"He hasn’t come home,” Josh paces across the bedroom, floorboards screech under his heavy steps. “He hasn’t come home.”

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Tyler gets kidnapped. Josh is an amateur detective.

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[poisoned food](#) / [outlandish dreamer](#) universe, but feel free to read it like a stand-alone work.
Chapter 1

“He hasn’t come home,” Josh paces across the bedroom, floorboards screech under his heavy steps. “He hasn’t come home.”

Jenna is just a dull voice in his cellphone, currently miles away and trying to think rationally.

“Josh, calm down,” she hushes him though she’s a pure worry.

“Calm down?! Tyler is fucking missing and all you can say is a stupid calm down?”

Jenna snorts into his ear.

Josh punches a pillow.

“But what if he’s having hard times at work? He could decide to just take a stroll? It’s not the first time he’s acting like this-” she’s babbling, conjectures thrown to the wind.

“I was there, Tyler’s boss said he left early. He didn’t explain anything,” Josh glances at the 8:40 on the digital clock. It mocks him. Everything does.

“It’s Tyler, Josh,” Jenna utters. Josh adjusts his phone in his sweaty palm.

His luck is like a kite, he’s just a clumsy little kid who can’t keep the string in his hands, and it slips between his fingers, and the light frame vanishes in the sky.

“He isn’t picking his phone,” Josh keeps observing the clock. 8:41 pm.

It’s too bright.

“He sometimes just ignores people, but…”

“But what, Jen?” Josh stumbles over the pile of his clothes on the floor.

“I know what you’re thinking about,” Jenna says sternly. “VESSEL needs to get something from Tyler again, right? Stop it. Let’s just think I’m on my way, and please, I’m begging you- don’t try to solve this problem just by yourself.”

‘Hide under the blankets and the monster won’t catch you,’ Josh hears instead. ‘Don’t go anywhere.’

“You think something has happened then?” Josh is shaking, plopping onto the unmade bed. It’s cold without Tyler.

“I don’t know. Tyler’s mental state has never been… stable. I can only tell you it’s not VESSEL this time,” Jenna responds, almost furious.

Having a friend who works for a secret organization should be cool, actually. But in this instance, it’s a disturbing fact. It’s almost 9 pm and Tyler’s phone has been on voicemail since noon. Josh is now cursing himself for not telling Jenna about this earlier; Tyler tends to disappear, but he always comes back, spilling random excuses. But today is different. And it eats Josh, enwathing his lungs.
in a black fog to the point it’s almost impossible to take a breath, and he’s dizzy, because the story takes a new turn.

“Josh?”

“I’m just thinking.”

“About how much you hate VESSEL agents?”

“About those events,” Josh inhales with difficulty. “With cloning and visions and stuff— they’ve changed him a lot,” they broke him — it’s hard to accept, but it’s too obvious to just let it go. “He’s like… he’s fragile. And lonely, and I don’t want him to be alone right now,” Josh tries to snatch the car keys without that dinging noise not to let Jenna know he’s not going to just sit and wait for any news.

“I know,” Jenna sighs through the speaker. “We’ll find him, I promise.”

With that, she ends the call.

Josh listens to the short beeps, cringing before dialing Tyler’s number for the umpteenth time — a toneless mechanic voice insists on trying again later.

“Damn,” Josh throws the device on the mattress.

The keys are clamped in his palm, the thoughts are reeling in his head — when he thinks everything is finally getting better, his life just kicks him in the balls and laughs, laughs, laughs, because Josh is too gullible. It’s been two years of yellow hair, two years of relatively peaceful life with his boyfriend-almost-a-husband, and of course, Josh has been desperate enough to believe that it could last for forever.

He hoped so.

Until today.

Josh is smarter now, he can spot the difference between the patterns of Tyler’s behavior — between ‘he’s not replying my messages because he’s mad with me’ and ‘he physically can’t pick up his phone because he’s lying half dead somewhere’. Unfortunately, Josh has experienced both kinds of these situations. And, regardless of his attempts to convince himself it’s just one of Tyler’s quirks, the second option is more plausible right now.

He takes his phone again.

Josh: hold on

Josh: Jenna’s gonna find ya

Josh: please be alive

All of the messages stay unread.

Maybe, Tyler’s phone is just out of battery.

“Hold on,” Josh whispers, thinking up the route. He has a vague idea though.

It’s been two years of relatively peaceful life, but also two years of nightmares, of ‘Josh-nothing-feels-real’ late night conversations, of —
‘What if I kill you one day?’

It still cripples both of them.

It’s been two years of working at their shitty jobs, two years of unwillingness to move forward — two years of blackness of Tyler’s marks. They haven’t seen any spaceships, any UFOs, they haven’t met any Contactees, but Tyler is missing.

So Josh decides to drive his car to the place where all of it has started.

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Tyler is not lying half dead in the middle of nowhere. He’s lying barely awake, he’s most likely in the forest, and he’s quivering. His neck is a steel rod, too rigid to bend it.

The night is just a navy-blue ink splashing around him, the grass under his back is still soggy after the rain — he’s discouraged, but he remembers how it’s been raining for three days straight; it’s probably the only thing that somehow clings to him. His pockets are empty — were they supposed to be full? A hole on the shoulder of his windcheater, was somebody dragging him through the woods? Dirt, leaves and pine resin stick to his face and his mind is blank of any more memories.

“What?” his lips are so dry the skin splits as he begins to speak.

Speaking to himself too often is not healthy.

Speaking to himself, Tyler learns things.

His neck hurts more than the rest of his body — it crunches when he turns his head and sits up, and is greeted by an instant rush of blood to his brain. The rocks under his ass aren’t that smooth either.

Josh is probably going crazy right now —

Josh.

Tyler is glad he still remembers him, kneeling on the ground and thinking if his legs are going to hold him when he gets up.

“What’s going on?”

Tyler would be terrified to hear an answer.

And he is, honestly, not knowing what could lead to these consequences — has he hit his head again? His heart is a jackhammer, and his palms are numb — he frantically touches the back of his head not finding any bumps or blood here. And Tyler is about to let out a breath of relief, but the air gets stuck in his windpipe.

A tree branch crackles like a bone getting fractured, and again, and again, and once more, and somebody’s about to assail him, a predator — or just a human, Tyler doesn’t know which is worse. The tree crowns are wavering, the grass rustles under somebody’s feet — Tyler whips around, taken aback by a swish — and that’s when he spots it, standing under the moonlight, a figure with abnormally long limbs and with abnormally melon-like bald skull.

Tyler doesn’t need to think twice before galloping away from a sinister Creature — he wades through the bushes on his path, too aghast to look back once again. He just hightails up all
hills and down all dales, he just wants to get out of this twisted circuit — Tyler trips over the snag and falls down the shallow gully, head over heels.

He’s out for what feels like one minute, waking up with the start and finding himself being enclosed by the same déjá-vu. The Creature is not chasing him anymore, and Tyler blames it on the night and on his mind.

“Josh, Josh, Josh,” Tyler slaps the side of his heavy head, slaps his cheeks with his tremorous hands, really hard — just to keep himself awake for as long as possible.

He gets up again, dusts off his jeans, now ripped on the knees and revealing bruises here, and he walks. Walking turns to running, and running brings just giddiness, and Tyler blinks to make these black flies in front of his eyes go away. He’s jogging, losing track of time; he’s only forced to stop once, just to piss on the tree when he makes sure that no one is going to attack him from the rear. And then he’s running again, crashing down couple more times and nearly snapping his neck once, when he notices a gap between the trees, a clear sky with the glitters of stars.

He’s suddenly enthralled, hurrying towards the spot which isn’t surrounded by the forest, fleeing though he’s about to collapse due to exhaustion and thirst.

Here’s one certain sensation, tangling over Tyler’s subconscious, making him squint his eyes shut.

“I’ve done something bad,” Tyler starts his inner dialogue again. “Something really, really bad.”

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Josh has been driving for hours, not having a plan B in case his current one won’t work. Jenna could come up with a better plan, probably, but Josh is too anxious to take a breather — the headlights keep throwing yellow rays all over the road as he races forward with nearly illegal speed. He’s approaching the wood, determined to find the spot where Tyler’s mobile laboratory once was — with its antennas that could catch extraterrestrial signals, with the computers and radios tuned to white noise waves.

Though this task might be a struggle since Josh doesn’t quite remember where it had exactly been located.

Something on the periphery draws Josh’s attention and makes him slow the car down.

“Hey?” he leans to the open window.

Somebody’s tottering down the roadside, mostly limping and hunching their shoulders and clutching their right side.

Somebody’s who’s wearing a familiar green windcheater.

“Tyler?” Josh pulls over but almost runs him over. Tyler jumps off the trajectory he’s been hobbling at and sprints back into the woods. “Shit,” Josh throws the car door open, icy air prickles his exposed skin. “Tyler, wait!”

Tyler absconds, Josh keeps hollering; the wind swallows his words instantly, spitting them back in the form of echo.

“Ty-y-ler!”
Tyler outs himself by stepping on a tree branch.

It takes one more dart towards the sound, and Josh flings his body over the figure in Tyler’s clothes, wrapping his arms around their midsection and hauling them backwards.

“Tyler?”

Hugging Tyler now is like hugging a plastic doll. Josh is afraid he might see a mask painted on Tyler’s face instead of his true emotions.

“Jesus, what have you been doing here?”

And Tyler finally stops lashing out, kicking the trampled grass under their shoes.

“Why did you try to hide?”

Josh wants to kiss him, to comfort him, but Tyler ducks his head when Josh’s fingertips skim over his cheekbone. Everything is wrong, it never stops being a splinter in Josh’s mind as he steers Tyler through the trees, towards his car parked athwart the road with the door from the driver’s side still open.

“I’m s-sorry.”

“What?”

Josh is glad that Tyler is still able to speak, but his stutter is back which indicates the last stage of his invariable nervousness.

“Sorry,” Tyler lowers his head as he gets into the passenger seat.

“For running away?” Josh takes his camouflage jacket off and throws it over Tyler’s shoulders to keep him warm.

“I didn’t recognize your car, I thought it was someone else’s car,” Tyler drawls, massaging his neck. “I d-didn’t want to take a ride with unknown people. I’m sorry. I’m so- I’m so confused.”

The more Tyler talks, the eerier this situation becomes.

“Why did you come here?” Josh asks, turning the heater on and starting the engine.

“I wish I knew,” Tyler is just staring at the dashboard. “Josh, something has definitely happened, but I don’t remember? Like, anything?”

This doesn’t sound like something Josh wants to hear right now.

Josh looks at Tyler’s face, not finding any serious injuries here — there are just diminutive scrapes on his left cheek, covered with the dried blood, little dirty smears on his chin. And Tyler is pale. Very pale.

“Josh?” Tyler’s wriggling on his seat, beyond alert now. “What happened to me?”

He’s on the edge, lips bluish and eyes contoured with dark circles. Josh is not an astute psychologist, but he starts with little things — with focusing on his own breathing, with making sure he won’t upset Tyler even more.

He begins with a simple question.
“The last thing that you remember?” Josh is watching the road now. He could’ve said he’s a qualified driver but a fresh color of Tyler’s weirdness is a great hindrance.

“I don’t remember anything since the last evening.”

It’s okay, Josh thinks. Stress might do that. Josh just has to be gentle.

“What do you remember from the last evening?”

Tyler picks at the hole on his torn sleeve, widening it.

“Um. We went out for a walk, and then there was a downpour so we had to run back home-”

“Tyler,” Josh nearly hits the brakes. “Are you sure it’s the last thing?”

“Is something wrong?” Tyler frowns.

Josh smiles bitterly.

“It’d been two days ago, Ty.”

“No way,” Tyler looks at him, perplexed. “And what happened yesterday then?”

Josh’s jaws hurt from clenching his teeth so hard.

“Yesterday we were at work. Came back home. Had dinner. Had sex.”

“Are you kidding me? Why don’t I remember?”

“I found you in a frigging forest, do you really think I’m heartless enough to prank you right now?”

Josh gazes at him with the pent-up irritation.

“Yeah, right.”

Josh’s phone buzzes in his jacket Tyler is wearing now — Josh nods and Tyler fishes it out of the pocket, touching the screen and showing Josh one new message.

Jenna: I’m at the door. Where are you?

“Jenna’s going to bite your head off,” Josh says. “And mine, for a company,” he’s pulling the steering wheel with one hand while he’s typing, one more rule is broken tonight.

Josh: found him. he’s fine. we r driving home

It’s not much of a surprise that the reply comes promptly.

Jenna: Thank God!.. Where’s Tyler’s phone?

Josh reads it out loud. Tyler seems to be dozing off; Josh takes a risk of losing the track and turns to him, shaking his shoulder.

“Where’s your phone?”

“Ah?”

“Where’s your phone, Tyler?” Josh repeats.
Tyler scratches his nape.

“I, um, I don’t know? Damn, I think I had my wallet as well?” he’s pulling his windcheater up and Josh notices that Tyler’s jeans are unbuckled.

Please, no.

“Who did it?” Josh gestures at the zipper before turning back to the road.

Though, Tyler doesn’t find it a problem.

“Me, I’m sure- don’t worry, I just forgot,” he quickly zips his pants up.

The thought of somebody sexually assaulting Tyler causes an onslaught of nausea in Josh’s stomach.

“Okay,” he says meekly. “You’ve lost your memory, your phone and wallet, but it’s definitely not just a mugging. Any ideas?”

It’s not that Tyler’s brain can be useful now, no, Josh just doesn’t want to drown in uncertainty.

“I don’t know.” Tyler shrugs.

This answer perfectly fits Josh’s expectations.

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Tyler is eating donuts, which is bizarre since he’s not a big fan of chocolate and powdered sugar. He stops chewing and undresses obediently when Jenna asks him to, he lets her examine the skin on his neck and on the crooks of his elbows with the magnifier in attempts to find any evidences.

In fact, they get nothing.

“Have you been unconscious?” Jenna asks patiently.

“I woke up walking,” Tyler is more preoccupied with brushing the crumbs off his chest than with replying to her. “Almost l-like sleepwalking, but I didn’t remember falling asleep. And then there was Josh’s car. He saved me,” Tyler’s certainly unnerved, it radiates through each word.

They’re sharing a couch in the living room that has somehow turned to something of the emergency room — here’s a blood pressure monitor, a thermometer and other medical things, including bottles with anxiety pills. Sitting next to Tyler, Josh feels uncomfortable; he’s told Jenna his part of the story, and now it’s Tyler’s turn, but he’s still unable to synchronize their timelines.

“He tried to run away and almost kicked me,” Josh remarks.

“Okay. Have you been bleeding?” Jenna sticks the tip of her tongue out as she inspects the back of Tyler’s head. There are fallen leaves in the tuft of his hair.

“No. Here,” Tyler pokes at his cheek, the scrapes are not noticeable already. “A little.”

His eyes are glazed over, moves slow and cautious, as if he might just keel over, imbalanced. Tyler just transmits his fright to Josh, he’s contagious, and God knows what could’ve happened if — or what has already happened. He complains of pain in his neck, but there’s no microchips implanted
into it; Josh is about to take Tyler to the hospital to survey him just in case.

Tyler doesn’t blink until Josh pinches his bare thigh.

“He is either heavily drugged or brainwashed,” Josh just can’t hold it back. Tyler keeps quiet, swallowing a mix of dough and chocolate.

“He’s not acting like himself,” Jenna agrees. “And he has these bloodstains on his sleeves, from the inner side. The ones you get when… when you donate blood, for example, and some of it leaks out of the needle-holes if they’re not bandaged properly. But he does not have any needle-marks on his arms. And he’s zoning out more than usual.”

“I just don’t remember what’s happened, that’s all,” Tyler shoves another chunk of donut into his mouth.

Aware of Tyler’s forgetfulness, both Josh and Jenna are just trying to get him out of his shell. Though he flinches each time Josh touches him.

Jenna is reckless, shining a small flashlight into Tyler’s eyes.

“I don’t think it’s a concussion. Though… What have you eaten for breakfast?”

“These?” Tyler blindly points at the vanilla-smelling box on his lap.

“Eggs,” Josh corrects him.

“And coffee,” Tyler says confidently.


She puts a flashlight into the pocket of her jeans. Tyler still doesn’t mind sitting in front of her in just his grey briefs; in his normal state, he would never ever let anyone treat him this way, but this time he just… doesn’t refuse. And it bangs in Josh’s head.

“Yeah. He’s most likely gotten kidnapped, sedated and robbed in addition to all the aforesaid,” Jenna coaxes Tyler to outstretch his arms. They’re trembling so intensively he drops them down on his lap.

“Why is he so pale?” Josh asks. The skin around Tyler’s mouth looks blue as well.

“Because something erased two days of my life from my memory?” Tyler pops open a can of soda to wash his late dinner down.

“Are you sure you haven’t been bleeding?” Jenna takes her bag with the medical supplies.

Tyler nods.

“I’m gonna check your blood pressure, it’d be cool to take your blood for a test to define if there’s a drug in it, but I guess somebody has already done that,” Jenna sums it up. “Any more blood loss might lead to a faint.”

“What do you mean?” Josh sets the sweets away from Tyler. He has no desire to watch him suffer from nasty stomach troubles due to overeating.

“Whoever did that, they did it with purpose, it wasn’t a regular kidnapping,” Jenna declares, resting her hands on Tyler’s knee. The bruise here is gone, though in the car Josh saw it distinctly. “I’m
99% sure they’ve taken his blood. Lots of it. Too much even for Tyler’s self-healing powers- he hasn’t recovered yet.”

Green lights officially turn to red.

“But who could do that? Aliens?!” Josh exclaims, he is not ready for the truth though he yet craves to find it.

“I doubt it. This doesn’t look like the alien abduction,” Jenna shrugs hesitantly. “I hate that, but I’m gonna find a chemical or serum or whatever zombified him,” Jenna changes the tone of her voice as she begins to talk to Tyler. Sickly-sweet. “You probably need to use bathroom? Take shower, piece your thoughts together, and,” she then gives Tyler one of those vials with a cap. “You know what to do with that.”

Tyler just takes it apathetically.

“I don’t know what h-happened today. Or yesterday. I’m sorry,” he says as he rubs his temple.

“No worries, it’s not your fault,” Jenna soothes him. Fake smile, fake enthusiasm.

All the sugar in Tyler’s system is probably going to screw up the results.

Josh doesn’t want to deal with the billow of the newfound problems. He just wants his Tyler back.

Chapter End Notes

i hope my horse isn't dead
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Tyler keeps calling.

“Hey, Ty?” a loud sigh pierces Josh’s left side brain. “You’re not gonna believe what happened.”

Chapter Notes

corpse description warning

Tyler is acting more like himself three days later — tests don’t reveal any chemicals in Tyler’s system, any toxins, Jenna reports it as she calls them. She gives them a lecture about how tricky Tyler’s blood is.

“His body had absorbed the drug. Or whatever it was,” Jenna says. Josh can hear her tap her fingernails on her phone case.

Tyler is fine. There’s no need to visit them or there’s no need to take Tyler to VESSEL. It’s a common decision that Tyler stays home from work for a while; his boss doesn’t mind either — Tyler hasn’t taken unscheduled days off for years.

Josh’s heart is heavy, an organic sack stuffed with anxiety and doubts. He watches, he watches closely, to figure out if Tyler’s attitude is a bit off — it’s not, Tyler has always been rather eccentric. Tyler eats, Tyler sleeps beside Josh in the bed (a cold, cold body pressed to Josh’s side, clammy hands touching his nipples, his stomach, gliding down and teasing his half-hard cock through his boxers — ‘…not now, love. Don’t overstrain yourself. Yes, Ty, of course I want you, we just… we need some time.’ Josh needs a break. Josh blushes at the thought he’s prevaricating).

He hopes Tyler is going to tell him what happened in the forest.

But Tyler doesn’t bring it up anymore.

Three days pass like a blurred flash —

But that’s when the police find a dead body in the woods.

It circulates in morning news — the guy who worked at the gas station store was in the wrong place at the wrong time — and here he is now, packed in a black body bag like an ugly caterpillar. His injuries are apparently too terrible to be shown on TV — they must’ve been caused by a wild animal, TV announcer says. He’d been killed approximately two days ago, she adds. And his face and torso are quite mutilated.

“We would like to offer our condolences to his family,” the girl with a big black mic tries to pretend she’s crying though her stone-like facial features say she’s bored.
One more close-up of the crime scene, of the police cars nearby.

This shocking reportage is like a flow of caffeine into Josh’s system.

Tyler grunts and chokes on his cereal.

“I was here,” he rasps as he stops coughing.

“But you didn’t see anything?” Josh is about to grab Tyler by the shoulders and shake him like a
snow globe.

But Tyler is exceedingly dejected.

“I…” Tyler sets the bowl back on the table. “I don’t know. I still don’t remember. We have to
find the pictures,” his trembling hand snatches his laptop. “What if VESSEL thinks I did it? Or the
police? What if I’m gonna get arrested?!”

That’s gonna be the end of Josh’s little world.

“Stop blaming yourself,” Josh is like Tyler’s anti-stress therapy, a listener to his rambling and a
shoulder to cry on. It’s not that Tyler cries way too much, but his brain is wounded and so is his
soul.

But Tyler doesn’t stop blaming himself, surrounding himself with the feeling of guilt. Josh’s heart
is bleeding.

“They’re not gonna arrest you, they don’t have anything against you!”

It doesn’t stop bleeding when Tyler finds the HQ pictures of the corpse, they’re definitely gonna
be taken down as a graphic content, gonna be censored, and Josh does not feel honored that he has
a chance to look at them at the moment.

God, he wishes they were banned already.

“He looks like he’s gotten shoved face first into the pool of acid,” Tyler states, scrolling through
the article.

Just at the sight of it, the toast in Josh’s stomach turns to a brick drowned in a bucket of coffee.

The dead guy’s face is decorated with plethora of blisters, with the yellowish-red blotches and
darkened sores all over his neck under the jaw and on his bare chest. Well, he does not have a chest
anymore — there’s just a gaping tear where the sternum once was, with the white stubs of his ribs,
some of the internal organs are misplaced, covered in clogged blood and dirt. Here are the lumps
of swollen dislocated joints under the corpse’s grayish skin, arms crooked and fingers balled into
fists. He’s like an open anatomy textbook, bowels on display. Here are four images, each taken
from different angle.

And Tyler saves these horrible photos.

The coffee tastes like just a sour water. Josh is too sensitive.

“I haven’t heard anything about tragedies like this before,” Josh utters. “Not in our town, at least.”

“Who could do that?” Tyler finally closes the tab. “And why was I there?”

This question is a manifestation, like Tyler is about to jump into the new investigation; despite all
the previous mishaps, Tyler is still sneaky and sly.

“What do you think, Josh?”

Josh seriously thinks he has to ground him like a teenager just to keep him away from the forest. In his mind, Josh is already leaving the USA, ready to dissipate in a beautiful sunset.

“I think we need to call Jenna,” Josh says. The words are like the slime on his tongue. Tyler’s kidnapping and the mysterious murder can be related.

“Do you really think she doesn’t know what happened?” Tyler is now surfing through other freshly written articles about the accident. “I bet she’s going to appear here in like… three… two…”

“I’m not joking. Enough,” Josh takes the laptop and closes it.

“Why are people dying all around me?”

“They’re- do you want to call it a curse?”

Tyler shrugs.

“Who knows. I’m always in the middle of some boiling shit, and I’m dragging you down. All the time,” Tyler takes the TV remote and turns it off.

“I don’t actually get offended,” Josh takes a chug of his now cold coffee. “We still have to know what VESSEL thinks about this, though."

“I didn’t have anyone’s blood on my hands,” Tyler rubs his palms, lathering them with invisible soap. “But I think I could."

Josh wants to delay this conversation. He even thinks about cutting off the internet connection while Tyler’s hanging out here just by himself — sometimes it’s better to watch cartoons.

“Alright,” Josh looks at the screen of his phone. “But I don’t want to be late for work, do I? Sorry, but I just really need to go. And try not to bury yourself in these thoughts.”

A friendly reminder that never works.

They’re just getting stuck in the swamp.

“Yes. You’re right. Have a good day,” Tyler replies a bit sarcastically.

The images of a poor guy with the disfigured face don’t want to get out of Josh’s head. His bloodied eyelids are torn apart, his eyeballs are yellow.

