

LIGHTBRINGER

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K. D. McENTIRE



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For Jake.
You believed.

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PROLOGUE

When the last off-key strains of *Happy Birthday* trailed away, Wendy opened her eyes and blew hard. Twelve flames winked out and the waiter clapped politely before retrieving the candles from the cake, leaving the three of them alone with dessert.

The mountain of chocolate cake and ice cream in front of her was nearly the size of her head. Eddie, fork in hand, leaned forward to dig in when his father's fingers on his wrist stopped him.

"Manners, Eddie. Wendy gets the first bite."

Eddie grinned sheepishly at his father. "Sorry, Dad."

"It's okay, Mr. Barry." Wendy grabbed her own fork. "Race you to the plate!" Together they dug in and when the cake was demolished, Wendy tore into her gifts with equal abandon.

While the waiter cleaned up the mess of paper and plates, Mr. Barry helped Wendy clasp the locket her father had left for her around her neck. He patted her shoulder when he was done but Wendy did not miss the sympathy in his eyes. "It suits you."

"Yeah," Eddie agreed, spearing one last bite of cake off his plate before it was whisked to the kitchen. He wiped his wrist across his mouth. "It's pretty."

"You missed a spot," Mr. Barry said wryly, wetting a corner of his napkin in his water glass and gently wiping Eddie's chin. Eddie rolled his eyes and squirmed but Wendy caught the small smile he gave his father in thanks. She couldn't help a slight pang of jealousy at their closeness, but by now it was a familiar feeling and easily squashed.

Sensing her discomfort, Mr. Barry signed the bill quickly and rose to pull Wendy's chair away from the table. He held her jacket for her as she slipped it on and then offered her his arm. Wendy, feeling very grown up, took it. "When is your father due home again?"

"Next week." Puffed up and proud, she added, "Dad said that I can stay by myself tonight! I'm old enough now."

"But the twins and your mother will be back in the morning?" The doorman opened the door with a flourish and they stepped from the warmth of the restaurant into the slushy, drizzling night.

At her nod, he said, "Well, Wendy, if you decide that you don't like spending the night by yourself, you can call anytime and Eddie and I will come get you." He winked. "Or if you want Eddie to sleep over there, I think we can get along without him for a night."

Bounding up beside his father, Eddie grabbed Mr. Barry's wrist and tugged. "Really? You mean it?" Wendy grabbed his other wrist and danced a quick jig for joy.

Faced with their beaming smiles, Mr. Barry was lost. He threw his head back and laughed, hugging them both close with either arm. "You two were planning this, weren't you?"

"Thank you, Dad!" Eddie wrapped his arms around his father's neck and hugged tight.

Still chuckling, Mr. Barry held on for a moment and then stepped back, smoothing his son's ruffled hair. "But you have to behave yourselves," he warned, leading them toward the car. "Only one horror movie apiece. And if you call me at midnight scared out of your wits, I'm not coming over there."

Eddie sniffed haughtily. "We're not kids, Dad."

"Right," his father agreed gravely as they reached his car. A push of his key-fob unlocked the doors; it was Wendy's birthday so she sat up front while Eddie, plotting the rest of the night under his breath, slid behind her, sprawling across the seat on his back.

"Buckle up," Mr. Barry said to Eddie, cutting off his son's whine

of protest with a pointed look. Eddie, scowling, followed orders. Wendy did as well.

The rain drizzling on the roof was soothing and Wendy, lulled by the swish of the wipers and the warmth of the heater blowing steadily across her face, quickly dozed.

Soon the car was too warm, however, and she uncomfortably shifted awake. The only noise was the hum of tires on pavement, the only light the hazy glow of the headlights barely cutting through the mist ahead of them. Mr. Barry was hunched over the steering wheel, craning his neck forward.

Groggy, she lifted her head and started to ask if she could turn the heater down, when a lurching shudder rocked the car.

“SHIT!” Mr. Barry’s hand jabbed down, grabbed a lever nestled between the seats, and yanked. The car swerved violently left and right and Wendy heard the scream of tires drowning out her own tearing scream with their wail.

