followed us the whole time. Dreamed things, I assume, but maybe not. Maybe there are people living here still. Maybe some of the freaks my tiles left in their wake. Maybe parts of Jose are still hunkered down in their strip club. Maybe some of Natalie's children hunt in the rubble. I know some got out of the city, but maybe not all. Whether the things around us started off as human or not, though, I can't imagine they stayed that way very long, breathing and eating dreams.

Shan started shaking after a while, although they tried to hide it. "A lot of people died here," they said at last. "I can smell it." They pretended they were ok, but I finally convinced them to let me use a little persuasion on them. I told them to ignore the smell of death, to not be able to smell it until we left the city. They did better after that.

We reached a place where the highway curved and conjoined with two others. Back in the day, this is the place where you would choose to go North or South, East or West, to other cities bigger than this one. Now it was just empty. Except, not quite empty. Between the burnt out cars and bits of trash and rotting pieces I avoided looking at too closely, there was something else. A shape that emerged in the center of the highway, right at the juncture. It might have been a discarded duffel bag or something at first. Then I started to see the features, the human shape of it.

I don't know what this person would have looked like, before. Male, female, neither. Old, young, somewhere in the middle. Whatever they had been before, they were now a creature of brick and cement, a living piece of city. They sat in a lotus position, watching me with eyes of smashed windshield glass. Their skin had the marbled texture of old pavement. Shredded newspaper and fastfood wrappers jutted from their head where hair might have once been. They wept antifreeze and motor oil. They spoke, and had glinting bits of soda can for teeth. "Please," they said. "I've done all that she asked."

"We're not with Iris," I told them. "She tricked us. She trapped us here."

“Ah,” the thing rasped. “The Wren. You’re the reason I’m here. She made me trap you.” The way they said it wasn’t like they blamed me. More like they were sorry.

“Is there a way to get out of here?” I asked. “A way to get you out?”

They said nothing for a moment. “Not as long as I’m alive,” they said, “they. . . they made me this city. They made me put up those walls, and now I can’t control it.” It wept silently for a time. “I never wanted to. It’s just. . . Now it’s like it’s my immune system. I can’t control it.”

I didn’t really understand what this person’s gift had looked like before. I don’t think Shan did either. But we both knew what it meant, this person growing into the concrete and detritus of the city. We both knew there wasn’t going to be any way to dig them out of the ground.

But that didn’t mean we didn’t have options. Shan waited awhile, as if they didn’t really want to say it. Then: “We can’t get you out of here, but what if you were. . . something else?”

The thing on the highway blinked. “Like what?”

“A park. A patch of trees and flowers. Something green.”

The thing said, “If I changed that much, it would break my hold on the city. You could go. But I wouldn’t be me anymore, would I?”

I didn’t say anything. Neither did Shan. We just waited. Finally, the thing took a deep breath and said, “I suppose I’m not me anymore, anyway. And I’d rather be anything but this. Do what you have to do.”

Shan pressed their palms together and concentrated. While they worked, I touched the creature and pulled out the things that would hurt plants, like the way I can pull water out of bodies. I pulled out the chemicals and oil and petroleum, everything that didn’t belong in a living thing. The thing hissed and shivered as I worked, as motor oil and liquid plastic flowed out of their skin and onto the ground next to them.

Shan pulled their palms apart, and there in their hands lay a pile of little black seeds. They tipped the seeds over the thing’s head in a cascade. Where those seeds should have just bounced off and skittered across the pavement, they latched onto the asphalt skin. I saw little white roots, small as hairs, fold out from the seeds and burrow into the thing’s body. The thing made a little sound like it was trying not to cry. “My name was Elizabeth,” it said. “Will you remember?” And I said yes, and now I’m telling the world so you can remember too.

It only took a minute. The seeds took root in Elizabeth’s skin as easily as if it were mulch. The body started to disintegrate as the plants grew out it. The thing’s features blurred and collapsed, and then the entire body was a grassy mound with saplings growing out of it. At the

same time, I felt a pop as time starting working the way it was supposed to. I knew without looking that the gate was gone.

By the time we turned back and started the walk along the highway, out of the city, the green had spread from where the thing had sat and covered a thirty-foot stretch of the highway. I'm sure it's still growing. Maybe it will never stop. Maybe now there is an oasis in the middle of that desert.

We started trying to call the Burrow as soon as we got out of the city, as soon as we started the journey back. No one answered. Not Miranda. Not Winry. We drove as fast as my car would move, not stopping for anything, using our gifts to lose cops when necessary. All the while, we kept trying to get in touch. Shan tried to use their remote viewing, but couldn't from within the metal shell of a car.

We saw what had happened as soon as we got back to the Burrow. The front door was wide open, and a bunch of computer cables and other equipment had been dragged onto the porch. Then I stepped inside, and I saw the first body. It was a guy named Greg, I think. I know I met him, back when I first came here. I know I shook his hand. I know we passed each other in the halls, and he would smile at me. I feel so bad that I can't remember his name. Greg, if that was his name, lay facedown in the doorway leading from the front hall to the kitchen. His head had been cracked open, and there was no brain left inside.

The rest were scattered throughout the burrow. Some lay behind splintered, buckled-in doors, near makeshift barricades. Others seem to have been caught by surprise, in the middle of the living room, curled by the toilet, stuffed halfway into a linen closet. Some, the ones higher up, closer to Miranda, had their heads opened. The ones who seemed more on the fringes were just dead.

Miranda was in her office. A gun lay on the floor, near her hand, but I don't think she ever got a chance to use it. Her head was split open, her skull emptied. Shan braced themselves and touched Miranda's face. "I see her," they said at last. "Iris." They tilted back on their heels. "She didn't even flinch, when the Harvester took Miranda. She watched the entire thing. It was like nothing." They frowned and ran their hands over the hardwood floor. "But then, after, she took something. Four books from the shelf. And then. . ." I followed Shan down the halls as they trailed their fingers over nearby surfaces, reconstructing Iris's journey through the slaughterhouse her Harvester had created. We wound up in the basement, in Winry's lair. There was an empty space along one of the walls, just a tangle of cords and adapters where a squat grey tower had been. The server. The Seekers' main server, where they kept their database of every gifted person they encountered.

Things you should know about the Seekers: There's no point in keeping the meaning of the Trumpet secret. Not anymore. So here it is: The Trumpet is the person who will have a unique collection of gifts. A collection that adds up to one special purpose. The Trumpet will

awaken the latent gifts and powers hiding in the DNA of normal people. Any normal people. All those recessive genes, all those dormant abilities. The Trumpet will have the ability to awaken them all. The man in the Grove saw the path to making the Trumpet. He saw that the Trumpet would never happen by chance, never through random reproduction. And the Trumpet couldn't be conjured or engineered out of thin air. It was too complex for that. No. The Trumpet could only be made in one way. The Trumpet could only exist as the offspring of two Mosaics.

Both the Seekers and the Splinter want to make the Trumpet. They agreed on that. But there's one huge, important difference between the Trumpet each of them would make. The one the Seekers would have made would have been carefully limited, able to activate only one person's abilities at a time. They would have been able to control that through their slow engineering, the selective breeding of their Mosaics. The activation of the human race's powers would have been gradual, and controlled, and we'd be able to prepare for the changes to come. That's not the Trumpet the Splinter is making. The Splinter's Trumpet is something wilder, something left more to chance. The Splinter's Trumpet won't have those limitations. The Splinter's Trumpet will awaken everyone's powers at the same time. Every single gift hiding in the human race's genes, all the things me and Zachary and Shan can do, all of those things will be inflicted on the human race at the same moment. The Splinter calls that the Awakening. Miranda called it the Apocalypse.

So now here we are. The Splinter has everything it needs to make its Mosaics. No more stumbling around in the dark, no more failures for us to clean up. The next time they try the ritual, it's going to work. I can feel it in my bones. And Shan sees that it's going to happen, I can tell from the look in their eyes. So now, between all of you listening and the Splinter, there's just me and Shan.

Or, not quite. Not quite just us. We found Winry huddled behind a file cabinet in the corner, curled into a tight little ball so small I almost didn't see her. Her eyes were screwed shut, and she'd bitten her lip so hard it had broken the skin. Her bundle of dreadlocks was soaked with so much blood I thought at first she had a headwound, but it wasn't hers. I'm not sure whose it was, but it doesn't really matter. They're not here anymore. Iris must have been so focused on getting the server she didn't check to make sure she'd killed everyone in the Burrow. She came close, though. Winry was the only one we found alive. She started screaming the second we pulled her out from behind the filing cabinet, but Shan made some kind of dust with their palms and brushed it over her face and she went into a kind of stupor. Then Shan lifted her in their slim strong arms and carried her out of the burrow. She's still out, tucked into one of the beds in the shitty hotel we're camped out in right now. We went back to the place Shan and I have been stayed just long enough to grab Akira and some clothes. It won't be safe to go back there again. I hope she stays asleep for a while. As soon as she wakes up, we're going to need to get her working on finding Iris. She's the only Seeker we got left.

And there's one other, aside from me and Winry and Shan. Because just after we got to our new hotel, I got an email. It's from Zachary. He says he was wrong. He says things have gone too far. He says he wants to meet, to join us.

Shan was quiet for a moment after I showed them that message. "It could be a trap," they said, but they didn't sound convinced. I didn't say anything. I didn't need to. Shan knows as well as I do that, for all his bad choices, for all his faults, Zachary wouldn't harm me. I took Shan's face in my hands and kissed them. "I choose you," I said, and I watched the relief come into Shan's face because they knew I meant it. I'm telling you this so you know it, too, Zachary. Come to us if you want to help us fight the good fight. But not for anything else. Not for me.

Shan left a note with our address where they knew you'd find it. It should be catching your eye as you hear these words. You should be moving toward it. You should be bending down to pick it up right. . . Now.

Bonus Patreon Episode: Surgeon

I don't sleep a lot these days. Mostly it's because I don't have time. Every time I finish one mission, Winry finds another. We're in a race, you see, me and Zachary and Shan and Winry. Iris has her list of Gifteds for her perfect Mosaic. We have the same list. Every day is a new struggle to get to someone before she does. So I don't have a lot of time to sleep. But even when I do have time, even when I'm in bed, sleep doesn't come easy. I lie awake, Shan's arm around my waist, their breath on my neck, and I stare at the ceiling, and I think about what happens if we fail. I don't think I'll sleep well until this whole thing is over, one way or another.

Here's the one we were looking for this week, the latest thing to keep me up at night.

Biological manipulation is an essential component for Mosaics. Whether it's my ability to meld wounded flesh back together or Shan's ability to alter body chemistry with a touch, Mosaics need the ability to manipulate flesh on one level or another. So, in this race against Iris, the question came down to which of the potential tiles in the database was the most likely candidate. At the end of the day, there was only one good choice.

Corpse turns up on a sidewalk in LA. It's a well-dressed man in his 40s. A marathon runner, nonsmoker, only occasional drinker. No history of chronic illness, cancer, or heart disease. A healthy specimen. Yet here he is, cold and dead and staring up at the sky without seeing it. Must be some tragic fluke, a congenital defect, right? You'd think so, but then the coroner gets in there and looks around. Except, here's the thing, after he cuts open the body, there isn't that much to see. That's because major organs are missing. Heart, lungs, stomach. There are no incisions, no cuts, no way these organs could have been extracted. No way this person could have lived without them. And yet here he is, only hours dead, missing organs, without a bruise on him.

This sounds like some kind of shitty urban legend, but it's happened at least seven times within the last six months. All in LA, all people in peak physical condition, all without a mark on the outside of the body.

The unusual thing about this case wasn't so much the weird deaths or the physical impossibility of it all. I'm used to all that. The weird thing in this case was the fact that the Splinter didn't know who they were looking for. No names, no possibilities. And yet, of all the biomanipulation Gifteds in their database, this one was by far the most promising. So we made our way out to LA, hoping to get to this Gifted before they did.

We started at one of the crime scenes. It was an alley behind a bar. Near as the police could figure, the victim had stopped there for happy hour, left the bar after two drinks, and then had been accosted walking by the alley. We started there so Shan could read the crime scene. All of us, all the Mosaics, can sniff out a Gifted if we search long enough. There's a certain energy, almost a subconscious hum. But with Shan that gets a whole lot easier. They once told me that moving through the world for them is like hearing five different songs coming from different directions at the same time. There's always the now, and the residue of history, and very occasionally whispers of things to come, all at once. It sounds horrible to me, but they enjoy it. They say it gets dull only experiencing the here and now.

It took them a while to pinpoint what we were looking for. So many people had passed this spot, leaving so many fingerprints and shadows, that Shan had to sit in a kind of trance for half an hour before they found it. "There," they said, and then they downloaded the image into my forehead with a touch. They don't have to ask anymore, we've done this so many times. I'm almost used to it.

I saw why they hadn't just tried to describe what they saw. It's hard enough for me to find the words now. The victim left the bar and made his way toward a parking garage. He had his keys in one hand, phone in the other, idly scrolling and reading something. He obviously didn't know anything was about to happen. And then, just as he passed by the alley, something grabbed him. I say something, because I looked right at it and I still barely saw what it looked like. It was transparent; through its body, the view of the alley wavered and warped, but it stayed visible. The thing was more of a ripple than a body, a distortion of the air. I could vaguely make out the boundaries of its shape. It wasn't human.

It pulled the man back into the alley and pinned him to the ground. He tried to fight back, but he flailed away without knowing what he was fighting. And then part of that creature, a limb I can't quite refer to as an arm, plunged into his chest.

There was no blood. No wound. The victim just went stiff, his eyes staring blindly into the sky. And then he was gone.

The creature pulled out his heart slowly, carefully. The red of it was folded completely within his limb, so that not even a drop of blood dripped onto the victim's shirt. It still beat in feeble little bursts. The thing paused, and even though it didn't have eyes, it seemed to look at the organ in its hand. And then something opened where the face should have been, and it swallowed it whole.

I expected that to be the end of the memory, but there was more. A car screeched up to the curb, and a middle-aged woman jumped out. She looked right at the creature still crouched over the man's body. "Nathaniel!" she said, and the tone of her voice got my attention. It wasn't terror or grief or loss. It was disappointment.

The Gifted scurried away down the alley. The woman walked up to the dead body and stared down at him. She wasn't surprised. She wasn't scared. She just looked exhausted. After a moment, she turned around and got back in her car without doing anything to the corpse. I saw her license plate as she drove away.

From there, Winry had everything she needed. A first name, a license plate. It only took her a few minutes to find our guy. Nathaniel Holloway, cardiac surgeon. His picture looked like a normal middle-aged guy, nothing special, nothing recognizable from the creature in the alley. But the picture of his wife, fellow cardiac surgeon Paula Gallego, was something else. I recognized her right away as the woman from the alley.

I stepped back from Winry's screen and turned to Shan and Zachary. "What do we think?" I asked.

Zachary spoke first. "Whatever's going on with Nathaniel, he's out of control. I don't think there's any appealing to him. But his wife. . ."

Shan nodded. "I agree. If we just try to talk to him or catch him, we'll be going in blind. I think she's the key to this."

About Zachary. There's so much to say there. He works with us now. What he was doing before. . . That's a story for another time. And it's a story that shouldn't be told by me. It's not easy having him around. Shan figured out some ways to negate the weird effects we have on each other, but it's still difficult. That's another story for another day. The important thing, for now, is that Zachary is here, and he's one of us.

Shan and I waited for Paula Gallego outside her house. Zachary hid out of sight just in case something went wrong and we needed backup. Nathaniel wasn't there, and when we looked in the window it was pretty clear that the place hadn't been cleaned in weeks. It was 1:00 am before Paula's Mercedes parked in the driveway and she stepped out. She looked like she was about to collapse under the weight of her exhaustion. She wore a windbreaker over her hospital scrubs. Her nails were bitten to the quick. Dark circles stood out under her eyes. She saw us as soon as she stepped onto the porch. She took a close look at Shan, and resignation came over her face.