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His palm is bleeding copiously, bandages are drenched in scarlet liquid — as a quite awkward guy, Josh wasn’t attentive enough and somehow let that paper knife slice the skin on his left hand. He was just unpacking cardboard boxes at work but couldn’t stop living the morning events over and over again. Josh ended up with a jagged razorblade-like cut ranging from his forefinger to the heel of his palm, but he still had to get into his car. So that’s why his blood is now staining the steering wheel like a sick print. It’s annoying.
And Josh drives down the serpentine-like highway, reducing the speed near the wood — it’s the way to save the time though the police don’t recommend anyone to be there in twilight. But here’s a magnet, disturbing but enchanting power that makes Josh watch the side of the road carefully not to miss something important.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees a movement; it’s almost imperceptible, but Josh stops the car just like his intuition urges. He’s alone here, he has to be home, Tyler is waiting for him — but he can’t resist.

The car radio hisses and falls silent all of the sudden, Josh tries to tune it again, but he can’t.

“Wonderful,” Josh grumbles.

Here are the outlines of a figure in the woods, right between the trees; it’s standing here, watching Josh too. Staring at his back, he’s sure. Josh unbuckles the seatbelt, still protected by his car, he just should smash the gas pedal and scoot away. But he wants to look at the paranormal being that is as curious as he is; it’s so sci-fi, so the X-files-like. Josh takes the knife out of the glove box, that trusty Swiss knife — and gets out of his car.

“Am I really going to go into the forest where the body was found?” Josh hesitantly steps towards the pine tree. “Probably, yes.”

He’s not going to go astray like other times, seriously — he just wants to check if he can find anything that can be a landmark. VESSEL is probably going to dig real deep into this case since Tyler’s head is just a dump for his messed up memories.

Josh is walking, bypassing the bushes just like years ago, when he’d been just trying to make friends with Tyler, to prove him he wasn’t going to hurt him or to tell anybody about his laboratory locked in the travel trailer. Tyler refuses to buy his own car since he sold his good old friend on wheels. Josh can bet Tyler still misses it, even after all of these years.

His thoughts are a cobweb, and the forest is so pleasantly quiet and the air is fresh and clear — this somehow helps Josh smother his misgivings. The oxygen is so intoxicating that at first Josh doesn’t even notice a lanky creature hiding behind the pine trees.

When he notices though, it’s gone.

But then, Josh hears it.

“Hey?” the noise is quick and illegible, but Josh is alone again, standing on the ground carpeted with half-decomposed leaves and pine needles. It’s soft, almost like a featherbed.

He catches a glimpse of something on his right — just a grey ghost; the branches bend and break as the shadow creeps through them.

“Hey?” Josh whips out a knife though he knows it’s stupid.

The calmness melts into a pure terror as something — it’s out of Josh’s sight — dives into the depths of the forest and so does Josh.

He runs.

He’s rushing back to the road, to his car, but he sways and scrapes his already injured hand on the tree bark, leaving a small glistening smear there. And he swears the vulture feels it, devours the smell, and it’s chasing Josh as he jumps over the boulder and squats behind it, breathing out
through his nose and suspecting it sounds very loud.

Here’s a pile of green moss and moldering wood right by his side, and somebody’s shuffling past his place of refuge.

Josh regrets he’s gotten himself into a situation like this, but he also regrets he hasn’t taken his phone with him — he’d like to film it. What if it’s a real alien, and Josh is about to come in contact with it? What if it’s the one from the Andromeda Galaxy, and it can give him the answers? What if — ‘what if it’s gonna kill me,’ Josh smirks sullenly. Aliens aren’t friendly, they’re spying and killing and giving orders and performing illegal genetic experiments. And they’re implanting microchips that can control people’s minds. Josh wonders how one of them could appear here if no one has seen their spaceships for such a long time. But Josh can’t say if this extraterrestrial being matches the descriptions from those fantastic books he had read when he was a kid.

Josh doesn’t dare to stir, doesn’t dare to breathe evenly, just waiting until the danger passes. Josh tries to count minutes even, blinking at the reflected sun rays on the blade of his knife.

He sits, and his hips and his back hurt, the cut on his hand throbs.

The silence is way too overwhelming.

Slowly, Josh lifts his head and looks around in case the beast is waiting. His palms are wet as his sweat and his blood keep leaking, and when he gets up he understands it’s a mistake. He’s slipping straight away, almost falling but slamming both of his hands on the rough stone. It’s filthier than he thought.

“Crap,” Josh scowls at his hand, stained with a sticky mucilage. It’s almost colorless, with the bits of green and yellow, and it gets on his bloodied bandages and even underneath them.

Josh’s left palm is burning, as if tiny ants are eating his flesh; here are the blebs already forming on the wrinkled skin, almost as if it’s gotten sprinkled with acid —

“Oh crap,” is all Josh can manage right now, running forward and at the same time unwrapping dirty and soaked bandages off his hand that now feels like it’s gotten stuck in a bonfire.

Josh turns around one more time when his half-invisible pursuer begins to howl. The pain captures his forearm and even stabs at his shoulder as the sound vibrates in his bones. And Josh runs faster, ducking under the loose branches that try to whip him across his cheeks and hurt his eyes, jumping over the lumps of trampled dirt and other rubbish hidden beneath the grass.

Josh sees it a few times, a lonely monster standing on the stone he’s been hiding at; its limbs seem to be a little too long in the growing dark, its head is — Josh isn’t even sure if it even has a head.

Or maybe it’s just the pain in his hand.

When Josh finally makes it to the highway, he falls on all fours on the asphalt, warmed by the setting sun. He crawls towards his car as the strength suddenly drains out of his slack muscles. He gives up and lays on his back, half awake as he hears his phone buzz under the driver’s seat.

And Josh feels like he’s got beaten all over as he sits up and leans his shoulder against the tire.

He groans and aches at the thought of moving.

His phone buzzes again, and Josh already knows who’s calling. He yanks the door open and climbs inside, blindly grabbing for his phone. When he looks at the screen clock, he realizes he’s just lost

In the forest, it didn’t seem that long.

Tyler keeps calling.

“Hey, Ty?” a loud sigh pierces Josh’s left side brain. “You’re not gonna believe what happened.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

“How’s your hand?” Tyler asks politely. Another pancake joins the heap on the tray.

“Stop pretending,” Josh picks at the bandages. They’re permeated yellow. “You don’t care.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Josh’s hand is festering by the time he opens the door of his apartment — here’s a huge gash on his palm, surrounded by the patches of his skin. It’s inflamed and ugly, and Josh doesn’t argue when Tyler wordlessly takes his hand, inspecting the damage with a frightening professionalism.

“I’ve touched some shit,” Josh says timidly.

“And where did you find it?” Tyler sticks his forefinger into what seems to be the deepest part of the wound. It’s dark-red, almost black. The skin around it is burnt and blistered, peeling off.

“In the woods.”

“In the woods,” Tyler echoes. “They told us to stay away from it, and what our Joshie is doing? Joshie is going to the woods and touching everything he finds there. Fairytale gone bad.”

Tyler clicks his tongue.

Josh feels sick.

“Yes, you can keep telling me that I am dumb, but I just wanted to check that out, and I found this,” Josh expounds. Every move just erodes the tissues even more, his fingers begin to swell. “My bandages are soaked in that- I don’t know, alien goo?” he’s about to fetch his coat and take them out of the pocket, but Tyler gives him a sign to sit down onto the couch.

Tyler doesn’t get his story.

“Okay, but let me help you?”

Tyler’s fingers feel cold compared to the hotness of Josh’s palm.

“This time- this time, yeah, I’m really sorry that you’re gonna feel what I’m feeling now, it’s just awful.”

The deformed skin on Josh’s hand collects to creases. It’s hideous. The blood gathers even on the knuckles. A thin cut turns to an open mouth with sharp teeth that keep masticating the flesh. Here’s the pounding in Josh’s temples, pounding in his chest, Tyler’s words are garbled.

“You’re running a fever,” Tyler says musingly. “Did you clean the scrape?”

“I guess so…I had some water and I had washed it, of course, but it still feels dirty,” Josh doesn’t
tell him that he didn’t have any spare bandages and had to use a paper napkin like a wrapper. “Please, help. Do something. I think I’ve seen an alien.”

“Yeah, fever can do that,” Tyler chuckles. Though Josh hasn’t said anything funny.

Josh is about to pray for Tyler’s healing abilities.

Tyler’s eyeballs are twitching underneath his closed eyelids as he sandwiches Josh’s hand between his palms. Josh knows this gesture, it’s usually followed by the alleviation of any sorts of pain; Josh can’t wait until the wound closes up, but the pressure only pushes more of the fluid out of it.

Tyler opens one eye.

“Do you feel something?”

“No.”

The skin is still aflame; the phantom of that paper knife is just chopping it again.

Tyler concentrates harder. Josh doesn’t want him to overextend himself.

“Better?”

“No!” Josh retracts his hand. A mixture of blood and pus dribbles on his pant leg.

Tyler licks up a tooth-shaped sore in the corner of his mouth. It doesn’t usually take eternity to heal a graze —

“Damn,” he gently strokes the back of Josh’s hand. “I can’t take your pain.”

“Excuse me?”

“My powers, they are… they’re just n-not working here,” Tyler recoils, folding his hands between his knees.

Josh battles the urge to throw up right here.

“This acidic shit is not working on you, too,” Josh grunts, swallowing. His limb is burning as if he’s smacked it on the heater multiple times.

“But it might still be toxic,” Tyler winces at the smudges of slime on their clothes; this nagging ache twists the corkscrew into Josh’s palm. “We’re cleaning you up and then calling Jenna- and oh, she’s definitely going to yell at you, so get ready.”

If Jenna’s yells will contain any good advices, then Josh is going to handle it.

***

In the bathroom, while Josh clutches the edge of the sink with his good hand and holds his wrecked one under the stream of cold water, Tyler panics. And Josh panics too, because the never-ending rill of sanies looks just repellent. His skin feels mushy, the wisps of thin curved strings run sideways from the cut, painting Josh’s blood vessels deep blue. Josh’s veins hold something impossibly fiery, something similar to his telekinetic abilities, but it demolishes him now. His energy swirls in the drain along with the bloody flakes of his skin. It is like a trivial scene from a
zombie-apocalypse movie when one of the main characters gets bitten and the adverse effect is already kicking in, but their partner refuses to admit that they’ll gonna have to kill them later.

Josh imagines how his hand is mutating, turning to a paw with claws instead of his fingernails.

“Jenna’s going to tell us what to do,” Tyler mutters, dabbing the towel at the source of pain.

“Do you think they can take me now?” Josh asks.

“Who?”

“Agents. I think this would be interesting for them.”

“Gonna send yourself to the lab? Come on, Josh,” Tyler cradles Josh’s hand as the water washes away the remains of the skin.

“If we’re wasting time, I’m gonna simply lose my hand,” Josh points out. He’s pretty sure the sepsis is going to eat it away down the bone.

Tyler turns the faucet off, though some of the mess still stays on the bottom of the sink.

“You’re not gonna lose your hand.”

Then, it’s the time to disinfect the incision, which is more traumatic than getting the corrosive sludge into the wound. Josh can envision the level of pain when Tyler takes the bottle with peroxide and a clean cottonwool sponge. Josh doesn’t even say a word, just folding a cloth and shoving the corner of it into his mouth, already shivering.

He closes his eyes.

“Ready?” Tyler inquires. Josh hears the slight splash of the liquid against the glass.

“Uh-huh.”

Tyler doesn’t count to three or to one, just opening the cap and pouring the peroxide straight onto the tainted skin. Josh lets out a loud shriek, a yelp, strangled by the cloth in his mouth as his jaws lock around it, teeth grinding into a bit fluffy material. The peroxide fizzes, gushing with the white foam like a tiny geyser.

The second go isn’t less painful.

“We’re almost done, we’re almost done, Josh,” Tyler shushes him when Josh is about to drop the gag and scream.

Or maybe he’s just going to pass out.

Spitting the cloth out of his mouth, Josh holds his hand above the sink and looks at the droplets of now pink foam with teary eyes.

“We’re almost done, hold on,” Tyler doesn’t release Josh’s fingers out of his grip. He wipes the fluids, ripping the wads of paper towels and gingerly touching the sores. “Gonna stay awake for me?”

“Yes. Thanks, Ty,” Josh exhales weakly.

“You’ve handled it well, we’re almost done,” Tyler reassures.
Though it feels like a handshake with the chainsaw.

Once they’re done with cleaning, Tyler puts the peroxide bottle back into the cupboard. Josh doesn’t feel any better.

Josh trudges down the hallway, not quite seeing where he’s going. Tyler slouches under Josh’s weight, maneuvering him back to the living room; Josh almost falls twice, but the next stop is this lovely couch so Josh lands on it, somewhat relieved. He presses the towel harder to his hand, grey-tinged up the wrist, stinging and evidently corroding.

Tyler is fumbling with the charger next to him, dragging his laptop and giving Josh weird looks; FaceTime window pops up on the screen and the feeling of being watched never leaves Josh. Soon enough, Jenna responds; there is too much pixels, there is something like shelves with the glass vials in the background.

“Hey, guys!”

The sadness in Jenna’s eyes doesn’t match her friendly smile.

“Hey,” Tyler greets her. “Can you help us?”

Jenna leans closer to the camera as if she’s trying to get into the room just like that girl from The Ring movie.

“Has something happened?”

“Yes,” Josh blurts out, showing his mangled palm. “This happened. And we don’t know what is this.”

Jenna frowns, then pulls backwards, the strands of her blonde hair weave in the air.

“Josh, where did you get this?!?” she gasps.

Black spots begin to appear on Josh’s hand, in his mind.

“In the forest,” he sighs.

“What?! Isn’t one dead body enough to scare you away?! Josh, I can’t believe!..”

I can’t believe you’re so stupid, Josh. Josh almost concurs. And oops, she knows about the corpse, Tyler was right.

“You’re just like Tyler,” Josh is certain he blushes. “By the way, Tyler can’t do anything with that, and I’m pretty sure I found something to explain the said injuries on the body- have you seen it?” a short nod from the screen. “And here I am. My hand is rotting, Jen. Tyler’s powers aren’t working. Any ideas?”

Jenna tiredly rubs her forehead.

“What does all the shit have to happen in one day?!” she roars desperately.

“Why does all the shit have to happen in one day?!” she roars desperately.

“What do you mean?” Tyler squirms with the laptop on his thighs.

Jenna lowers her voice to the whisper, looking around rabidly.

“We’re having some really big troubles right now. Huge troubles, I’d like to say.”
“Yes, we are having them too!” Josh snaps. The joints in his hand are inflexible now.

“I wish I could be in two different places at the same time,” Jenna looks back once again before speaking directly to Josh. “You have to clean the wound regularly. Use the antiseptic I gave you and bandage it. I’ll come. Most likely after the midnight but probably early in the morning. When did you get this?”

“Three hours ago, maybe?” Josh hums. “I got a little hurt at work and then touched some goo smeared on the stone while the alien was haunting me.”

Jenna props her elbows up on the table, waiting for more.

“Nevermind. He’s just running a fever,” Tyler interjects.

“Make him take antipyretic then,” Jenna responds quickly.

Josh sticks his hand to the web-camera once again.

“What if I die of an unknown disease?”

He gets a synchronic answer from both Tyler and Jenna —

“Please, don’t die.”

***

Josh wakes up angry. He ponders if he should get himself drunk to drown out the rage that’s tearing up its way out through his tired muscles. He’s furious enough to strangle a bear to death, with his bare hands despite the ache in his ruined one. It never goes away, here’s no way to endure it, and Josh whimpers as he gets up from the couch.

A short nap hasn’t cured him.

Tyler is not in the room, but the muffled rumbling in the kitchen gives Josh some clues, so he plods in this direction. The pain rolls through Josh’s body with every step, coiling in his head, in his stomach, swarming underneath the bandages.

“You’re up,” Tyler smiles warmly, turning away from the stove. Here’s something sizzles on the frying pan, the pancakes maybe, though Tyler is a terrible cook who can only set the food on fire. And it suddenly riles Josh up even more.

Because Tyler is always acting like a douche (especially when he’s spending his time eating and watching TV while Josh is working), and he doesn’t know what it feels like when your hand is putrefying. Because he couldn’t take it. Josh is so distraught he doesn’t want to interact with anyone, let alone with Tyler. And Tyler keeps baking these ugly pancakes, placing them on the tray and smearing too much butter all over them; Josh wants to throw them out of the window.

“How’s your hand?” Tyler asks politely. Another pancake joins the heap on the tray.

“Stop pretending,” Josh picks at the bandages. They’re permeated yellow. “You don’t care.”

“What?” Tyler finally seems to notice the unpleasant vibes.
“You didn’t even try to help,” Josh spits accusingly.

“I tried!”

“Not hard enough.”

“Josh. You’re not feeling well, I kn-now, but please, stop. Jenna is about to come over, and she’ll definitely tell us how to cope-”

“Shut up,” Josh sputters.

Too much stupid words are being spewed out, too much, but nothing helps, nothing can dull the pain, and Josh is possessed, for the first time in his life he’s incredibly mad — he’s about to cause a physical damage to a person he once loved. Tyler’s hands fly up to cover his face as Josh drags him by the front or his t-shirt. The skin under Josh’s bandages never heals, and more blood and pus stain the fabric.

But Tyler keeps talking.

“Sh-h, Josh, you’re scaring m-me, I’m sure everything is going to be okay-”

Tyler is just a beanbag as Josh jostles him until he falls down on the floor, kicking him in the stomach before he hoists himself up. Tyler attempts to, but Josh’s next punch flips him over, Josh’s foot on his collarbone, pressing, stomping — one more worthless word and it’s gonna be broken.

“It’s not going to be okay.”

Here is the smell of burning flour.

Seeing Tyler in pain doesn’t satisfy Josh as his arm just hurts even more, he just wants to take this cleaver — one *chomp* and it’s gonna be over —

Tyler’s defenselessness just kindles up Josh’s aspiration to trash the kitchen along with his boyfriend’s body. Tyler’s eyes snap open, fear leaks out of them, leaving the wet trails on his cheeks. *It almost* brings Josh’s sanity back.

“I tried, I s-swear,” Tyler thrusts his hands between his thighs and his abdomen to protect it. He shrinks when Josh hunches over him. “It-t’s not you, J-josh.”

Josh’s socked toe collides with Tyler’s ribcage.

Tyler whines, something cracks.

Josh expects him to fight back, but Tyler has always been a weepy bitch —

“Josh, don’t-“

Josh kicks him in his stupid useless mouth, crimson blended with little white pieces splatters on the floor next to Tyler’s head, and Josh is itching to make Tyler’s bones as squishy as this dough for the pancakes —

“Josh?”

Something doesn’t fit together.

Josh blinks.
He’s lounging on the couch, head resting on the cushion as he realizes that he hasn’t moved at all. His gauze-covered hand is tucked between his bent knees, Tyler is sitting next to him and ruffling Josh’s hair plastered to his forehead and the sides of his face.

“You’ve been asleep for like forty minutes,” Tyler says. “Something helped to reduce the fever.”

Josh is sweating, damp spots appear on the chest and under the armpits of his t-shirt. But it’s not as disgusting as the flashback of Josh’s dream. He moans as it begins to pulse in his temples.

“I’ve just had the worst nightmare ever.”

“About what?” Tyler is concerned, voice soft.

“About…” Josh hesitates.

“You can tell me, it doesn’t seem that spooky when you say it out loud, believe me,” Tyler chortles, rubbing the bandages with a congealed mess on them.

“About hurting you.”

“Oh.”

Josh is sure it hurts Tyler even when he just hears about it. Even though it was just a fever-produced vision, Josh thinks he’s obligated to apologize anyway.

“Tyler, listen to me, I’m sorry about all those times I had to slap you during your… incidents, I’m really sorry, but that was the only way to wake you up. I’m afraid I can hurt you in real life again, so I’m just…” Josh brushes his bangs away from his eyes. “Sorry.”

Tyler appreciates his words with one nod.

“How’s your hand?”

The timely treatment has probably worked just right — Josh’s fingers don’t look as thick as sausages, a normal shade of his skin is back. There are no nasty-blue fibers underneath his fingernails.

“Better? Um, a lot better,” Josh tugs at the gauze to look at the wound.

“It seems that the infection is gone,” Tyler utters.

And Josh just unties a neat knot and unwraps the crusty layers off his palm, off his thumb — it doesn’t ache anymore. It just vibrates a little.

A white ribbon falls into his lap, palm exposed and pink.

“Wow,” Josh exhales.

It seems that something has just fought every single damaged cell, stitching up the flesh and skin — here’s just one thin scar across Josh’s palm, a little glossy with leftover fluid.

“It’s not leaking anymore,” Tyler’s hands are trembling, making Josh’s hand tremble too.

“I see,” Josh responds. “How are we going to explain this shit to Jenna?”

“Maybe she can do something with these bandages, they h-have enough information, I guess,”
Tyler stammers.
The bandages look just terrible.
And Josh has just somehow healed himself.

Chapter End Notes

of course he wouldn't do /that/
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

“But Blurry said…”

“You’re talking about him after you’ve just fucked me? Are you even serious?!”

“…that the aliens work with whatever they can find,” Josh finishes despite Tyler’s chagrin.

“Wanna say they steal babies?”

“Wanna say they steal the cells,” Josh says.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s 5 am and Jenna is already here in their apartment, goggling at Josh’s hand in disbelief.

“Well, I think you still remember how bad it was just a few hours ago?” Tyler is marching across the room while Jenna is tracing her fingers down the fresh scar on Josh’s palm.

Her nails are like sugar glaze. White. Almost sweet.

“It felt like the worms were already eating it,” Josh tells her.

“It looked like that, too. I’ve made couple of crappy screenshots during that FaceTime call,” Jenna nods, biting down her lip.

Both sets of Josh’s bandages are packed into a plastic bag and hidden in Jenna’s backpack. The syringe with Josh’s blood is placed into a blue portable fridge.

“Here was a huge sore, but it’s gone now. How?!” Tyler wonders. “One more healer in this room or what?”

“No, that’s impossible,” Josh argues. “The inflamed cut is the only thing that has healed itself- I got those scrapes on my shin the other day, and they’re still there,” he rolls up his pant leg to show them four long grazes from his fingernails, right above his ankle. “And I also saw something in the trees. I would call that an alien, but Tyler laughs at me.”

And Tyler still laughs.

“What did it look like?” Jenna asks.

“Like an alien!”

“Josh, you had a fever, and you were bemused,” Tyler finally stops roaming the room.

“You’ll see that ‘fever’ when you inspect the bandages,” Josh points at Jenna’s backpack. “What happened in VESSEL, by the way?”
Jenna’s hand grips her blouse as her chest heaves. Arms crossed, Tyler is about to start dropping the questions —

“What happened?”

“Tyler, better sit down,” she says bluntly.

“Why?”

“Just believe me. These news are not for everyone.”

Tyler shrugs and squeezes himself into the small gap between her and Josh.

“So?” Josh’s patience is about to burst as well.

He expects an epic pause to fuel up the suspense, but…

“Somebody raided VESSEL yesterday evening,” Jenna blurts out.

Tyler promptly turns pale though he yet tries not to freak out.

“What do you m-mean by raided?” he asks carefully.

“Literally robbed,” Jenna strikes him down. “Our archive, files, the material we’ve been working with- somebody broke the scanning system, sedated both Brendon and Merrick, and here we are- broke and hurt. Hey, Tyler, breathe,” she places her hands on Tyler’s chest and on his back as he hunches forward with his fingers gripping his hair.

“And you don’t know who was it?” Josh flinches when Tyler falls to his side with a groan. Josh only manages to hug him and try to whisper something like ‘don’t worry’. Tyler breathes, but it sounds as if he’s going to sob into Josh’s shirt.

“I suspect I know;” Jenna glances at both Josh and Tyler sympathetically.

“And?” Tyler mewls into Josh’s too-tight collar.

“Butchers.”

“Butchers?”

“You’ve never heard of BUTCH?” Jenna scowls.

“No,” Josh says confidently before poking Tyler’s side to make sure he hasn’t lost consciousness.

“No-o,” Tyler grumbles. Josh’s heart aches.