In slow motion the car slid left one lane, two lanes, three; Wendy threw her arms up over her face as a flood of fierce white light cut through the fog right in front of them. Dimly she felt the thump of Mr. Barry’s hand slap against her collarbone as his outthrust arm protectively pinned her to the seat. A horn blared, filling the world with noise and the blinding white light.

Years or maybe only seconds later, Wendy opened her eyes.

There was a choppy *whirr-chunk* noise to her right and groaning to her left. Her whole body felt funny, tight and numb, and her mouth was filled with a taste like salt and metal. She spat twice and it helped somewhat, but it did nothing to ease the dreamy sensation of floating. Wendy blinked and realized, very gradually, that she was upside down. The seatbelt held her firmly in place and her hair, loosened from its band, brushed the roof of the car.

Slowly, marveling at the strange sensation of her hair catching on what could only be bits of metal and glass, Wendy turned toward

the groaning. Her hand, moving of its own volition, stretched out in front of her, and stroked Mr. Barry's shoulder.

He, too, dangled toward the roof of the car, but there was something wrong. His cheek flapped open, wet and gleaming, torn apart in a wide swath at his chin. Mr. Barry's hand, studded with safety glass, rose up, took Wendy's hand in his own, and squeezed. The touch felt strange, his bones ground beneath the pressure of her fingers, but Wendy didn't let go.

"Light," he said, turning toward her so she could see the complete ruin of his face, the shattered nose, the misshapen lump of cheek and jaw. He deliriously hacked the words out one by one, stuttering and shivering as he spoke. The bottom curve of the steering wheel pressed into his sternum, cutting off his air. "Pr-pr-omise?"

Wendy nodded. He squeezed her hand again and she realized that his middle three fingers had been bent completely backwards, flopping over her knuckles loosely as he squeezed her hand over and over again, as he tried to soothe *her*, to comfort *her*.

"Eddie?" he asked. His words huffed out of him on a fine spray of blood and spit. "Is . . . Eddie?"

Craning her neck, Wendy felt the first stirrings of pain in her back and shoulders, but no matter how she twisted, she could not see. There was no guiding noise from the back, just the dying *kachunk* of the engine. "He's okay," she croaked, lying to calm him. She coughed, swallowed, and tried again. "He wore his seatbelt."

"Good." Mr. Barry's eyes fluttered closed. His lips moved but no sound came out. Wendy thought they might have formed "Eddie."

Long moments passed. His body sagged and Wendy realized that Mr. Barry must have passed out. Without thought she loosened her hand from his grip. His arm flopped onto the roof. Wendy, shifting until she could wriggle her leg to the left, kicked weakly at the dangling car keys, careful to avoid hitting Mr. Barry. It was better that he stayed unconscious until help came. On the fourth kick the engine gurgled to silence.

From the back she heard Eddie shift, groan, and mutter, “Dad?”

“He’s sleeping,” Wendy said, closing her eyes. In the distance she thought she heard the keening wail of an ambulance. Wendy relaxed, letting the seatbelt hold her weight. She felt herself drift again and welcomed it. “Let him sleep, Eddie. He needs it.”

Time enough for Eddie to see his father broken and bloodied. *Let him sleep*, Wendy prayed silently to herself. *Let him sleep.*

CHAPTER ONE

Piotr hefted the newest box of loot and hauled it to the back of the mill floor, wrestling it into their makeshift pantry with effort. It had been good scrounging this week, their cubby was filled to overflowing, and Piotr was grateful to finally be done. On top of the closest box was a portfolio, battered but blank inside, and underneath a grocery bag bulging with Prismacolor colored pencils. Piotr collected the pencils and the portfolio, leaving the pantry. There was no light to turn off behind him.

It was late and the mill was silent. Poking his nose into various nooks and crannies, Piotr checked on the kids he was watching over. Snoring quietly, Specs lolled in his recliner, glasses askew, with a tattered copy of *The Hobbit* hanging from the tips of his fingers. As he'd done every night for over fifty years, Piotr saved his place and covered Specs with an army blanket, tucking aside the thick, black glasses on the windowsill.