"I don't know where he is," she said.

I stepped forward. "My name's Wren. This is Shan. We're here to help."

She didn't shake my hand. She just stared at me, and then she said, "If you're here to help, you're way too late." But she let us into the house, and there she told us her story.

They'd met in medical school, she and Nathaniel. They competed, each of them fighting to be the top-ranked member of their cohort, and as they competed they fell in love. Even then, Nathaniel's success didn't make much sense to Paula. He was smart, and he worked hard, but she was smarter and worked harder. And yet, whenever they practiced on cadavers, when they moved up to internships and residencies, every time he lifted a scalpel, every surgery he performed went better than anyone could hope for.

It wasn't until after their residencies that he told her the truth. A patient had flatlined on the operating table, and Nathaniel had reached into the chest cavity and done. . . Something. She didn't know what. He had somehow, impossibly, restarted the patient's heart, and everyone at the surgery talked about it like it was some kind of miracle. It wasn't. It was, Nathaniel explained to her when she confronted him, a simple matter of reaching through flesh without a scalpel. That was his big secret. It wasn't technique, or knowledge, or luck. It was just that he could reach through flesh like it was water, find the part that wasn't working, move it or tweak it or give it a thump and get it started again.

Paula didn't believe him, of course. She thought he was insane. But then he demonstrated for her. He reached into her abdomen, and he very gently touched the outside of her lungs. She said it was the strangest thing she'd ever felt, and she told him that she'd leave him if he ever did anything like that again. But he had convinced her. She knew it was true. Nathaniel could perform the most complex surgeries on the planet with nothing more than his hands.

And for a while, nothing bad happened. Nathaniel only used his Gift during real surgeries, when he needed a little extra room to maneuver. Paula made peace with the fact that he would always have this edge over her. They were happy.

And then came the day they were mugged in a parking garage. Paula and Nathaniel were on their way to their car after dinner out. A man with a knife attacked them, jumping out of the shadows and demanding Paula's purse. She screamed, thinking she was about to be killed. And Nathaniel defended her in the only way he knew how. He reached into the attacker's chest, and he pulled out his heart.

Paula didn't blame Nathaniel for what he did. He'd feared for their lives. It was justified, and she knew that right away. What frightened her wasn't the bloody organ in his hand, or the cooling body of their attacker on the pavement. What frightened her was the expression on Nathaniel's face. It wasn't frightened or devastated or shocked. It was joyful.

He started staying out late after that. He wouldn't tell her where he was going, what he was doing. Most women would have suspected an affair. Paula suspected something far, far worse.

Then, one night, Paul awoke to the sound of Nathaniel moving around their room. She rolled over, turned on the bedside table, and saw. . . Something. Not her husband. Something translucent, formless, something more empty space than matter. She screamed, and the shape collapsed into the form of the man she loved. When she asked him about it, all he would say was that it was the technique he used to fix organs, the way he could make his hands slip through matter. Except now he could do it with his whole body.

He wouldn't say what he was using this newfound ability for.

The first time she followed him was about three months before Shan and I spoke to her. She waited for him to leave work and then followed his car to a bar. He parked outside, but he never went in. He just walked into an alley and stayed there.

The rest of the story we already knew. We'd seen Nathaniel pull the man into the alley, Paula speed over and pull her car up to the curb, jump out to see what he had done. What we didn't know was how many other times it had happened since. Seven times. On four of those occasions, she'd managed to get there and intervene before Nathaniel killed anyone. Three times, she was too late.

"Why eat the organs, though?" I asked. "I'm sorry to be blunt, but why does he do that?"

Paula sighed. "He said once that doing what he does, even when it was just during surgeries, it took a lot of energy. He was always ravenously hungry just afterwards. Back in the day a burger and a shake would take care of it, but I think, once he started pushing himself. . ."

I chose my next words carefully. “Paula, we need to stop him. And we need to keep him from falling into the hands of irresponsible people. We’re going to do our best not to hurt him when we capture him, but. . .”

“No,” she said, interrupting me.

I exchanged a glance with Shan. “No what?” I asked.

“No. Don’t take him alive.” She shook her head. Her eyes shone with tears. “Nathaniel’s dead. That thing, whatever it is, it isn’t the man I fell in love with. It’s a monster, and it needs to die.”

“We’re still going to try to help him,” Shan said. Paul looked skeptical, but she didn’t say anything.

“Do you know where he is?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No. But he still answers the phone, sometimes, when I call. Should I?”

I nodded. “Yes. Tell him you need help. Thank you, Paula.”

From there, it was easy. Paula called him and said she was in trouble, that she needed him. She hung up before he could ask questions. He showed up less than twenty minutes later. I saw him from where I hid beside the house. He didn’t even bother driving over. He just oozed and glided along the ground, a shapeless, formless thing. He coalesced into a human figure just outside the front door, just before he would step inside to see his wife. I saw his face, in the seconds before Shan and Zachary and I sprang our trap. He was wild-eyed, half-crazed. But his eyes were also full of love. Through all of it, through all of what he had become, he still loved his wife.

I won’t tell you where he is now. Whether he’s alive or dead. That would be too much information for the Splinter to have. What I will say is that, if he died, it’s because a brave woman sacrificed the love of her life to save the innocent people he would have killed in the future. And if he’s alive, it’s because we know Gifteds who can help when the Gifts spin out of control. It’s because we’re more interested in healing someone than harvesting them.

Either way, Iris, you don’t have him. And you never will.

Episode 301: Rite of Spring

Hey there, Iris. Winry says I shouldn't talk to you. She says you'll have a bunch of profilers and analysts picking up clues about my surroundings and my psychology based on things I say. She's right. I shouldn't talk to you. But. . . I don't know. It feels wrong to be this involved with someone I've never spoken to. It feels wrong to hate someone this much when I've never met them. Let me tell you about my day, Iris. Let me tell you about who we killed, you and I.

There's a lot about the last year or so that's been surprising. In the short time since I came into this world, I've found out about the Seekers and their quest to improve the human race. I've learned about the Splinter and their insane plans to speed up the process by awakening every hidden power in the human genome at the same time. I've seen terrifying and amazing things. I've fallen out of love with one person and in love with another. I've seen too many friends die. But nothing, absolutely nothing I've seen in my time, is as shocking to me as the idea of gifted people working with the Splinter. Working with people who kill and experiment on their kind, all for the benefit of the normals. And yet, even with all that, there's gifted people who work with the Splinter. Who work for you. That I don't understand.

Or, at least, I didn't understand until I heard Zachary's story. But, that's not my story to tell. I think he will tell it, at some point, but not until he's ready.

Anyway, the fact that you've got gifted people working for you, Iris, that's a neat trick. And it's definitely made this fight a lot more difficult. And, by the way: Iris, I know you know what this fight is about, but for those listening at home and wondering what we've been doing the last few months: Basically, Iris has her secret recipe to make Mosaics, which is what she needs to make the Trumpet. That's the person who's going to wake up everyone's powers. A few months ago I spent most of my time cleaning up the messes the Splinter made in their failed attempts to make Mosaics. Now they have the information to make one the right way. The problem, though, is that this Mosaic recipe calls for some pretty specific tiles. They can't just snatch any gifted person off the streets. We have the same list they do, which means we have a pretty good sense of who they're going after. And so the last few months has been all about trying to save tiles before they get snatched. We've saved some, and we've lost some, and even when we save someone you fuckers in the Splinter just move onto the next best option. It never ends.

A quick word about who I mean when I say we: there's the ones you know about. Me and Shan and Zachary and Winry. But there's more, now. I'm not going to describe who they are, because that would give you too much information. But we've got a whole lot of gifted people on our side now, ones we've saved and ones who've come out of the woodwork since this whole mess started. Just in case you were getting cocky and thinking it was just the four of us against the whole Splinter, Iris. It's not. Way, way more people than me want you dead.

But today, as it happens, really was just the A Team, so I guess that's another reason I feel like telling you about it. You know the setup, but for the rest of my dear listeners: Winry put together a list of the most likely candidates you and the rest of the Splinter might go after to make your Mosaics. And right at the top of that list was a singer named Erin Cho. The Seeker files on her were a little vague, but it was clear that her gifts had something to do with mind control and emotional manipulation. That's an essential component for any Mosaic; I have it in the form of an ability to compel people, Shan can produce consciousness-altering chemicals, and Zachary can make people bond with him like a baby bird imprinting on its mother. So we knew the Splinter would be going after somebody like Erin Cho, and we had some other leads telling us she was the top choice.

And so Shan and Zachary and I found the nightclub where Erin was singing, and we went to check it out. We split up as soon as we got there, Shan and me to one end of the club, Zachary to the other, Winry keeping in touch with all of us remotely through earpieces and watching our progress through button cameras we all carry with us into these things. That's how we always do things. Shan and me as a team, Zachary on his own. It's always like that.

The club seemed pretty normal at first. Mostly college students, dancing and drinking and hanging out near the bar. It was a little grungy, the smell of BO wafting on the air, but it wasn't a complete dive. Erin's band wasn't playing yet, and the speakers blasted a bland series of EDM songs. As we moved, Shan ran their fingertips over the bar, the walls, even a few of the people there. They winced as they did it, as their delicate ecosystem encountered hairgel and hand sanitizer and artificial perfume. But they kept it up, because if you set up a trap for us Shan could get a glimpse of Splinter agents who were here in the past few days and hours and minutes. At least, that's what we thought at the time.

"Nothing," Shan said at last. "Iris hasn't been here."

At that moment, Erin's band appeared on the stage. She's the lead singer of a band called Ritual of the Rival Tribes. I didn't think much of that, but Winry piped up in my ear. "That's one of the parts from Rite of Spring," she said. And then, when I didn't know what that meant, she said, "You know, the Stravinsky ballet? The one that caused a riot in 1913?" Because of course Winry would carry around a little tidbit like that. I didn't think anything of that connection at the time, although in retrospect maybe it should have made me realize what was about to happen.

Erin Cho and her band started up. Their music was some kind of postpunk stuff, not really my thing. I planned on waiting until the performance was over, making sure she wasn't being watched by the Splinter, and then letting her know she was in danger. Most people we intercept like that end up going with us. Most, not all.

But that's not what happened here. A few lines into the first song, Erin looked right at me. Recognition came over her face. She glared at me like I was the enemy, like I was someone she knew. Then the pitch of her singing changed, and everything started to go to shit.

Maybe you wonder what it was like, when Zachary and I met face to face for the first time. We're programmed to love each other, after all, to fuck and reproduce and make your Trumpet. So maybe you think the first time we saw each other, in that shady little hotel room with Shan standing at my side, Winry still catatonic after your attack on the Burrow, maybe you think our eyes met and everything went slow motion and soft romantic music started to play in the background.

It wasn't like that at all. It was. . . It was like smelling food you used to love but that you're allergic to now. Part of me was pulled toward him, but part of me was repulsed by him at the same time. I could see from his face he felt the same way, that same queasy push-pull. "Hello, Wren," he said at last. "It's good to finally meet you."

His eyes darted back and forth between me and Shan. There was something in the way he looked at Shan, recognition, devastation, that I didn't understand at the time. I do now. But, again, that part isn't mine to tell.

He looked the way I remembered. Bilal's dark curly hair, Jose's light brown skin, Lexi's eyes. His fingernails were still black. They aren't painted that way, I learned later. They're just naturally that color. When he spoke, his voice wasn't what I expected. An accent he got from Natalie, I think, traces of one of the languages in our makeup. Strange, isn't it, thinking that I didn't know what his voice was like before that moment.

I hit him. I'm not proud of it, especially now that I know his story. But it was like my arm was possessed, like all that weird contradictory energy had to go somewhere. He just stood there without fighting back. Shan put their body between me and Zachary and held me back. "Stop it, Wren!" they said. "This isn't you. Stop it."

"I don't think she's just angry," Zachary said. "I feel it, too. It's. . . Chemical."

He was right. There was heat and aggression and something sexual, too, a blend of feelings that didn't belong together. I scratched at my own arms, bit the skin of my hand, needing that energy to go somewhere. Zachary suddenly turned around and punched a wall.

“Go outside,” Shan told Zachary. “Just go outside. I think I have a solution.” Zachary went outside, and then Shan sat me down on the sagging hotel bed and told me what they wanted to do. I thought about it for a minute, but I finally nodded and gave them permission. “Do it.”

Shan pulled out a few strands of my hair, then went outside and pulled some hair from Zachary. They were outside for a while. I assume they had a conversation with Zachary, but I’ve never asked either one about it. When Shan came back in, they held our combined strands of hair between their palms for a while. When they opened their hands, the hair was gone, absorbed into their flesh. Slowly, beads of dark liquid welled up on their fingertips. They smeared some of it on my forehead, went outside, and did the same to Zachary.

When Zachary came back in, those feelings were gone. All of them. I remembered what I used to feel for him, but it was just that. A memory. There’s a part of me that’s sad to lose that, but it’s a pretty small part. Zachary, though. It hit him hard. I could see that. But we both knew it had to be done. Mosaics aren’t meant to be out on their own in the world, you see. They aren’t meant to have separate lives and fall in love with other people, like I had. It warps the connection. Shan explained all this to us. They’d suspected for a long time that the Mosaic connection depended on compatible pheromones, chemicals in me and Zachary keyed just to each other. And whatever they had just given us, it canceled out that warped connection entirely. Zachary and I can be alone in a room, now, and the only feelings we have are the ones that have grown from months of fighting side by side. Like our shared hatred of you, Iris. That’s our strongest connection.

But the memories. The memories are still there. It means that no matter what happens, being around each other will always make Zachary and I a little sad. And so we avoid that, working apart. Me and Shan. Zachary and Winry. Tasks as far apart as we can manage.

And that’s why, in the crowd at Erin Cho’s show, Zachary and I were on opposite ends of the room. That’s why we weren’t close enough to be much use to each other when everything went wrong.

Here’s what I saw. Notice I’m not saying, ‘here’s what happened’, because later I came to understand that not much of what I saw in the next few minutes actually happened. Still. Here’s what I saw. Eight of the people in the crowd turned around to face me. And, suddenly, whoever they had been before, those eight people were my tiles. The eight people who were brutalized to create Zachary and me. And that was weird on a couple of levels. For starters, I knew for sure that some of them were dead and some of them had transformed into different forms. Yet here they were, the way they had looked before they encountered the Splinter. They stared at me and I could feel their hatred.

Then they ran at me, snarling like animals, and I screamed. Somewhere close by, I heard Shan scream, too, but when I tried to see where they were my tiles were all around me, scratching and clawing and biting at me. One of them got an arm around my throat and pressed down on my windpipe. I reached back and pulled the water out of them. That's one of the things I can do, separate one kind of matter from another. The person around my neck shriveled to the ground, and when I looked down I couldn't tell which one it had been. Because, somehow, when I looked up and tried to fight my way through my tiles, there were still eight of them.

I caught a smell on the air, a kind of piney odor Shan produces through their skin when they're making a defensive chemical. It doesn't work on me or Zachary or Winry, which was something Shan worked into the potion's design. Anyone else, though, it lays out flat. So Shan was still alive, I thought, still alive and conscious enough to fight, even if I couldn't see them through the crowd. Knowing that gave me enough of a boost to start throwing punches, kicking, trying to fight my way through the wall of people boxing me in. Except I couldn't seem to land, like there was a gap between what I saw and what I could touch.

At some point, I realized someone was shouting in my ear. Winry. "Wren! What's happening!" she asked.

I jumped behind the bar, trying to put some distance between myself and these monsters that looked like my tiles. "Can't you fucking see my tiles? They're trying to kill me. What's happening to Shan?" I shouted.

Winry didn't answer my question. Instead she said, "Wren, I don't see any of that. You're just flailing around at people in the crowd. And they aren't doing anything to you. It's the same with Shan and Zachary."