“Biologically Unique Technologies of Controlling Humans,” Jenna informs them.

“Controlling humans?” Tyler sits up from his half-lying position. “Isn’t it too radically?”

“They’re quite intimidating.”

“I’ve never bumped into them,” Tyler says, a bit ashamed. “BUTCH. What a stupid name.”

“It’s true, you shouldn’t actually know about them. None of you went to military, and butchers only work with soldiers,” Jenna deliberately ignores Tyler’s groan. “And now they have accesses to all the levels of our virtual archives, and not only that. They took your blood samples.”
“Tyler, breathe,” Josh is forced to remind Tyler how his almost collapsed lungs are functioning, balancing him as he rocks forward once again. Tyler is a very impressionable person.

“Tyler, breathe, I haven’t finished yet,” Jenna says dolefully. “The first time we accidentally lost some of your blood samples- it’s been one month prior to the kidnapping. I didn’t want you to know about this, my bad. We tried to solve that problem, but this time... They have taken much more than the other time; there was a thing me and Hayley have been working at- some kind of a medicine; we didn’t make it that far, but we tried to turn Tyler’s regenerating genes to the remedy. It’s been stolen too, along with the backup copies of Josh’s files, and… they’ve stolen Blurry’s body too.”

Here’s the point when the hair on Josh’s nape begins to move by its own.

After all of these years —

“He’s dead,” Tyler sputters.

“He is,” Jenna agrees. “And his brain is. But the cells in his body aren’t.”

“But you told us that VESSEL was going to give a lead to the government.”

Josh recalls the past events. Flashbacks form a thrombus that’s about to block out his brain, kill him.

“We didn’t arrange. And Blurryface had been staying in the shock freezer.”

Josh rubs Tyler’s back again while he sits with his face buried in his hands.

“Damn.”

“But at least, it now explains the reason of Tyler’s kidnapping,” Jenna utters, smoothing the wrinkled fabric on Tyler’s shoulder. “It was just a warning. For you, for me, for VESSEL, it was just the beginning. That’s why he had those specific bloodstains on his sleeves,” Jenna is just gluing the fragments together. “BUTCH kidnapped Tyler with their own purpose, took his blood- lots of his blood, but it probably didn’t work in the right way — I don’t know why — and so they robbed our laboratory to get the samples,” she snaps her fingers.

Josh can’t just process it — how can secret agents be so incompetent?

“They also t-took everything I had in my pockets,” Tyler adds, still covering his face.

“Well, maybe they thought you had VESSEL pass codes in your phone or millions of dollars on your card,” Jenna guesses with a gloomy giggle. “I think they got disappointed.”

“And I feel personally victimized.”

They’ve taken Tyler’s keys as well, so Josh thinks he has to change the lock in the door of their apartment to save themselves from any possible night visits from butchers. Josh’s life is like the Truman Show — but with agents, aliens, evil clones and bloodlust creatures hiding round the corners.

“When will VESSEL stop failing?” Josh asks, feeling a head rush. “Tyler has lost too much blood during the Contacts and fights, and you’ve taken enough of it to feed an army of vampires- and now it just turns out VESSEL was not able to protect it?!?”
It’s Josh’s turn to pace across the living room while an apathetic Tyler just lies on his side with a cushion on his face.

“Jen?” Tyler’s voice is muffled by the pillow. “Do you have a gun? Because I’m feeling like blowing my brains out right the fuck now.”

“Tyler, stop it,” Jenna tries but this unexpected fountain of fury makes her trail off.

“You didn’t even tell me that you wanted to use my blood for something like that!” Tyler throws the cushion across the room. “You didn’t even tell us about the first robbery, for fuck’s sake! I didn’t give you my permission, Jen, I didn’t! But you always think you’re right, and now all of us have just gotten fooled like blind kittens, and what? You just come and tell us about fucking BUTCH that now knows everything about me, but you didn’t even think about warning me beforehand?! How?”

Josh is on Tyler’s side, but he always gets scared whenever Tyler gets this mad.

“He’s right,” Josh just nods.

“I hope you understand there was not only your and Tyler’s blood?” Jenna stands up, leaving Tyler grieving in a fetal position on the couch.

“Yeah,” Josh’s mouth goes dry. “We weren’t VESSEL’s first Objects. I know.”

Who knows where their personal files might surface next time; maybe, the butchers are collaborating with press as well.

“BUTCH didn’t know about our activity until- until Tyler’s incident, but I swear, there were no signs of a nearing war between us! VESSEL has always been trying to cover up the UFO incidents all over the USA, and BUTCH has been working closely with government and military,” Jenna catches her breath. “And now think- what can unite our agencies?”

‘Tyler,’ dings in Josh’s head. ‘They won’t get him alive.’

“Do they want to sell our blood to the President?” Tyler props himself up with his elbow. “BUTCH wants to kick VESSEL in the balls?”

“I’d personally recommend you to never ever work for butchers, or you’re taking a risk of getting your own balls smashed,” Jenna fends off.

“Fine. Never planned on doing so,” Tyler sticks his nose into the crook of his arm. “Fuck VESSEL. Fuck bitches.”

“Butchers.”

“Whatever.”

But here’s a thing that causes an outburst of frenzy inside of Josh’s brain.

“Fuck them, but they erased Tyler’s memories!” Josh stomps his foot when he thinks Jenna stops listening to him. “That could bring an irreparable damage, and we didn’t know if that hasn’t happened! What if they weren’t butchers? Why was there a corpse in the forest? Why do I get infected and then magically healed and intact and well?”

Jenna doesn’t dwell on the details. So Josh’s ranting doesn’t get a proper response.
“We’re gonna find out. I’m gonna work with your blood today, and no- I’m not gonna put that into our hacked database- here’s just a thing between you and me. Well, and Hayley. Though, no. I’m not going to trust anyone since today,” Jenna is angry and determined.

“What else do you know about butchers?” Tyler inquires. He sounds like he’s not going to take any excuses.

Josh eyes Jenna’s backpack with the V on the front as if this thing might bring more bad news anytime soon.

“Their labs and offices are located on the small isle north from here,” Jenna says. “Tyler, please, try to mentally get back to the day when you had gotten kidnapped, please, this might help,” she pleads, taking his hands.

Tyler looks like a confused kid.

“I wish I could,” he croaks out.

“Could they block his mind with something? What do they usually use?” Josh can’t stand Tyler’s current state. He’s not handling his own state either.

“BUTCH owns a hospital on the isle; I heard they had been taking the soldiers there,” Jenna gibbers out. She’s like a detainee during the interrogation. “But I don’t know what kinds of serums they’re working with.”

Jenna is flummoxed by all of these questions, by these situations, and it’s written on her face as the dark circles under her eyes and crinkles on her forehead.

“And so, what would Tyler do among the soldiers and those crazy scientists?” Josh isn’t even sure if he wants to know what could happen in the worst kind of way.

“He’s a universal donor,” Jenna points out. “And I still think that his kidnapping and the robbery are coming from the same place. Brendon couldn’t save the server.”

“Brendon can’t tell the difference between the power outage and DoS-attack,” Tyler retorts.

“Brendon is one of the high-qualified programmers!”

“That’s why he asked me for help when aliens hacked your archive, that’s why he let Blurry do that, damn, he didn’t even stop me, though I’m just an amateur hacker.”

“Do you understand why we wanted to recruit you?”

“Ask Merrick.”

“Touché,” Jenna sighs. “You and VESSEL don’t get well together.”

“And what the agents are doing right now?” Josh just wants to stop their verbal skirmish.

“Since somebody has left the lab in ruins? Oh, they’re doing just great!” Jenna spits acrimoniously.

“I even feel a little sad. Ha-ha, no,” Tyler’s still having troubles keeping his tongue behind his teeth. “Finally you can get a normal job which doesn’t include spying on me.”

“I’m not gonna leave VESSEL,” Jenna says firmly.
“As you wish,” Tyler huffs.

“Yes, but what about your fucking agents?!” Josh shouts, the ceiling lights flicker.

Tyler factitiously clamps his palm over his heart.

“They’re trying to contact BUTCH and get our files back. I’m terrified though,” Jenna confesses. “And the thought that somebody might hurt you, guys- it’s just killing me, to be honest.”

“And what do you want us to do now?” Josh asks. “What if big and scary bitches will come to us again?”

“You can’t just stay at home, I guess?” Jenna raises her eyebrow.

“No, we have to go to work,” Josh protests.

“Tyler got kidnapped from his workplace.”

“Really? I didn’t notice,” Josh cackles. Though everything seems to be pretty sinister.

“Just be careful. Alright, I see you guys are relatively fine,” Jenna snatches her backpack. “I’m gonna get back to VESSEL now, I hope Chris is not busy searching for UFOs in the sky. I’m gonna call you once I’m done with Josh’s blood test. Josh,” she attracts his attention again. “No offence, but if I find anything dangerous in your blood, I’m taking you to our lab to inspect and treat it.”


He can’t resist anyway.

He’s seen enough weird things in his life, but they somehow get just weirder.

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“You know, I’ve been thinking too much,” Josh pants as he comes and lays limply on top of Tyler.

Tyler chuckles in the dark.

“Am I this boring?”

Tyler’s come is warm and sticky on Josh’s stomach and in his fist. It doesn’t stop his thoughts. Josh doesn’t like it.

“No, no,” Josh’s cheeks grow hotter along with the dampness on his temples. “It’s not about sex.”

“What’s this about then?”

Josh shrugs.

Orgasms make him philosophic. And Tyler’s sweaty hand is on Josh’s groin, stroking his softening cock again, teasing him for the round two though Josh might still probably need a moment.

“How did They create you?”

“Oh, that’s a good question,” Tyler smiles a little. “But unfortunately, I have no answers for this.”
“But Blurry said…”

“You’re talking about him after you’ve just fucked me? Are you even serious?!”

“…that the aliens work with whatever they can find,” Josh finishes despite Tyler’s chagrin.

“Wanna say they steal babies?”

“Wanna say they steal the cells,” Josh says.

Tyler’s head is on Josh’s shoulder now; Tyler’s bare thigh rubs against Josh’s. Tyler isn’t trying to jerk him off anymore.

“What could it be?” Tyler’s finger tickles a full-sleeve tattoo on Josh’s right arm.

“I don’t know, Ty, I’m just asking. Have you ever wanted to remember, like, anything?”

“Remember spending eighteen years in a chamber, probably naked, and with the alien faces staring at me? No, thanks,” Tyler replies with the slight scoff.

“But what if you have the real parents?” Josh insists.

Tyler tugs the blanket over his head.

“That’s beyond the scope of fiction.”

“Our life is beyond the scope of fiction,” Josh says.

Tyler rolls over onto his side, with his spine against Josh’s ribs.

“Go to sleep, Josh.”

Chapter End Notes

shoutout to Shadowkid and their comment on outlandish dreamer: 'why do I feel like it's not VESSEL at all'. here we are, man, you kinda sorta helped me create BUTCH
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

He just buries himself into it, trying to find the missing pieces here and there — he’s not even sure what he’s searching for. He just needs something.

‘Three middle-school boys witnessed a flying saucer above the lake’
Wrong.

‘A group of tourists has seen a Bigfoot in the woods.’
Wrong.

‘UFOs: truth or fiction?’
Truth. But this article is wrong anyway.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You’re not gonna believe what I have found.”

Jenna is already in their bedroom, with the excited gleamer in her eyes.

“Explain?” Josh grasps at Tyler’s shoulder a little too hard. He seems to be travelling through his headspace again.

“You’ve definitely fought some kind of a virus, Josh,” Jenna states, her bag is sitting in her hands like a lapdog.

When the problems fall like a snow on their heads, Josh always manages to stick to another one. A virus. He could’ve definitely lost his hand. Tyler sounds and looks a bit paranoid.

“But what if butchers are overhearing us now?”

The possibility of being watched makes Josh want to drill the holes in the wall to find their equipment.

“I doubt they could install any bugs here,” Jenna replies. “But they’ve done it to VESSEL building maybe. It’s just… an unsafe place. And I want to stay closer to you in case you need me.”

She smiles ingratiatingly.

Josh doesn’t blame her anymore. It’s pointless. Jenna can’t control every enemy. But Josh isn’t going to forget about the pains he’s went through though it’s been a few days ago.

“So, what kind of a virus?”

Jenna unzips her bag and takes out a thick paper folder.
“Epidemiology is not my field of science, but really— you have to be a complete dumbass not to notice the changes.”

“Has my blood composition changed?!” Josh practically yells. He’s sure that Jenna hasn’t just called him a dumbass, but it sounds rather insulting anyway.

“No, not exactly,” Jenna calms him down. “But here’s a thing. You gave me your bandages. And, I inspected them under the microscope, and I’ve done two or three manipulations with them— with the one you’d been wearing before you called me and the one you’d been wearing after. They were soaked in completely different fluids.”

“What do you mean?” Tyler bites his fingernails while Josh tries not to fret about Jenna’s words.

“You said there was the slime— it was, it stained your bandage and got into your blood, and it infected you; then, you let me know, you changed the bandages, but here was the time when your system began to product antibodies to keep you away from the infection. And, some of your active blood got onto the gauze — and here we are!” Jenna even claps her hands, glancing at Josh like he’s made of gold. “You didn’t let it get you, I don’t know how, but you didn’t.”

Josh was infected. The virus has been defeated. And if Jenna doesn’t even know how that could happen, then Josh is about to just keep his mouth shut not to let his hypothesis leak out.

“But why couldn’t I heal the wound? Am I the only one who’s bothered about this?” Tyler is like a nervous pendulum, swinging back and forth.

And yes, Josh is definitely gonna get more nightmares.

“It was probably because of the synthetic substance that was spreading in Josh’s veins, I’ve never seen that before,” Jenna holds a red paper folder on her lap. Apparently, she still hesitates to show them the decryption of Josh’s blood test results. She probably thinks Josh and Tyler won’t be able to understand her scribbles anyway.

It’s kinda offensive.

“He could’ve died, but his inner resources did a great job for him,” Jenna concludes.

Josh is aware of the fight in his blood system; he doesn’t need to clarify what could exactly have happened if his body failed for a split second. But here’s a thing he wants to know.

“Where did that substance come from?”

“I’m not sure. But I don’t think it’s something from,” Jenna sticks her forefinger out and points at the ceiling. “From Them.”

But Josh still wants to believe he saw one of Them. It’s easy to blame all of it on aliens.

“Is somebody on Earth experimenting this hard?” he tries. “Butchers?”

“I’d prefer to work with aliens, honestly,” Jenna sighs.

“You’re gonna get a lot of work when they kidnap me next time,” Tyler scoffs.

“Why do you always need to pick on my words?” Jenna squeezes the folder as if she’s about to smack Tyler with it like a pesky mosquito. “Okay, Josh, I’m pretty sure you’ve made it through, but I need to take your blood once again. Just to make sure there are no needs to quarantine you.”
She looks at Josh with overt respect.

Josh thinks that if he has anything left in his blood, it’s too late to quarantine him anyway. Especially in such unsafe place like VESSEL isolation room.

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Josh’s blood composition is pretty fine — he has no leftover virus in it, no any infections, and he can feel Jenna’s smile as he talks to her over the phone.

“Try not to get kidnapped,” she says. She’s like their security guard.

And Josh always suspects something, he watches the shadows on the dark road and in their apartment complex while he goes back home every evening. Tyler is getting back to work, too, gradually recovering from the incident that had left both of them so dumbstruck.

But the life is going on.

“What it’s like to be a kid?” Tyler asks one day, slurping on RedBull.

*It doesn’t feel so nice, because you’re scared of things that don’t exist and cannot actually hurt you, but you’re too small and weak to fight, and your parents just say it’s the fault of your tiny childish brain* —

And it is, here are his inhibitions and insecurities, but Josh is certain that Tyler just wants to hear a fairytale, not a lament.

“When I was little, I had a weird fear. Like, all the kids have their fears, but mine was just the weirdest. I was obsessed with an idea that the drain in our bathtub could suck me in. I was just terrified, I cried each time my Mom was coaxing me into the bathroom— and she had to give me a plastic chair so I could sit on it and be above the drain level,” Josh tells him the most innocent story from his childhood. “I didn’t want to drown in the sewage.”

Tyler laughs wholeheartedly, with these warm sparkles in his eyes.

“That’s why you don’t have a bathtub in here?”

“Probably. Shower cabins are much friendlier,” Josh admits. It’s not their own apartment anyway.

An awkward silence hangs in the air, almost reverberating through the room. Tyler’s standing stock-still for long enough for Josh to smell a rat. But then, Tyler speaks.

“You know, you asked me— sometimes I think I want to remember. Something,” Tyler puts the can onto the kitchen countertop. “It’s such a scary thing when you look back and see nothing.”

“But you’ve made it so far,” Josh encourages.

“No, and you know this,” Tyler says firmly. “Something always pushes me back. This time here are the people who c-can delete things from my memory with ease— it’s like to pit a cherry! But I and my brain don’t want to be anyone’s cherries.”

Here are the signs of a nearing panic attack — Tyler’s harsh breathing and his abstract twitching. Josh has to stop it before it starts; here’s a twirl of ruminations in his head, and Tyler’s ribcage jerks, words jumbled. The things don’t set right.
“Who do you think you would be if you were, like, in elementary school?” Josh asks softly, gently throwing his arm over Tyler’s waist.

“Um. I don’t even know- probably that kid with black crayons who sits in the corner and draws sad pictures?” Tyler gets distracted from his sorrows, leaning into Josh’s touch.

Josh just continues playing a game to pull Tyler out of his hazardous thoughts.

“Do you think you could make friends with somebody like me?”

“Yeah, definitely,” Tyler accepts the rules, tugging at one of the yellow strands and wrapping it around his finger. “I bet you’ve always been hot.”

“No, I wasn’t,” Josh chuckles. “You’ve seen the pictures of a little Josh. Nothing resembling hot. Puberty did a thing,” he pulls Tyler closer, nuzzling his cheek.

“You’ve always been hot,” Tyler repeats stubbornly as he begins to unbuckle Josh’s jeans. “Let’s go to bedroom.”

But even with Tyler’s hand down his pants and with Tyler’s hard-on poking in his thigh, Josh can’t stop thinking about the black desert Tyler sees when he looks back.

***

Josh starts his own investigation two days later, after weighting all of the pros and cons — his mental scales are broken beyond repair.

He doesn’t know if he’s doing a good or a bad thing when he begins to search for the articles about the alien abductions that had happened twenty-five years ago. It’s hard to say which incidents were real and which ones were just hoaxes — with low-quality videos of the shining objects in the sky, with the newspaper black and white pictures.

With interviews.

Josh doesn’t believe them.

He just buries himself into it, trying to find the missing pieces here and there — he’s not even sure what he’s searching for. He just needs something.

‘Three middle-school boys witnessed a flying saucer above the lake’

Wrong.

‘A group of tourists has seen a Bigfoot in the woods.’

Wrong.

‘UFOs: truth or fiction?’

Truth. But this article is wrong anyway.

And Josh reads, reads and reads whatever he can find, he stares at the screen until his teary eyes hurt. It seems that the worldwide web can’t give him enough information, can’t satisfy his hunger.
“Have you ever tried to use Deep Web?” Josh asks, ready to give up. The heaviness of his laptop on his chest is equal to the heaviness of his secrets.

“Of course,” Tyler says.

They’re getting ready to sleep, lying under the pile of blankets with Tyler peering blankly into his phone and with Josh playing agent Mulder again.

“What’s the catch?” Josh scans the screen mistrustfully.

“Wanna buy a gun? Or drugs? Hire a hitman?” Tyler smirks.

“You’ve sold your recordings on some of the Deep Web auctions?”

Josh is being straightforward, not leaving a single loophole for Tyler to avoid the conversation. Tyler just nods.

“And some of the Contactees were there too.”

Here might be a chance. Though Josh has heard rather disturbing stories about people using Tor browser and then getting arrested along with the drug-dealers and serial killers. But Josh just wants to peek into the keyhole.

Maybe there’ll be some things Tyler had missed before.

***

The Deep Web pages are all wrong. But Josh keeps doing a research, keeps looking for any available information about the Contacts that had happened a quarter of a century ago.

Tyler says it’s just a waste of time, and Josh won’t find anything anyway —

And Josh stumbles into that creepy forum, which is abandoned; the last update had been posted three years ago. It’s not a usual forum but a paranormal one — and if it’s hidden from the regular web search engines, therefore it provides the most truthful content.

Because Josh’s logic is wrong.

Because it’s a forum for the women who had experienced their confrontations with UFOs while being pregnant. It’s dire, and their posts are irrational and sometimes illiterate, but one of them tears Josh’s heart out of his chest.

_they’ve taken her baby_, — the title reads.

Here’s the story about the woman below, about some K. that loves God and her husband, and who doesn’t understand what she’s done wrong to deserve this punishment.

_k. thought her father abandoned her if he allowed this to happen to her and her boy. there was the light, there were their faces and their greedy arms that were tearing k. to shreds and ripping her clothes. they only needed her son, a precious part of her. and they took it away from k. when she was only one month pregnant. but she will never lose her hope to get her boy back._

~polly j. sheek
Josh is more than just sure it’s a nom-de-plume. Who even needs to use their real names on some bizarre Deep Web paranormal forums? But here’s something about this post, about the emotions and about the helpless hope that just bleeds through each letter. Josh is a Contactee as well, he knows what these sensations mean. The author of this story had probably gotten into this case as far as Josh had.

It happened to K. twenty-two years ago, the story says. Josh mentally adds three more years since the Forum is dead.

He’s experiencing a tactile hallucination of the invisible insects creeping under his skin.

“What are you doing?”

Tyler’s voice thwarts the delusion. Josh has almost forgotten he has Tyler in the bed next to him.

“Netstalking,” Josh mumbles.

“Have you found Sad Satan yet?”

“It’s not funny.”

Josh kind of wants to close the tab and forget about the crap he’s seen, because his excessive curiosity kills the relationship.

“Do you still think that Webdriver Torso sends signals to aliens?” Tyler lets out a derisive laughter.

“Never believed that,” Josh cuts him off. Though, Josh lies a little. It was fun to theorize about that YouTube channel. “See?” Josh turns the laptop so Tyler can see what’s on the screen.

Tyler quickly looks at the post Josh is showing him, getting more and more tensed as the lines seem to take the vacant places in his mind.

“And?” he just says as he finishes reading.

Josh is disappointed.

“Don’t you find this enthralling?”

“Sorry, but no,” Tyler clicks on the X on the page. “Internet is full or creepypastas.”

“It’s not just a creepypasta,” Josh resents. “And for some reason, somebody decided to post it on the Deep Web, and not on their Facebook page! Or, somebody had taken it down.”

“Yes. Government. Our lovely government.”

“Said the dude from Andromeda Galaxy who once got a microchip into his neck,” Josh quips.

The smirk on Tyler’s face portraits disagreement. Josh wants to beat Tyler’s skepticism.

“Because you know what?” Tyler rubs the skin behind his ear. “Even after all that crap, I filter the things to believe in. And you’re just showing me a weird post definitely written by a mentally ill woman about that mentally ill K.?”

“But what if she’s right?”

“I’m not gonna believe a woman whose name is Polly J. Sheek,” Tyler deadpans. “Why did she use
“Maybe she wanted her son to find her?” Josh guesses. “Well she probably expects her son to be a genius. Poor Polly.”

“What did you say?”

“What?”

“The last one,” Josh grabs his phone and opens the notes app, typing the letters quickly.

**P O L L Y J S H E E K**

“Kelly,” Tyler repeats.

“What if it’s a cipher?” Josh types again.

**K E L L Y**

**P O J S H E**

“Joshep- Joseph?!” Tyler swats Josh’s hand, his phone falls on the mattress. “Kelly Joseph. No, it’s stupid, it’s just our imagination, no, no, no,” Tyler gasps for breath while Josh braces himself to deal with Tyler’s hysteria again.

“Tyler,” Josh gingerly strokes Tyler’s hair. “Polly J. Sheek was not just a narrator, I bet she was K. she’d been writing about. Don’t try to hide right now. You still remember *his* words- aliens are just working with the biological material. With cells, with genes, but Earth is the source!”

Tyler refuses to comprehend the truth, wrapping his fingers around the lines tattooed on his wrist.