The tangle of GI Joe blankets Tubs normally nested in was empty. Piotr found him asleep in Dora's corner; Tubs was curled under her blanket and an old duster Piotr had discarded months before. The soles of his footie pajamas were filthy and his chubby thumb was thrust in his mouth, lips smacking around it. Dora, still awake, glanced up as Piotr poked his head behind the beaded curtain that sectioned off her part of their den.

"Nightmare," she said, jerking her thumb towards Tubs. "How'd scavengin' go?"

"Decent overall." Piotr eased into Dora's room, careful to not jar

Tubs as he joined Dora at the warped closet door balanced on cinderblocks, which she was using as an improvised desk. Making a mental note to see if he could scavenge a better tabletop for her, Piotr set the portfolio and pencils on top of Dora's dwindling stack. "How's your landscape?"

"The bark ain't right." Dora held up a sketch of the overgrown courtyard outside the mill, skeletal branches of the lone tree yearning towards the sky. "It's junk! It's all just junk." Scowling, Dora tossed down her pencil and wiped a hand across her forehead, leaving dim charcoal smudges behind. "This pencil stinks."

It didn't. The Prismacolors were the best Piotr could scavenge, but Pandora's death had left her eternally at the age where every artist's block was a major disaster, and Piotr'd long since learned to ignore her hysterics. He mussed her hair. "Keep trying. It'll come."

"Yeah, yeah. You stayin' in?" Dora smoothed the ruffled strands of her white-blond hair back behind her headband.

"At least for a while. I might walk the perimeter later."

"Kay. Thanks for the supplies. I know they ain't easy to rustle up."

He grinned. "*Nezachto*. It was no problem. *Spi spokojno*."

She waved a hand. "Yeah, yeah. You too. G'Night."

Resisting the urge to ruffle her hair again, Piotr left Dora to her sketchpad and, rather than walking the long way around, gathered his will and drifted through the half dozen walls that separated her cubbyhole from his own. Some days, he thought, there were definite benefits to being dead.

Outside the night smelled of metal and salt, the scent drifting in through the rotting boards nailed over remnants of shattered windows. His corner was on the far side of the floor, away from the kids, giving them privacy. Piotr would have liked to be closer for safety's sake but he knew they needed their space.

Once the entire San Francisco area had been filled with little groups like theirs—ghost children, nicknamed the Lost, eternally protected by teens like Piotr—but now there were darker things

preying the streets, and Piotr's makeshift family had become a rarity. It had gotten to the point that Piotr was considering leaving the dilapidated steel mill they'd taken as a home and relocating either north to the city or south into Silicon Valley. San Francisco was teeming with the living, however, as was the valley, and abandoning the relative safety of the mill was a very big decision; one Piotr was unwilling to make just yet.

Too tired to want to think further on the subject, Piotr stripped to his boxers and a tee shirt, crawling gratefully into his pallet. His window, one of the few in the deserted mill with glass still intact, gave Piotr a breathtaking view of the surrounding city and a hint of the bay stretching out beyond. Clouds drifted across the moon as Piotr sank into sleep.

Minutes or hours later, a shrill, high scream yanked him from uneasy dreams. At first Piotr thought he was in the living world again, where the sky was blue and bright and the sounds insistent, but the room was dark, and through his window clouds now rolled swiftly across the sky, obliterating the pale moonlight in shades of dark shale.

Stumbling to the window, Piotr scrubbed his eyes and squinted down at the street. Below, amid the trees, a luminescent figure, lean and white, loomed over a smaller shape, clearly one of the Lost. The kid screamed again and Piotr, snapped from his haze, shoved back from the window and pounded down the emergency stairs, leaping over rotted risers in bounds.

He was too slow. By the time he reached the ground floor both the Walker and the kid were gone; only the ice-frosted ground where the Walker had lain in wait remained. Panting heavily, Piotr glanced left and right, hoping to catch some flash of white, a telltale glimpse of the Walker's cloak to guide him in a rescue attempt.

Nothing.

Cursing, Piotr turned to go back inside . . . and found himself face to face with a second Walker. The Walker, hunched over and

slavering, leaned in close so that Piotr could smell the rot of its face, the black decay eating away at the skin of its cheeks. “Rider,” it hissed. “Meat.”