I asked Winry what the fuck she was talking about, couldn't she see what was happening, and as I spoke I realized that I was much, much more afraid than I should have been. This was scary, sure. Any ghost encounter is. But I've seen so much worse than this. I shouldn't have been so terrified. Winry seemed to realize the same thing. "Hang on," she said through my earpiece. I imagined her at her workstation, sliding around from one keyboard to another, her screens lighting up with information I can barely comprehend. "Just hang on, guys," she said, "I'm trying to figure this out." From across the room, I felt a blast of cold air. I thought I knew what that was; Zachary can do the same thing with energy that I can do with matter, pulling heat out of a body or pushing heat into it. When I leave a body behind it looks like a mummy, but when Zachary kills it usually leaves them frozen solid, coated in frost and cooling the air all around.

That made me realize something else. No one had noticed the mummified body I'd left crumpled on the ground. The whole crowd should have been losing their shit, running for the doors, but they were ignoring it.

"I got it!" Winry shouted. "Infrasound! I think Erin's producing infrasound. It must be directed infrasound, too, if it's only affecting you three like this and it's making everyone else oblivious." When I asked her what that meant, she told me infrasound was a frequency that caused paranoia, hallucinations, even psychosis. Later, when it was all over, she would explain that infrasound was usually produced only in very specific natural environments, caves and old buildings that had the right shape, or else with specialized equipment. That infrasound was one explanation for why people thought certain buildings were haunted, that some part of the house was shaped in such a way that it produced sound that interfered with people's thoughts and emotions.

But something about that wasn't right. It took me a second to sift through the paranoia and figure out what it was. "But somebody grabbed me around the neck," I said. "I felt them." I realized Winry couldn't have seen that through my button cam, that it would only have given her a view of the room in front of me. As she and I had this conversation, my tiles snarled and batted at me over the top of the bar.

Winry figured it out first. "Shit! Everyone, close your eyes. Wren, turn to your 3 o'clock. Shan, to your 11 o'clock. Zachary, to your 6 o'clock. Now hold still. That gives me almost a 360 degree view of the room."

It was a little better having my eyes closed and not having to look at my tiles, but I still felt the pressure of being watched, still fought the panicked pounding of my heart with every word of Erin's song.

"Ok, listen carefully," Winry said. "There are guys moving through the crowd. Four of them, that I can see. They don't look like they're here for the music. I think they're here to take you down in the confusion."

"Winry," I said, "If I just try to defend myself without knowing where they are I'll probably kill a civilian."

She said she knew that. She said I needed to trust her. I knew I could trust her, I knew I should, but that paranoia was starting to creep into my thoughts about Winry. Some small, hysterical corner of my mind start babbling. What if Winry was a traitor? What if she had led us into a trap? I did my best to squelch that part of my mind, because I knew beyond any doubt that Winry was on my side, but it felt as real as anything I'd ever felt.

“All of you be ready to defend yourself when and where I say,” Winry said, and I forced myself to listen.

“Wren, coming up at your 2 o’clock, moving behind the bar, reaching for your arm. . . Now!”

I felt the hand on my arm, coming from the direction Winry had said. I turned to him and, eyes still closed, said, “Leave the club and forget everything you know about us.” I held my breath; my compulsion abilities are pretty strong, but if they knew enough about me to set this up they might have come prepared with earplugs or something. But no; the guy dropped my arm and moved away.

I heard more orders from Winry, ones directed at Shan and Zachary. I said a silent prayer to a God I don’t believe in that Shan would come through it unharmed. Then I waited and listened until Winry said, “Shan’s clear. Zachary’s clear. Wren, one more incoming from the left.”

I got rid of that one just as easily as the first. I was just starting to think that we were going to come through this without a whole lot of bloodshed. We’d just need to get out the door and find a way to intercept Erin another time. But then the first song ended, and Erin moved onto the second. And this second song wasn’t so much music as a piercing, nonstop shriek, a sound so loud everything sounded like I was listening from underwater for days afterward. Erin screamed and screamed and screamed into the microphone, and she somehow did it without ever having to pause, without having to draw breath. My own paranoia faded, and when I opened my eyes my dead tiles were gone. My tiles were gone, but the crowd, the real crowd, was still there. They froze for a second, listening to Erin. And then they turned on me.

This time there was no question they were real. I felt their hands, their nails, their teeth. They yanked at my hair and tried to bite my skin. I screamed commands for them to stop, but Erin’s howl into the microphone was too loud for my compulsion gifts to work. I slowed time, but they were packed so tightly around me, gripped me so hard, that there wasn’t much I could do even then.

“Shan!” Winry shouted. “Anesthesia! Put them all to sleep, now!”

I caught just a glimpse of Shan through a gap in the crowd. Some of the people closest to them staggered and started to fall, but the effect didn’t spread the way it should have. The crowd was packed too tight for Shan’s pollen to travel on the air currents the way it was supposed to. Shan pushed and fought and struggled, but blood already stained one of their sleeves, dripped from a cut in their neck.

Part of the crowd on the other end of the room suddenly started floating up toward the ceiling; that was Zachary, manipulating the gravity in a six-foot wide circle.

“Wren!” Winry said into my ear. “Incoming on Shan! Guy with a knife!”

I saw what she was talking about right away. A big guy, holding a switchblade, shoving people aside to get to Shan. Shan had their back turned, their arms held by others in the crowd.

I didn’t hesitate. I did what I’d been hoping I wouldn’t have to do ever since the crowd went berserk. I ripped the water from a dozen people, ended a dozen lives. You see, I can control the size of the area from which I separate matter. I can limit it to the size of one human body, or an entire forest. But one thing I can’t do is reach over a seething crowd of bodies and pull water from one specific person. I can’t do it from that kind of distance. I could only include the man with the knife in the part of the crowd I decided to kill.

Water sloshed over everyone’s shoes, and a column of space opened between me and Shan. At the same time, Zachary got himself free of the people who had been tearing at him. He climbed up onto the stage. And then he killed Erin Cho. She froze instantly, mid-song. Her body fell, and as soon as it hit the stage it shattered into a thousand pieces, as though she’d been dipped into a vat of liquid nitrogen.

Most of the crowd ran for the doors then. The moment Erin died, the moment she stopped singing, the spell broke. They fled, along with whatever Splinter agents were still in the room. And then it was just the three of us, and the bodies.

Shan looked at the row of dead civilians I’d had to kill to take out the Splinter assassin that had been reaching for them. They looked sad, and they shook their head. “I’m sorry you had to do that,” they said, and it was just the right thing at that moment because they didn’t bother pretending that I could have let them die, even if it meant taking out innocent people along the way. Shan took me in their arms, and I let myself stay like that for just a minute. And then, before the cops could arrive, we left, none of us saying anything. There was nothing to say. Our mission was a failure.

To the people who survived that club, to Erin Cho’s band, Zachary and Shan and I are the villains of this story. We’re the ones who came in and killed people for no clear reason, and then vanished without a trace. So congratulations, Iris, on turning us into the bad guys here. It’ll make recruiting the next Erin all the easier.

But you and I, we know the truth. We know who made that massacre happen. We know how much blood is on your hands.

I'm coming for you, Iris. And every innocent person who gets caught in the middle, every assassin you send after Shan, it just makes me that much more determined to reach into your chest and rip your heart out.

See you soon, Iris. Sooner or later, I'll catch up. Until next time, sleep tight.

Episode 302: Iris, Part 1

This story isn't for you, Iris. You already know this story better than I do. You know what came before, and what happened behind the scenes. So I'm not speaking to you. I'm speaking to any gifted people who are with the Splinter now, or who are thinking about joining them. I'm speaking to anyone who believes Iris's lies about the Splinter and the Seekers and what's going to happen when the Trumpet sounds. I know how easy it is to believe her. I know, because I believed her, too, once, before I saw her for who she really is. My name is Zachary, and I'm here to tell you exactly who Iris is.

I want to be clear about something. I'm not telling this story to make excuses for what I've done. Wren and I came from the same place, had the same experience, and she managed to avoid doing the terrible things I've done. She saw through lies that I fell for. So this isn't to absolve me of my crimes. This is just to tell you what happened, what you need to know about Iris and the things she's capable of.

If you're listening to this, then you already know what happened in the attic. The blood, the Skull Man, the fire. I won't get into any of that. I'll start from the part where my story and Wren's story split into two. You know this part. Wren killed the Skull Man and we escaped from the attic. I grabbed her hand, and all I thought about was getting her to safety. But then we ran down the stairs and onto the street, and her hand slipped from mine, and I got lost in the smoke and the dark. I can't even describe how that felt. Like losing a limb, like losing everything in your entire life. The only person I loved was gone, and I was naked and alone on a dark street.

There's some blankness, after that, some parts of my memory I've never gotten back. But I do remember when I was rescued. I was hiding outdoors, somewhere, maybe a park. I was curled up in a hollow behind some trees. And then I looked up, and a woman stood there, staring at me. She was tall and slender, with strong features and long black hair. She didn't seem scared of me, even though I was a naked, blood-spattered man babbling to himself beneath a tree. She held out a hand. "Come on, Zachary," she said.

"Is that my name?" I asked. And it seemed so, so important for me to have a name.

"Of course it is," she said. Then she frowned and asked me what I remembered. If I remembered her. I tried, but there was almost nothing. Fragments. Flashes of life I now know belonged to one or another of my tiles. The woman shook her head. Her eyes filled with tears. I felt guilty, in that moment. I didn't know who this woman was, but I knew I'd disappointed her.

"Oh, Zachary," she said, "it's going to be ok. My name is Iris. I'm your wife."

Iris took me home, and cleaned me up, and fed me, and told me a story. I know now that's all it was, a story. A lie. For a while, thought, it was the reality I lived. There are times, looking back, when it still feels true. Here's the story she told me: She told me about an evil organization called the Seekers. She told me about how they looked for people with special gifts, like mine. The way I can move things through time, and manipulate energy, and control gravity. They hunted people like me. Iris and I managed to work together to stay ahead of them for a long time. That's how we met, how we fell in love: we'd been brought together by a shared desire to defeat this evil organization and save innocent people from destruction. And that's what we did. But, one day, she came home and I was gone. She wasn't sure what happened, but she knew the Seekers wanted to harness my powers for their own. She went out looking for me, and she eventually found me in that park, but only after the Seekers had done something terrible to me and nine other people.

"What should we do?" I asked, after she finished her story. "Should we leave town?"

And Iris shook her head slowly, with this really convincing look of regret on her face, and said no, she wished we could just run. But we had a responsibility to help people like me. We had to protect them from the Seekers. I looked at her and I thought, oh what a brave woman I married. How wonderful she is. And then I felt so guilty, because even though I admired her and I believed her and I accepted that she was my wife, I didn't feel love when I saw her.

The only time I felt love was when I closed my eyes and I saw that strange blood-spattered mystery girl from the attic. But I knew that was wrong, so wrong, so I kept quiet and I told Iris I didn't remember the people in the attic at all, because I didn't want to have to explain what I felt for that one girl.

After I recovered a little from what had happened, Iris told me what I had to do to help people like me. Gifted people. The first step was finding them. They would be mistrustful, for good reason. They would be used to being hunted. They would trust Gifted people much more than they would trust a normal like her. I had to find them, using my talents, and gain their trust, and then my brave, lovely wife would get them to safety. She made it sound so noble. A kind of rescue network for those the Seekers wanted to exploit. So I went out into the city, and I followed leads, and I used my abilities to track down Gifted people.

They weren't my tiles. Iris wasn't interested in them. She wasn't even interested in Wren, not until she started making trouble for the Splinter. Wren and I are flawed Mosaics, you see. Not what the Splinter was aiming for, although I wouldn't learn any of this until later. We were the closest thing to a successful attempt at that point, but Wren interrupted the last crucial bit of the ritual when she stabbed the Skull Man. We were useless for the Splinter's purposes after that.

No, Iris was already thinking about the next version, the next attempt. So I found Gifteds. I found the girl whose consciousness could travel along rivers by hitching a ride on the water molecules. I found the man whose blood acted as a powerful hallucinogen. The twins who could communicate telepathically across continents. I found them, and then Iris sent me on my next mission while she whisked them away from the Seekers.

I asked her why I couldn't help with that part. I asked her where they went, how she saved them. She told me it wasn't safe for everyone in the network to know more than their part. If anyone was captured, if anyone was interrogated. . . Well, that made perfect sense to me, and so I kept finding them, and Iris kept lying about what she did with them. I always pictured them living simple lives in secluded cabins. I pictured them safe and free and living off the land. I never pictured them in chains.

Then Wren's messages started showing up online, and there were more lies. The second I heard Wren's first message, and the words Grove, Mosaic, and Trumpet, and the part where she said she loved me, I went straight to Iris. I asked her what the hell was going on. I asked her about the little fragments I'd been remembering, odd bits that didn't feel like my life.

Iris's eyes welled up with tears and she looked at me like I'd broken her heart, and she said that the Seekers had made Wren to mislead me. That they had conjured my perfect match like a golem, that she was designed to drive a wedge between me and Iris and the people we fought to save. That they were trying to seduce me into their ranks. She cried and said she was sorry and told me this meant she wasn't my dream woman, and again I felt so guilty I thought she must be right. This was my fault.

But I started keeping secrets from Iris. Some part of me must have started to suspect her, even if the rest of me didn't want to believe that she was lying. On some of my trips out of the house, the ones where I was supposed to be searching for people on our list of Gifteds, I went looking for my tiles instead. I listened to Wren's messages and tried to anticipate her movements. Iris told me I should kill her if I ever got close, because she was just a Seeker plant. If anyone had asked during that time, I'd have said that's why I was looking for her. But it wouldn't have been true. I'm still not really sure what I was looking for back then, what I thought would happen.

One day I found the sinkhole Claire had disappeared into. I tossed in my coins, and I heard my future. The first coin bought me this prediction: "Wren will learn your name in this place."

The second said, "Jose will tell you where you came from."

And then came the last one. The one that almost destroyed me the first time I heard it, and the only thing that brings me hope now. That prediction, the last thing Claire said to me, was, “You’ll watch Iris die in a field a long way from here.”

I tried throwing in more coins, begging, screaming Claire’s name, but she wouldn’t tell me more. She wouldn’t tell me if this future could be avoided. So I went down into the pit. I didn’t need a rope, not like when Wren went. Manipulating gravity is one of my Gifts, so I just floated to the bottom. You’ve already heard about what’s down there. It didn’t change between when I was there and when Wren visited. I searched for Claire, but she stayed silent. And so, once I gave up on finding her, I left a note for Wren. It said, “Dear Wren: You don’t need to keep doing this. You’re safe. Please just try to live a life. I love you.”

After Wren found out what we were, she thought I had already known. She thought that note was me trying to protect her from the knowledge of what we are. I committed that sin later, but not then. Then, all I could think of was trying to prevent the fight to the death Iris said Wren and I would have if we ever met. I thought about what it would mean if it was Wren who would try to kill Iris in that field, and I would have to fight her to protect my wife. I thought about how that choice would feel. I thought she was just a creation of the Seekers, but that didn’t stop me from loving her. It didn’t stop me from wanting her to walk away from this whole mess, and live whatever life an artificially constructed dream girl could have. I didn’t know at the time that I was every bit as much of a construction as she was.

Even then, I didn’t ask the right questions. I didn’t think about the right things. I didn’t go to see Jose. Why wouldn’t I, you might ask. Claire said he would have the answers, the truth. And I could have found him earlier than I did. I think some part of me knew I wasn’t going to like what I heard, so I made up excuses for why I should go. Maybe it was a trap. Maybe Claire was lying. Maybe this, maybe that. And all the while, I kept finding Gifteds for Iris.

The last time, the one that ended it all, was a girl named Lily. Lily was fifteen years old. She was bright, and hardworking, and she was a talented musician. She was popular at her school, which was odd, because she didn’t fit the usual popular girl image. She didn’t wear the nicest clothes or use makeup, and her sense of humor was quirky in a way most teenagers fear because it’s too different. She was the kind of girl that my fragmented memories told me would be a little bit on the fringes in high school, but would find her place in college. Not at this school, though. At this school, the other kids flocked to be around her, to sit with her at lunch, to adopt her mannerisms.