“I can’t be that baby. Because… They had just taken the foetus out of the woman, Josh, that’s just disgusting!” Tyler yells in despair.

“But it’s easier not to let something die than create something new!”

Josh is beyond his limits.

“Do you even understand how far-fetched it is?” Tyler looks at the anagram again.

“You’ve met a woman who was pregnant when her contact happened,” Josh points out.

“Yes! But n-no one even tried to take the embryos out of her! Everything was f-fine with her and her babies later,” Tyler mumbles, pinching at the black bands on his arm.

“Well, then Kelly Joseph wasn’t that lucky,” Josh reaches for his laptop again.

“Aliens are stealing unborn babies, what a wonderful headline,” Tyler grumbles, still shaking.

“But the mention of *raising* makes more sense now,” Josh clicks on the search engine icon again. “So let’s try to find something about that Kelly Joseph, if she exists.”

“You’ll find dozens of women with this name,” Tyler says coyly.
“But our Kelly should be… weird,” Josh argues, scrolling the page down.

He just wants to dive into the stories about the Contacts, but another name surfaces — Chris Joseph, a farmer who gives advices about how to grow the best corn. Here’s the article about him, dated last month — nothing special, just a speech of a proud worker, but one paragraph makes Josh feel like his innards turn to ice.

“It’s hard to start from the very beginning, over and over again, but I’m the kind of guy who never stops fighting. I thought my life was over when my wife lost our first baby, but now we’re finally over it— it’s been twenty-five years, and me and Kelly know that God looks after him. He always does.”

“Tyler,” Josh elbows his side. “Her contact had happened twenty-five years ago, Chris talks about losing their kid at that time, and you’re- you’re now twenty-five year old!”

Tyler just scratches the top of his head as he stares at the article.

“And so what?” he only manages.

“Do you think that this Kelly Joseph might be our Polly J. Sheek?”

“I doubt it.”

“But why? You are usually the one who’s seeking to verify the facts! You said you tried to find the information about yourself, and now I’m serving it for you, but you’re just chickening out?!”

“Because I don’t need it.”

“What?!”

“You’ve heard me, Josh,” Tyler stretches on the bed. “I tried to find anything about myself, but not about my parents. I have no parents, well, technically.”

“If Kelly isn’t lying, then, technically, we’ve found your Mom and Dad!”

“We shouldn’t have found them. I don’t want to hurt them.”

“So you accept any of this can be the truth?”

Tyler shrugs.

“I hate just to think of it, but- I guess so.”

Excitement is overwhelming.

“Wanna meet them?” Josh is about to start searching for the address.

Tyler fiddles with the corner of the blanket, twiddling it between his fingers.

“If my mother is a… if Kelly is a Contactee, I’m gonna get marked.”

“But maybe she’s just a liar, who knows,” Josh grins encouragingly.

He knows how much Tyler hates getting marks. Though, this is the only way to prove her words.
Sad Satan is a deep web (illegal) horror game.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Tyler covers his ears with his hands and Josh hates himself.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A certain stench of the farm hits Josh’s nostrils as soon as he parks his car beside the lush cornfield. The air smells like hay and manure and even like something sweet which creates such a mind-blowing mix. The sun is setting, the shadows are drowning in the darkness — lots of horror-stories have similar beginnings. Josh misses their cozy bed already. But he can’t let go of those hours he spent searching for the right address — he still isn’t sure if it’s the right one — bless the maps — he and Tyler should try, at least.

“I feel like it’s a very-very-very bad plan,” Tyler mutters, climbing out of the passenger seat.

Josh gets out of the vehicle, too, a little walk is all he needs after their ten-hour ride.

“At least, we didn’t get lost.”

Tyler looks up at the navy blue sky and narrows his eyes.

“I should’ve simulated a migraine to stay home.”

Josh locks the car and looks around.

“But you didn’t.”

“Because I’m pretty curious,” Tyler huffs, touching one of the cornstalks. “VESSEL should’ve deleted all the information about this family not to tempt me.”

Tyler has been in a terrible mood since morning, backchating to Josh’s every word.

“I’m pretty sure they did. They’ve only left some neutral parts. A farmer grieving over his dead son-”

“Stop,” Tyler pleads. “I don’t wanna be anyone’s dead son.”

They’re shuffling away from the cornfield like birds frightened by an ugly scarecrow. Josh is pretty sure he’s allergic to any kinds of corn since their trip from VESSEL to home.

And they walk unhurriedly down the road, down the dusty asphalt, towards the somehow typical farmer house surrounded by the wooden fence. Josh is almost frustrated when he sees no cows and horses roaming the grass, but they just seem to be locked in their stalls. That’s why Josh doesn’t actually see anything — or anyone — here’s only a very, very nervous Tyler.

Josh gnaws the coarse skin around his thumb. If they’re not getting their ass kicked tonight, then Josh is going to start believing not only in aliens.
“So,” Josh pulls at the wicket. It opens easily.

“So,” Tyler nods. “We came here, so we have t-to find the guts and meet Kelly at least?”

Josh’s bravery is playing hide-and-seek. They haven’t actually discussed the plan since Tyler has been quiet and edgy all the way down here. Josh was about to come up with a lie that they were just journalists and came here for a reportage, but Tyler said that he hated any kinds of press. Honestly, Josh didn’t know.

“What are we going to tell them?”

Tyler tends to mock all of Josh’s ideas fitting this situation.

“Tell them my name? I dunno,” Tyler enters the front yard, and Josh follows him step to step. “It was your initiative. I’m not itching to get marked again- I’ve probably forgotten this feeling already.”

Josh will probably never forget those marking-sessions he witnessed.

Here’s a small path paved with smooth grey stones, and here’s a neat garden nearby — that’s where Josh finally spots an alive person that looks a bit off compared to the deserted front yard.

“Hey?” Josh calls.

It’s a blonde girl, with the yellow garden watering can in her hands, she flinches as she hears Josh’s voice but then she smiles.

Tyler smiles too, Josh notes.

Though their smiles effloresce immediately.

“Can we see Kelly Joseph?” Tyler starts, hiding his fists in the kangaroo pocket of his hoodie. “And… Hello.”

“Oh,” the girl almost drops the watering can. “Mom is inside the house- are you… are you those new boys from our church?”

*Church. Things are getting uncomfortable when it's about the church.*

“No, no, we just want to have a small talk with her- it’s personal, I guess,” Josh replies with the sour wince. “What’s your name?”

“Maddy,” the girl says, spraying the water all over the roses, liquid hits the dust. The flowers look a bit withered and beaten. “I’ll call my Mom, let’s go,” she invites, turning back to the path.

“I’m Tyler, by the way,” Tyler introduces himself.

Josh wants to maintain him.

“I’m Josh. You have a nice cornfield.”

“That’s my Dad’s pride!” Maddy beams. “Though he expects me and my brothers to keep working for this farm till the end of our days, but I have planned my life another way.”

*She has brothers, of course she does, because the Josephs weren’t going to mourn over their first kid for forever.*
Crooning the lyrics of an old lullaby under her breath, Maddy leads them to the house as if Josh and Tyler might simply get lost in the bushes.

“Mom!” Maddy shouts as they step on the front porch. “Here are some guys, they want to meet you!”

No response. Maybe, Kelly is just busy cooking or she’s not in the mood to talk to strangers.

“Wait here, please,” Maddy says as she opens the door.

And she sneaks inside.

“I hope Kelly won’t bring a rifle,” Tyler attempts to joke.

Josh doesn’t laugh. Because owning the guns is a common thing for all of the farmers or farmers’ wives. Josh has seen that in the movies.

The minutes of waiting jump around them like rabbits, and Josh hates it — he doesn’t want to re-open the family’s old scars. Tyler shivers as the footsteps behind the door grow louder, and then somebody tugs at the handle. The woman in a blue and white plaid shirt shows up; she shakes the drops of water off her hands as she speaks.

“Can I help you?”

“Depends,” Tyler says darkly.

The woman looks a bit like an older version of Maddy with a few crinkles around her hazel eyes and with the corners of her mouth turning downwards. Her hands seem massive and rough, almost like Josh’s, but with less calloused knuckles. Life on farm can do that.

“Kelly?” Josh starts timidly, because Tyler can spend hours without saying a word, and Josh doesn’t relish it. “My name’s Josh, and…”

“I’m Tyler.”

It’s like throwing a pebble in the window. This time, though, the window cracks.

Kelly cocks her eyebrows, a warm nostalgic smile forms on her lips.

“Josh… Tyler- these are good names. I wanted to name my firstborn Tyler,” she dreamily rolls her eyes skyward. “Tyler Joseph. Tyler Robert Joseph, more precisely,” Kelly throws her long blonde hair over her shoulder. Here are few grey strands in them.

Josh can guess why.

“Wanna come in? Maddy said you wanted to talk,” she is now staring longingly at both of them.

Josh looks at the small blades of grass peeking in between the wooden planks under his feet. He’s sure he’d get splinters if he’d walked here barefoot.

“Tell her,” Josh pushes Tyler slightly. If they’re coming for the truth, they should start with providing some facts as well.

Tyler’s sigh makes Kelly tense up.

“My name’s Tyler Joseph. Tyler Robert Joseph, more precisely,” he finishes with a laboured smile
on his lips. He even steps away when Kelly gets closer, and Josh is afraid that she’s going to punch
him —

But here’s just a hug. A very warm one, full of motherly love; Kelly almost cries into Tyler’s
shoulder, huffing something illegible, and it scares Josh.

“I saw you in my dreams- I can’t tell if they had been dreams, they were more like, prophecies,”
Kelly utters, grabbing at her messy hair and then wiping the tears off her eyes. “I’m sorry, my boy.
I couldn’t save you. I’m glad God did.”

She stops gripping at Tyler’s clothes as he doesn’t even hug her back, just letting his hands hang
limply. Josh begins to count hours before the next marking thing. For some reason, it didn’t hit
Tyler during his first meeting with Josh, maybe, there was not enough time to set off the reaction,
but the second meeting was fateful. Josh wonders how it would work with Kelly though.

Josh wants to forewarn her.

“We can go away,” Tyler offers instead.

Probably, he still hopes to trick the marking-thing, though, Josh thinks it’s already too late.

“There was a spaceship,” Kelly says, eyes wide, hands trembling.

“Can you tell us-”

“Come in, boys, come in,” Kelly urges, snatching Tyler’s sleeve and shoving him into the hallway.
“Josh? Oh dear, come in, too- your hair is a little too bright, isn’t it?” she coos. This baffles Josh. “I
like it, it’s like a sunshine- there’s never enough sunshine or sunflowers. Come in, come in,” she
fusses around as they go into a big living room.

Tyler’s body hides enough mysteries — Josh tries to guess where the brand new mark is going to
appear. Getting one across the forehead would be incredibly awkward.

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The house is so squeaky-clean it makes Josh sick. The floors are almost mirror-like, washed
thousands times, the curtains are tied up neatly; everything is too perfect here, even these pillows
on the plush sofa, even the humidity in air.

Kelly shows them her wedding photos — a happy young girl with rather unhappy eyes and a young
guy in a tux and with a pokerface. Other polaroids are not much different, though Kelly does not
look joyful in the ones that were taken after her Contact. Josh thought here was gonna be a huge
scandal, but he’s just sitting here and holding a thick photo album in a velvet cover. Here are also
some regular shots: in the kitchen, the kids playing in the garden, of two boys shooting hoops in
the backyard.

“Chris is going to come back from the town at any second!” Kelly says excitedly. “Since we sent
Zack to a military school, he’s so focused on Jay, our younger son.”

“Military school,” Tyler repeats. “Cool.”

Zack, Maddy, Jay, Josh counts mentally. They didn’t waste time even while they had been grieving
over Tyler.
Kelly takes the photo album from Josh’s lap and closes it with the slap. She then looks closely at Tyler’s hands.

“Are you married?”

And another dubious topic emerges.

“En-ngaged,” Tyler stutters out.

The couch they’re sitting on suddenly turns to a bunch of rocks. Kelly just keeps emitting happiness.

“Oh, dear, I’m so happy to hear this! Who is she?”

“And Tyler falters. “She isn’t… she.”

And Josh pulls his hand out of the pocket of his jeans and shows her his own black ring. Kelly’s grin falls off her face though she somehow manages to plaster it back.

“Oh. So you and Josh are- together,” Kelly chews on her words. “It doesn’t matter. I am happy for as long as I know that my boy is doing fine. Are you doing fine?”

Tyler responds with a nod.

“That’s amazing. I’ve spent years upon years in prayers, and I’m glad He’s finally heard me,” Kelly says, pressing her lips into a tight line.

Here’s a wooden cross on the wall above the couch; all three of them glance at it before getting back to their conversation.

“I’m taking care of Tyler,” Josh adds. He now feels stupid. Of course, Tyler’s parents aren’t ready to find out something like this.

But Kelly doesn’t start any homophobic conversations.

Kelly makes some tea for them, and Josh wonders where Maddy is — he hasn’t seen a glimpse of her since she entered the house. Mr. and Mrs. Joseph are pretty strict, probably.

They’re just talking, about their lives (though Tyler conceals a half of his adventures — ‘yes, we’re travelling sometimes. I kinda like Space’). Kelly asks them about Tyler’s past but Tyler distracts her with the discussion about cooking. It’s ridiculous, Tyler doesn’t know anything about that. Though, it works. Kelly even starts to laugh at Josh’s remarks.

He only starts to think about how lovely this family is, but it’s when the front door opens with a smack.

Kelly splashes the tea onto Josh’s knee when the two men come in — well, it’s a man and a boy, and they head towards Kelly, Josh and Tyler. And it brings some kind of a disaster, not a visible one, but the laughter trails off and the smiles fade abruptly. Mr. Joseph doesn’t even look this intimidating, but something in his glare makes Josh’s heart shrink.

The boy looks at all four of them.

“Honey, I didn’t know we were expecting guests,” the man says.

“It’s Tyler and Josh,” Kelly simply replies.
“We’re leaving,” Tyler gets up.

The man nods, staring him down.

“Jay, go to your room,” he says dryly.

“But Dad, I wanted to…” Jay begins.

“Later. Go to your room now,” Chris orders. Jay huffs in disagreement, but his father’s heavy glance promptly kills his rebellious spirit. Once the boy disappears upstairs, Chris turns to his wife.

“Now explain.”

Kelly stands next to Tyler.

“Chris-”

Josh doesn’t feel like any explanations might satisfy Mr. Joseph right now.

The disaster is more palpable now, and the desire to rush to the door makes Josh fidget. Here’s the anger, Chris fully consists of his rage as he cracks his knuckles. But Kelly isn’t scared, she’s genuinely happy, clutching the side of Tyler’s hoodie and pushing him in front of her, in front of Chris.

Chris’s nostrils are flaring.

“He’s not our son, Kelly! He’s just an unholy impostor!” his finger points at Tyler’s chest. “What do you want to get from us?” Tyler keeps silent. Chris speaks back to Kelly. “You had a miscarriage, and everyone thinks you’re crazy just because you keep saying this bullshit about the spaceships and aliens and ‘oh something had stolen my unborn child!’”

Kelly attacks her husband with her angry snapping.

“This boy looks exactly the same as I have seen him in my dreams, Chris!”

“You can’t be sure,” Chris retorts.

“Portraits, Chris!” she points out. “Why don’t you believe? It’s Tyler, see? Chris, it’s our boy, Tyler, he came back!”

Chris nearly grabs Tyler by the shoulder, but he dodges easily.

“Hey, mister, calm down,” Josh keeps him at the distance of an outstretched hand, but Chris seems to splash all of his grudges on Tyler.

Tyler rummages in his pocket and pulls out his driver license.

“S-see?” he shoves it into Chris’s face. “Read the fucking name!”

“Don’t swear in my house- Tyler Joseph?” Chris squints at the license.

Tyler is fuming.

“Found familiar letters?”

“Tyler, stop it,” Josh is now sure his idea was awful. “Thanks for the tea. We’re leaving.”
“No, you’re not!” Kelly grabs Tyler’s clothes once again. “You’re not driving through the night. We have a vacant bedroom with one bed, I think you’ll be comfortable here.”

“One bed?” Chris eyes her mistrustfully.

“They need one bed,” Kelly clues him.

And Chris starts the same old song.

He starts with showing them to the door.

“A son of mine wouldn’t live with the other boy, no, young men, stop saying nonsense!”

“You can’t insult our boy just because he’s in love with a man!”

Chris responds with the guttural growling merged with ‘I told you not to interact with the unknown people’. Family reunion gone bad. It now looks more like a family conflict, not a regular one though. Because Tyler hasn’t even been a missing person, he’s just been busy growing up in another Galaxy, too sure he was created by aliens. And his mother has been waiting for him twenty-five years. Josh didn’t think that the Josephs’ memories were still so vivid.

“My son can’t be a gay!”

“God loves everyone!”

“Yes, but I don’t!”

Tyler covers his ears with his hands and Josh hates himself.

Mr. Joseph’s reaction is not completely adequate, he doesn’t believe them, but on this occasion it might be taken as a normal thing. Tyler does not even look like him. Maybe here are some common traits, but Josh can’t tell what it exactly is. He can only tell that both Chris and Tyler look like they are going to set each other on fire.

“Come on, boys,” Kelly murmurs before glaring at her husband. “I’ll prepare a room for you. You’re staying here for the night.”

***

So here they are, sitting on the double bed in a guest bedroom. Josh can still hear Chris and Kelly yelling at each other next door. And it devours Josh now. And the lavender-smelling bedsheets are devouring him too. Everything is so intact it feels almost unnatural.

Tyler gives up and lies down onto the soft mattress.

“I’m sorry, Ty,” Josh whispers, urging Tyler to finally calm down.

“No, it’s fine,” Tyler says though it’s clearly a lie. “It’s her. Kelly. I feel it,” he swallows.

A hot wave rushes over Josh as he hears so.

“Is it coming? How can I help?”

“No, I don’t think you can help,” Tyler chokes out. “I’m just thirsty. It’s really hot here,” he pulls
at the front of his hoodie, wavering it and breathing. “I need some water.”

“I can go get it for you,” Josh offers and slides off the bed along with Tyler.

“I can do it myself,” Tyler sways a little as he takes a step. “I hope the Josephs will not think I’m gonna steal their silverware,” he smirks when he’s at the door.

Hopefully, the Joseph family doesn’t have any bear traps on their kitchen floor.

Chapter End Notes

i hate plot twists like this one SO MUCH that i had to write one
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

XLIII•XVI•XXXIII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Josh wakes up to a girl’s blood-curdling screaming, bewildered — he doesn’t recognize a bed he’s sleeping in. He then realizes that Tyler’s trip for a glass of water has probably taken much longer than necessary. When did he manage to fall asleep —

Josh plods to the bedroom’s door, carefully peeking out of the small crack and not seeing anything through the darkness in the hallway, but here are the dim lights in the end of it.

“Ty?” Josh asks in a whisper.

The girl screams again.

“Mom! Dad! Help!”

An obscure assumption swishes through Josh’s head —

Josh is the first who reaches her, jumping over the stairs and nearly tripping over as his bare feet slip across the smooth wood. Maddy is here, kneeling on the floor next to Tyler, attempting to hold his head up as he convulses and tugs at the laces of his hoodie — a terrible bad habit which cuts off the air, Tyler’s lips have already turned blue.

“What’s happening?” Maddy is struck, hysterical-like.

Josh wants her to stop yelling.

Tyler’s agony only proves all the facts.

“Did he say something before that started?” Josh just tries to distract her, at the same time fighting Tyler’s grip as he gasps and chokes.

“No, no, he’s just-” Maddy pauses, looking at Tyler’s pale face, the lamps on the walls leave yellow stains on his skin. “I was in the kitchen when I heard a noise, and there was Tyler near the stairs, and he wanted- I don’t know. He just smiled at me, but then he fell,” her eyes are wide and with fear in them.

“Good, you did so good, Maddy,” Josh encourages her, crouching down and cradling Tyler’s shoulders into his arms.

Josh is beyond scared, but here’s no way he can get something coherent from a semi-conscious Tyler, who just grasps at his own sleeve, nails almost leave the holes in the fleece. The skin behind Josh’s ear feels really warm, right where the X mark is.
“You need to breathe,” Josh murmurs. It’s obvious that Tyler can hardly hear him —

And that’s where Chris Joseph leaves his room and brings even more mayhem. Josh is sure that the man is about to strike him down with the lightning or to finally fire his rifle as he scurries downstairs, along with his wife behind his back.

His fury tears the night, his voice rattles in Josh’s ears.

“Is it a withdrawal or something? What is he on?” Chris hunches over both Josh and Tyler.

Tyler’s right arm is hot, abnormally hot, and Tyler just throws his head back with a faint cough as a thin trail of a whitish foam coats his lips.

Josh definitely remembers Tyler has previously mentioned that.

“Oh no, no, no, Tyler, wake up,” Josh gently lays him back on the floor, wanting to turn Tyler’s head to the side. Some of his frothy saliva gets on the wood beside his cheek which apparently breaks Mr. Joseph’s patience.

“Dad, no!”

“Chris, don’t do that!” Kelly’s hand flies to her mouth as Maddy continues to cry and Chris bunches up Tyler’s hood and tows him across the floor.

“What the fuck are you doing?!” Josh exclaims, batting Mr. Joseph’s hand, and the ties are pressed under Tyler’s Adam’s apple, and he wheezes and kicks his legs in feeble attempts to get his footing back.

It’s a short dispute, with Josh freaking out and with Mr. Joseph threatening to call the police and lock both of them in a jail. But Josh wins this part of a fight, gingerly hugging Tyler’s upper body and crouching back down.

“Is he an addict? Or an epileptic?” Chris wonders, eying the scene with enough disgust to make Josh want to punch him. “He’s made a mess,” he adds indifferently as Tyler spews out more foam, trying to swallow some of it back or it just runs back down his throat by itself, Josh isn’t sure.

Kelly’s lips are just lifeless colorless threads on her face.

“Are you going to leave right now?”

“Mom,” Maddy smacks her arm. Not a good behavior for a good Christian girl.

Which is not a great help.

“Your son is having seizures, and this is the only thing that bothers you now?” Josh sputters, astonished — Tyler’s shivers are not so intense right now, but he’s still burning, the light sparkling seeps through his clothes, all over his torso. “Tyler?” Josh cups his chin, wet from his saliva and foam.

He’s never seen it getting Tyler this bad.

He’s seen him convulsing and thrashing before, but this — this is the unknown territory. Josh’s palms are cold, and the adrenaline wears off, and his anxiety sets the snare — Josh now can tell it’s almost over, almost.

“What is this?” Mr. Joseph gawks down at them, at the natural illumination of Tyler’s body as Josh
pulls his hoodie up.

“No,” Tyler says in a gravelly voice. He even tries to throw the hood on his face and bend his knees to make himself smaller.

Tyler is vulnerable during the marking thing, it feels like thousands of bees sting the skin — these are Tyler’s words though Josh tries not to talk to him about the worst situations.

“Show me,” Mr. Joseph demands.

“He doesn’t want to,” Josh protests. Tyler’s trying to get up now, just on his hands and knees with Josh covering him from behind.

The glowing hasn’t subsided yet, permeating his clothing.

“What are you hiding?” Kelly slides towards him, reaching her hand to tousle Tyler’s damp hair. It’s just one innocent gesture but Tyler begins to shake.

“I’m a gleamer,” Tyler says. “And you’re a Contactee. N-now I know.”

“Drugs?” Mr. Joseph is here to grab Tyler by his hood again.

“Hey, stop!” Josh pushes him in the chest.

Frightened, Maddy looks up at them from the floor, now sitting beside the stairs.

“This is my house and therefore these are my rules,” Mr. Joseph spits through his gritted teeth. “And if he pretends to be a part of my family, he’s gonna work really, really hard to earn my condescension.”

“Hard?” Tyler is all wobbly as he stands up. “Just to make you believe me? Will you be disappointed if I say that it’s not my b-biggest dream?” he strokes his right arm. “But here’s one thing, Dad,” he says sarcastically as he sheds his hoodie off.

That’s when Josh gets that Tyler’s ‘no’ is a ‘yes’ way too often. He’s just so conflicting.

“Surprise,” Tyler turns to let his parents see him from the different angles. “Say something? What? Come on, call the journalists, call every-fucking-one, what?”