Stumbling, Piotr fell back, his teeth clicking painfully together as he thumped to the ground. Foolishly he’d run downstairs without a weapon, hoping to snag the child and race to safety before the Walker knew what’d hit him. Walkers were lone wolves—Piotr never expected a second one to be waiting nearby.

Fingertips sharpened to brutal spikes arced across Piotr’s upper arm, slashing his shirt into ribbons in four parallel lines of stinging pain. Hissing under his breath, Piotr grabbed his upper arm, and felt a gush of essence pour over his hand as he tried to stop the bleeding. The cuts were deep.

“Bastard,” he groaned and kicked at the Walker’s robed legs, hoping to at least push the monster back a few paces and give himself some space to scramble to his feet. Luck was with him. The Walker’s knees buckled at his kick, slamming the monster face first to the ground. Lifting his leg as high as it would go, Piotr kicked again, aiming for the head, trying to ignore the wet rip of his heel breaking the thin layer of skin covering the Walker’s skull. “Stay down!”

“Piotr!” Dora shouted from her window. “Here!” Balancing her hips on the windowsill, Dora leaned forward and flung her arm out in a wide arc. There was a whistling noise and a brief flash of moonlight on silver as a butter knife from the pantry clattered to the sidewalk mere feet from Piotr’s outstretched and grasping hand.

“Fight to the death,” Piotr grumbled, darting forward and snagging the blade with the tips of his fingers, “and she tosses me a dull knife. Great.” Still, he knew what he was doing and even a dull knife was better than no knife at all.

The Walker, either sensing danger, or simply tired of the fight, flung a handful of pebbles and dirt into Piotr’s face, blinding him. Cursing, Piotr swiped his free hand across his eyes, scrabbling to see,

but the Walker had used his momentary blindness as a chance to flee. The courtyard was empty once again.

Groaning, Piotr struggled to his feet. He sniffed the air but his scuffle with the Walker had left a dense smell of rot clinging to his clothing. There was no way he could track the beast by smell alone.

Trudging back inside, Piotr hid a bitter smile. It looked like the decision whether to stay or go had been stripped away. Thanks to his clumsy fighting, the Walker had gotten away and now it knew where some Lost could be found. It would be back. They had to leave.

Inside, Piotr was met with anxious, pale faces. Tubs, clinging to Piotr's duster, huddled behind Dora, and Specs peered past splintery boards to the courtyard below. Piotr wanted to soothe them, to swear they were safe, but he didn't want to lie. Instead he remained silent.

The silence grew too long. Abruptly Specs turned from the window, pushing his round frames up on his nose. His hair, dark with grease, fell over one eye. "That was the third time this week, Piotr. We should pack."

"*Da*," Piotr sighed. "We should." He knelt down and Tubs flung himself into his arms, sobbing into his shoulder. Piotr stroked the back of Tubs' hair and let him cry.

"It spotted me," Dora said. "I saw it watchin' me."

"Most likely." Piotr stood, Tubs resting on his hip, and hugged the little boy close. Life seeped into Piotr from Tubs' skin in blue arcs, dulling his pain. The wounds on his arm began to slowly seal shut, itching like fire. "I am unsure but, yes, most likely."

"Perhaps we might bunk down with Miss Elle or Miss Lily," Specs offered, hesitant to bridge the topic of Elle to Piotr. "Or perhaps Mister James."

The thought of begging his fellow Riders for a place to stay made Piotr laugh roughly. "James? I'd rather leave you on your own." He set Tubs down and smoothed the wispy blond hair back from his forehead. "You okay now? Yes? Go wash your face."

When Tubs had toddled off, Piotr reached out and enfolded both Dora and Specs into a hug. Specs clung tighter than Dora, trembling lightly, the remaining unspent years of life flowing into Piotr in small, sharp spikes. The itching on his arm faded, replaced with smooth, blessed coolness.

Piotr squeezed them both and then stepped back, alert and wary, listening for intruders. "*Spaseebo.*" He gestured to his upper arm. "Thank you. For the aid."

Uncomfortable, Specs shrugged. "It is the least we can do, Piotr. You're welcome."

"They, the Walkers, are getting closer." Piotr crossed his arms over his chest.