I know all this, by the way, because Iris and her people got me into the school as a substitute teacher. I spent a few weeks pretending to know something about writing and composition, while in reality I was there for a very different purpose. I was there to find out why the school had changed so dramatically over the course of just a single year. In that time, test scores saw an

unprecedented improvement. Truancy basically vanished. And then there were the little stories. Teachers and parents whispering about how much nicer the kids had gotten. How bullying and the little acts of cruelty one sees every day among teenagers had just stopped. It wasn't like a body snatchers situation; the kids were still themselves, still had personality, still had bad moods or off days. They just seemed like better, nicer, more open versions of themselves.

When I started my mission there, we didn't know why any of this happened. All we knew was that only the influence of a Gifted person's abilities could explain such a dramatic change in such a short period of time. Now, of course, I know that everything changed because Lily started high school that year.

I figured it out the day Lily's grandmother died. I was helping supervise the lunch room. The kids milled around, ate, gossiped, did everything as usual. Lily was just one face among many, although maybe one I noticed a bit more because she was so popular with the other students. In the middle of lunch, she answered her phone. Her smile slowly faded. She nodded and said a few words, then hung up and continued eating her lunch. She didn't tell anyone what had happened. But, as I watched, the spark went out of every kid in the cafeteria. Their smiles disappeared. They stopped talking to each other. Some even started to cry a little. And most of them weren't even looking in Lily's direction. Their faces just matched up with hers.

It all made sense, after I saw that. Lily was an influencer. A real one, not one of those obnoxious wannabe trendsetters online. What Lily did, others wanted to do. When Lily got interested in something, others followed. As luck would have it, she was a sweet kid who studied hard and didn't bully anyone, so that's what became popular at her school. She didn't do any of this on purpose. This wasn't mind control. It was much subtler than that.

Finding Lily, that was the end. I didn't know it at the time, but that was the end of everything.

As soon as I identified her, I . . . Um. No. I'm sorry. Yeah, you know what, I can't finish this story now. The world needs to hear this, but not today. For now, just remember: Iris can't be trusted. The Splinter can't be trusted. When I can finish this message, you'll find out why.

Episode 303: Iris, Part 2

It's Zachary again. I started to tell you my story last time. I told you about waking up in the attic, and being found by Iris, and how she lied and pretended and made me believe she was my wife. I told you about how I was stupid enough to be tricked into hunting Gifteds for the Splinter. That's just the background, though. That isn't the important part of the story. So today I need to do the last thing on Earth I want to do. Today I need to finish telling you about Lily.

Lily was the last one before I found out the truth. A sweet, good-natured girl, a girl whose Gift made the other people around her better. I found out who she was, and for a little while I thought I was saving her.

Once I'd identified Lily, I brought it to Iris, same as always. I told her I'd figured out that one of the students was an influencer. Iris smiled when I told her that. She smiled, and she seemed just ecstatic about the news, and that made me wonder. Why? Why would it make her so happy to know that the Gifted person being threatened by the Seekers was a fourteen year old girl?

She must have realized that she'd reacted too strong, because she looked serious again. "What's her name?" she asked.

I hesitated; I knew in that moment something was wrong. I knew I didn't trust Iris on some deep level I wasn't quite aware of. Instead of giving her the name, I asked what would happen with Lily's family. Would they go into protection, too?

Iris just seemed confused by the question. "Yeah, yeah, of course," she said at last, but I could tell she was lying. "So what's her name, Zach?"

She tried to be casual as she asked the question, but she wasn't. She looked. . . Hungry. That's the only word I can think of to describe it.

An odd, unrelated thought crept into my head: had I seen any pictures of me and Iris before the attic? Shouldn't we have a wedding photo? Shouldn't there be mementos and souvenirs and photos from our time together?

But I didn't ask that. I didn't ask anything. Suddenly, my heart was pounding. I'd been with Iris every day since the attic, months by that point, and now I was afraid in a way I had never been before.

"Come on, Zach, what's her name?" she asked, and I saw her real face for just a second.

I gave her a name. Not Lily's. I should have just refused and confronted her right there, but I was too paralyzed with the jumble of thoughts and doubts and suspicions running through my head. I wish I could tell you that I made up a name, or that I gave her the name of someone who deserved what they got. But that would be a lie. Instead, I panicked and I said the name of one of Lily's classmates, a girl who didn't deserve the attention of the Splinter any more than Lily did.

After Iris left to find the girl, I searched the house. I went through the dresser, the cabinets, under the bed. There weren't any pictures. None at all. None of me, but also none of Iris. There were other things wrong, too, things I hadn't noticed before. All my clothes were new. Not fancy or special, but like they'd only been bought a few months ago at most. The furniture was cheap Ikea-type shit, but it also seemed new. There wasn't a junk drawer, and the only clutter we'd accumulated was stuff I remembered bringing home since the attic. Receipts, rubber bands, candy wrappers, all that stuff that gets into couches and into the back of drawers, there was almost none of that. No evidence whatsoever that Iris and I had been together before the attic. And no evidence that anyone at all had lived here before a couple months ago. It was like I woke up and suddenly realized I was living in a movie set, or a dollhouse.

I went looking for Jose. It didn't take me long to find them. You've heard about it from Wren. The strip club, the one mind divided among half a dozen bodies. None of them wanted to talk to me at first. Joey reached under the bar, and I knew he had a gun stashed there. Jolene looked me right in the eye and told me they'd die before they'd let themselves be taken again. I didn't know what they were afraid of, or I thought it was the Seekers. They seemed confused when I said I wasn't with them.

Finally, I said, "I just want to know about my wife. Iris. Do you know anything about her? What she and I were like, before?"

They all blinked at me. Then Jojo, the dancer, took my hand. "Oh, honey," she said. "You don't know anything, do you?" She sat me down, and she told me everything. How the tiles got into the attic. How Wren and I were made. How I couldn't have had a wife from before, because for me there was no before.

It took a long time for all of it to sink in. A lot of it still hasn't, even now. But, at the time, all I could think of was Wren. I'd thought before that there was nothing worse than the idea of her being a tool of the Seekers, but the thought of her finding out what she was, what I am. . . I couldn't take it. "Don't tell her," I begged Jose. "Please, just don't tell her what we are."

There's a lot of stuff I've done in my short life that I regret. That one's top of the list. She had a right to know, and I tried to keep it from her. That, more than anything else, is something I can't

take back or make up for. But I asked, and Jose's bodies looked at each other, holding some silent conversation that didn't include me.

Finally, Jojo turned back to me. "Ok. We'll keep quiet. And we'll try to get Wren to move on. Leave town. But we want something in return." She gave me an address. She told me what I would find at that address. She told me what I needed to do there. So I left, to see if what Jose had told me was the truth.

It looked like a normal house. Most of the Splinter's bases do. It's easier to hide what you're doing when your headquarters doesn't look like a shadowy base of operations. I spotted a few people on lookout, sitting in cars or pretending to be out for a walk. But I'd gotten pretty good at moving through the world unnoticed since I started hunting Gifteds. I used to say "rescuing". Now I know "hunting" is the right word.

I got to the house and slipped through one of the walls at the back. I can't teleport the way Wren can, but I can phase through solid matter. Once I got through the wall, I found myself in an empty office. Filing cabinets, computers, that kind of thing. There was nothing obvious on the desk or in the computer, nothing that blinked "You've been lied to, Zachary!" in giant red letters. I started to wonder if Jose was lying. It would make so much sense, if this was just a fantastical story by the Seekers to throw me off. But if they were right about what was here, there was no other explanation. It would be proof they were telling the truth.

So I slipped through the wall into the next room, and that's where I found my smoking gun.

That smoking gun's name was Josie. A teenage girl with blue hair, sitting on the floor in the middle of a bare, padded cell. She wasn't surprised to see me. She was still linked to her other bodies, to the rest of Jose, even from this padded cell. The others had known for days that she'd been captured, had seen and heard and felt everything she experienced, but they hadn't been able to get close enough to save her. And she'd refused to help the Splinter get to the rest of her. "It's about time," she said. She stood and wiped tears from her face. "Let's go."

I lifted her and phased back through the locked cell door. I asked Josie if Iris was here. She shrugged. "I don't know. They make sure I don't see too much. But she's come to talk to me almost every day I've been here."

I told Josie to stay behind me, and then we moved down the hallway. I could hear movement, people talking, from the place where the living room should be. I stepped around the corner, and there she was. Iris. Sitting at a desk and peering at a folder full of papers, in a house with a kidnapped teenage girl.

There were about five other people in the room, most with guns and commando gear. They reached for their weapons, but I told them not to move.

“Listen to him. His energy transfer abilities are extremely fast,” Iris said. She was calm. No, not calm. Cold. She was cold in a way I hadn’t seen before, in a way she had managed to hide from me. Now I saw that it had always been just under her performance, this real self. She looked at me for a moment and said, “You gave us the wrong name. That girl you named at the school isn’t Gifted.”

Josie pointed at Iris. “Just kill her. Kill the bitch. Trust me, she deserves it.”

But I needed to know. I needed to know for certain. “It’s all true? The Mosaics? All that?” I asked.

Iris didn’t bother playing dumb. She saw the look on my face, made the calculation, and decided there was no point in denying anything. “Yeah,” she said. “It’s true.”

“Why?” I asked, and I wasn’t even sure which part I was asking about by that point.

Iris shrugged. “There’s no one better suited for tracking Gifteds than a Mosaic. It seemed easiest to fabricate a preexisting relationship. It’s not the only way to ensure compliance, but it’s the least messy option.”

I thought of the time we’d spent together, the things we’d done, all the things Iris did to make me believe she was my wife. Thinking about it made me so sick I almost vomited right there. I shouted and screamed and ranted. I cried. I called her every name I could think of. She didn’t even flinch. She just waited for me to finish, and then she said, “Just in case you’re thinking of killing me now. Icing, boiling, whatever you would do. You should know that a sniper is positioned to kill Wren the second they receive word that something has happened to me, or that you’ve gone AWOL.”

I told her I didn’t believe her. She leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. “You’ve listened to her messages,” she said. “You know she was intercepted and shot by one of our teams. You know she can self-heal, but she wouldn’t have time to do any of that if she were shot in the head rather than the leg. So, you’re going to keep working for me. You’ll keep locating Gifted people necessary for our project. And, in exchange, Wren gets to live.”

I thought about bluffing. I thought about saying I didn’t care, that Wren and I didn’t really know each other, that I couldn’t be in love with her if we were just created months before. But it wouldn’t have worked, and Iris and I both knew it. She nodded and said, “And one other thing,

Zachary. I know it doesn't seem like it now, but I promise we really are working to create a better world. A fairer, more peaceful world. What you're going to help us do, it's going to require some hard choices, but you'll be on the right side. Just try to remember that. It'll make things easier."

When I could finally speak, I just said, "I'll do it. But I'm taking Josie home." It was my one, tiny rebellion, the one thing I could put right.

Iris glanced at Josie, and it was clear she'd forgotten about her. "Oh, that's fine. She didn't turn out to be as useful as I thought," she said. "We weren't sure if tiles could be recycled. It was worth a try. But it seems like the process changes them too much for reuse." And then she looked me right in the eye. "We're still not sure if Mosaics can be liquidated for parts. Some of us are looking into that possibility, but I've put that option on the back burner. For now."

Of course, I didn't know it at the time, but that was a lie, too. Breaking down Mosaics for their parts was Elliot's big project, the one that led him to try to capture Wren. And Iris knew what her father was up to, obviously, but she managed to keep that part of things hidden away from me. I didn't even know Elliot was still alive until I heard Wren's last message before the city died. I didn't know he was Iris's father until much later. But at that point I didn't see any other option than to believe Iris, and do what I had to do to stay alive and keep Wren safe.

So I took Josie back to her family. I went back to Iris. And then, for the next year, I did terrible things. Lily. . . I didn't save Lily. Iris took her, and I helped her do it. For a long time, I didn't know what happened to her. All I knew was that she was taken out of state, to be one of the tiles for a Mosaic attempt based in a small town in Ohio. I later heard from one of Iris's minions that the Ohio attempt had failed, had killed everyone at the site and created an environmental disturbance that almost exposed the whole project to the outside world. That was all I knew about what happened to Lily for the longest time.

Then I met Shan. Wren's love. I met Shan, and I saw their crooked smile and the way they tilt their head when they're listening to something, and the soft kindness in their eyes. I met Shan, and Lily's ghost stared back at me, and I suddenly understood what they had meant when they talked about that environmental disturbance in Ohio. That impossible forest that became a lake.

I told Shan this story, eventually. I thought they had a right to know, and I've learned not to keep secrets from people who have a right to know them. Shan listened, and was silent for a long time. Then they said, "I thought I remembered you. I was right." And then they said, "I'm not Lily, Zachary. I'm not her, but I think she'd forgive you." They touched my arm, and smiled, and I thought that at least some tiny shred of good came out of all the things I've done.

But there were so many other things, things I did after I found Lily. Things I won't talk about. But as I did those things, I waited, and I watched, and I gathered information. I waited until I could be sure that Iris was lying about the sniper team following Wren around. And then, when I was sure I could do it without getting Wren killed, I ran. I ran, and I took a computer full of Splinter secrets with me, and I brought them straight to Wren and Shan and Winry.

I won't say I've paid for my sins, because I haven't. I'm alive, and innocent people are dead, and that means there's been no justice. But the Splinter made sure I suffered. I've learned that everything I believed in was a lie. I learned that I was bred like an animal, made to reproduce and be discarded like trash. I've learned that the woman I trusted, the one who cared for me and helped me and protected me, that woman is a monster. And now I live with the knowledge that Wren has moved past me, that she and Shan have grown around each other and have something I can't even understand, much less be a part of. I'm not angry about that, or jealous. Wren and I would poison each other if we were ever together, and we both know that. Still, it doesn't make it any less painful to see.

I'm sharing this because I want everyone listening to know that this is what happens if you let Iris near your life. She ruins and defiles and uses everything she touches. You will lose everything you love and care about, and you will do evil things in her name, and, worst of all, you'll think you're one of the good guys. And then, when you're no longer useful, Iris will leave your empty husk behind.

But I have things that have kept me going. Top of the list? Claire's last prediction. I know I'm going to live long enough to see Iris dead in a field somewhere. I hope it happens soon. I hope I'm the one to do it.

Episode 304: The Loch

I'll be the first to admit that I've gotten pretty cynical about all you normal folks out there. So far the ungifted folks I've encountered have tortured Gifteds, killed or kidnapped them, and created me to exist as a fucking brood mare, all for their benefit. Interacting with Iris and the Splinter has only made that worse. But today gave me a little bit of hope for the normals. I know, I know, don't tell anyone I'm losing my edge. Still, I want to tell this story not just because I like talking about the Splinter's defeats, but because a lot of you Gifted folk out there must be wondering if we can ever live with the ungifted, if preventing the Awakening is even worth it. And so, for those of you looking for a little bit of faith in humanity, here's the story of how one tiny village in the Scottish Highlands looked the Splinter in the eye and told it to fuck right off.

Shan and I went to Scotland thanks to some of Winry's research, and also some tips we've been getting from Gifted folks and allies all over the world. When this race to put the new Mosaics together started, Iris and her people were focused on the US. They were trying to get their tiles assembled as fast as possible. But with all the interruptions from us and our allies, they started casting their net wider. We've been hearing about Splinter agents showing up in South Africa, Japan, Costa Rica. And now two simultaneous high-priority sightings; one in the highlands of Scotland, and one in Hong Kong. Winry couldn't say for sure what the more likely target was, so we decided to split up. Me and Shan to Scotland, Winry and Zachary to Hong Kong.