Josh has to restrain him.

“Oh, Tyler,” Kelly’s fingers are almost poking at Tyler’s torso.

“Don’t touch,” Tyler snarls. “Just watch.”

“What about the new one?” Josh nods at Tyler’s right shoulder. Even standing a few steps away, he can feel how hot and inflamed it is.

Tyler raises his hand up, revealing the reddened skin around the long string of Roman numerals on the inner side of his bicep, taking the place between the crook of his elbow and his armpit.

**XLIII•XVI•XXXIII**

“Wonderful. What else can I say?!” Tyler groans. “Geometric patterns, symbols, Latin, circles, a cross-and now this. What is this?”
He’s so distressed it’s almost funny. Though it’s not. No one knows what will be the next one, and where exactly it will appear. Josh feels like Tyler’s personal security guard when the Joseph family surrounds him, trying to decipher the new tattoo. It’s still yellow and golden, just like the others, but the blackness begins to swallow the light.

“Forty-three, sixteen, thirty-three,” Maddy utters, brushing the remaining tears off her eyes. “These can be three of Martin Luther’s Ninety-five Theses. Or I may be wrong,” she sniffs. “Just the first thing that popped up in my head, uh, sorry,” she nudges back into her corner.

“So you’re getting these out of the blue?” Mr. Joseph asks, making Tyler step under the light. “And… sorry for dragging you. I just wanted to throw you out.”

“So very nice, you’re just a father of the year,” Josh is about to start a fight, to be honest. That man didn’t even have a right to lay his finger on Tyler let alone manhandle him towards the back door.

“It’s okay to be scared when it happens. I’m scared, too. Each time,” Tyler bends to pick his hoodie up. “I think we’re going to leave now. Don’t want to bother you anymore,” he says as he dresses up.

He’s still unhealthily pale.

“Ty, I’m not sure if I’m okay to drive right now,” Josh points out softly. “Let’s just sleep in our car?”

“Boys,” Kelly blocks their path when they are about to go. “Stay.”

“They’re two grown-up men, you can’t hold them here,” Mr. Joseph hoists his weight up on the carved wooden railings.

“But what if our boy needs an ambulance?” the worry almost spills out of Kelly’s eyes as she looks at her husband.

“I don’t need an ambulance,” Tyler grumbles, playing with the ties on his hoodie again. “It’s not an epilepsy, it’s just… that hasn’t happened for forever, seriously. Kelly was the one who could set that off. It’s just… a marking thing. With a blackout,” Tyler covers his freshly tattooed numbers with his palm.

Tyler is nervous and jerky, and his every little move screams about how uncomfortable he’s feeling in his house. And so is Josh. And Maddy is still sitting in the corner between the wall and the staircase, tugging her long nightdress over her shaking knees.

“Go back to your room and don’t leave it until the dawn,” Mr. Joseph turns back to a strict father.

Josh decides not to backchat not to hurt Tyler more — he needs to get some rest after the marking.

So they go back to the bedroom; Tyler immediately curls into himself under the duvet and Josh spends the rest of night staring at the phone screen and reading The Ninety-five Theses or Disputation on the Power of Indulgences he finds on the internet. Just for self-education.

***

A silhouette blocks the sunlight as Josh opens his eyes — it startles him, but then his puzzled brain guesses it’s just Tyler. He sits on the edge of the bed, swinging back and forth.
“Ty?”

His voice is raw.

“Are you ‘kay?”

Tyler holds his hand against his forehead.

“What happened?”

He sounds as abashed as he looks.

“You- you don’t remember?” Josh clears his throat right after. He shouldn’t show his fear.

“I got marked,” Tyler says confidently.

It’s hidden under his clothes, it’s not gleaming, but it’ll take some time for Josh to adjust to the new tattoo. Another special one. Because Kelly Joseph was right.

“That was tough.”

“It’s always tough. I told you.”

“This time was different,” Josh says. “Maybe because she’s your mother?”

Tyler grips on to the duvet.

“So I have to suffer harder?”

“Does it hurt?” Josh props his elbow into the pillow to reach and touch Tyler’s skin.

Tyler hums.

“They probably think I’m a druggie,” he licks his lips. “And I haven’t gotten any water since- um,” he stops, thinking. “I’m gonna die of dehydration.”

Tyler didn’t make it to the kitchen, and then he belched everything out in the form of foam — Josh feels sorry.

Tyler wraps his arms around his middle.

“That was terrible. I think we need to leave before they wake up.”

Josh’s phone says it’s 5:01 am. They’re probably doing stuff in the corn field. Farmers used to get up early.

“Do you think we can get out without getting caught?” Josh asks, but his hopes die when somebody knocks down the bedroom door.

“May I come in?”

“Yes,” Tyler grumbles.

It’s not his house anyway.

And Josh feels like an alien here, he’s no longer ready for any dialogues.
It’s Maddy who enters the room with a shy smile on her face.

“Good morning,” she greets. Here’s the plastic tray in her hands, here’s the smell of toasts and orange juice. “I thought you might be hungry after…” Maddy gives Tyler an eloquent glance. “I just leave it here,” she sets the tray on the table in the corner of the room.

“Thanks,” Josh says since Tyler is still keeping silent.

“I’m sorry for being this intrusive, but…” she nearly rushes to the door when Tyler just moves his hand. “A thing happened.”

“How stupid of me,” Tyler drawls.

“Explain?” Maddy takes a step. “That’s all that I need, because my Mom was- she is obsessed over a boy named Tyler who has to come back and find her?”

“She’s experienced a weird thing in her past, Maddy,” Josh says. “Don’t blame her.”

“But she’s been leaving messages everywhere! I was four when I learned a thing about death and miscarriages, about people going missing and about mental illness,” Maddy whispers angrily, closing the door. “She’s been drawing you, she kept telling us creepy stories about our older brother, and about ‘one day Tyler is going to find his way back home’,“ she wipes her watery eyes. “She wanted to call the police, she was trying to write an article, but my Dad had to cut off the internet connection not to let her do those stupid things.”

A big fat fly buzzes over the toast and swoops down on it.

Maddy kicks the table.

“I didn’t know,” Tyler exhales. “I swear I didn’t even know she existed.”

Maddy doesn’t get his words.

“She has a collection of your portraits. And now you just appear,” Maddy waves her hand to scare the fly away. “Don’t be surprised if she’ll try to lock you in the barn.”

She doesn’t sound mad though. Amazed, mostly.

“Was she saying anything about the spaceships?” Josh already knows the answer, but he just wants to hear Maddy’s version.

“ Heck yes!” Maddy cries out, balling up her fists. “All. The. Time. That was her favorite story, about levitating and about the white room, and about some crazy alien surgeons taking her baby.”

Tyler chokes. Josh pats his back while he coughs.

“That’s c-correct,” Tyler rasps. “The operation room is white.”

“Oh no, don’t tell me you’re one of those lunatics, too,” Maddy clasps her palm over her lips.

“We both are,” Josh says.

Everything is terrible anyway.

“What do you mean-”
“Aliens are real. Spaceships are real too. Alien abductions are not a fiction,” Josh utters, watching Maddy stagger backwards and lean her back against the door.

“Your Mom is not a psycho,” Tyler nods. “My epileptic seizure from last night- it was not a seizure. I get this whenever I meet a person who was affected by UFOs.”

Maddy blankly chews on the toast she brought.

“We’re leaving,” Tyler says gloomily. “Sorry about scaring you guys.”

He doesn’t even touch the orange juice as Josh helps him make it to the hallway.

***

“We’re running away like cowards,” Josh says, watching the nearly calming picture outside the window. Tyler has recovered enough to drive as the miles and miles of the road weave a spider web behind them.

“You should be grateful that Chris d-didn’t strangle us with pillows in our sleep,” Tyler responds, turning the steering wheel.

Chris Joseph still doesn’t believe them. It’s okay though.

Josh begins to feel even worse about this family meeting — they found the truth, but they also made Kelly’s state more dangerous. She’s now sure she’s found her son she’s been searching for for years. She didn’t throw a tantrum when Tyler apologized and told her he had to leave again.

“It’s okay,” Kelly said. “Now I know that my boy is alive and well.”

It was awkward.

Chris didn’t even let Jay leave his room and say hi to his brother.

And that was awkward too.

“I’ll be always waiting for you, boys,” Kelly smiled as she hugged both Tyler and Josh.

Maddy cried a little.

Josh didn’t feel relieved as they crossed the front yard, finally seeing cows and sheep in the paddocks.

“I didn’t know this could bring more troubles,” Josh mutters, turning the car radio on. Here’s the song —

‘Little men, big guns pointed at our heads.’

“So optimistic,” Tyler scoffs, re-tuning the radio-wave.

‘…a deer, presumably torn-apart by the wild animals.’

Josh adds the volume. It’s even less optimistic than the song he’s heard before.

‘…on the farms and in the neighborhood. Do not leave your livestock unattended.’
“Something killed a deer,” Tyler repeats. “Poor deer.”

“When something killed that guy, they said it was a wild animal, too,” Josh points out.

“But we haven’t seen a tattered deer yet,” Tyler argues, driving past the abandoned field.

“Thank God,” Josh sighs.

Chapter End Notes

well
thanks for reading!
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

“It felt like a landmine in my brain, and if I remembered what happened, it was gonna detonate,” Tyler says quietly. “I c-couldn’t talk about that. I thought it was because of the hit in my head or something.”

“So you lied to us when we tried to help?” Josh snaps. “What else are you covering up?”

Chapter Notes

autopsy scene warning

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They get home, they totally make it, they repeat their ten-hour ride with sleepy brains and flattened ass. Josh’s legs give up underneath him as soon as he makes it towards the couch — Tyler lands next to him, exhaling a puff — and turns the TV on.

When Josh sees the news ticker on the screen though, he nearly throws up.

Another body has been found, they say in the evening news. It’s mangled and the blood has been drained out, and the picture is censored here and there, where the woman’s face and chest were. The people on TV presume that it was a grizzly bear. Because they have to blame it on something — FBI is working, they don’t divulge the details. Because here’s no logic. It’s gonna be just a grizzly bear, even though no one has seen them in this area before — but it’s also the work for the agents.

“I hate the morons who try to feed us with this shit,” Josh says, throwing the TV remote between cushions.

“That’s what happens when you have two cool versions but can’t exactly pick one,” Tyler chuckles. Tyler’s lips look dry, with the white flakes on them.

It reminds Josh of the foam that was spilling out of Tyler’s throat, out of his convulsing body. It will never stop being an ominous thing.

Josh ruffles his hair.

“I feel dumb.”

“I’m never coming b-back,” Tyler wipes the corner of his mouth. “I wish I could erase their memories.”

They made everything more complicated.
“She’ll be waiting, Ty.”

“Whatever.”

The evening news end, here’s a short break before the movie.

“Something is eating people.”

“I heard that.”

And, they’re getting stuck again.

Tyler peels the dead skin off his lips; he’s downed two bottles of water over the course of the ride, but it doesn’t seem enough.

Josh wants to make some tea for him.

Josh doesn’t want to think about the corpses. Or about Tyler’s family.

***

Jenna calls them at midnight; Josh can’t understand what she wants to deliver over the noises on the line. She doesn’t know that they have solved Tyler’s mystery, which has made Tyler even sadder.

“What? We don’t hear you,” Tyler yells at his phone.

“…again,” Jenna croaks out.

“What?” Josh takes it, bringing it to his ear though it’s too loud.

“Something tried to get into VESSEL again,” Jenna says.

“Something?”

Josh hopes she misspoke.

A pause and more noise.

“I’m sure they’re listening. I can’t tell you everything. But it’s dead now,” she assures.

Josh can already feel his heart flaring up.

“And you’re calling us because-”

And Josh regrets he doesn’t keep his mouth shut. Because the following sentence is a killer —

“We’re performing an autopsy tomorrow. You should be there.”

***

It’s easier to just skip a day off work than explain to their bosses why they need a day off work again — they need a day off because here’s a helicopter that takes them to VESSEL laboratory.
Josh feels quite uneasy when he just thinks of the word *autopsy*.

“What’s it?” Tyler asks through the roar of engine.

“Something was creeping down the backyard, just beside the helicopter- the alarm went off, we thought it was one of the butchers, but it was…” Jenna scratches her temple. “A *creature*. I don’t know how to describe it, you’re gonna see it really soon, be ready. Mark shot it dead.”

Josh is totally not prepared for seeing a creature with a gunshot wound. He just tries to think of videogames instead.

“And, here are some confidential details I couldn’t tell you over the phone. The slime the creature had produced was identical to the one on your bandages, Josh. And it contains some fragments of Tyler’s blood.”

“My blood?!” Tyler shouts. “H-how can you be sure?”

“Because I’ve spent enough time working with your blood, I can write a dissertation!” Jenna shouts back.

“You’ve spent enough time, but you couldn’t even keep the samples,” Tyler fends off. “I hate VESSEL.”

“We have a dead monster somewhere in the lab, and you’re still bitching about the thing both of you couldn’t change anyway? Seriously?” Josh is beyond pissed. “I got a virus in my system, and now VESSEL has finally found the source- let’s not kill each other until we see it, okay?”

“No,” Tyler says. “Just. No.”

Arms crossed over his chest, he leans back and blankly glances at the porthole. Tyler’s stubbornness makes him act like a little kid sometimes.

“What does it look like?” Josh is talking to Jenna. “That… thing.”

“When you said you saw an alien in the wood, I didn’t believe you, honestly. Because aliens tend to attack from the sky, but there were no any UFO incidents, so I… I blamed all of it on your fever. But now when I saw it just a few feet away, it’s just… it’s still inexplicable,” Jenna sighs. “It looks like a distorted human’s form. You’ll see.”

Josh’s groan is devoured by the whistling coming from outside. He wonders if there’ll be the times he will enjoy these helicopter rides.

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Josh’s nervousness just kicks in by the time they land, getting out of the helicopter and hurrying towards the VESSEL building. No matter how many times Josh has been here, it never stops being scary. This time, Jenna signals them to round the corner and guides them towards the metal door, but not the front one.

“A new level of trust?” Tyler huffs.

Jenna wordlessly pushes him into the dark gap and waves her arm towards Josh. Here’s the staircase, covered in dust and greenish mold.
“You don’t use this way very often,” Josh winces squeamishly.

Jenna looks around and closes the door behind her.

“It’s a disguise.”

“But where are we going?”

“To the morgue.”

Tyler stops dead in his tracks. They don’t have a single flashlight so the threat of breaking a leg here is pretty real.

“You’re gonna do the autopsy by yourself?”

That’s what Josh is thinking about.

“No, we have an agent for this,” Jenna responds, turning and nearly slipping on the humid concrete. “Though it’s gonna be her first case like this.”

Josh shudders when the small stone crumbles under his step and ricochets off the floor. It sounds like a gunshot.

“I’m gonna throw up,” Josh warns.

Jenna sympathetically rolls her eyes.

“We haven’t even started yet.”

“I know, but…” Josh’s heart soaks through his chest. “But somebody’s going to slice open a creature unknown to science, and rummage in their innards… I’m gonna throw up anyway.”

“Come on,” Tyler’s warm palm rubs his back. “It’s going to be okay. It somehow has something from my blood. I am as anxious as you are.”

This doesn’t soothe Josh.

Mostly because here’s another door, made of a slightly turbid blue glass; here’s the bright light bleeding from the small crack underneath, mocking the darkness.

“Let’s come in,” Jenna declares. “I can’t wait for you to see this, guys.”

Josh doesn’t share her excitement.

Tyler swallows and tugs at the collar of his shirt.

Jenna opens the door.

“Melanie prepares the body for an autopsy,” Jenna says, greeting the girl in a green coat and with the huge plastic glasses covering a half of her face. Her hair is hidden under the medical cap, but it’s obvious that her hair is dyed half black half pink. Josh is aware that Tyler knows this girl from his past, from those times he tried to meet up with the mentally ill Contactees.

“Hey”, she smiles at Tyler.

“Haven’t met the dentist yet?” he smiles back.
She has a gap between her front teeth.

“You haven’t met them as well,” she teases.

“Both of you are too old to get braces,” Jenna says dryly. “Josh, it’s Melanie; Melanie, it’s Josh.”

Josh nods, unsure if he has to shake her hand while she’s wearing these medical gloves.

Here’s the body on the autopsy table, covered with a single white sheet.

Tyler avoids looking at it yet and either does Josh.

“Let’s watch what it hides before butchers steal it.”

The word butcher sounds funny in the context of autopsy.

Melanie rips the covers off the corpse, and Josh inadvertently presses his knuckles to his lips, almost bruising them. Tyler gasps on his left.

And now Josh can see it in all its dead glory.

It’s a creature, indeed, embarrassingly human-like, but with its features distorted in the most impossible way — maybe death erases the traits, but it has a bald head with the thin grayish-blue skin, it looks bug-eyed with the eyelids that have no eyelashes. Its nose is barely bulged on its face, mostly flat, with colorless lips like a long line crossed above its chin.

Its neck and hands are not very different from humans’ — it has the Adam’s apple and five fingers with claws. Claws are making sense, they’re thick and sharp with the hues of brown dried on them.

“So here we are,” Melanie states, snapping her gloves. “Cause of death: a gunshot wound to the chest.”

Josh literally gags when he looks at the round hole in the center of the creature’s ribcage, the skin is torn and burnt, with the purple-blue streaks coiling like serpentine in different directions.

The bullet is still inside, in its flesh, and Melanie wordlessly grabs the forceps off the tray and sticks them into the wound with the sickening sclench.

Jenna hasn’t offered them any coats or uniforms, so Josh tries to stay away from the work not to get sprayed by any liquids still left in the body like a ticking bomb.

“Mark did a good job.”

The bullet flops into a little glass full of transparent fluid.

“Just once,” Josh mutters, despondent.

“We don’t know how to explain this,” Jenna points at the creature’s skin. It looks clammy and sticky. “Here are some things… similar to sweat-glands, but it products some goo.”

“It’s just its kind of sweat,” Melanie nods.

Then, she takes a scalpel.

“But its blood composition is similar to Tyler’s,” Jenna says, turning to one of the racks and finally taking coats and glasses and handing them to Tyler and Josh. “It might be toxic. Better cover
yourselves up.”

And so they dress up, taking their time and turning away while Melanie makes the first manipulations. When Josh turns back, here’s the Y-shaped incision in the creature’s upper body, the dark-purple meat and the skin of the color of dust.

“Ready to enter it?” Melanie asks.

Josh’s palms begin to shake and sweat. He thinks of the wound on his hand, of the peeling skin and blood, and he feels sick again.

“Finish your work, Mel,” Tyler says.

Jenna impartially glances at the creature’s naked torso.

Melanie opens the layers of skin like a book, it slides easily, leaving wet smears on her gloves and on the cuffs of her sleeves.

“Are you okay?” Tyler whispers into Josh’s ear.

Jenna hears it, because she quickly turns her head.

“Fine,” Josh croaks through his clenched teeth.

Melanie reaches for the rib cutter, shiny and squeaky clean until — until she sinks it into the cut and moves it, presses it to the bone and it cracks. And again. And again, and Josh closes his eyes and scrunches up his nose, because he’s sure he can feel the scent of the creature’s venomous bowels.

“Unbelievable,” Jenna exhales, causing Josh to open his eyes again.

“What?” Tyler grips the edge of the table. He stares down at the gaping hole in the corpse’s ribcage — well, here’s no ribcage. It lies on the sheet next to the sink.

“It has human’s organs,” Jenna says, pointing her finger at something that Josh supposes to be its dead heart.

“And it also has males’ genitals,” Melanie adds. But the creature is still covered with the sheet below its waist.

“I thought it was genderless,” Tyler frowns.

“I’d like to think it was a poor guy who went through Hell,” Melanie says, sticking forceps into the flesh once again.

“A human experimentation?” Josh tries to play cool. Though, he can’t stand the sight of the mutated creature being dissected just like a frog.

“I think so,” Jenna agrees. “One more surprise from butchers.”

“Are we going to look at its brain?” Melanie glances at the saws near the sink. “Or let’s weight its internal organs first? It’s not a regular autopsy anyway; I’ve seen enough crap volunteering for a mental hospital, and a little brains on my clothes don’t scare me- Josh?”

“Josh?”
Tyler sounds panicky.

Jenna looks worried.

The mention of trepanation pushes Josh over the edge, and he sheds the coat off, along with the glasses, because it’s suddenly too hard to breathe.

“The bathroom’s there,” Melanie understands him, gesturing to the door behind her back.

It’s such a short distance, which is good.

Josh doesn’t even manage to kneel beside the toilet as his last night’s dinner scrapes all the way up his esophagus, escaping from his mouth. He just doubles over, balancing himself against the wall in a tight stall. ‘Damn it,’ Josh thinks. The image of the body on the autopsy table makes him gag and then vomit again, yellowish bile splatters on the toilet seat. It tastes like spoiled chicken. People in the autopsy room are making scientific discoveries, and he’s just blowing chunks instead of being useful. Well done, Josh —

“J-josh? Are you feeling better?”

Josh takes a roll of toilet paper, ripping some and wiping the mess off the seat.

“It’s okay, it’s not for everyone.”

Josh doesn’t respond. But he can’t spend the end of the day here, in the stall that reeks of puke.

“I’m sorry,” he says mostly to himself, flushing the toilet.

Tyler is standing beside the wall, one shoulder props it as if it might just fall down.

“Feeling better?” he asks again. He’s not wearing a coat or the glasses.

Josh Presses his palm to the smooth side of the metal sink, grey and shiny under the ceiling lights.

“There were just… real guts,” he fills his mouth full of water right after. To wash away the taste, to wash away the words.

“Almost human guts, yeah,” Tyler agrees.

Josh chokes and coughs, the water hits through his nostrils.

“They’re gonna take its brain out,” he hacks up, lungs full of fluid just like that time he came down with pneumonia.

They’re gonna think Josh is weak just because he’s not used to watching all of the procedures.

“It’s gonna be interesting,” Tyler assumes.

“I’m not gonna stay,” Josh says, spilling handfuls of water on his face.

“I know. We’ll just wait outside.”

“Why did they want us to see its innards? I see no difference between kidneys and gallbladder,” Josh holds his hot hands under the tap for a while.

“It’s like, we’re dedicated since now, I guess,” Tyler shrugs. “Big scary BUTCH hurts poor little
VESSEL and they just need a shoulder to cry on.”

He maneuvers Josh to the exit, shushing both Jenna and Melanie as he steers Josh past the table. Their coats are sprinkled in red, along with their gloves and glasses, a bunch of bloodied tools is lying on the tray.

Jenna distracts from weighting — Jesus, is it its stomach?! — and looks at Josh sternly.

Josh gags into his palm cupped over his lips. He’s certainly about to throw up again, but Tyler jiggles the handle and pushes the door open. The air still smells like mold and fungus, it smells like a typical basement. Not like an autopsy room anymore.

“Well. That was awkward,” Josh mutters, taking a pack of gum out of his pocket.

“You haven’t vomited on the corpse, so that’s alright,” Tyler reassures him. He picks at the plaster peeling off the concrete wall.

And Josh can breathe now, one sip at a time, drinking the oxygen slowly not to gulp down a vague scent of a dead body.

“You said you saw an alien,” Tyler says. Tyler is a distraction. “Was it- was it looking like that dead shit?”

Josh’s hair is wet as he touches it- but maybe his palms are.

“I didn’t see it clearly. It was far too quick,” Josh sniffs. His throat is still sore.

“I thought it was just your fever,” Tyler admits. “I saw it too. Something. When I woke up in the woods.”

“What?” Why didn’t you tell me or Jenna?

The shock is so intense Josh forgets that he’s about to hurl. Tyler has had too many hallucinations to believe in anything. Though, Josh’s situation has made him even more skeptical.

“It felt like a landmine in my brain, and if I remembered what happened, it was gonna detonate,” Tyler says quietly. “I c-couldn’t talk about that. I thought it was because of the hit in my head or something.”

“So you lied to us when we tried to help?” Josh snaps. “What else are you covering up?”

“N-nothing, I swear. I’m still not sure what I’d seen.”

Tyler’s state had been terrible when Josh found him. Josh doesn’t want to make him agonize over it again.

“But you were right- it was not an alien,” Josh glances at the door. There are the shadows seeping through the glass part.