"And smarter." Dora chewed her thumbnail. "Remember, Specs? When we saw one of 'em grab that kid right outta a tree last week? They ain't ever done that before."

"Do you think it's because of the White Lady?" Specs asked, pushing his glasses higher on his nose.

"White Lady or no, so long as you three are safe, I don't care the reasons why." Piotr ran his hands through his hair. He was still shaking, his mouth sour with adrenaline. The mill had been in a safe zone for years, but with the coming of the White Lady almost no place was safe anymore. The Walkers were everywhere.

"Honestly, I don't know what to do. Walker territory is spreading and the mill is stuck between them." Piotr leaned against a nearby wall, tilted his head back, and closed his eyes. They felt gritty with lack of sleep.

"We ain't strong enough to fight 'em." Dora drummed her fingers along the kitchen countertop. "Ain't stupid enough, neither."

"Since we are running, we should decide where to go," Specs said. "Which shall it be? Move closer to the bay or the valley?"

"I thought of that before, but there are too many of the living," Piotr said, rubbing his hands across his cheeks, feeling the light rasp of hair that would never grow past a certain point, brushed by cal-

luses that would never fade. Piotr pushed away from the wall. “You should weigh in. What do you want to do?”

Hesitantly, after several seconds, Dora hunkered down into a squat and, wrapping her arms around her knees, murmured, “I don’t mean to start no fuss, Piotr, but I wanna stay with Elle for awhile.” Before Piotr could protest, she hurried to say, “I know we’re safe with you, but there’s been a lotta Walkers ’round lately and you can’t be with us 24/7. We gotta be somewhere more, I dunno, more castle-like, you know? With a moat or somethin’. Def . . . dev . . . dependable.”

“Defensible?” Much as he hated to admit it, Dora had a point. “Specs?”

“Staying with Miss Elle does indeed appear to be the best course of action.” Specs took off his glasses and cleaned them on his shirt. Like Dora, Specs was too thin and gangly, caught in an early growth spurt by a death that had come too soon. Eternally eleven. “No offense.”

Sighing, Piotr rubbed his hand along the wall, feeling the spots spongy with decay crumble away under his fingertips. Elle was not going to like this. “*Net*, there is none taken. Fine. Go pack up then and we’ll go in the morning. Pandora, please pack for Tubs?”

“Gotcha.” Dora and Specs drifted towards their quarters, leaving Piotr alone by the window. Lost in thought, he stared down at the empty courtyard and watched the swirling fog drift in from the bay. With a Walker down there somewhere, he knew there’d be no more sleep for him tonight. None at all.

Dawn came, lightening the sky to a pale grey, and Piotr carried Tubs piggyback as they made their way through the shriveled remains of the world. Picking a path through crumbling brick streets, they followed the whisper of surf breaking against the piers in the bay, leaving the mill behind. At first the going was slow; Piotr’s turf was around fifteen miles from where Elle and her own Lost squatted dangerously near the tourist zone, amid the life and

heat of Pier 39 and North Beach, wading through the press of humanity that eddied like the tides.

A steady pace brought them just inside Elle's territory by mid-morning. The idea of leaving the kids so close to the haunts of the living bothered Piotr deeply, but Elle was particular about her space, and likely wouldn't stand for another Rider on her turf for long—especially if that Rider were Piotr.

As if sensing his thoughts, an arrow speared the road inches from his toes, shooting shards of brick shrapnel in every direction. Piotr raised his hands high as the arrow quivered in the street, testament to Elle's skill. Raising his voice, Piotr glanced left and right, trying to determine from which direction the missile had flown. "*Dobrye utro*, Elle!" he called, striving to keep his tone light, cheerful. "Good morning!"

"How many times have I told you to stop with that foreign jibber-jabber?" echoed a reply, sounding both close and far all at once. Elle had picked her hiding spot well. "A simple 'Hi, Elle' will do me just fine."

Piotr bowed at the waist, struggling to keep his senses attuned to their surroundings, attempting to assess which direction the arrow had come from. "My apologies! Good morning, Elle. I see that you've gotten better at hiding."

"You haven't." There was a light tread behind him and Elle's hand firmly cupped the back of his neck, the strength in her fingers daring him to try something. Knowing the power of those hands and the muscles behind them, Piotr held still.