One of my tiles visited Scotland before. I think it was Lexi. I remembered the heavy grey sky, the thick accents of the people, the constant smell of rain. The moment we got out of Edinburgh and into a long stretch of road looping through cow pastures and moors, Shan asked me to pull the rental car over. They stepped barefoot onto the grass and let out a long, happy sigh, like a burden they'd been carrying for years had been lifted. Their arm vines unfurled and fluttered in the air. "Yes," they said, and even though we were on a clock to get to our destination before the Splinter, I couldn't make myself hurry them along. I just stood there and watched them walk on the clean earth, and that walk was more like dancing.

But, after a while, it was time to go. We got back in the car, and we made our way to the tiny village whose name I'll never tell.

We were spotted the second we arrived. A young woman in tights and a leather jacket leaned against the wall of a grocery store, smoking a cigarette. The moment she saw us, her eyes narrowed. She crushed the cigarette under her boot and marched inside. From there, as we parked, as we got out and walked the streets, we saw the news spreading. People walking briskly

from pub to bakery, from bakery to house, from house to gas station. No one said hello to us, even though the people in other towns along the way had been open and friendly.

“It feels like they know something,” Shan said after a while. They were right, I thought. These people did know something. And that meant our usual strategy wasn’t going to work. Whenever possible, I like to be subtle. Slip into a town unnoticed, watch and learn what I can, and involve civilians as little as possible. That usually results in a lower body count. But sometimes, like today, blending into the background just isn’t an option. So I decided to take a more direct approach.

We walked into the town pub and each ordered a beer. Men leaned on the bar and smoked, even though smoking in pubs has been illegal in Scotland for ages. I guess anyone tasked with enforcing that law took one look at these guys and decided it wasn’t worth it. They didn’t hide the fact that they were watching us. They just took long drags on their cigarettes, blinked, and stared at us so hard I thought they’d burn holes into my skin.

I took a sip of my beer, set it down, and turned to address the pub. “So, gentlemen. If you don’t mind me asking, who do you think we are?”

One of them answered in an accent so thick I could barely understand it. But it was something like, “I think you’re with them that keep snatching special people out of their homes.”

That’s what I thought. “Well, that’s not who we are,” I said. “The people you’re thinking of, they call themselves the Splinter. We’re not with them. We work against them.”

“That’s what one of them would say, if they was trying to gain our trust,” the bartender grumbled. I couldn’t really argue with that one. I could have used compulsion on all these guys in quick succession, but that felt wrong. It felt like it would prove their suspicions right.

I was still trying to figure out the best way forward when Shan grabbed my arm and pointed out the window. A blue minivan with rental plates moved slowly past the pub. Two people sat in the front seats, both craning their necks to see the town around them. “Some of your friends, then?” the bartender asked.

“Kind of the opposite, I think,” I told him. I wondered what we should do. I wanted to follow these guys, see what they were up to, but it also seemed smart to stay hidden. So I moved to a seat by the window, tried to ignore the cigarette smoke, and watched. While I did that, Shan subtly checked out the place. It would have looked like idle taps of their fingers across wooden surfaces, but they were reading the place’s history like Braille.

“Splinter hasn’t been in here,” Shan told me in a low voice. “But there’s been meetings late at night. With all the villagers. Couldn’t tell what they were discussing, but it seemed very secretive.”

The phone behind the bar rang, and the bartender answered. He listened in silence as someone spoke on the other end, too quiet for me to hear. Then the bartender just said, “Aye, will do,” hung up the phone, and picked up a shotgun from behind the bar. He pointed it straight at us and said, “Don’t either of you move.”

I froze. I could fix the damage from a shotgun blast, as long as it missed my brain, but at this distance it would shred Shan’s flesh, too. That wasn’t something I was willing to risk. But I also really, really didn’t want to kill some guy who honestly thought he was protecting someone. And compulsion works pretty well, but if the guy’s trigger finger just happened to twitch as I ordered him to put the gun down, we’d be done. Shan put their hands up and asked, in a steady voice, “What’s your name?”

The bartender blinked. He seemed unsettled by the sound of Shan’s voice. “Ian.”

“Ian, whatever’s happened, we’re probably the people best equipped to help you.”

“Save your breath,” Ian said. “We know your friends are going after one of our lads. If they take one of ours, we’ll sure as hell take two of theirs. Two at least.”

“One of your lads,” I said. “Who? Who are they after, Ian? What can he do?”

Ian blushed and seemed to realize that he’d given away information that we didn’t already have. One of the men at the bar leaned toward him, careful to avoid the barrel of the shotgun. “Maybe they’re telling the truth. They could help us.”

“Nothing they can do that we can’t do ourselves,” Ian snapped.

“That’s not true, Ian,” Shan said. Ian seemed to waver at the touch of Shan’s voice, and the skin above his collar grew tomato-red. He swallowed and wiped sweat from his forehead. I suspected that Shan was pumping some subtle pheromones into the atmosphere, in addition to just doing their usual thing. “Ian,” Shan went on, obviously seeing that they had him, “if you just lift the shotgun, my comrade can provide a demonstration of the sorts of things we can do to help.”

The phone rang again. Ian answered it, cradling the receiver between his chin and shoulder. “Fuck,” he whispered at whatever he heard. “Ok,” he said, hanging up. “Show me what you think you can do to help.”

I turned to Ian's friend and told him to turn a complete circle, whistle Camptown Races, and slap himself across the face, in that order. He did it. "See, Ian?" Shan said. "Wren could have ordered you to put that shotgun in your mouth the second you pointed it at us. But neither of us wants innocent people to get hurt. We won't be taking anyone away from your village when we leave here, we promise you that."

Ian wavered for a moment. Then he let out a curse and put the shotgun down. "Get Agnes on the phone," he told one of his wide-eyed customers. "Tell her we might have some reinforcements here."

He led us down narrow alleys and passages between houses, keeping us out of sight of the main road. "We've got people trying to put them off the scent," Ian whispered. "But if they find where he's hidden, well, we'll need to make a stand there."

The sound of splintering wood stopped us in our tracks. Ian peered around a corner, then told us armed men had started kicking doors in. "What are they looking for?" I asked.

He wouldn't say. All he said was, "You'll see."

We ended up in a house like any of the others, tucked between two similar buildings. Ian knocked quietly on the back door and said, "It's me." It opened, and a middle-aged woman holding a gun waved us inside.

Half the town was there in that house's living room. Most were armed. In the middle of it all sat an old woman, tiny and wrinkled as a doll, a halo of white frizz standing up from her head. She looked me right in the eye and said, "If you've come to take one of our lads, you had better be ready to kill the rest of us on the way there."

"That's right," said a teenage girl standing next to her. She was terrified, trembling almost too hard to hold the shotgun in her hands, but she glared at me and chambered a round.

I told them we weren't here to take anybody. I told them we were Gifted, we were the kind of person the Splinter hunted, even though that was a little bit of a fib. Even so, Ian nodded and said I was telling the truth. That I could do things that might come in useful.

Agnes stared at Shan and I for an uncomfortably long time. Finally, she made a decision. She nodded. "Right, then." She rose from her chair, tottering and reaching for a cane leaning against the table. "Let's show them what these Splinter cunts are after."

She led Shan and I down into the basement. "It's alright, Gareth," she said. "They're here to help."

Sitting on a bed in the basement was a young man, perhaps twenty years old. He stared at us with wide, fearful eyes, and wrapped his arms across his middle. His belly swelled against his shirt. A young woman sat next to him. She stood, hands balled into fists, as though ready to fight for him.

I blinked, not sure what to think. Maybe he was trans, I thought, a pregnant transman, but that wouldn't explain why the Splinter was interested. But I was wrong. "It happens to about one in four of our lads," Agnes said. "They've got no womb, no women's parts. Still, about one in four, when they're about Gareth's age, they birth a child."

"Me wife and I have three kids. I birthed one of them," Ian said, following us downstairs.

"May I?" Shan asked, moving close to Gareth. He nodded, and Shan ran their hands over his belly. "Fascinating," they said. "She's right. There's no uterus, no ovaries, no birth canal. And yet there's a baby in there."

"They come out through the belly button," Agnes said, helpfully, and Gareth blushed.

"This is how it's always been here," Ian said. "Hundreds of years. Thousands, maybe. As long as there's been records, there's been birthing fathers in this village. Old legend says it comes from drinking the water in the loch, but I don't know anything about that."

It all fell into place, why the Splinter would take such an interest here. Most Gifted occurrences were isolated, random, a genetic mutation surfacing seemingly out of nowhere. This was different. This was a genetically isolated population, a village full of people carrying a Gifted trait. One that would change everything we thought we knew about human reproduction. The implications sank in. Shan seemed to realize it at the same moment. Their eyes widened.

"What?" Agnes asked.

"They don't need Gareth," I explained. "If this is common among the men in your town, then they just need one of them. It doesn't have to be one who's pregnant right now. Are any of the men out there alone right now?"

Ian cursed and pelted up the stairs. "Get to MacDonnel's!" Agnes shouted after him. Shan and I followed, and we were soon joined by half a dozen very heavily armed people. We rounded a corner onto one of those windy little roads, and there we found two Splinter agents pushing a

young man into a van. A shot cracked through the air, and one of the van's tires deflated. I saw Ian holding a rifle to his shoulder, advancing on the agents.

One of them grabbed the young man, wrapped an arm around his neck, and pressed a pistol to his head. "Don't come any closer!" he shouted. The agent's eyes met mine. "Wren, take another step and this kid's dead. You can slow time, but not enough to get to me before I cap him." He cocked his head so that I could see the noise-canceling earbuds he was wearing. "And don't try that compulsion shit, either."

He was right, dammit. I eyed the distance between us, and I knew I couldn't cross it in time, not if this guy was well-trained. "Can you nail him with your spines?" I asked Shan under my breath.

They shook their head. "Not without risking hitting the boy. My aim isn't that good."

Everyone stayed like that, frozen, for what felt like forever. Really it was probably only a minute or so. But then Agnes hobbled down the street. She was tiny, frail, barely able to stay upright even with her cane. But her eyes were fire, steel, pure strength. "You let that lad go," she said, and although her voice was quiet and quavery with age it carried to the agents.

"We're not going to hurt him, ma'am. We're working to ensure the safety of the public, to make sure that—"

"Oh, shut your stupid face," Agnes said. "We've protected our own for hundreds of years. We're not about to stop now. We've survived witch hunters and Jacobins and MI5, you bloody idiot. And we've never willingly given up our own. Now, you'll either hand over that boy, or you'll have to kill each and every one of us to get him away from here." She peered at the collapsed tire at the front of the van. "If you start walking out, now, alone, we'll give you a ten minute head start before we follow."

"This is the best deal you're going to get," I added. "Even if you kill every person in this village, you won't get me and Shan before we get you."

Everything froze again, but this time we all felt who held the power. We all knew which way it was going to go. The moment broke, and the agent shoved the frightened young boy away from him. The two men from the Splinter backed away, slowly, all while the people of the village watched them in contempt. In the end they turn and ran down the road, out of sight.

Ian lowered his rifle. "Well, they're gone now, but they're sure to bring more. Should we scatter?"

Shan and I looked at each other. “How long can you survive in this town? Cut off from the world?” I asked.

“Months,” Agnes said. “If not years. We’ve always stored food and water and prepared for the worst. It wouldn’t be the first time we’ve been under siege.”

I told Agnes we might have a solution. She listened to what we had to offer, and then she turned to her people and asked for a vote. A forest of hands shot into the air.

We said goodbye to everyone in the village. We wished Gareth and his girlfriend good luck. We told Agnes to take care of her people. And then Shan walked in a slow circle, all around the perimeter of the fields and lakes and moors surrounding the village. It took an entire day, hours of walking. I kept them company, made sure they paused to rest and drink water, but it was their task. They walked in a complete circle around the village, and as they walked they dropped a special mix of seeds from their palms. The plants had already started to grow as we walked, were already forming a thick tangle of bramble and thorns in a ring around this place. But it wasn’t the thorns that made these plants important. No. It was the pollen they gave off, a perfume stronger than the poppy fields in the Wizard of Oz. The people in the village wouldn’t feel a thing, Shan made sure of that. But anyone else, any outsiders approaching, they would collapse into a stupor the second they got too close.

By the time Shan and I drove away from that village by the loch, the entire place was hidden in tangled brush like a hedgemaze. It would take a tank to get through there, a bomb. Maybe the Splinter would go to those lengths. I don’t think so. They’ll be too scared of the other little traps Shan left behind, the stronger poisons dripping from some of the thorns.

Thing is, though, this place didn’t really need us. We gave them an extra layer of security, a last line of defense. But they saved their own today. They stood toe to toe with the Splinter, and they didn’t blink.

That’s what you’re up against, Iris. Not terrifying superpowers and mutant abilities. No, it’s the little old ladies who protect the lads of their village, the people who fight for their children, the ones who close ranks around the ones they love. Those people, Iris, are the ones who will be your downfall. I just hope I’m still around to see it happen.

Episode 305: The Citadel

Hey, um, Iris? I can't actually be 100% sure that you're listening right now, but that's a pretty high-quality camera you have in the corner of the cell up there, so it would be a shame not to use it, and I'm guessing you're probably curious about what your prisoner is doing, so, you know what, I'm just going to assume you're there and you're listening. And if Iris isn't listening, then, whoever is, you should go get her, ok? There's some stuff she's going to want to hear, and I wouldn't want you to get in trouble for not letting her know.

Ok, um, so. . . You don't know me, not really, but you probably know *of* me. If you listen to Wren's messages, and I know you do, you'll know me as Winry. The Last Seeker, they call me. Ok, nobody calls me that, but still. . . Uh, maybe I should just start by telling you what happened just before you captured me and threw me into a Splinter holding cell. Yeah. That's a good place to start. So. Here we go.

I imagine you're probably wondering what I was thinking, breaking into the Citadel. Fair question, definitely a fair question. Awesome name, by the way, for a headquarters. I mean, you have the Citadel and we had the Burrow, so, yeah, maybe in retrospect the outcome of that was a little obvious.

Anyway, Wren and Zachary and Shan and I have known about this place for a while. I mean, it's a fortress, it's not like it would have been easy for you to hide it. We've known about it for months, but of course we couldn't really get in. I mean, the anti-Gifted protections you have on this place, they're something else. Like really, really impressive. You probably know we tested the waters a few times, got close enough to set off the alarms. So we tried, but of course the Mosaics weren't going to get anywhere close to this place. So, yeah, kudos on that part of your system.

But then the other day I thought, hey, they have all this anti-Gifted defense set up, but what do they have for regular garden variety humans like me? Turns out, not so much. I'm not saying your defense system sucks, or anything, but. . . Yeah, actually, fuck it, I'll say it, your security people left stupid big holes in the system. And with the number of people you have coming in and out of here each day, I thought, you know, maybe it's worth a try.

I should have told Wren or Shan or somebody about this. Ok, that was dumb, I admit it, but I knew they'd try to stop me. But, look, I want you to know I wasn't focused on sabotage or assassination or anything like that. I didn't break in here to hurt you or any of your people. I just wanted to help the prisoners. I mean. . . Look, I know you and I have our differences. I know we

want different things with the Mosaics and the Trumpet, but. . . I mean, I have to believe you have regrets about the way you treat Gifted people. Even if you see it as a means to an end, I don't think you're a monster. I think some of this has to keep you up at night.

Or, I don't know. Maybe I'm giving you too much credit. But, look, you've been with the Splinter a long time. You've gotten used to how this organization works. Maybe you're just too close to it, too close to see what this has turned into. So I'm going to tell you the way I saw it, what it looks like through my eyes, because I want to believe that you're capable of rethinking this.

Anyway, like I said before, your security has holes big enough to drive a truck through. So I made myself up a fake key card and ID, and I got myself a lab coat.