“Yes, but where did it come from? What if aliens tried to create a new form but their experiments went wrong?” Tyler wonders, too loud, probably —

“But it was created here, on Earth, in the laboratory. I think I can give you an exact location even. On the isle,” Jenna says, coming out of the morgue. “Tyler, I need you to remember what happened the night you got kidnapped.”
“But I-” Tyler stammers, hands raised in defense.

“I didn’t work with the monster’s blood for long enough, but I can say its, no, his genetic background has been screwed up completely. It’s like somebody had tried to implant some extraterrestrial genes into his natural ones- and here’s the result. The rejection,” she explains, going down the hall.

“They tried to change it with my genes, you mean?” Tyler catches her hand, pulling Jenna backwards.

“Unfortunately, yes, I think so,” she deadpans, uncurling Tyler’s fingers from her wrist. “Don’t do that. It hurts.”

“I’m just- shit, sorry,” Tyler rubs a little reddened spot just above Jenna’s palm.

“We need to find out what happened to you that night,” Jenna says. Here’s no bruise on her skin anymore. “We need to find out what happened to Josh. We need to identify the body and connect his relatives.”

“Relatives?”

“He was a human, here’s no doubt,” Jenna states. “And therefore, here might be his family.”

“And you’re just gonna call them and be like ‘oh your son accidentally turned to a mutant and our super secret agent shot him in the chest’? Seriously?!” Josh exclaims, following Jenna and Tyler upstairs.

“It’s not the greatest idea, but we’re not going to cover up all the facts,” Jenna responds. “They deserve to know the truth.”

“Truth brings nothing but frustration and pain,” Tyler interjects. “We’ve done a research.”

“What kind of research?” Jenna asks blankly.

“Family problems,” Tyler says.

Josh can’t believe Tyler is going to tell her about this in such inappropriate moment. Though they’re still pretty close friends.

“Do you know anything about Kelly Joseph?” Josh comes straight to the point.

Jenna stops.

“I don’t think so,” she says calmly.

“A Contactee, got abducted while she was pregnant and lost her baby, like, literally- she lost her baby,” Josh continues, watching Jenna frown.

“Is it a joke?”

“Do I look like a joke?” Tyler huffs.

“It’s just an alternate theory of ‘where the babies come from’,” Josh smirks humorlessly.

“The alien-presented theory,” Tyler adds.
“VESSEL didn’t have any files about Kelly Joseph,” Jenna replies quickly.

“I know. When I tried to find anything about me, I started with your archive,” Tyler says. “You got no information about people with my last name. Damn, there even was no info about me.”

“We added it later,” Jenna says.

She doesn’t look amazed by Tyler’s skills.

“With the blank space where my parents’ names should have been,” Tyler points out. “Josh’s files look different.”

The fact that the personal information about his family is in butchers’ hands now just fuels Josh’s anxiety. He doesn’t want them to suffer just because he’s not the best son and brother.

“Yes,” Jenna looks at her wrist with the pink marks from Tyler’s fingers instead of the watch. “Josh’s files were different until—until Blurryface hacked our system and deleted them along with yours.”

“That was the only good thing he’s done though,” Tyler scratches his forehead. “I appreciate it.”

“If we don’t have anything about you in our database, it doesn’t mean BUTCH has no files either,” Jenna cuts him off. “They got the backup copies, don’t forget about that.”

They’re going upstairs, on the street — it’s a murky day with the chilly wind shepherding the fat clouds across the sky. And there is a slight drizzle, the raindrops scatter across Josh’s jacket. The wind hits him as if he’s one of the clouds — Josh regrets he’s not wearing a beanie.

This weather drives him paranoid.

These news are too heavy to stomach them.

“I’m afraid somebody might come for Josephs,” Tyler says, pulling up the hood of his windcheater. “Or for Duns.”

Josh is almost sure there were no cars lurking in the roadside bushes when they were making their way to the farm.

“We’ll protect them, I promise,” Jenna sighs. “But come on, I’m not even trying to fool myself—how on Earth did you manage to find Tyler’s family?”

“That’s a long fairytale with a quite unhappy ending,” Tyler mimics her sigh. “And here’s no morality I think.”

Tyler’s manner of talking is currently pissing Josh off — this reminds him of a heartless bastard who liked profound words.

“Do we have a place when no one overhears us?” Josh asks, twitching the joints in his fingers until they click.

“I’m not sure, but I think yes,” Jenna shakes her head, the drops of water stick to her hair. “I’ll show you one room. We can’t fly back right now. I can even make tea for you and be your friend until your clothes dry off.”

Josh prefers coffee, but he doesn’t argue.
The rain pours harder.

Chapter End Notes

here's where the sci-fi horror part BEGINS
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and, also, here's the last chapter from my drafts, and i haven't written the rest of the fic (sorry). but i'm gonna continue soon!
i still can't believe i've handled 8 (!) weeks of regular updates, so i'm kinda proud.
stay safe l-/
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

It’s sad to be a coward.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It’s a rather unexpected plot twist, but Jenna sends them back home. It’s better for everyone, she says. Jenna tries to find any information about Kelly Joseph; Josh sends her the link with that post from the abandoned Deep Web forum. And Jenna discovers a thing — it has not always been like this, it was just a regular website for regular users, but it has been taken down for some reason.

They all know who’s the reason.

And Tyler checks some facts about it.

“It’s been kind of blocked by the creator, but it’s gotten back,” Tyler explains. “It’s like… somebody wanted us to find it. But, if another evil corporation takes the spotlight— give me a gun, please.”

Tyler slams his laptop shut.

“Joseph family members have no profiles on social media,” Josh says as he finishes his own research. “But maybe they just don’t use their real names. What a weird family,” he closes the browser window with a click. The internet doesn’t bring much joy recently.

“I doubt this can protect them,” Tyler cracks his knuckles. “I can’t even consider them my family — they’re just a married couple with a bunch of kids, nothing except this. I used to live just for myself, I know I’m egoistic, but this just fucks me up. I think we should perform a genetic examination; my genes are different from theirs, so… They’ll think I’m just an impostor as they had thought at first. The end,” he taps his fingers against the table.

A part of Josh gets it.

“Wanna look like an asshole in your parents’ eyes?”

“Wanna erase myself from their lives. I didn’t know Kelly was obsessed over losing me.”

Here’s an example of how Josh screws everything up. They can’t just mock Kelly with the sudden appearance of her kidnapped son and then just take Tyler away — Josh doesn’t want this woman to spend the rest of her life in a mental hospital.

“But it’s stupid. A thing you’re up to, I mean,” Josh mumbles.

“I’ve done stupider thing,” Tyler responds, chewing his lip. “I gave Maddy my phone number.”

“She’s your sister,” Josh shrugs. “There’s nothing wrong.”
“She’s just a daughter of the people who conceived me,” Tyler corrects him.  

Josh caves.  

“Call it as you want.”  

They’re just sitting in the bedroom doing nothing while VESSEL tries to cover up the hole in their database, in their trashed laboratory; Jenna occasionally calls them and spills her heart out about how hard it is. And their life changes again. They’re not allowed to go out anywhere except for work, they’re on almost-suicide-watch; Josh sees a black truck following his car when he drives Tyler to his workplace, when he races across the town delivering things to people.  

He tells Jenna about it.  

“Those are our agents, don’t worry,” Jenna tells him.  

Tyler is not allowed to step over the auto-repair service territory until it’s 6pm, until Josh picks him up beside the garage.  

Something bad is coming, and all the efforts to prevent it are just ridiculous.  

“Butchers are going to start a war,” Jenna forewarns. “Watch your back.”  

Josh watches his and Tyler’s back for the next week and a half.  

“I’m scared of my own shadow,” Tyler grumbles as they drive back home after the hard workday. “My boss thinks I’m a stoner.”  

“Tell him it’s just your anxiety,” Josh recommends. Because his boss believed it. Though he hates it when Josh just disappears without any explanations — he’d most likely have fired him if there were any delivery guys who wanted to work at day and night. This is Josh’s good trait.  

“No, you don’t understand. He wants me to make a test to prove I’m not doing drugs. He says I shouldn’t kill myself like this,” Tyler tries to smile though the darkness throws its shadow on his face.  

Josh looks at the rear view mirror and sees a black truck sitting on their tail — they won’t help if the spaceship is going to fry them up with the laser.  

Tyler is squirming beside him, loosening the seatbelt across his chest and breathing rapidly. Josh gets distracted from the road and turns to him while there are no any cars — except the one behind them — and fights the urge to pull over immediately.  

The rays of yellow are creeping through the black fabric of Tyler’s sweatshirt.  

“What is this?!” Josh shouts nervously, slapping the steering wheel. “Why is this happening?”  

This never happens with no reason anymore.  

Tyler tugs at his sleeves, at the front of his sweatshirt, letting the gleaming out. It’s golden. And it’s bright.  

“It stings,” Tyler breathes out. “All of them.”  

This usually happens when Tyler gets a new mark —
“Have you met anyone?” Josh inquires.

Tyler shakes his head.

“It’s a warning.”

There are too many warnings in Josh’s life. Though sometimes he doesn’t notice them.

“Need to get out?”

“I’m fine,” Tyler exhales. “Just h-hot. Speed up.”

That’s the smallest thing Josh can do now.

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The speed is almost illegal by the time Josh pulls the car into the garage near the apartment complex — and Tyler rushes inside, upstairs, tugging his sweatshirt over his head and tossing it on the floor as soon as they enter the hall. Josh doesn’t turn the lights on, because Tyler is eerily beautiful. It’s almost like Christmas lights are wrapped over his body, glistering with a vibrant golden shade.

And Josh wants him. All of the sudden.

“What’s coming?” he asks, just in case.

Tyler doesn’t act like this when people are dying or getting hurt — he’s oddly calm though his sporadic breaths show his anxiety.

“I don’t know,” Tyler says. Shirtless, glowing. “I need to get off.”

Josh is drowning in the illumination of Tyler’s skin, pressing him to the wall and kissing him. Intimacy always starts with kisses, with innocent ones, on the lips, then sliding to the silky skin of Tyler’s neck.

Sliding to his marks.

Tyler’s hands smell like motor oil when he places them on both sides of Josh’s head, on his hair, encouraging him for one more endless kiss while Josh unzips the flies of their jeans.

“So damn handsome,” Josh gasps. The pads of his fingers glide over the geometric ornaments on Tyler’s torso while Tyler’s hand is already down his pants —

Josh looks down, at the glimmering yellow with the bits of black, swimming and moving as Tyler keeps jerking him. Josh strokes him, too, leaning on Tyler’s chest and hearing him groan and spit as his hair gets into Tyler’s mouth. Tyler chuckles and they kiss again as Josh backs him into the room, Josh’s dim silhouette and a lightning shadow next to him.

“Your hair is glowing in the dark,” Tyler chuckles in between kisses.

“You are glowing,” Josh replies, getting them out of their underwear.

He feels sort of ashamed, because he’s been dreaming of it, of having sex with the gleamer. Here’s the stardust on Tyler’s skin, behind Josh’s ear; Josh has touched Tyler’s marks so many times, but
now they’re much warmer than the rest of Tyler’s body. Josh’s cock throbs while his lube slicked fingers are working on preparing Tyler for more; Josh swears the shining goes brighter when he pushes in, spreading Tyler’s legs and moving inside of him.

He can’t get enough of the light.

Tyler moans, gripping at Josh’s yellow hair, his dry lips caress Josh’s again. Josh’s heart shrinks to the size of Valentine’s card, getting softer and softer, then dissolving to small pieces.

“I need to get off,” Tyler almost pleads, head thrown back, eyes closed. “P-please. Get me off,” he pants, and Josh moves his hips, squeezing the air out of Tyler’s chest with his hands.

Tyler doesn’t ask to choke him.

Josh isn’t going to do this anyway.

Instead, Josh pumps him, rubbing his thumb over the slit and finding a new perfect angle to tease himself. Tyler lifts his hips up, his cock is hard and leaking onto Josh’s palm, and that’s when he comes, white streaks seep between Josh’s fingers as his own orgasm hits him rather suddenly.

Just at the sight of Tyler’s tattoos and his parted lips.

It’s like Josh can see through the dark.

He comes, he spills inside of Tyler, too dazed to pull out instantly. The gleaming subsides as Josh nuzzles Tyler’s collarbone.

“We stained the bed,” Tyler mumbles, wriggling underneath Josh.

“Should’ve used a condom.”

Bedsheets are sticky and damp — they probably smell of sweat and sex.

Josh has always thought that Tyler’s marks were a thing in this kind of way — he’s jerked off thinking of it, he’s jerked off hundred times, imagine fucking a glowing Tyler instead of his hand. Those times had been awkward and fast.

But in real life, it’s not awkward. This one time is quite romantic.

Josh’s thoughts flow the wrong way again — they’re harmful and toxic, and this fading gleaming is still permeating Tyler’s skin. Tiny golden splinters crawl onto Josh’s palm as he clutches Tyler’s marked shoulder and earns a sloppy kiss.

“My life is like a reality show, but instead of the actors here are secret agents everywhere,” Josh whispers.

Tyler smirks and rubs the glint off his torso.

“And aliens,” he says.

“Yeah,” Josh agrees. “And aliens.”

He’s never seen one.

Well, if they don’t consider Tyler an alien anymore.
Tyler is a gleamer.

“You look good in these lights,” Tyler says, rolling onto his back and outstretching his hands. The shadows waltz across the ceiling.

The mattress feels hard underneath Josh’s bare back.

“Do you think something’s gonna happen?”

Tyler huffs.

“Of course.”

“Of course,” Josh sighs. He wants to say something else, to argue; recently, the orgasms make him talkative, but, before he can open his mouth, Tyler’s fingers are twiddling with his earlobe.

“How did you get these?” Tyler pokes at the stainless-steel gauge.

“Wanted to rebel,” Josh chuckles.

“And this nose ring,” Tyler continues. “Ashley has a septum. Is it Dun’s style?”

“She wanted to rebel too,” Josh tugs at the silver ring in his nostril. “I’m a bad influence.”

In his past, he’d almost gotten his nipple pierced at one of the parties, but his friend Jack stopped him — and Josh still regrets it.

“My skin wouldn’t let me get any piercings,” Tyler says thoughtfully. “It’d heal, and we’d never take the jewelry out.”

Josh knows it, but he can’t stop thinking about how a rebellious Tyler would look like — with more tattoos instead of his marks, maybe with colorful ones. And with a lip ring.

“I had a lip ring,” Josh informs him.

“I noticed,” Tyler nods. “Here’s that tiny hole, I can see it.”

Josh can still feel it, and his old photos are a reminder.

“It wasn’t a right decision.”

“I like it.”

Josh touches his pierced lip again.

Tyler’s fingers trace down the line of Roman numerals on his arm.

“This one looks weird,” he concludes. “I’m gonna call it ‘How I met my mother.’ Sounds good.”

Josh still can’t wrap his head around that situation. He’s now afraid that Kelly is going to stalk them and get herself into troubles.

“We need to protect the Josephs,” Josh blurts out. “Or, we should ask VESSEL to do that for us.”

“Yeah,” Tyler agrees. “It was too easy to find them— and that means that butchers might be pretty smart too.”
Everything is far too unstable when VESSEL is under siege, when Tyler’s memories haven’t returned, when the creatures are roaming the woods. Josh will never forget the autopsy, those pictures, Tyler’s seizures — these moments are imprinted into his scarred brain.

And he can only wonder what else he’s going to see.

***

Something’s off.

Josh wakes up with his head as heavy as a rock and with his forehead sweaty — something’s off, his subconsciousness screams. Tyler’s not in the bed beside him, Tyler’s not even in the bedroom — Josh’s heart sinks. It might just splatter all over his ribs as a red speckle.

“Tyler?” Josh calls.

A little too loud, probably, his hoarse voice scares him, his throat is dry.

“In the kitchen!” Tyler responds, irritated; it’s all in his tone. Josh hates this tone. Tyler isn’t missing again, so Josh can take a breath.

But something’s still off.

In the kitchen, Tyler’s leaning on the windowsill, covering his eyes with his palm; here’s his phone in his other hand, and he’s listening to —

“…I want to see you,” a girl’s voice says.

Josh can’t catch any more words.

It’s not Jenna’s voice.

“Why do you think I can help?” Tyler interrupts the hushed sobbing on the line. “I’m not a doctor, Mads.”

“Mads?!” Josh exclaims. “Is it Maddy?”

Tyler nods, pressing his forefinger to his lips and turning the speakerphone on.

“Say hi to Josh,” he sighs.

“Hi, Maddy,” Josh waves his hand though it’s just a call.

“Hey,” she responds. Josh can recognize a little smile as she greets him. “My brother is pretty stubborn, you know.”

Tyler is the most stubborn person Josh has even known.

“You believed me instantly,” Tyler interjects.

And that’s when Josh thinks back of Chris Joseph’s hysteria. But despite all the problems, Kelly and Maddy are definitely staying by Tyler’s side. But Josh isn’t sure whose side Tyler is going to take.
“Zack is dying,” Maddy whimpers, swallowing down her tears.

Tyler rubs his jaw.

“Yeah.”

Josh’s heart finally bursts open, sending hot waves all over his sternum.

“What?!”

“He got hurt in that stupid military school,” Tyler says grudgingly. “Bye, Mads. Josh and I have to talk, I’ll call you later,” he doesn’t even wait for her goodbye, just turning his phone off.

Everything is off.

“Explain,” Josh demands.

Tyler dodges Josh’s order.

“You heard her.”

Josh nervously tugs at his hair.

“Tyler,” he starts, unsure if Tyler understands him. “Your brother is dying.”

“Damn,” Tyler rolls his eyes. “Why do you talk to me as if I’m mentally retarded? I understand every-fucking-thing, Josh,” he groans out. “I don’t know how they could figure that out.”

“To figure out what?”

“That I’m a healer.”

“But—”

“Only a few people know about my powers,” Tyler points out. “Like, you, VESSEL, butchers, well, n-not just few, maybe, but— how could the Josephs figure that out?”

It makes sense, for Josh, at least — if their life is so unpredictable now, their enemies can be everywhere.

“So, you think it’s just a trap?”

Josh’s eyelid jerks.

It’s getting too much.

Tyler nods again, his mask falls down, revealing his real features, revealing his anxiety.

“But what if it’s not?” Tyler looks at his phone. “She was crying, you kn-now, for real.”

The sleep is still clouding Josh’s head, but the hammering in his ribcage is unbearable, he’s pretty sure he’s about to start hyperventilate right now, right in the kitchen.

“We have to check it out,” Josh decides. “Call your sister, then try to contact Jenna and explain the whole thing,” he says. “We need some cover-up.”

Tyler taps at his phone with his thumb.
“She said that Zack wanted to meet me since he hadn’t had a chance earlier. I d-don’t even know what to say now. Kelly wants to see me too,” he reaches for his phone again.

Josh wouldn’t have thought that their next trip to the farm could be like this —

“Yeah, Mads, it’s me,” Tyler says with the fake smile on his lips. “We’re coming.”

***

They’re wading through the forest of doubts, but they’re going forward anyway. Straight to the snare of the Devil, probably. Josh is driving while Tyler keeps hypnotizing his phone with his gaze; his face expression is almost peaceful, only the little moves indicate that he’s on the edge.

“Tyler?”

Tyler jumps up on his seat.

“What?”

“Don’t zone out,” Josh says softly. “Try to focus.”

He can see Tyler biting his tongue not to blurt out a sarcastic answer.

“Focus,” Josh repeats.

He doesn’t even know how Zack got hurt in military school — a broken bone, loss of the limb or — or something worse. But he’s dying, and that’s what matters at the moment.

“I’m just thinking,” Tyler drawls, phone placed on his lap. “We’ve just met those people, but already trying to help them. I don’t even know if I want to play a Good Samaritan.”

Josh can feel the steering wheel turn wet under his palms, the lead plate on his chest is back. He tries to trick himself, tries to convince himself that everything goes the way they have planned — Tyler told Jenna the address. VESSEL is going to observe the farm, Kelly and her husband and their kids.

“We can drive back home,” Josh offers. He feels like a douchebag already.

Tyler shakes his head.

“What if they’re just gonna use me?”

Josh can’t keep his mouth shut.

“What happened to Zack?”

The words settle down on his tongue as he spews them out.

Tyler glances at his phone again.

“Maddy didn’t tell me.”

“And you didn’t ask?”

“I tried to calm her down, Josh.”
The road looks like a big fat snake getting flattened out by the tires of the vehicle; maybe the snake is about to take revenge and rear its head and swallow them, sinking its poisonous teeth into their flesh.

And Tyler’s brother is dying.

And Tyler doesn’t care about this.

“I still can’t get over it,” Josh mutters.

“You think I’m heartless?” Tyler turns to him abruptly.

The snake sways, blurred trees by the side of it are just a green and brown mess.

“I don’t think so.”

“…right,” Tyler turns back to the window.

The framers’ houses begin to appear, the snake gets holes in its spine and everything in the car shakes, Josh’s thoughts scatter across his brainpan.

They have to put a sign ‘BEWARE OF CHRIS JOSEPH’ here. Right on this nice-looking tree. In bold red letters.

“We’re almost here,” Josh states. “The grass looks familiar.”

Tyler scratches the bridge of his nose.

“This might sound weird, but,” he scowls. “Am I the only one who noticed that Kelly looks a bit like Jenna? Like. She looks like Jenna, but years and years older. I can’t get it out of my head now.”

This makes Josh think hard.

“Maybe I’m not good at recognizing the faces,” Tyler continues. “But still. They look pretty similar for me.”

Switching the subject doesn’t help.

“Well, maybe,” Josh responds blankly.

Here’s something in Tyler’s words — it’s not that Josh had compared Jenna to Kelly, but that’s what he’s doing right now. Both blondes, blue-eyed, with something similar in their smiles — or maybe, Josh is not good at recognizing the faces as well.

Josh can only imagine what they’re gonna see in Josephs’ house. He felt the same when he was entering Tyler’s travel trailer in the woods — plain black anxiety mixed with excitement.

Tyler’s phone is buzzing, but he doesn’t accept the call, just shoving the device into his pocket. ‘Maddy’ — Josh catches the caller’s ID but ignores the way Tyler’s lips turn pale though he bites them repeatedly. Josh stops the car beside the large cornfield and presses the heels of his hands to his eyes, causing the rainbow-like circles to pulsate behind his eyelids.

“Well, let’s go?” Tyler is about to open the door, and Josh nods.

But Josh doesn’t want to go anywhere.
“I can’t believe your brother is dying,” Josh says, his vision is still dotted with spots. He’s never fainted due to anxiety or fright, but he won’t be surprised if he’ll start soon.

It’s sad to be a coward.

Josh expects to see the butchers here, hiding in between the cornstalks, in the bushes, but nothing happens. They just go towards the fence, entering the front yard and seeing the same roses, the livestock in their paddocks, and it makes Josh remember of the warning he heard on the radio — never leave it unattended.

Josephs’ livestock is neglected. Because their son is dying and no one knows what’s happening —

Tyler knocks.

Josh tries to hear any movements from within.

And he hears the footsteps immediately, somebody runs to the door — Tyler barely manages to bounce away as it opens and smacks into the wall.

“You came!” Maddy exclaims, jumping and wrapping her arms around Tyler’s neck. “And Josh, you came too!”

“Hi,” Josh says, amazed by this brother-sister scene. “Sure.”

Maddy drags Tyler inside, waving at Josh with her free hand; he enters the hallway and follows them to the living room.

Josh notices that wooden cross on the wall and stares at the floor.

Chris and Jay are here, sitting on the couch and watching a show about fishing; they both turn up their eyes at Tyler as he walks in.

“Hello,” Tyler mumbles.

Josh is waiting for the attack.

“You’re here only because Zack has been asking for you,” Chris informs him.

Here’s another round.

“Dad,” Jay pokes his arm. “Don’t start this now.”

Maddy clutches the front of her strict skirt.

“He’s upstairs,” she whispers. “With our Mom. The doctors don’t know what’s wrong. He’s been here for only four days, but his condition is terrible. Come on, Tyler, he wants to see you,” he yanks Tyler’s sleeve. “He’s waiting.”