"Elle!" cried Dora, dropping her bags and flinging her arms around the slight girl holding him hostage. "I missed you!"

The hand squeezed sharply once, pinching, before dropping away. Elle turned to embrace the child. Freed, Piotr swiveled and dropped his hands cautiously to his pockets, hooking his thumbs just inside.

Dora had always adored Elle and the feeling was mutual.

Watching them hug was like watching a rainbow appear from the mist—all the darkness fell away and they were momentarily awash in happiness and light. Where the two of them touched, crackles of blue essence hummed, the years traveling from Dora into Elle and back to Dora in a circuit of joy. Dora was so pleased Piotr could taste her energy on the air itself.

Keeping her tone easy, Elle glanced up from rubbing her cheek along the top of Dora's head, and said, "I never'a thought a palooka like you'd show your mug around here. Didn't I give you the bum's rush last time?"

"Yes, well, times change." Piotr scratched his chin and glanced up at the brilliant silver sky. The sun shone with fiery white light, basking them in its dim warmth and faded glory, but in the distance thick black clouds churned above the sea. "The weather's looking foul. May we move this elsewhere?"

Elle rose from her crouch, muscles rippling. Her short, fringed tunic and thigh-high skirt left nothing to the imagination and Piotr politely turned his face away. Noticing his discomfort, Elle smirked. "Fine, ya wet blanket. What's eating you?"

"A Walker was poking around the mill last night."

Elle stilled and her blonde waves, silvery pale and close-cropped, trembled. "It sussed you out."

"Yes. And it escaped." Piotr shoved his hands deep into his pockets and hunched over slightly. "So I was wondering if you'd—"

"Of course." Elle turned fluidly, taking Dora's hand in her left hand and Specs' hand in her right. "This way."

Once, when they had been on better terms, Elle had confided in Piotr and shared some of her living memories like the jewels they were. She'd been a gymnast once, and rich, spoiled by parents with too much money and not enough time for their wild daughter. Archery, horseback riding, a separate tutor for every fancy. In the Never, these skills made her a handy ally but a terrible enemy. Piotr struggled to keep up as Elle sped through walls and past throngs of

living men, their heat momentarily searing but fading the further they traveled. Confidently athletic, Elle raced along, never turning to note his pace behind.

It was early afternoon when they neared the pier and Elle's home. Unlike the mill, one derelict building among many where few humans bothered wandering, Elle's tribe squatted in an abandoned bookshop just off the main strip of Pier 39, the walls papered with droppings and overrun with nesting rats.

If he squinted, Piotr could just make out the words "Coming Soon" above the door. The letters were pink with age, however, and the floor inside was littered with the ghostly living shapes of sleeping rats huddled beneath overturned bookshelves and gently decaying easy chairs. Termites chewed the stairs, seagulls cooed in the eaves, and the floor was white and pebbled with decades of dried droppings. The living animal heat was mild however, easy to stand, and Piotr passed the rats with no problem.

The third floor of the bookstore was empty of furniture but sectioned into offices, the areas claimed by Elle's dozen or so Lost clearly marked with bundles of possessions and sectioned apart with piles of books that reached the warped and splintered ceiling. Elle led them here, leaving the kids to pick spaces of their own while she unstrung her bow and checked the arrows in her quiver.

Piotr, at a loss for what to do in this room once familiar but now alien, hovered near the door as Tubs explored the cupboard underneath the stairs and Specs unpacked in a relatively clean hollow in a far corner lined with the ghostly original copies of Yeats, Dickenson, and Blake.

Without pausing from her work, Elle said, "I have to hand it to you, Pete, you've done a good job with those kids. They kept pace pretty well."

Piotr crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the doorway. He was surprised to realize that he was relieved. Elle was a good fighter, and smart. She'd keep his Lost safe. "That wasn't me. I still don't train them the way you do."

She snorted. "You oughta."

"*Da?* Well, I say let kids be kids." Piotr rubbed the bridge of his nose. It was warm up here, and close. He felt as if he could barely breathe. "As long as they want to be, that is."