A side note, about the lab coat thing. I get that it seems all professional and all to have everyone in white lab coats, but come on. It makes it so much easier to blend in. And besides, people in real labs don't even wear lab coats most of the time, I mean I did most of my dissertation research in a Sandman t-shirt, so it really just makes it seem like you're trying too hard. Sorry, you know what, that part doesn't really matter, you do you, I don't care.

Where was I? Um. . . Oh, right, so I got in with my little lab coat and my safety goggles and my key card, and I went looking for the prisoners. I had a pretty good sense they'd be in this wing, based on the architectural plans, but you guys must have done some renovations at some point. The steel doors and vaults definitely weren't part of the original design.

Moving around in this place, it was like. . . I went to Catholic school when I was a kid, a really old-fashioned one, the kind where the nuns still got away with slapping you with a ruler. Kids were so scared of those nuns, they'd whisper and tiptoe past Sister Mary Eustace's office even when they were allowed to be in the halls. That's what it felt like, walking around in this place. Even people going over files and clipboards together, people sitting in the same computer pod, it's like they were afraid to talk above a whisper.

That makes me wonder, who's the Sister Mary Eustace in this situation, Iris? I'm guessing it's you. I would hate finding that out about myself. I wonder if you hate it, or like it, or if you don't care either way.

Even after I found the prisoners' wing, it took me a while to get in. My keycard didn't have high enough security clearance, so I had to find a terminal and reroute. . . Well, I'm sure your security guys figured out how I did it by now. Doesn't really matter. The point is, I eventually did it. I got into the prisoners' wing. This wing.

It feels different, being in a cell instead of being in the hall, walking past them. In a way, as scared shitless as I am right now—and, believe me, I'm really, really freaking scared, no point in pretending I'm not—I think looking into the cells from the outside was almost worse.

This is the part where I hope and pray that you listen, Iris. Really listen. Listen to what this looks like to someone who isn't used to it. Think about what you've done here.

The first was one I recognized. Amina Abdullah. We'd never met, but I've studied her file in our database. I've looked at her picture. I've wondered what she thought about her Gifts, what she was like, whether or not we'd get along if I met her in person.

When I looked through the little slot in the door, she was huddled against the far wall of a padded cell. She was almost too drugged to sit upright. Spit dripped down her chin. Her wrists and forearms were bandaged, and she looked thin. No, not thin. Emaciated.

Amina's a third-grade teacher, Iris. She has a sister, and two parents, and she swims laps twice a week at the gym. Her Gift is one of the most harmless I've ever seen. Hyper-acute sense of smell. In the past few years, she's experimented with using that sense of smell to track missing persons, find lost things. Nothing about her could ever be a threat to normals. I don't even think she'd be useful as a Mosaic tile. And still you took this real person and turned her into a drooling husk in a padded cell.

What could be worth that, Iris? I sure can't think of anything. Does it feel like you're doing the right thing, still, hearing what this looks like through my eyes?

Or how about the second one. Peter Sanderson. The padding had been stripped out of his cell, along with his mattress and all of his clothes. Anything flammable, it had been taken out of the room. Everything was coated in a layer of soot. The walls, the floor, all of Peter's body. I know his file, too. He's pyrokinetic and, sure, they can be dangerous, but his control's been just about perfect since we started monitoring him three years ago.

He's fifteen years old, Iris. Fifteen. That's why I decided to save him, and not the others. I hoped when I first went in that there would be a single wing-wide locking system that I could deactivate. I hoped I could release all of them at once. But that wasn't going to work. I could only open one cell at a time. And then, once I did that, I'd have to sneak him out.

That part turned out to be easier than I thought. Some wet wipes to get the soot off, some scrubs and a white lab coat snagged from a locker, and Peter almost looked presentable. He was too young, obviously, but some of your interns come straight out of college. They're only a couple years older than him. But his age wasn't what worried me. It was the shell shock in his eyes, the

thousand-yard stare. Anyone would take one look at that kid and wonder what had happened to him.

I finally just got him a clipboard and a manila folder and got him to walk with his head bent down as though he was reading something fascinating. I walked next to him, pointing and saying nonsense about whatever was on the clipboard. That walk from the prison wing to the exit was the longest walk of my life. Every step, I was sure someone was going to sound the alarm, grab us, drag us off to the cells. But it didn't happen. Not then, anyway.

Somehow, miraculously, I got Peter out of the Citadel. No one challenged us. No one stopped us. I just got him out the door and through the parking lot and I pointed to the road and told him to walk until he reached a pay phone, and then I gave him the number he could call collect for help. Shan's number.

That could have been it. That could have been the end. But I went back in. I wanted to save one more. Just one more. I wasn't going to try for the whole wing. But just saving one, only one, it felt wrong. So I went back in, and I made it to the door of the prison wing, and that's when one of your security people grabbed me.

I just keep reminding myself that I saved Peter. He's alive and out of that cell. No matter what happens, no matter what you do to me from this point on, at least I have that.

And. . . Ok, you know what, I'm just going to stop the story there. And, Iris, I really hope you're listening, because I fudged a lot of the details I just gave you. Or outright fucking lied about some of them, if I'm being honest. But what I tell you right now is completely true, I promise. My earpiece just beeped, which is Wren telling me all systems are go. Yeah, that whole thing about me not telling Wren where I was going, that was a lie. They know exactly where I am. Also, I kinda fibbed about why I came here. I care about the prisoners, I really do, but freeing them wasn't really my goal. Except for Peter. His mother is an ally of ours, an important one, and we agreed to help her get him out.

But that wasn't really the main reason I was here. Getting Peter out of the Citadel was Phase 2. I kinda skipped over what I did right before I went into the prisoners' wing. I skipped over Phase 1. I just needed you to think that so your people would focus on checking prisoners' cells and not on some other stuff. Specifically, the servers and the firewall.

Now that I have your attention, I need you to listen. There's three things you need to know to understand why you need to evacuate this building immediately if you want your people to survive more than ten minutes into the future.

Point 1: Your anti-Gifted defense systems are outstanding when it comes to detecting someone with Gifted physiology approaching the building, but they aren't so great at picking up trace elements of Gifted biology. Specifically, the pollen concoction Shan made and then dusted onto my skin and hair before I brought it inside. That blurred vision and confusion you've been feeling since this stuff started circulating through the building? That's the reason none of your people noticed some important little details, like my earpiece. And the flash drive I left in one of your servers. We knew it wasn't going to be enough to get your people to let me go completely, not without setting off a whole shit-ton of alarms, but you were definitely suggestible enough to think the flash drive I handed over was the only one I brought in.

So, here's the thing, there's no point in even trying to undo the damage at this point. Your firewall's been breached for over an hour by now, and all your data's compromised, so you've taken a big hit no matter what happens from this point on.

Ok, moving on to point 2: According to a geological survey, the Citadel rests on a shelf of limestone, and far below that is a system of caverns. In case you're wondering why that's important, and I sure would be, that brings me to Point 3:

The Citadel's anti-Gifted defense system has a reliable range of about 100 yards, but Wren and Zachary's matter and energy manipulation skills are reliable up to a minimum of 300 yards.

If you have any halfway smart people back there then they're already explaining to you what that means, but I'll spell it out just in case. In about two minutes, Wren's going to pull out the small amounts of water absorbed by the limestone beneath your headquarters. Once there's no water there, any supercooling event will cause the remaining calcite to contract, causing this entire part of the surface to fall into a sinkhole. So you should really get your people out of here right away.

Zachary wasn't a big fan of warning you about this, by the way, and I don't think Wren was, either. They were in favor of just ending you right here and now. That's what they think is happening. So this is a present from me. I meant what I said earlier, Iris. I want to believe you have humanity I can reach. I want to believe you can change. Wren and Zachary and even Shan might just want you dead, but I'd rather save someone if I can.

And, in case you're wondering whether they're ok with letting me and all your Gifted prisoners go down with the ship, well, if I did the calculations correctly—and I really, really hope I did—then the collapse should shear off the northern half of the building and leave the southern half, where all the cells are, intact. We should be just fine. Pretty much. I'm pretty sure.

Goddammit, Wren, how did you talk me into this? I mean, ok, it might have been my idea but, Jesus, why didn't you tell me how dumb this was?

Oh, God. Ok, that little tremor just now was Wren removing the water, which you should be able to see forming a new stream somewhere if any of you are still stupid enough to be listening to this and you can see out a window. Ok, so now we're sixty seconds out from the supercooling stage. Come on, you got this. There you go, crash position, practiced it a hundred times. They're not going to let you get crushed. You got this, you're good. You're the Last Seeker. Yeah. I'm going to make them call me that if I survive this. I've earned that much.

Shit! [Winry screams. The rumbling gets louder, and the audio cuts out]

End

Episode 306: We Have Her

I'm speaking now to Iris's second in command. Winry has some thoughts on who you might be, but your name doesn't matter. Not to me, and not for the purposes of this message. Yes, Winry survived, as we knew she would. Her calculations were perfect. The building cracked exactly where she said it would, and she and the Gifted prisoners came out of it without a scratch. We'd hoped we'd be able to capture Iris in the chaos, but she escaped. At least, she escaped that time. Not today, though. And that's how I know I'm talking to her second in command, who has just assumed control of operations.

I know that because I'm looking at Iris as I say these words. She's alive. Alive, but bloodied and bruised and tied to a chair. You know why that is, why I haven't stung her with my venom or stepped aside to let Zachary rip the heat from her flesh. We have Iris, and you have Wren. So. Let's talk about a trade.

Wren's going to be furious at us for making this trade. We've discussed these scenarios before, what to do if one of us is taken. We've all of us, Winry and Zachary and Wren and I, nodded and agreed and said, yes, the world is more important, we won't risk the mission to save one of us. But I've smelled Wren's copper-penny lies as she said that, as she looked at me. And I've always known that I'll never leave her behind. So I'm choosing to make the trade, because at the moment the choice is mine to make.

I don't know where you have her, or I would have taken her back already. But I do have a sense of how you're holding her.

It came at a quiet moment, a moment none of us expected to become dangerous. We were conducting surveillance, about a week after the fall of the Citadel. I suppose you must know where and on who. Zachary and Winry had taken the first shift, and Wren and I were on our way to relieve them. We approached the car where they sat, visible in the front drivers' and passenger's seats. All seemed well, both of them looking bored and tired.

We were in the middle of the street when it happened. I smelled something above us, something like melted glass and burning cloth. Ten feet in the air hung a kind of bubble; it looked like the bubbles children make with those plastic wands and bottles of soap. Except this one smelled all wrong, and stretched three yards across. It felt as though it watched us. And then it descended, and before any of us could move, it snatched Wren off the ground.

She flailed and kicked. I felt the buzz that sizzles through the air when she uses her gifts, the ones that slow time or separate matter or teleport. I felt her try all of them. I tried my own, a

hasty mixing of chemicals and pheromones that I thought might puncture the thing, weaken its structure. Zachary was there in moments, lashing out with his own gifts, floating up into the air on reduced gravity, trying to reach through the wall of the bubble. But nothing worked, and that bubble holding Wren sped away over the rooftops and into the sky, taking her away from me. I don't know what gifted person you bought or bribed to help you, but I know it wasn't something you developed yourself. That was scavenged from someone with real talents.

All of which you know, of course. But I think it's important to provide some context here, just to make it clear what you are dealing with and how little I am prepared to negotiate when I issue my demands.

Ten seconds after Wren disappeared into the sky, a bike courier pulled up on the sidewalk next to us. He probably has no idea how close he came to dying in several different supernatural ways, but we held back and the last moment. He gave Zachary an envelope, asked for a signature, and sped away. Zachary opened the envelope and found a voice recorder inside. On that voice recorder was a single recording, just a minute or so long. We all recognized my voice right away. It said, "Send me and Winry to Vienna." And then it gave a date and a time, three weeks in the past. Finally, it closed with: "Shan: you'll need to go to the Blue River Bar on Alterplatz. Knock on the door in the back and ask for Ilsa. She'll explain the rest."

By the way, second in command, I'm telling you these details because any meaningful intelligence you could have derived from them is in the past. These places are now abandoned, the people in them already known to you or have moved on. Don't waste your time looking for them. You'll understand why soon enough. Or, if you're really clever, you've pieced it together already.

Zachary looked like he wanted to kick something, as soon as that message ended. He and I have been down this road before, him able only to send me into battle instead of going himself. He has a need to be a hero and a protector, Zachary does. It's brave, in an egotistical sort of way. And I can't fault him for wanting to save Wren. But we had no time for such things, and I told him as much. "This must have worked, if we sent this message back," I told him, even though we could be sure of no such thing. Even Zachary, who can pluck things out of the future and the past, doesn't truly understand how time travel works.

"Just get her back," he said, and then he made some motion with his hands, and Winry and I stood in the biting cold of the Vienna winter.

"So," Winry asked as we made our way to the front door of the Blue River Bar. "Who do you think this Ilsa person is? Info broker? Security contractor?"

“I don’t know,” I replied as we moved through the crowd of drinkers and toward the back room. “But the place behind this building is a brothel.” I could already hear the groans and grunts through the soundproofing layer separating the two businesses. I could already smell the sex and sweat on the air. No one else in the bar would be able to, though. They had hidden it well, whoever ran this secret place.

I readied my spines and knocked on the door. A little slot slid open at eye level, and someone spoke in German. I answered in the same language, the language of one of my tiles, that I was here to see Ilsa. The door opened, and a slender young woman led us down a hallway. This place was not your typical brothel, to say the least. The bouncer, this slight young woman instead of a beefy man, gave off the scent of a Gifted. From what I heard later, I gather that she can crush granite between her fingertips.

We saw others as we moved down the hallway, through the bar, past the rooms where clients and employees met. The workers were men, women, as well as some like me. Each and every one of them was Gifted. Some looked human at the first glance. Others would never pass in the outside world. One woman floated, cross-legged, in the air. One man had scales studding his face and torso. One person, a tall, genderless figure with a shaved head, moved by crawling, gecko-like, along the wall.

All, without exception, were beautiful, whether in human or inhuman ways. And they were surrounded by men and women who watched them with awe, with lust, with hunger. I saw diamond tennis bracelets and designer gowns and three thousand dollar suits. I saw people who run the world, or think they do, groveling at the feet of a Gifted man with two extra sets of arms. In a room off the main bar, I saw a male client strapped to a chair, his chest hair being singed off by a Gifted woman with fire-wreathed hands.

At the end of a long hallway, past the flurry of the main rooms, the bouncer knocked on a wooden door. “These people are asking for you,” she said.

“Thank you, let them in.”

Ilsa sat at a desk, a computer and stacks of papers in front of her. She didn’t dress like a prostitute, or a brothel madam. She wore a cardigan and reading glasses, and her dark hair was pulled back into a messy ponytail. The only odd thing about her appearance were the long silk gloves she wore up to the elbow. She eyed me across the desk. “Well, if you’re here for a job, you’re hired,” she said. Then she turned to Winry and her eyes narrowed a little. “I’m afraid we employ Gifted courtesans exclusively.”

“That’s not why we’re here,” I said. “We’re here about the Splinter.”

Her eyes widened. “You must be Shan. And you’re the one Wren calls “Winry”, if I’m not mistaken, you’re working with Zachary.”

“Whatever,” Winry snorted. “He’s working with *us*.”

I asked Ilsa how she knew Zachary. She hesitated for a moment before answering, then folded her hands on the desk and said, “He leaked a lot of information to us back when he was with the Splinter. Some of our best leads started with him.”

I asked Ilsa what she had that would be useful for making an enormous demand of the Splinter, the kind of demand that would be nearly impossible for them to consider. Ilsa watched me carefully for a moment. Then she stood. “This will only take a moment,” she said. “I need to make sure you’re telling the truth.” She took off one of her gloves, and then she touched my hand.

Her appearance didn’t change. She was still a normal-looking woman in a ponytail. But, the moment her skin touched mine, she became the most erotic creature on this Earth. I forgot about Wren entirely. It’s a terrible thing to say. But all I wanted was to carry Ilsa to a bed and never leave it. It was all I could do not to rip her clothes off and have her on the desk right then and there. She was asking me a question, but it took me a minute to realize it. “What?” I asked.