Chris Joseph doesn’t argue when Tyler shuffles his feet towards the stairs, he doesn’t stop Josh when he’s on his way upstairs. Josh is sweating nervously, his shirt sticks to his back as he steps into the hallway and Maddy leads him and Tyler to the room in the end of it.

“He’s here.”

She opens the door without knocking.
Josh holds his breath not to sniff in the smell of the sanitizer or microparticles of Zack’s illness, but he can’t control his lungs and gulps for air anyway. Here’s just the smell of the pine tree air fresher and sweat, nothing else.

Josh sniffs.

Kelly’s sitting beside Zack’s bed, holding a wet towel on his forehead; she gives them a frazzled smile as they walk in. The anxiety swarms in Josh’s chest, this typhoon never stops, and he just gasps loudly as he sees Zack, exhausted and barely conscious. Behind his back, Tyler gasps too.

Zack is pale, verging on grey color with his thin eyelids closed tightly. His cheeks are hollow, the skin almost gets ripped by his sharp cheekbones, and his chapped lips have almost lost their color. The word cancer emerges in Josh’s brain, but how could it beat Zack up so fast? Kelly never mentioned that Zack was sick before.

“Here’s my boy,” Kelly lovingly tousles her son’s hair.

Zack’s ribcage raises and falls, his t-shirt is pulled up so Josh can see his six-pack abs — he hasn’t started to lose muscle mass yet, but the illness definitely progresses.

Kelly gets up and hugs Tyler, squeezing him in her arms; the floor screeches under their feet, and Zack wakes up with the jerk of his head. There are blue circles under his bloodshot eyes.

“Is… this—” he starts, the sound barely comes out. “You?”

He combs his dark messy locks with his fingers. Some of his nails have begun turning yellow and sharpen. This sign had been spotted before —

Josh’s heart stops for a second.

“It’s me,” Tyler responds.

Tyler’s shaking like a leaf.

“Can you…” Zack’s breath gets all wheezy. “Take this out of me?”

Tyler’s teeth leave marks on his bottom lip.

“You did it to the others,” Zack explains.

The surmise strikes Josh like an arrow.

“My boy had a vision about you,” Kelly says.

Zack coughs.

“It was not a vision.”

“What do you mean?” Josh asks.


The whites of his eyes turn yellow as well.

Just like those victims’ eyes.
And the creature on the autopsy table looked alike.

“Mom?” Zack’s voice is raspy.

Kelly adjusts the towel on his forehead.

“Yes dear?”

“Can you leave us alone?”

“Oh,” Kelly falters. “Are you sure you’re gonna be good by yourself?”

“Yes,” Tyler says crisply.

Again, Josh doesn’t like his tone.

Kelly’s eyelashes are wet with tears as she leaves the room with a heavy sigh. She closes the door, and Josh feels trapped. He looks at the shelves with a plethora of shiny golden cups on them — Zack is a captain of a local basketball team.

Tyler is good at playing basketball, too, Josh remembers.

Zack clears his throat before asking —

“Are you involved into the experiment?”

Tyler cocks his head.

“What are you talking about?”

“Dammit, Tyler,” Zack sits up with a groan. “Did they vaccinate you?”

Tyler glares at him.

“Who?”

“Those people in hazmat suits,” Zack winces. “Don’t tell me you don’t remember. They offered money to the people from the list — I don’t know how I got there, but… They vaccinated me. They tested a new serum for the military; I was told to keep it in a secret, but you’re my bro, right?”

Josh can’t tear his eyes away from Zack’s abnormally blue veins sprawling under his skin.

“How did you meet Tyler?”

Tyler’s whole life is experiment.

“Well,” Zack folds the towel on his lap. “I was lying in the cot and saw the dude behind the door — he was shirtless, but you know — his tattoos were pretty specific. I remember them from my mother’s paintings.”

Josh hopes he will never see Tyler’s mother’s paintings.

“They didn’t pay me. I spent two days on the isle, but just got poisoned,” Zack whimpers, gripping the collar of his t-shirt. “They sent me back home to die. Those people called you a savior. And so did my Mom,” Zack is drowning in delirium, beads of sweat gather on his temples.
The metamorphoses of Zack’s body are suggestive enough for Josh to curb the flow of his thoughts; yellow and grey palette, random bruises and knobby fingers — he’s gradually turning to one of those mindless creatures, to the mutant with the venomous internal organs. It just flashes in Josh’s head — the isle, vaccination, they used Zack like the laboratory rat along with other young guys.

“Butchers,” Josh utters.

The question is — what Tyler was doing there, or, here’s a chance that it was just Zack’s hallucination.

Tyler is the healer.

The savior.

“Butchers,” Tyler repeats.

“Help me, please,” Zack pleads, outstretching his ugly, tremoring hand and grasping at Tyler’s wrist.

“How?” Tyler is getting edgy again. “To dance with the tambourine?”

Josh knows what kind of thoughts occupies Tyler’s brain now.

He can’t turn back the erosive process, his powers aren’t working here, he couldn’t heal Josh’s wound caused by something similar —

A disfigured body on the autopsy table.

Next time, it’s gonna be Zack’s corpse.

Or he’s gonna turn to a monster and tear his family to pieces —

“My blood,” Josh says.

“Your blood,” Tyler agrees.

Zack falls back onto the pillows, choking on air.

“I’m sorry, bro,” Tyler pats his shoulders. “I was an asshole.”

Zack accepts his apologies.

“Do you remember being on the isle?” he wheezes out.

“No,” Tyler simply says. “They didn’t let me remember that.”

Tyler’s twitching more than usual.

“Do you have a syringe?” Josh storms off the place he’s been standing at.

Zack nods faintly.

“In the nightstand.”

“Fine,” Josh rummages through the packs inside, finding the bandages and vials and syringes here. “Got it,” he passes the syringe to Tyler before rolling up his sleeve. “Do it.”
Josh’s blood cells had fought the infection for him, and therefore it might work the same way for Zack.

Tyler holds the syringe as if it’s the gun.

“But what if it’s gonna kill him?”

“I’m dying anyway,” Zack interjects.

But that’s still too risky.

“Yeah. And if you’ll die on me, your dear father is going to bury me at the front yard,” Tyler says gloomily. “And, you know, Maddy will grow the flowers there.”

That’s not an optimistic perspective.

“Just do it,” Zack encourages.

Josh hopes it’s not that late.

Tyler doesn’t warn him before aiming for his vein. Josh watches his blood streaming into the transparent barrel; he feels the cottonwool pressed to the crook of his elbow. Tyler’s fingers are cold.

Zack eyes them silently.

Tyler doesn’t take much of Josh’s blood, shaking it a little and watching the red liquid splash here.

“Now you,” Tyler says to Zack.

“I’m ready,” Zack responds.

Zack is brave, and Josh can’t even force himself to look at the tiny red dot on his skin. The needle sticks beside one of the bruises on Zack’s arm, breaking through the grayish skin as Tyler pushes Josh’s blood into Zack’s vein. Josh looks at it with his mouth ajar.

“Have you ever had seizures?”

“No,” Zack replies.

Josh’s blood is circulating in his system now.

“That’s not pretty, believe me.”

Kelly can still hear the TV working downstairs.

Tyler lays an empty syringe onto the nightstand. The color of Zack’s cheeks is not sickly-grey anymore.

“How are you feeling?” Josh places his hand on Zack’s clammy forehead. Zack quivers.

“I’m burning.”

Josh thinks he knows what to do with Tyler during his seizures, but he has no idea what to do with Zack if the bout is about to strike him down. Josh promised to message Jenna once they figure out
the problem; though, he feels like he’s sitting on the bomb. The only option left is waiting.

Tyler throws the blanket over his brother’s shoulders.

“If that trick won’t work, we have a badass friend who knows everything.”

Josh is about to pray for his blood’s magical abilities.

“So, no tambourines this time?” Zack chuckles.

All the Josephs have peculiar sense of humor, Josh thinks.

Chapter End Notes

of course i'm gonna finish it
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

“She doesn’t want to see us dead and neither do I.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They spend the night in Zack’s room, watching him recover little by little. It’s a magical thing for Josh — Zack’s skin is no longer a mess of those monstrous hues of grey; his face is still blank, but he doesn’t look like a living corpse anymore.

“He’s strong,” Tyler nods at him. “And so are you.”

The blood in Josh’s veins is strong. And it’s apparently drugging him, drugging Zack — in a good kind of way.

“I don’t even know,” Josh mumbles. He doesn’t know. Anything.

He’s just a silent watcher.

Chris and Kelly occasionally peek into the room, but the sight of a sleeping Zack satisfies them. They don’t try to kick Josh and Tyler out.

“My boys,” Kelly whispers, giving Tyler a heart-warming smile.

Chris Joseph’s forehead is dappled in wrinkles.

Josh can’t keep his eyes open but when he closes them, his flashbacks throw a horrifying party in his skull again — the forest, an alien-like creature chasing him, the slime, the blood, Tyler.

Zack is sweating, his fingers grapple the bedsheets.

“I think it’s gone.”

Tyler helps Zack keep his head up as he breathes out a sigh of relief.

“At least it didn’t get worse,” Josh says, shrugging the sleep off.

Tyler looks at the needle.

“You’re pretty smart.”

Zack’s bitten nails aren’t yellow-speckled anymore.

“I don’t understand,” he rustles out.

And Josh doesn’t understand it, too, a thing he’s holding in his bloodstream, a precious cure he’s filled with — his veins are just wires underneath his skin, the electricity coils there. The pain gathers there. Josh’s heart hurts; not metaphorically — it pounds and aches, shattering his ribs and
misplacing them. He grimaces, pressing his hand to his sternum, massaging it and letting the discomfort dig deeper into his muscles.

He doesn’t want Tyler to notice it.

Tyler notices.

“Josh?”

Josh straightens up his back with a slight crack.

“I’m fine.”

Zack presses his thumb to a tiny puncture on his arm. His skin is as tanned as Tyler’s, but now the color has drained from his face; he rubs his neck repeatedly, scratching it, and Tyler eventually forces him to tilt his head forward to check it out. Josh knows what he’s searching for. He will never forget the feeling of touching a hard bump behind Tyler’s left ear for the first time. Tyler examines the said spot, holding his breath.

“Nothing.”

Josh nods.

“Good.”

This doesn’t make his heart hurt less.

Chris Joseph’s voice doesn’t make his head hurt less.

Zack huddles underneath the blanket.

Josh’s eyes feel itchy and dry as he blinks at the door — it opens slowly, not to bother the boy’s sleep.

“How’s he?”

Chris sounds as grumpy as he looks — not the same man who was trying to wipe Tyler off the face of the Earth; he’s just a hopeless father with the corners of his mouth turned downwards, with these deep crinkles around his eyes. With more grayish-white hair.

“How’s he?” Chris asks again.

He glances at the bloodied syringe but keeps his comments to himself. Because Zack isn’t dying anymore, his ribcage doesn’t jerk unsteadily, threatening his every breath to be the last one. He doesn’t look perfectly healthy either. Just a tired student battling his raging hangover —

“Oh my God,” Chris whispers, barely parting his lips.

Tyler hunches his shoulders and looks at the floor.

“That’s it,” he concludes.

‘Please, don’t mention the isle,’ Josh prays mentally. ‘Please, be smart, Zacky.’

Zack coughs. It’s probably because his secret gets stuck in his throat.
Tyler flinches and folds his hands between his knees as Chris closes the door behind his back — Josh is ready for the talk.

Or for the encounter.

“Dad,” Zack starts, kicking off the blanket. “I’m as amazed as you are, but— maybe it’s time to believe?”

‘Do not mention the isle, do not mention, do not—’

The engine in Josh’s chest might set itself on fire.

Josh regrets he can’t read minds.

Tyler still doesn’t lift his head up.

“Boys,” Chris speaks again. “Explain what happens, and I swear I’m not gonna yell at you.”

And his voice softens, and he clenches and unclenches his fists.

“The truth is not that pleasant,” Tyler warns.

Zack sits up again and opens his mouth, but Josh doesn’t let him clarify the situation.

“There was the infection,” Josh blurts out. On the scale from 0 to 10 the stupidity of this answer would be at least 14.

“I’ve already figured that out,” Chris smirks.

Now, when Zack’s getting better, Chris doesn’t seem that intimidating.

“…and I had it,” Josh continues, trying his best not to come to heel of his panic. “The infection, I mean, I had it before, and, and…” he sees Tyler grit his teeth. Josh wants to make it to the window and open it, but he’s sure his legs won’t hold him. “I got immunity, and we recognized the symptoms, and we…”

He spots the disbelief in every Chris’s facial feature.

“Josh gave me his blood,” Zack says. “Here’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Josh feels uneasy.

Chris crosses his arms over his chest, palms rough from hard work and covered in tiny scratches. Josh can imagine these palms on his neck, suffocating him, shaking his soul out of him until me slouches onto the floor —

“Josh,” Chris says. For the first time probably. Looking right into Josh’s eyes for the first time too. “I have no clue who you are.”

Josh almost wishes Tyler could draw Chris’s attention with another witty remark.

Tyler doesn’t say anything.

Josh is sure that the night Tyler got his mark has turned to Chris’s worst nightmare. As the whole Tyler’s appearance thing.
“We’ve met dozens of different specialists within the past four days, you know,” Chris says. “Neither of them could diagnose the illness, and then there are you two again,” he sighs and sits down onto Zack’s bed, next to Tyler.

Tyler lurches forward to get up, but Chris’s hand on his shoulder pins him back down. Danger. Danger, Josh’s inner voice warns.

“Hey,” Josh moves along with the chair.

But Chris just inspects Tyler’s face closely while he screws his eyes shut as if he’s waiting for a punch.

“It’s him, Dad,” Zack rasps out. “It’s impossible, but it’s our Tyler.”

The blood in Josh’s veins burns.

“Kelly created you,” Chris informs him.

“Yes, she kinda… did,” Tyler desperately tries to pull away.

Josh almost laughs, but his chest is too tight to let him get the air into his lungs.

“You saved my son.”

Josh’s vision swims a little as he nods.

The daylight reveals all of their secrets, but the windows are just two lifeless rectangles on the wall.

Zack yawns, adjusting the pillow under his head and ruffling his hair in Tyler’s manner. And Josh wonders again — all those years when Tyler hadn’t even been transported to the Earth — these people had just been living, raising their kids and telling them stories about their older brother. Or, those stories had been banished by Chris, yes, definitely, but the image of Tyler had leaked into their childish minds anyway.

Zack stares at Tyler in awe.

Tyler scrapes the lines tattooed on his wrist.

And that’s when Kelly comes, emitting an invisible light as she sees Zack smile, as she sees a confused Chris and Tyler —

“My boys,” she chimes.

“Mom, you don’t have to——” Zack starts, but Kelly cuts him off, hugging him and kissing his cheek.

Zack’s face is not so pale anymore, a light blush creeps up his neck.

Josh just wants to turn away while Kelly keeps grinning and thanking both of them.

“We didn’t know how to take that parasite out,” she says, half laughing, half sobbing. “I’ve been praying for you, my special boy,” she pats Tyler’s hair. “You’re my special boy, Tyler.”

Josh can see Tyler choking on his sarcasm.

“I’m f-fine, actually.”

Tyler rubs his face as if it might help him make the bags under his eyes smaller.

“You haven’t slept.”

Zack is probably the only person who slept just fine.

“Thank you for saving my life,” he swallows. “It’s just… I felt like… My body was transforming, and it was just killing me,” he looks down at his hands, *at his hands*, not paws of a vulture.

Chris still glares at Tyler as if he’s about to sting him with his forked tongue.

“Wanna tell us something about yourself?” Chris asks, placing his hand on Tyler’s shoulder again. *Danger.*

“It’s not a cool story,” Tyler says cagily.

Tyler’s glance is a wordless plea.

“Will you believe us if I say that he doesn’t remember his childhood? Or his teenage years?” Josh doesn’t want to bring Tyler’s amnesia up to the surface, but here are no adequate people in this room anyway.

Kelly nods vigorously while Chris purses his lips. *Danger.*

“How could that happen?”

“I smashed my head. Really hard. Or… Aliens erased my memories before dropping me down on Earth,” Tyler shrugs. “Not even kidding.”

“He’s not kidding,” Josh confirms.

Josh doesn’t want to participate in this confrontation.

All Josh needs right now is a cup of coffee and their bed in their apartment and maybe Tyler’s hand down his pants, but he’s not sure about the latter.

Tyler looks dejected.

Kelly speaks again.

“Zack told us about the vaccine,” she gently touches Tyler’s sleeve. “Dear, do you know anything about it?”

That’s the forbidden territory, and Josh’s heart never stops convulsing in his ribcage. Tyler shouldn’t answer.

But Tyler always does the things he shouldn’t do.

“I don’t remember, I swear I don’t remember,” his voice comes in unsteady waves. “I don’t know. Something bad happened, and I—”
“And he doesn’t remember,” Josh finishes for him.

When it comes to Tyler’s memories, he always acts like he’s been programmed to say the same words over and over again, and Josh can’t blame him; though he doesn’t know if Tyler really tries to remember.

“Another pointless babbling,” Chris rolls his eyes, showing off his irritation.

Though his anger has drained, Josh notes; he can stay in the same room with Tyler without trying to kill him.

“They helped our boy out, Chris, you’re being rude,” Kelly scolds him. “You’ve experienced the Contact as well, right?” she turns to Josh, and some invisible dust obstructs his breathing again.

“It’s…” Josh coughs. ‘It’s different,’ he wants to say. “Yes,” he manages. “It changed me.”

He doesn’t talk about his powers or about telekinesis; Kelly doesn’t ask. Josh is a little lucky.

“It changed you in a good way,” Kelly says, sadness fills her eyes. “You’re a special boy just like my Tyler.”

“You’re a special woman,” Tyler interrupts her politely.

“I wish you could stay with us,” Kelly sighs. “With our special family.”

Zack sits up.

“But Tyler’s gonna visit us one day? Yeah, Ty? I have a basketball game next month, and it’d be cool to see you there,” his eyes are shining with joy.

Josh mentally counts Zack’s golden cups — the boy’s putting a lot of time and energy into this.

“I can’t promise, I’m sorry,” Tyler winces.

“It’s okay,” Zack nods.

Josh can’t explain what bothers him — here’s a family, Tyler’s family, and Josh just feels like he doesn’t belong there.

He’s not the only one.

“It’s strange,” Chris utters, fingers glide over the stubble on his chin. “I dragged you across the hall when you had seizures, but you still came back to help my son.”

Tyler rubs his palms.

“We all should thank Josh’s blood and my creativity.”

Anxiety makes Josh shiver.

“Tyler,” he starts hesitantly. “Don’t you think it’s time to get back home?”

He can swear this question is everything Tyler has been waiting for within the past few hours.

“Yes!” he exclaims. And Josh is relieved, he almost gets up when Kelly stops them again.

“You’re not leaving without a decent breakfast,” she says sternly.
Josh is too flurried to get hungry, but he needs the energy to handle the ride back home. He’s not excited about it.

But Zack isn’t dying anymore, and it’s the only thing that matters.

***

“Where’s Tyler?”

These are the first words Josh hears when he accepts Jenna’s call.

“He’s jogging,” Josh responds, looking out of the window and seeing Tyler sprint down the sidewalk. “He’s literally just running circles around the building.”

Jenna screeches into his ear.

“What?!”

“What?”

Josh outstretches his hand with Tyler’s phone in his palm — Tyler didn’t take it with him not to break it accidentally. Tyler’s on his sixth or seventh lap, and Josh can’t figure out what’s going on. But he thinks he keeps controlling it.

“Don’t let him do something stupid,” Jenna practically hisses out. “He might do something stupid when he begins to act like this. Like, he starts with taking care of himself, and then, he just goes crazy.”

And Josh suspects it, but he still refuses to get the facts straight.

“He’d been jogging every morning when we just met.”

Jenna laughs hysterically.

“And do you really think he hadn’t done any stupid things back then?”

Josh ponders of her words — Tyler is not a person who doesn’t know what they’re doing; Tyler’s rushing down the street, leaping over the empty can of beer, and some certain feeling starts to tickle Josh’s nerves.

“Josh?”

Jenna’s fretting about Tyler’s behavior.

Hacking VESSEL satellite and stealing the encrypted files can’t be just accidents.

“Josh, do you hear me?”

Josh wants to go out and stop him, to break Tyler’s defense and fish all of his plans out of his damaged brain. Below, Tyler pulls his black hood back up and starts the next lap; he probably knows Josh is watching him, but he doesn’t give him any signs.

Jenna is oddly impatient.
"Jo-o-o-sh?"

"He’s getting ready," Josh whispers.

"For what?"

"For the war? Jen, I think he knows something, and he’s just preparing—"

"Do you think he’s lying?"

Josh bites his tongue.

He doesn’t want to betray Tyler, Tyler is not a liar.

"No," Josh responds. "I just think he expects something."

Tyler leans against the tree to catch his breath, one hand wrapped around his waist.

"We can’t blame him," Jenna says.

"I’m gonna take him home," Josh decides, observing Tyler’s hunched figure. "He shouldn’t push himself too hard."

In his ear, Jenna chortles.

"That’s what he’s doing all the time."

"Because it’s Tyler," Josh points out. It’s the best explanation.

"It’s Tyler," Jenna repeats. "I just want to warn you — last time, I mean when he was living with me, he… he started jogging and cutting himself at the same time."

Josh takes it without flinching.

Tyler stretches and continues to run in a slow pace.

"He wanted to go and run in the park, but I didn’t let him," Josh says. "I think I’ll go with him tomorrow."

"Good idea," Jenna agrees.

Tyler hasn’t touched knives or paper knives or razorblades, Josh is sure; Tyler doesn’t have bloodstains on his clothes, he just wants to get distracted from all the stuff that’s going on — and Josh grabs at this hope as hard as he can. Tyler needs some privacy, and Josh usually respects it, but the danger is hanging over them like the sword of Damocles.

"Okay, bye," Josh mutters as he sees Tyler stumble towards the apartment building.

"Bye," Jenna sighs. "Call me."

Josh hangs up.

He still feels terrible for talking about Tyler behind his back.

Josh won’t let him do something stupid — that one time when Tyler had hurt himself in the shower is one of his darkest memories; that was just Blurry’s influence, but there was also a bleeding and terrified Tyler, a terrified Josh. But now here are the butchers, these literal non-alien monsters.
Josh’s innards shrink and jostle as he hears the keys jingling in the hallway.

“Josh, I’m home!”

Josh wonders if all the adverse things have already begun happening.

“Jenna called,” Josh informs Tyler as soon as he walks into the room. “I answered.”

“Cool.”

Tyler sings something under his breath as he tugs his hoodie over his head. He’s sweaty and flushed, and he’s not wearing any t-shirt underneath; it reminds Josh of their second meeting when Tyler was beaten down, when he slammed to his knees, and the tattoo-like mark appeared on his shoulder.

Josh shakes his head.

Tyler looks at him expectantly.

“Josh?”

Josh feels like he’s just gotten caught on doing something nasty.

“What?”

“What did she say?”

“Be careful.”

“Sure.”

If it wasn’t about Tyler’s red cheeks and drops of sweat streaming down between his collarbones, Josh would’ve said he looks sick. He starts losing weight, again, that small amount he’s gained during their life-without-adventures. Josh hates these adventures, hates seeing the outlines of ribs under his skin, hates —

Josh loves him.

When he says it, he means much more — the words just don’t come out right.

Tyler huffs and unties the laces in his joggers.

“She doesn’t want to see us dead and neither do I.”

“I’m sure we’re gonna die on the same day,” Tyler responds.

Josh is sure he’s not kidding. Here’s the storm in Josh’s veins, neon-red rivers under his skin, and he wants to save Tyler from all the stupid things he’s about to do. Maybe, Tyler wouldn’t mind being saved.

The stardust in the ornaments on Tyler’s body is dead.

The stardust in Josh’s system is cocaine.

“We’re going together tomorrow,” Josh says thoughtfully. “Jogging, I mean.”

“Of course,” Tyler murmurs. “Shower?”
Josh feels a little scratchy stubble under his fingertips as he caresses Tyler’s jawline.

“Shower.”

Josh can only dream about having a trip to Tyler’s mind.

Chapter End Notes

well
thanks
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

_Minus one_, dings in his head.