"Whatever. You staying, too?" Elle glanced up from her task. Her voice was pitched low. "I don't see that excuse you call a bag."

"Have you forgiven me?"

"Never will." Elle returned to her task, her fingers flying nimbly over the arch of the bow, smoothing and polishing the grain of the wood. "But maybe I can forget for a bit. We can be copasetic for an emergency."

"Then I'm not going to impose." Ignoring the bittersweet pang at her words, Piotr sketched a shallow bow. "I owe you that courtesy." Glad to have the current state of their animosity sorted out, Piotr stepped away from the door and raised his voice. "I'm leaving."

"What?" Dora appeared at the door of a far office, pale-faced and scowling. "You ain't staying too?"

"Sorry, I can't." Piotr knelt down and opened his arms. Tubs trundled willingly in for a hug but Specs and Dora hung back, both frowning. "I need to go get the lay of the land."

Dora tried again. "But it ain't safe—"

"For you." Passing Tubs to Elle's waiting arms, Piotr rose and dusted his knees. "Walkers usually don't eat Riders, remember?" he teased, poking his bicep. "Our meat's too tough."

"Technically, you aren't a Rider anymore," Specs pointed out, pushing his glasses up his nose. When Piotr wouldn't drop his arms, Specs reluctantly stepped to Piotr's side and hugged him. When he squeezed, Piotr could feel Specs' ribs and the steady thrum of the years un-lived just beneath his skin. "You quit, remember?"

"Teenagers, then." Specs stepped away and Piotr held out his arms. "Dora, please? I don't know when I'll be back this way again." He glanced out the window as he pleaded, noting the swiftly rising fog rolling in from the bay and the dappled clouds covering the shining silver sun. The storm was rolling in.

"I changed my mind." Hurrying across the room, Dora dropped her backpack at his feet and flung herself at Piotr. Clinging powerfully to his waist she cried, "I ain't stayin' here without you."

"Geeze, thanks," Elle muttered under her breath, and Piotr hid a smile.

"It's safer here for you." Piotr knelt down and embraced Dora tightly. "Elle is amazing at this. You know how good she is with her bow. She'll keep you safe."

"But you ain't comin' back if I stay!"

"Pandora, my *malen'kaya printsessa*," Piotr groaned. He hugged her tighter. "I promise. I promise that when I can guarantee there aren't any more Walkers sniffing around the mill, I'll come back for you three, yes? We'll go back home as soon as it's safe. *Da?*"

She sniffled, drawing back slightly. "You promise?"

"Cross my heart."

"Kay." Pulling away, Dora knelt down and sorted through her bag until she had her sketchbook in hand. She flipped to the last page and ripped the tree sketch free. "Take it. You promised."

"I promise," he agreed, taking her sketch and tucking it away before dropping a final kiss on her tousled curls.

Elle, balancing Tubs easily on her hip, followed Piotr down the stairs. One-handed, she loosened a dagger from her hip and slapped the flat of the blade against his upper arm until Piotr took the gift and tied it at his side. Like all Elle's weapons, the dagger was honed to a razor-sharp edge and curved cruelly.

"Offer's still open if you change your mind." Elle jiggled Tubs until he giggled. "Isn't that right? Isn't it?" Tubs babbled happily and the warm haze of his energy surrounded them in a sweetly scented mist.

"Keep them safe." Piotr momentarily considered kissing Elle's cheek but thought better of it. Dagger or not, she was still pissed at him.

In the distance a trolley bell dinged, faint and faraway. The fog

was starting to really move now, rolling across the streets in swift and steady waves, already up to Piotr's knees. Up the street the living thronged together, ignoring the fog and the dank smell of rotting fish rising from the sea. Nearby a woman screamed laughter; for the living it would be piercing, but Elle and Piotr were cushioned by the years of empty silence and could barely hear the cry.

"You keep yourself safe," Elle retorted. "Just cuz I hate you don't mean I want you pushin' up daisies. Again, I mean." She smirked.

"I'll try to do my best," he replied gravely and left, moving swiftly towards the shifting, eddying crowd.

"You always do," Elle sighed, waiting at the door until Piotr had vanished into fog and humanity. Then, fondly, she added, "Jackass."