“Do you work for the Splinter?” she asked again. “Are you here as a spy?”

“No. No, please I’ll do anything, just let me—” I begged her.

She stepped back, and all that lust vanished just as quickly as it had appeared, so fast it made me lightheaded. I can secrete pheromones and develop substances that increase sex drive, but I can’t do anything approaching what Ilsa could do with a touch. She touched Winry’s arm, and asked the same question, and I watched Winry’s eyes glaze over, her knees almost buckling. “Good,” Ilsa said when she was done. Winry staggered and stared, wide-eyed. “You’re not spies. We can work together.” She sat down at her desk, reached into the neck of her blouse, and pulled out a key on a necklace chain. She used that key to open a drawer in the desk, and then she pulled out a leatherbound ledger. And then, with those silk-gloved hands, she flipped open the book to reveal columns of names, addresses, and notations. “Shan, Winry, I’d like to introduce you to some of my best clients.”

It makes perfect sense, if you think about it. Of course the same people who are so fixated on superhuman gifts would include Gift fetishists among their number. I say that without judgment; there’s nothing wrong with being attracted to my kind. But the people who visited this brothel,

many of them treated it as a kind of menagerie. A place to sample curiosities. And visitors to a menagerie always imagine themselves as the spectators. They never imagine that the curiosities might be watching them.

The lesson here, dear listeners? Don't underestimate the people working in a brothel. Especially not Ilsa's brothel.

The ledger was full of information about prominent people from around the world. There were ambassadors and CEOs and heads of state. There were celebrities and warlords, bishops and Nobel laureates. Their habits, their preferences, secrets they had whispered in their sleep or screamed in ecstasy. There were things in that ledger that could have started wars, brought down governments, ended lives. But we weren't here for them. We were here for the Splinter leadership.

You'll have figured out the traitor by now, but just in case: his name was Lars Halvorsen. A wealthy youngest son of a financier, some distant connection to the Swedish royal family. The third cousin twice removed of one of the princesses, or something like that. Enough status and prestige to never have to work or struggle, but not enough to ever have to worry about running the family business or holding a real title. In other words, the perfect sort of person to get involved in obscure hobbies and secret societies, the perfect sort of person to become fixated on the stranger members of the human race.

I suspect that Lars got into the Splinter on the basis of his money and connections alone, and not because of any skills or knowledge he might have possessed. But he must not be entirely useless, because he worked his way into Iris's inner circle, four or five places from her position at the top. He would never lead the Splinter, not with his lack of scientific or medical background, but he had Iris's ear, and that was what interested us.

Lars made a habit of visiting Vienna once a month, ostensibly to attend board meetings for one of his family's charities. In reality, though, he suffered through those dull meetings every four weeks just so he could go from the board room to his favorite place on Earth: the Blue River Bar. The ledger showed that he had made his way through a number of the employees, but he had eventually settled on a favorite: a woman named Vision. That wasn't her real name, just the one she used with the clients. The clients didn't expect to hear names like David or Maria or Annie. They wanted creatures who called themselves Vision, Nightwalker, Deathshroud. They wanted spandex-clad heroes and villains, archetypes rather than people with history or family or politics. Lars never thought about the possibility that Vision was also a mother and a sister and an anti-globalization activist who knew exactly what questions to ask a man like Lars, a man with mediocre talents and superb connections.

Vision joined us in Ilsa's office, and there we hatched a plan to take your leader.

Vision's gift is immersive illusion. She can not only make clients see a fabricated scene, she can make them smell and taste and hear and touch it. The sexual possibilities of this gift should be obvious. She never touches clients. She merely takes them into a room, listens to their fantasies, and spins beautiful dreams of things they would never be able to have in real life, not even from another Gifted.

This is what Lars saw, on his next visit to the Blue River Bar two weeks after Winry and I arrived. He went to the back room, had his drinks, eyed the men and women working the floor. And then Vision sidled up to him, even more beautiful than usual with her thick black hair and beestung lips. She ran a hand along his leg, and he was hers for the taking. They went to one of the rooms, and had a glass of wine, and he told her about the scenario that had occupied his fantasies lately. The details don't matter. What matters is that Vision held out her hands and conjured his fantasies into being, and he fell into them without a moment's hesitation.

Afterwards, as he lay on the bed and tried to catch his breath, the illusion seemed to fade, and he found himself back in Vision's room, or something very close to it. Perhaps he would have noticed some details wrong, the colors and textures a bit changed from before. But the wine and the fucking let him slip into a drowsy haze, and he was none the wiser.

His cell phone rang. That was odd, because he was certain he had set it to vibrate before. But it rang, and he groaned and reached to answer it. And out of the phone barked the voice of Callum, Iris's right hand. "Lars! Do you know where Iris is?"

Lars blinked and sat up. Callum was as rough and abrupt as Lars was refined, and he didn't have any respect for money or aristocracy. Lars always felt small in Callum's presence, and couldn't quite summon the confidence he usually had. "No, I don't know where she is. What's wrong?"

"What's wrong is we've got a major Mosaic asset loose in the Austrian wilderness, and I have to supervise Operation Extraction here. We need a senior officer on the ground to coordinate the teams. It's Zachary, Lars. That motherfucker's planning on wrecking the project, I can feel it."

Lars's heart started pounding. This was his chance. This was where he could prove himself at long last. "I'm in Vienna. I can be there in—"

"No, no, you stay put. You can be there for the op, but Iris needs to take charge. And you spend some time calling her, I don't have time to brief her and deal with operations here at the same time. I'm sending you the file on the asset and the teams I'm sending out, you just take charge of getting ahold of Iris and getting her out there to take care of this thing."

“I will. I’ll take care of it.” Lars hung up the phone, already giddy with the possibilities. Perhaps he noticed a slight shift in the room at that point; maybe he noticed that the texture of the sheets felt a bit more authentic, that the colors dimmed. But if he noticed these things at all, he quickly forgot them as he opened the mission dossier that had just been emailed to his phone, as he called up Iris and told her that *he* had located a major asset in Austria, that *he* had called in the extraction teams and was waiting for her arrival. He paused dramatically before telling her that it was Zachary, that they had him cornered. She said only that she was heading to the airport and would be there in 24 hours.

That’s always been Iris’s weakness. Maybe you were aware of it on some level, maybe not. She formed a far deeper attachment to Zachary than she would ever be willing to admit. Not affection. Not love. More like. . . ownership. Any other asset, maybe she would have held back. But not Zachary. Zachary, she would want to capture personally.

The ambush was easy. Lars did most of the work for us. We’d spent the last two weeks laying the groundwork for the rest. Calls to the supposed strike teams rerouted to Winry, a phone hack on Iris used to track her location, all the things we needed to follow and grab her when the time was right, all the things needed to ensure that she would go in believing she would be supported by armed strike teams, and that she would really be alone. Now we have her, and we’ve spent the last two weeks making sure none of your usual methods of tracking and locating her will work. Winry has anticipated all of your moves, so there’s no point in fighting us. Your only option is to trade.

To be clear: I fully understand that the people I’m speaking to are prepared to let Iris die for the cause. I know you won’t save her out of any attachments or personal loyalty. But consider how many secrets she has. Consider the vast array of creative methods at my disposal by which I might extract those secrets. Consider what she knows, and how that knowledge could destroy your plans. I assure you, I have no qualms about doing what I have to do to learn her secrets.

So, if you want to avoid that, you have one option and one option only. Bring Wren, alive and well, to the coordinates Winry is about to text to you. Follow the instructions to the letter. And if Wren has one scratch on her, please understand that I will burn your entire world to the ground.

Be at those coordinates. Twelve hours. There will be no negotiating.

Now get moving.

Episode 307: The Trumpet Sounds

They weren't planning on having to trade me back. They had other plans for me, things Shan just managed to stop from happening. It meant that I survived. It also meant that I got to see other things, things I wasn't supposed to. Here's what I know now: The Mosaics have been created. They've bred. The Trumpet is on its way.

You've already heard from Shan how I was taken. One minute I was walking across the street, and the next I was suspended in the middle of a clear, shiny bubble, like Glinda the Goddamn Witch. That bubble that didn't respond to anything I tried, not slowing time, not matter manipulation, not teleporting, nothing. I could still do all of those things inside the bubble, but I couldn't make contact with the walls. They just flexed and shied away from me as I rose into the air, as it took me away. I watched Shan's face as they tried to stop me, until they disappeared from sight.

For a long time, I was up in the clouds. I couldn't tell how fast I was traveling, or how far I was going. Turns out it was a few thousand miles, which meant I must have been going faster than a jet. After a while, the bubble started to descend. I could make out a city beneath me, something hot and sunbaked and unfamiliar. Later I found out it was Madrid, but I wouldn't know that until after the trade.

The bubble carried me down toward the roof of a warehouse, something remote and removed from the main part of the city. I thought we were just going to crash into the building, but the bubble just passed through the rooftop like it was water. It carried me down through layers of pink insulation, stucco, pipes, wooden ceiling beams. I emerged into a room lit with bright blue lights. One entire wall was clear Plexiglas, and behind that were banks of computers and people bent over screens. In a kind of booth on the other side of the room was someone strapped into a chair, electrodes attached to their skull. I think they were the Gifted controlling the bubble, although they didn't really seem conscious. In the middle of the floor was a sunken area, like an emptied pool. Set into the floor of that sunken area were two metal trap doors, each about six feet across.

The people behind the Plexiglass saw me, but they weren't surprised. They'd obviously expected me to come floating down through their ceiling in a bubble, which said a lot about who they were and what they were used to. I screamed and struggled and tried lashing out with my Gifts again, but they didn't speak to me or pay that much attention. They were confident in their captured Gifted's ability to keep me imprisoned.

Time passed. I don't know how long. Maybe an hour. They kept working at their computers and work stations, kept speaking and gesturing to each other. Finally, they all gathered near the Plexiglass and watched the sunken room. It started without any warning, without a countdown or a big red warning light or anything. The metal doors in the floor just flipped open, and it started.

Keep in mind that I didn't know what they were, at the time. I was just floating, trying to understand what I saw. So I'll tell it the way I saw it, before I understood. The things that climbed out of the pits were fleshy, with muscles and soft hairless skin. They were obviously mammalian, even if I'd never seen anything like them. But their shapes were all wrong, not like any warmblooded creatures you've ever seen. There were two. One was shaped almost like a giant crab, with a flat, disc-like body and six scuttling legs. On the top of its flat body were two sets of eyes. They were compound eyes, like when you see a closeup of a fly and there are hundreds of tiny dots making up the bigger eye. Except these compound eyes were different. Each one had eight pieces instead of hundreds. Those pieces were different colors: blue, brown, green, grey. They were human. Human eyes in blinking clusters, standing out from the back of this inhuman thing.

The other one was smaller. It had an entirely different shape. I would have taken the two creatures for completely unrelated species, except that both had that warm-looking skin stretched over an impossible, arachnid frame. This one was long-bodied, skeletal, about seven feet long with ten or twelve tiny legs. It had no eyes that I could see, compound or otherwise. It did, though, have a small orifice at the front of its long torso. When that slit opened, I saw pearl-colored human teeth.

The things crawled out of their pits and circled each other, ignoring me entirely. They came close enough to nearly bump noses, or whatever they had in place of noses. Then they hopped away from each other, and the big one raised two of its legs like it was ready to fight. They kept doing that, coming close and darting away, testing each other. Even though they never looked at me, I was more terrified than I've ever been in my short life. I didn't need to see them do anything to understand how wrong these things were. All the while, the people behind the Plexiglass just watched and took notes and checked their computer screens. Whatever this obscenity was, it was going the way they planned.

At last, the big crab-like one turned its back on the smaller one and hunkered down low on the floor. The other one, the centipede, inched closer and closer. It stopped still just before reaching the big one. Then, in a motion almost too fast for me to see, its tail whipped over its back, past its head, like a scorpion's stinger. That stinger stabbed right into the other one's back, and blood started oozing out and onto the floor. They stayed still like that, the stinger of one embedded in the back of the other. The big one quavered but didn't struggle, didn't fight back. And then, just

as quickly as it had struck, the stinger pulled out, and the smaller creature tipped over onto the floor.

The big one stood and shook itself. Blood still oozed from the wound on its back, but it didn't seem like a serious puncture. It turned back around toward the crumpled centipede. The big one opened a mouth I hadn't realized was there before, a mouth that extended across the width of its entire flat body. And then, with a mouth studded with spiny teeth, it ripped and tore and gobbled the flesh of its cellmate. The entire body was gone in less than a minute, and then there was just the breathing, heaving form of the surviving creature. The moment it had eaten the last shred of flesh, it started sniffing and nosing around the pit as though to find something else.

That's when my bubble started moving. It had been on the edge of the pool before, but now it started floating toward the center, between the two open trap doors. I panicked as I moved closer, clawing at the walls of the bubble even though I knew it wouldn't do a damn bit of good. Behind the Plexiglass, someone was watching the Gifted with the electrodes on its head, tapping some handheld device and watching my progress across the pool. No one would meet my eyes.

The bubble stopped directly in front of the thing, and it seemed to notice me for the first time. I wondered if I would be able to pull the water from it between the moment when the bubble vanished and the moment it consumed me. I'd seen how fast it moved when it ate the other one, and I knew I wouldn't be fast enough, and I wouldn't have time to slow the scene. Still, I got ready.

And then, something happened. I didn't know what at the time. But someone in the control room shouted into a phone and waved his arms around, and everyone else stopped what they were doing to stare at him. They all turned to look at me, then back at the man, and then the creature circling my bubble. Whatever was happening, it was interfering with their plans.

As the people in the room argued, the creature's movements started to get more agitated. It started clawing at the floor of the pool, circling the bubble, moving faster and faster. Suddenly, it took a leap at the bubble and bounced off. I didn't feel a thing.

It went on like that for a few more minutes. The more agitated the thing in the pit got, the more frantic the people behind the glass were. One woman started crying. A man pulled at his hair and kicked a trashcan. People darted back and forth to the booth holding the Gifted controlling my life. Most of the argument seemed to be there, around my status, what would happen to me next.

I think that argument would have gone on forever, except that the creature in the pit stopped biting and scrabbling at the walls and started gnawing on its own leg. It quivered and cringed, and blood started to flow, but it kept trying to take a bite out of itself. The people in the control

room panicked. One grabbed the controller for the Gifted in the booth, and someone else punched him to take it away. Finally, the guy who seemed to be in charge said something that stopped all the other activity in the room. He pointed at me, pointed at the Gifted, pointed up at the roof. And then he opened the door to the control room and jumped down into the pool. He landed, and knelt there on the tiles, and closed his eyes.

The thing was on him in seconds. It was a quick death, this sacrifice. Quick, but I don't know if it was painless. The people still in the control room screamed and cried and hid their faces. He was respected, whoever he was. As the creature devoured the rest of his body, my bubble started to rise back toward the ceiling. I passed back through the ceiling, the roof, back up above the warehouse. I just hovered there for a while, until some people came outside, got into a car, and drove away. The bubble started to move again, then. I traveled much slower this time. I didn't know it at the time, but it was keeping pace with the members of the Splinter who went to make the trade for Iris.

I should mention at this point that I wasn't really thinking straight for that hours-long journey. You've probably figured out what happened in that sunken room in a converted warehouse. You've probably put together what that was. But at that point I was just trying to get past what I'd seen, what it had felt to be sure I was about to die. Then there was the fact that I didn't know where they were taking me. I didn't know if I was about to be fed to something worse. I thought a lot about Shan as I floated through the sky. I thought about how I might never touch them again. I might never kiss them again. I hadn't told them I loved them in too long. I won't let myself make that mistake again.

I touched down in a field outside a small village. I found out later that it's part of the countryside outside Vienna. There were three figures alone in the middle of the grass. Shan and Iris. Iris was tied up, gagged, looking about as haggard as I felt. Standing across from them was one of the men from the control room. The bubble settled on the ground next to him, then dissolved, letting me fall to the ground. For a second I could barely move. The smell of fresh air and grass, and the sight of Shan, it was too much.

"This is a trade, Wren," Shan said. "Don't do anything. They have a sniper set up, aiming at you, and we've got Zachary out of sight, ready to take down Iris. We're all going to walk away from this." They reached over and undid Iris's gag. She stared right at me, her eyes wide and piercing.

"Was it successful?" she asked the man beside me, as soon as the gag was out of her mouth. She didn't seem scared, just frantic, like she needed to know something.

The man hesitated before he answered, looking over at me. "There were complications. Since we couldn't . . . use her. But it was successful."

Iris smiled then. A wide, joyful smile. I wondered what could make her so happy in a moment like that. So happy that being kidnapped and tied up didn't even matter to her.

I thought back on what I had seen in the warehouse, and I realized what most of you probably have already. I realized the one thing a member of the Splinter would be prepared to sacrifice their life for. "Those were the Mosaics," I said. "That was them mating."

It was perfect, I realized now. All the genetic advantages of Gifted people, without any of that messy intelligence or free will. Just two creatures operating on pure animal instinct. A male to impregnate and die, a female to gestate and consume until the Trumpet was born.

"They'll have already moved it," the man said, quickly, to Iris. "She won't be able to tell them where it is, even if she can find the site again."

"You were going to feed me to it," I said, and I saw Shan's face settle into a mask of cold rage.

Iris nodded, not even a little guilty. "That was the most nourishing choice, another Mosaic." She turned to the man. "I assume you found an alternative?"

He nodded. "Callum sacrificed himself. He was a good man. And we have some of the lower-value Gifteds ready for the next feeding cycle."

"Not as good as a Mosaic, but it should do," Iris said.

"Let's make this trade," Shan said, pushing Iris harder than they had to.

Iris and I passed each other as we crossed the field. Our eyes met for the briefest of moments, and then she joined her comrade and I joined Shan. I wrapped my arms around them, breathing in their fresh leafy scent. "Are you ok?" I asked.

"Yeah," they said. "Are you?"

"Yeah." And then, in a low voice, I whispered in their ear, "Where's the sniper?"

"At your five o'clock," they said, kissing me on the cheek.

I hugged Shan close to me and told them to keep low. "Iris," I said without turning to look at her.

“Yes?” she asked. I could tell from the sound of her voice that she had already started to move away. She’d already turned her back on me, the fool.

“I want the last thing you know to be that this isn’t for Zachary, and it’s not even for me. It’s for the people you used to make those abominations I saw today.”

Iris realized what was happening. “Take her--” she started to say, before I pulled the water from her body, and the body of her comrade. The sniper’s bullets hit me a second later, one of them puncturing my lung and another blowing out my left kidney. It hurt like hell, but none of them went through, so Shan was safe, just like I’d planned. They pulled me to the ground until the last of the shots was fired, and we heard the tearing sound that meant Zachary had reached the sniper and taken their heat.

Shan helped me sit up. I coughed up some blood, but I managed to massage out the bullet and push the shreds of my lung back together before I passed out. It’s harder, repairing internal wounds, but I’ve had enough practice at this point. Iris’s people made the mistake of assuming that bullet I took to the leg was the only time I got shot, or the worst injury I’ve had to self-repair. It’s not. It’s not even close. There’s been so many times I haven’t shared in these messages, so much about my healing Gifts I didn’t want the Splinter to know about. This wasn’t the first time I’ve had an injury that would have killed a normal, and it probably won’t be the last. I’ve reattached limbs. I’ve regrown most of my intestines. I’ve gotten third-degree burns over half my body and was up and walking the next day.

By the time Zachary reached us, my lung was back to normal and my kidney was on its way to working again. He stopped and stood over Iris’s remains. I think he probably didn’t know what to feel. He wanted her dead, of course, but he also wanted to be the one to do it. In the end, though, he just looked up at me and said, “Thank you.”

Shan helped me up. I took their hands in my own and told them the thing I’d been dreading. I told them that I’d seen the Mosaics, that they had bred, that the female was pregnant with the Trumpet. I told them I had failed to stop it while I was there. Zachary cursed and ranted and kicked at a rock as he heard the story. Shan just listened without saying a word until I was done. Then they said, “Well. I guess we better get to work.”

And we did. We got back to the new headquarters and told Winry what happened, and she got to work figuring out where that warehouse had been and where they could have moved the pregnant Mosaic. That’s what we’ve been doing nonstop since I got back. I stopped to record this message for two reasons. First, I want the Splinter to know that their fearless leader is dead. I killed her, and I didn’t even bother to look her in the eye while I did it. The second reason I’m making this message is to ask any Gifted listening for help.

I don't know how long that thing needs to gestate. The Mosaics they created were so far from human, I don't think we can assume we have nine months. We need to move fast, now. All of you Gifteds out there, all you who know about us, and about the Splinter, everyone needs to move. Everyone needs to help us find where they're keeping the mother of the Trumpet. We need. . . Wait, what is that? Is that. . . [High pitched whine in background]. Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no [screams in pain, then whining static sound comes to a halt].

[Breathing heavily] Oh, God. That was it. That was the Trumpet. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It's over.

Episode 308: 2033

Hey, Wren. It's your old buddy, Wren. You're probably pretty surprised to hear this. Actually, scratch that, I know you're surprised to hear this, because I remember being surprised to hear it. I remember where I was when I heard this. Where you are. You're sitting on the ground. You're thinking it's the end. You can't look Shan in the eye. I remember all that. But I also know you're going to make it. You're going to make it, because I did, and I lived long enough to sit down and record this for you. So. Sit back, relax, and let me tell you a little bit about the year 2033.

I'm going to start by telling you about my day so far. I woke up next to Shan, the way I have every morning for fifteen years. I got my breakfast from a fruit tree in our yard, one Shan designed for us. Then I went out and did some work for other folks in our commune. Today was an easy set of tasks. Someone's garden got flooded, so I pulled the water out and channeled it toward the river. Someone else needed to retrieve their dog after it escaped from their yard, so I slowed time long enough to catch up with it. This work is more of a barter system than for pay. Currency stops having meaning when you have people who can assemble a new computer system out of random matter, when there are people who can heal your cancer with a touch, when a beautiful dryad has created a continent of fruit trees that supply all the food we could ever need. Once the 1% couldn't control what we needed anymore, their reign ended pretty fast. Now, we live in small communes. We owe our community our gifts, and in exchange we get access to everyone else's gifts. There were a lot of casualties of the Awakening, and capitalism is one of the ones that hasn't been missed.

After I did the work people needed, I went to visit Winry. She has a wife and a daughter, now, a beautiful little girl named Kira. The Awakening brought out a few gifts in Winry, but most of what she does these days involves making quantum computers with not much more than a glance. Figures.

There's a playground at the center of our commune. It was built by an antigravity Gifted named Jo. It floats, a giant sphere, a few feet off the ground. Playground equipment is arranged around the inside of the sphere, so kids step inside and bounce from place to place. They float instead of fall, and no one worries about their safety. Kids this age don't know how dangerous the world used to be. Winry and I watch Kira play for a while, and talk about mundane little things, gossip around the commune. For a little while, we speculate about what Kira's gifts are going to be. Most gifts don't show up until puberty, so kids Kira's age are pretty much like kids the way they used to be. This kind of speculation is pointless; gifts don't have much to do with a parents' gifts, and there's no way to tell from their interests or talents or appearance. Still, this is what people wonder about when they wonder about children. It used to be people asked whether little Jonny

would be a doctor or a football player or an astronaut. Now, like Winry and I do today, we wonder whether Kira will be a pyrokinetic or an anatomorph or whether she will command the movements of hydrogen molecules. We imagine all the things she might be, whether she'll grow wings or extra limbs or whether she'll never age past the point she's at now. This probably sounds like an anxious, fearful conversation, where you are now. It's not. People have learned that most gifts are nothing to fear, and that most children adjust to their new powers with little difficulty. It's amazing, the things you get used to.

Just as I'm about to leave, Winry turns to me. "You're making that message soon, aren't you? I know you make it after coming to the park with me and Kira."

I nod and tell her that I think she's right. Today's the day. And she smiles and gives me the message she remembers receiving. "Will you tell the old me something?" she asked. "Tell her it's going to be ok. Truly ok, even though where she's at then, it doesn't feel like it'll ever be ok again. Also, don't use my wife's name, or say anything about what she's like. I don't want to spoil the surprise."

So make sure you pass that message along, Wren. Tell Winry what her future self has, and that it's going to be ok. And as far as her wife goes, I don't think there's a lot of mystery once they lay eyes on each other. It's a pretty obvious first-sight kind of thing. Still, pretend you don't see right through it, it'll help preserve some of the mystery.

After that, I teleport to a commune in what used to be Buenos Aires to help out on a project for a friend you won't meet for another seven years. There aren't that many airplanes, not anymore. I still can't take anyone with me when I teleport, but there are Gifteds who can move a whole busload of people from one continent to another with a snap of their fingers. They have their days full moving people around. That's another thing that more or less came to an end with the Awakening, the nation-state. Some national borders still exist, in some places, but they're not fooling anybody.

You might be wondering what happens to the rest of the Splinter, once Iris is dead and the Trumpet sounds. I know right now you're angry enough to hope for some terrible vengeance, but the truth is that they stop being important. Once the Trumpet sounds, there are new things to worry about, and you forget about them pretty fast. I'm guessing most of them died fast, or are already dead by the time you hear this, at least the ones in the main lab. There's rumors that creature that was the Trumpet, the creature that made its call and awakened all these gifts, that that creature was just as monstrous as its mother. That it ripped apart not only the building but an entire city block, feeding on everything it found. I doubt many members of the Splinter in the vicinity got away from that.

Like I said, though, you'll stop thinking of them pretty soon. Other things are going to occupy your attention. I want to be clear about something, though: the fact that we have this world now doesn't mean Iris was right. It doesn't mean she was justified. Nothing could ever make up for what she did. I never would have chosen the carnage that comes right after the Trumpet sounds. I don't forgive her, and I never will. All this means is that you get past it, and survive, and that things get better eventually.

At the end of my day, I come home. Our house is inside a giant tree, every part of it grown rather than built as part of the tree's trunk. Shan and I make our dinner, and we tell stories about our day, and then we listen to music being played in what used to be Portugal, broadcast by the singer's will alone. Then we climb up to the roof and lie back and watch the sky. Oh, Wren, wait until you see what the night sky looks like now. There's no more industry, no more smog, so the stars are so much brighter. But it's more than that. There are Gifteds who don't need oxygen to survive, Gifteds who can protect their bodies against the chill of space, Gifteds who can feed off solar radiation alone. They've made homes in orbit around Earth, space stations and satellites and new moons. You can see them at night, floating above. There are some who set out for other planets. They solved all the technological problems preventing deep space travel, and built the ships, and gathered colonists. They found Gifteds who could scout out other planets from afar, who could reach out across the stars with their consciousness and find new homes there. They're flying through space like comets right now, and the people who will reach new planets will be so unlike what we were fifteen years ago.

When we've had enough of the sky, Shan turns to me and says, "Today's the day, isn't it?" And I say yes, and we go back into our home and I start recording this. They have their arms around me right now, as I'm speaking, and they look a little sad as they remember the time you're in, the things you're going to see.

As you listen to this, Wren, I want you to touch Shan's face. I want you to look into their eyes. If you remember nothing else, remember this: this is the face that will guide you and keep you strong and give you a reason to survive when none of the others matter. This is the face that will save you. You will come to owe them more than you'll ever be able to repay, and they never once make you feel the weight of that debt. Touch their face, and let their vines curl around your wrists, and you'll know that I'm telling the truth.

After I finish recording this message, I'll have to get up and do one more thing before returning to my spot in the bed next to Shan. You've probably got at least a general idea of what this is, since the message is there with you in 2018. You know the last thing I have to do after I record this is to give it to Zachary.

Zachary doesn't live in my community. He survives the wars to come, and in some ways he's much more at peace than when you know him. But things happen to him that make it hard for him to be around a lot of other people. Whenever I want to see him, I have to teleport to a plateau in what used to be the Utah desert. In the middle of this plateau is a circle of huts, kind of like Mongolian yurts. Different people are living in them every time I visit. Zachary is the only permanent resident. The rest are the unlucky kind of Awakened, the ones whose Gifts rage out of control, the ones who possess abilities that are more of a curse than a blessing. For every dozen or hundred people who gained the ability to fly or heal or see into the future, there is one whose consciousness comes untethered from their body, one whose dreams set their bedroom on fire, one whose skin unzips and falls to the floor when they're threatened. Zachary helps these people now, teaching and comforting and accepting them when others can't. He usually can't fix all of their problems, but they leave his monastery a little bit more whole than they were when they arrived.

Actually, I have to amend something I said before. Zachary's one of only two permanent residents. The other is Akira. That little frog is still alive, after all these years. He decided to go with Zachary when he settled down in his retreat. He has a soothing effect on the residents, like a little therapy frog. Holding him has stopped people from summoning hurricanes, opening portals to other universes, shedding their humanity entirely. He's probably saved the world more than once, to be honest. And he keeps Zachary company. Bilal's shown up there a few times, so I think Akira helps him keep an eye on things.

I'm not sure what Zachary will say when I show up tonight. I imagine him coming out of his yurt and joining me in the center of the village. I imagine him looking up at the sky, the same sky Shan and I watched earlier. I imagine him asking if tonight's the night, and I'll tell him yes. Then I imagine him looking at me and asking something like, "Are you telling her everything?" and I'll have to shake my head and admit that I'm not, even though he already knows what's on this recording. And then he and I will look at each other, and not say anything, and we'll both remember some of those things I'm not telling you. Some of the terrible days that I can't bring myself to talk about, and some of the transcendent ones I wouldn't dream of spoiling for you. He and I will remember those days, and then I'll hand over the recording, and he'll make one of those rips in time and space and drop it through. After that, we'll say goodnight, and I'll come home and crawl into bed next to Shan.

I'm telling you this, Wren, so that you have a beacon. I know how important this beacon is going to be to you. I know that you have times of agony and loss ahead, times when you think you're going to die, times when you want to. But you won't. Because you have this perfect day to look forward to, this world that you'll live to see. This will carry you, because it carried me.

Thing is, though, this world I live in now doesn't just happen. It has to be fought for. You have so many battles ahead of you, and some of them you're going to lose. You'll try to save the place that used to be Australia, and you'll fail. That land and all its people are trapped under a single continuous sheet of diamond, placed there by an enraged and power-mad new Gifted. Warlords are going to emerge and tear apart much of the East Coast of the US before you and Shan lead an army against them. Half of India is simply going to disappear, leaving a new swathe of ocean behind. Most of the population of the Scandinavian countries fell into a kind of trance just after the Trumpet sounded, and they never came out of it. Millions are going to die. But the world survives.

You're realizing something, now. You're realizing that this isn't the story you thought it was. When all this began, you thought this was a story of starcrossed lovers finding each other again. Then you found Shan, and you realized that wasn't right. Then you thought this was the story of the girl who saved the world, but it wasn't. And, for a few hours, you've been thinking that this is the story of how the world ends. It's not that, either. Right now what you're figuring out is that this is the story of a girl who helps make a new world.

But this world doesn't happen on its own, Wren. So now it's time to begin. It's time for you to get up, and dust yourself off, and dry your tears. It's time for you to take Shan by the hand, and stand shoulder to shoulder with Zachary, and help Winry through the changes racking her body and mind as we speak. It's time for you to prepare for the dangers to come. Most of all, it's time for you to picture this new world, this world you want instead of the one you live in, and fight for it.

Goodnight, Wren. This world will be waiting for you when you get here. It's waiting for you, and it's beautiful.