The week goes on, and Josh’s damaged nerve cells begin to raise from the dead little by little; his conversation with Jenna doesn’t seem something extraordinary anymore. He’s working like a dog, having a lot of stuff to deliver all across the city, and Tyler is doing just fine in that auto service. That’s the illusion Josh clings to.

Tyler doesn’t bitch with customers.

Josh’s neurons are zombified.

Each time Josh sees the car chasing them he wonders if it’s Merrick or Mark or some agents he’s not familiar with; maybe it’s butchers’ car even — Josh shakes, Josh is paranoid.

He’s on his way to pick Tyler up, the car radio is on, but Josh doesn’t listen to the shitty songs that are playing. Josh can’t stop scolding himself, because his slow mind can’t register the things that have changed: they jog in the mornings, they take long walks before going to bed, they have sex, and it seems that their life has finally settled, but something is off.

Every detail screams about it.

That’s what Josh’s subconsciousness throws at his face. The facts.

Josh stops beside the garage; Tyler’s waiting for him, sitting on the curb and waving his hand as he spots the car.

“Hey,” Josh greets him as Tyler gets into the passenger seat. “How’s your day been?”

Tyler smiles tiredly.

“Busy. Yours?”

“Same,” Josh nods and turns the car towards the highway to get home quicker.

Tyler chuckles and tugs at the sleeves of his hoodie; it’s a purple one, and Josh sees it out of the corner of his eye —

“What’s this?” Josh looks over his shoulder.

“What?” Tyler covers his palm with a crumpled cuff.

Josh can’t ignore it — red smudges are almost unnoticeable, but they’re here anyway. Like a thin layer of crust on the fleece.

Josh gives Tyler one more chance.

“What’s on your clothes?”
Tyler doesn’t use the opportunity.

“Nothing.”

“Really?” Josh glowers at him. His heart’s pounding erratically, hands trembling on their own accord. “Have you been bleeding?”

Tyler chews the inside of his cheek.

Josh focuses on driving, Josh’s mind focuses on Tyler; if he didn’t hurt himself, then somebody did. Tyler hides his hands in his pockets.

“It was just my nose,” he says reluctantly. “Again. I just pressed my sleeve to it while going to bathroom.”

Josh’s skin crawls.

“Oh.”

He should’ve guessed that it was just a nosebleed; Tyler wouldn’t cut himself at work. Tyler is not that type. But Josh will never forget that one time when Blurry stabbed Tyler with the screwdriver; even though Josh hadn’t witnessed the whole scene, he can relate. Tyler’s pant leg was completely blood-soaked, he had that scratch with the threads and hair sticking to it.

If it wasn’t about Tyler, Josh would’ve said it was disgusting.

“I barely managed to stop it before you came. I didn’t want to drip my blood everywhere. I’m sorry,” Tyler pokes at the stain, and Josh feels guilty.

He tries to speak calmly not to push Tyler farther.

“You should’ve told me.”

It’s not that they can control it, but Tyler’s being really cryptic these days; Tyler scares him, Josh can’t deny. It’s not just that ‘I don’t remember anything’ banal shit, it’s just Tyler’s personality. And that’s what doesn’t let Josh sleep at night.

“Are you doing okay?”

Tyler sniffles and rubs his eye with the heel of his hand.

“Not really.”

Tyler’s mood has been terrible this morning, Josh is aware. He speeds up, the back of Tyler’s head hits against the headrest, and Tyler doesn’t have time to strangle a pained noise.

“Feeling something?” Josh wants to turn to him, but he can’t while he spots that black car behind them.

Tyler shrugs.

“They’ve t-turned my blood to poison,” he sounds like he’s about to cry. “Don’t you think they haven’t taken enough from me?”

The explanation to this is that freaking black minivan sitting on their tail, it keeps smothering Josh with gasoline in his lungs, keeps being a reminder. The steering wheel feels slippery as if it’s about
to slither through Josh’s fingers or maybe turn to jelly.
Butchers will definitely be trying to kidnap Tyler again.
“We won’t let them,” Josh says mostly to himself.
“Really?” Tyler snorts. “I think it’s time to pick the side.”
Josh is not ready to face the enemy yet.
“We’ve already chosen our side — we’re good guys, yeah?” he smiles though his heart is stuffed full of shattered glass.
Tyler doesn’t smile back. He doesn’t even try; he just keeps rubbing his sleeve against his face, wiping his chin though it’s clean.
“Do you think electroshock therapy would help me remember what happened in the woods?”
Tyler’s voice cracks again.
Josh wishes he could take it as a joke.

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Tyler refuses to eat dinner once they get back home; he doesn’t even undress, heading straight to bedroom and plopping down on top of the covers.
“Sleep,” he mewls, burying his face into the pillow.
“It’s still too early,” Josh frowns and then checks Tyler for a fever. His forehead is hotter than it’s supposed to be; Tyler lets out a slight groan.
“I just need to pass out before the migraine hits me in full force.”
He’s sweating and quivering, his cheeks are green-tinted.
“Want me to stay with you?” Josh asks. “I mean, I can bring the food here if you don’t mind.”
He’s still hungry even though he’s nervous. Maybe it’s a coping mechanism.
“No food here, please,” Tyler grumbles, words muffled by the pillowcase. “Don’t wanna throw up once I smell it.”
Josh sympathetically rubs circles on Tyler’s back.
“If you feel sick, better let it happen.”
“No way,” Tyler tucks his hand between his stomach and the mattress. “I just need to sleep it off.”
Josh hates seeing him like this; recently, it never happens with no reason. Josh doesn’t take a risk to ask if he’s starting to remember something right now. It’s just like one of those movie scenes when a character clutches their head when the prophesy opens their third eye — Josh almost wishes Tyler’s headache would bring some result.
But it seems that he’s suffering in vain.
Tyler’s breathing steadily, either dozing off or faking it with the pinpoint accuracy.

“Good night then,” Josh pats his back once again before going to kitchen.

He makes coffee to wash down a burger he’s going to eat — and he hears his mother’s voice ‘starting your family life, you have to learn how to cook, Joshua’; Josh nods mentally.

Well, neither of them cooks.

He stays in the kitchen for a while because he thinks he still smells like food, then plodding to the shower to wash away all the scents that are probably too pungent for Tyler now. Taking shower is equal to a meditation, and Josh just stares at the tiled wall in front of him, watching the crystal droplets and streamlets hitting it; hot water coaxes his muscles to relax, and his fogged mind clears. He wraps the towel around his waist and goes back to bedroom to make sure Tyler hasn’t gotten worse; he’s just lying on his waist and goes back to bedroom to make sure Tyler hasn’t gotten worse; he’s just lying on his stomach with his hand hanging over the side of the bed, and Josh is nostalgic again — he once found Tyler sleeping in his trailer, in that tiny bunk that had even been their bed for a while.

Tyler snorts and hugs the pillow when Josh lies down next to him and reaches for his laptop. Josh is so restless he’s about to read the articles about alien invasion and how to fight back when it happens. It’s ridiculous.

“Good job, Scully,” Josh sighs.

The X-files doesn’t seem so appealing anymore.

Nothing does.

Josh gets stuck with random videos on the YouTube, some song covers and cats, and it’s so calming he falls asleep, spooning Tyler and nuzzling his short nape hair.

When Josh wakes up with a start, Tyler’s phone is buzzing in his pocket, Josh can feel the vibration through his jeans and down his thigh.


“W’at?”

Tyler sounds like he’s wasted.

Josh’s palm slides into the pocket of Tyler’s jeans to whip out his phone, because no one calls Tyler when everything is alright. Once he gets the phone which is still buzzing, he clicks the green icon.

“Jenna?” Josh clears his throat.

“You have twenty minutes,” she says, voice breaks through the crackling sound. “We’re in a helicopter, don’t talk to anyone until we arrive; just get ready and go to the football field, the helicopter will be waiting here.”

She just spits it at Josh, letting the words eat away his brain just like acid.

“What’s happening?” Josh partially yells.

“Emergency,” is all he gets in reply.
“But explain—”

“Twenty minutes,” Jenna repeats, voice dripping with coldness.

Short beeps creep into Josh’s ear canal like ants while he’s still sitting on the bed with his mouth open.

“Tyler,” he starts.

“What did she say?” Tyler tries to prop himself with his elbows.

Josh jumps off the bed, nearly losing the towel wrapped loosely around his hips, and begins to search for his clothes.

“Something’s happened,” he utters, taking on his underwear and jeans. “No details.”

Obscurity is all he gets.

Josh’s body moves on autopilot as he staggers across the bedroom; he can’t coordinate himself, his brain doesn’t send right signals to his limbs. Here’s that awful sour taste on the back of his tongue.

Tyler pinches the bridge of his nose.

“It’s bad,” he sits up and points at his pillow. “I think it’s bleedin’ again.”

Josh takes a quick look at the red speckle and mentally curses these white pillowcases. White pillowcases can’t keep the secrets. Tyler is confused, holding his fingers on the tip of his swelling nose and breathing through his mouth. He’s in pain, it’s obvious, he can’t think fast, can’t move fast; Josh is afraid of it already, because it might just turn to one of the worst of Tyler’s episodes.

“Both nostrils again?” Josh winces. He can spot that certain kind of a pink snot coating the pads of Tyler’s fingers.


Josh has never been able to catch it when it starts — he’s only forced to deal with the consequences. Twenty minutes.

Seconds are ticking, Josh’s eyelid jerks; Tyler’s motionless frame on the bed turns to a sinister shadow.

“Take the tissue and let’s go,” Josh hurries him up.

Tyler is still only half awake.

“It’s better to wash the blood now,” he says softly. “You loathe it when I stain the bedsheets or whatever.”

Tyler is right. Josh can’t even count how many blankets and t-shirts he has had to drown in a bleach to make the red spots less bright. Although it hasn’t happened in the past two years he still remembers it, remembers pink soapy water.

Josh suspects that he doesn’t understand; Josh doesn’t understand either, something odd is happening, and they have no time.
“Can you get up?”

Tyler nods.

“I should clean it up,” he tugs at the pillowcase, crimson gets deep into the threads.

Josh’s mother’s Christmas present.

Josh doesn’t want to die without a warning.

“The helicopter’s gonna be here soon,” Josh outstretches his hand for Tyler to grasp it. “How’s your head?”

Tyler looks up at the ceiling, pupils dilated.

“I might puke my brains out.”

“Please, don’t do it,” Josh doesn’t wait until Tyler comes back to his senses, taking his forearms and trying to stand him upright.

Tyler screws his eyes shut.

Josh thinks he has to haul him downstairs now.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Tyler whispers as Josh helps him totter out of the room.

“You’re good?”

“A bit fuzzy.”

Josh grabs his phone and keys and tries not to think of Jenna’s motives. She’s their isle of trust, but something’s screwed up; she sounded angry, and Josh can only guess why.

“We’re going to the football field,” Josh explains, holding Tyler by the elbow.

Tyler is about to stifle himself with the napkin.

They waste their eternity getting downstairs, it feels like running a mile with Tyler’s constant apologies. Step by step, the elevator is so ironically broken; they almost keel over a couple of times but Josh barely manages to steady both of them against the wall. It’s almost like dealing with your drunk husband, these similarities make Josh nauseous.

It’s getting late.

Josh catches Tyler under the armpits when he slips again.

“Sorry. I d-don’t know why I’m so weak,” Tyler draws, almost unfazed. “I’m s—”

“You’re not,” Josh cuts him off before he says sorry again.

It doesn’t take much time to realize that Tyler’s current state and Jenna’s call are related.

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Fresh night air clings to Josh’s hair like invisible claws. The sky’s rumbling as they go to the
football field; there’s no place to hide for Josh, but all the spies are lurking in the roadside bushes and behind the trees.

He sees the helicopter, a hungry machine with people inside.

“Come here!”

The door’s open and Josh runs, runs towards a gaping hole, the grass is rustling under the soles of his shoes. He’s dragging Tyler next to him, Tyler choked on air but speeds up obediently. It’s gonna wear him out. Josh feels trapped inside of a big metal stomach as they climb inside; here’s Jenna sitting on the bench with a grey briefcase in her hands.

“Hi,” she says.

Metal stomach purrs, digesting them like food.

“Hi,” Josh says back.

The bench shakes as the helicopter takes off; Tyler squeezes his eyes shut and presses his fist to his lips, still clutching the red-stained tissue.

Jenna points at him.

“He’s pale.”

“Got a migraine, yeah,” Josh jerks his hand.

Tyler fidgets on his seat, drawing their attention.

“Our neighbors have seen us,” he utters.

Jenna’s fingers are clasped over the lock on the briefcase.

“We need BUTCH to know we’re taking you to the laboratory,” she informs.

Her gaze is scorching Josh’s churning innards.

“Can you explain what’s going on?” he barks out.

Jenna taps her fingernail against the briefcase.

“They sent us the tape,” she only says.

“The tape,” Tyler repeats. “Did they film the plague of prisoners or what?”

Jenna tiredly rubs her face.


Josh automatically looks into the porthole, the night is the only thing he sees there — no bright lights, no spaceships, the sky is empty and dark. And this ‘much worse’ is eating Josh’s soul like a worm crawling into it, making the holes wider, filling them with filth.

“It’s about Tyler?” his tongue is dry as he speaks.

Jenna averts her eyes.
Josh takes it as the answer.

Tyler shoves the tissue into his pocket.

“Something bad happened,” Tyler says again.

“We want butchers to think that VESSEL is fast. We’re gonna watch the tape together and maybe find the solution; I don’t think you’re safe from now on,” Jenna’s voice sounds robotic. “I’m sorry.”

Josh knows what the deactivation is; Tyler knows about it too, he pales even more, verging on a green color. A wave of turbulence rakes through the helicopter, making Josh slide down the bench and slam his hips against Tyler’s; Josh gasps and Tyler keeps silent, swallowing rabidly.

“I just need him to remember everything before he gets attacked again,” Jenna exhales.

Tyler doesn’t respond.

Josh’s heart hurts.

The flight seems longer, almost endless, and the clouds outside swallow them; every trip to VESSEL stresses Josh out more and more, the scanning and those dubious glances from all the people in uniforms and white coats. There’ll be a span of time when Jenna will not be able to save them anymore, and Tyler’s gonna get caught and deactivated, and Josh will spend the rest of his life in the laboratory. These thoughts occupy Josh’s consciousness as the helicopter lands on the VESSEL territory, on the asphalted spot on the ground. There’s so much barbed wire all around the fence surrounding the back yard.

Tyler falls out of the door and leans his back against the side of a helicopter, chest heaves with sporadic breaths.

“Are you okay, buddy?” Chris pats his shoulder.

“Honestly, no,” Tyler responds as Josh hooks the crook of his arm not to let him crash down.

Chris takes off his headset.

“So?”


Tyler puts his palm over his eyes as soon as he looks at the signal lamps all around the perimeter.

“Jenna’s not in the mood today,” Chris hums.

“Of course, because we’re about to lose our job,” Jenna interjects. “And… she looks at Tyler. “Let’s go, we have no time but keep wasting it,” she yanks at Josh’s shirt. “Get ready.”

Josh is not ready.

Chris doesn’t follow them, and Josh feels like he was the only protection they had. And now The Talk is going to revolve around the grey briefcase; it strikes Josh all of the sudden — what if the butchers have chopped somebody’s hand and sent it to VESSEL?

“Do we have to start undressing already?” Josh asks, not even intending to be optimistic anymore.
“No,” Jenna fakes a smile. “The ride hit you hard today,” she tells to Tyler who is still deadly pale.

“Not feeling well. Are you surprised?” he wipes his nose on his wrist.

They go towards the entrance, towards their personal Hell maybe. Jenna makes them skip the scanning system which doesn’t work right since the butchers’ first attack — *it doesn’t show anything*, Jenna says. They round the corner with the long corridor in front of them, darkness, darkness is everything in sight. Tyler sniffles again.

Small ceiling lights flicker.

A perfect scene for a shitty horror-movie.

“And now we’re in the basement,” Tyler states. “Cool.”

Jenna takes the key out of the pocket of her uniform, grips at the briefcase and says —

“I have no idea what to do now.”

And she leads them into the emptiness.

“And—”

“Come in,” Jenna waves at them.

With this, Jenna goes to the door and opens it, smacking her palm against the light switcher on the wall. Here’s the small room, somewhat cozy, with the rickety couch in the corner, with the table and with the open laptop on it. Josh doesn’t like this place already, it’s something from 80s but with the laptop instead of the VHS player; Josh sits down onto the duvet with a floral print and thinks of how offbeat this room looks compared to the rest of VESSEL building.

“I’m gonna show you everything I know,” Jenna says.

It doesn’t make anything clear.

It’s like Jenna’s delaying the moment.

“Well,” she clicks the small lock open. “I couldn’t leave it there. Your personal files, you know. Some updated information about Tyler’s family. I can’t believe this is happening to us, dammit,” she’s certainly about to break down but she manages to pull herself together.

Josh looks at the contents of the briefcase — here are the papers packed in a blue folder and here’s a black USB flash drive; heaving out a sigh, Jenna just inserts it into the slot.

“Maybe it will clue us into something,” she says as the video starts.

It’s black and white, a typical security camera recording, but it’s such a high quality one — here’s the room, something of a hospital ward with the row of cots standing closely next to each other.

“What is this?” Tyler whispers.

“Watch,” Jenna almost orders.

Here’s the door, it slams open and three men come in; two of them are wearing plain black uniforms with the white letters BUTCH on the back, there’s too much black and white —
The third man is shirtless, being restrained by the BUTCH agents; he doesn’t look up at the camera, but he has geometric tattoos on his chest and the ‘ii’ sign on his shoulder.

“No way,” Josh gasps.

Jenna pauses the video, looking at Tyler.

“Do you remember it?”

“No,” Tyler sounds horrified.

“It’s the tape from the isle, got it? You were there,” Jenna clarifies.

The picture’s static, putting Tyler’s marks on display at a perfect angle.

“What was I doing there? What was I thinking?!” Tyler grips at his hair and pulls, and Josh only has empty words that never work.

“Calm down.”

Tyler whines in a low voice.

The video continues; on the screen, Tyler struggles and lashes out, and one of the men strikes his knee into Tyler’s stomach, making him lurch forward and nearly drop to his knees. And that’s when the other agent takes something out of his breast pocket — a small thing glimmers faintly — and stabs Tyler in the neck.

“No,” Josh screams out, palm clasped over his mouth. It’s not a knife, he realizes a second later, it’s a syringe, and the agent pumps something into Tyler’s blood. Tyler’s knees buckle, but the agents don’t let him fall, yanking him upright with ease.

“That’s why my head hurt when I woke up in the forest,” Tyler snaps his fingers. “Because of the injection.”

He massages the base of his neck as he says so.

“And of course, you don’t recognize any of it,” Jenna scowls, staring at the screen.

The agent on Tyler’s right leans in, bending slightly, his lips at the level of Tyler’s ear.

“Is he saying something to me?” Tyler shakes his head. Josh can feel him shiver.

“It looks like that,” Josh responds.

Josh wants to be emotionless right now — but it’s just overwhelming. He focuses back on the video — the agent keeps whispering something to Tyler, and Tyler nods helplessly, head lolling. The agents nod, too, guiding Tyler to the first bed.

That’s when things get out of control.

“I can’t watch it,” Tyler says firmly. “I can’t. Please, turn this off. Can we turn this off?”

Sweat gathers on his forehead, Josh takes his hand, and it’s wet, fingers cold and clammy.

“Breathe,” Josh says gently.
“You have to remember, I’m begging you, try to remember,” Jenna pleads. “Does anything look familiar?”

“No!” Tyler shouts, turning away from the laptop. His eyes are covered with the fog of delirium. “I can’t watch it, I can’t!” he cries out and puts his hands on his face, elbows propped on his spread knees. “I can’t think of it, I can’t remember, please, I’m gonna d-die, I don’t want to watch it!”

Josh wants to hug him but Tyler bats his hands away.

And Josh notices people lying on the beds as Tyler comes closer to them, ripping the blanket off — here’s a body, a half naked guy with his eyes closed. ‘A corpse,’ Josh thinks. Tyler takes the guy’s hand and bends over him, other palm gliding across his bare chest. The guy’s eyes snap open before closing again.

“It looks like they’re heavily drugged,” Jenna concludes.

Tyler hides his face in the crook of Josh’s neck.

“Tyler,” Josh says softly. “Please. Watch.”

And Tyler watches.

Tyler’s eyes are glazed over as he watches himself passing the cots and touching the guys lying under the covers; on the video, Tyler’s moves are slow as if he’s afraid to break himself, but he goes forward obediently, shaking the guys’ hands and pressing his palms to their shoulders and necks, and these gestures look familiar.

“Is he… Is he healing them?” Josh coughs up.

Tears brimming Jenna’s eyes as she looks at the screen.

“Look like this. He’s not handling it well though… I think it brings too much pain for him to endure it, but he just keeps going?” she blurts out. “Tyler, how can it be?”

Tyler bites his fist.

“Tyler?” Josh shakes him slightly.

“I don’t…” Tyler looks at the screen before heaving into his palm. “I need to get out.”

Josh holds him, the sound reverberates through the room.

“Next door is the restroom,” Jenna sighs. “Don’t get lost.”

Tyler gets up and storms off the couch; Josh is about to follow him, but Jenna gestures at him to stay here. Josh thinks that their situations are pretty similar — he still feels ashamed of that one time he didn’t have courage to look at the guts during the autopsy, and now it’s Tyler who’s ill. It’s almost like a virus, too.

“He just needs to recover from shock,” Jenna says.

Josh winces as the video continues.

“Don’t kill him if he vomits in the middle of the hallway.”

The video is coming to the end, two men catch Tyler under his armpits and manhandle him back to
the door, Tyler’s toes drag against the linoleum floor.

“What was in that syringe?” Josh wonders. “Ty wouldn’t have been able to heal those people, I mean, all of them — you know how much of his energy it takes,” he just tries to collect that puzzle. “So… if VESSEL is able to block the powers and BUTCH is anything but VESSEL — what if they vaccinated him with the power-simulator? Or something like that?” Josh straightens up his back.

“They want to get Tyler,” Jenna purses her lips. “Either way they’re going to declassify our archive.”

“So fucking smart. They threaten us to tell the world about our activity, and the only thing we have about BUTCH is this damn tape with Tyler on it,” Josh hits his knee with his fist. “As if Tyler has preferred to work for them instead of VESSEL, but come on, they fucking punched him!”

“They can cut it out and then kill everyone who saw the original tape.”

This truth forms a lump in Josh’s throat as he gulps it down.

Now they’re metaphorically chained — though they know the real facts — and it’s all because of Tyler.

“They made him do it, Jen,” Josh tries. “They made him.”

And it’s pointless; it’s like being an insect hitting the glass in attempts to get into the room. These thoughts smash Josh’s brainpan, because there was something that broke Tyler’s stubbornness, and the butchers had hurt him —

Jenna puts the flash drive back into the case.

“Now we know,” she says.

“I think Tyler’s brother was there,” Josh hates it as he says it.

“Among those people?”

“On the isle,” Josh corrects her. “He said it when we… He got vaccinated as a volunteer from the military school, and he — he started to turn to a creature, but my blood helped,” Josh stammers. “I’ll tell you a full story later, okay?” he gets up. “But he said he saw Tyler there.”

It starts to click: the kidnapping, the serum, the isle, Tyler’s sudden blood-loss; they took Tyler’s blood samples from the laboratory and made the first serum for the military, but it didn’t work right — it turned people to the monsters instead of super-soldiers — and that’s why BUTCH decided to kidnap Tyler and take his blood again.

But Zack Joseph was a victim of the first wave.

Such a tragic chain of events.

“They needed him as a healer also,” Josh mumbles, deep in thought.

“Or maybe they just wanted to test the serum,” Jenna says. “Your idea about improving powers is so… original.”

“Thanks,” Josh chuckles darkly. “The creature I saw in the woods was probably the product of the first experiment. Tyler said he saw it too but didn’t believe it.”
“Of course he didn’t.”

Jenna stares at the briefcase with the pent up disgust.

“Don’t…” Josh’s throat tightens as the words come out. “Don’t judge him,” he pleads but he doesn’t care — losing Jenna’s trust means losing the last hope. “He couldn’t resist.”

Tyler couldn’t resist the chemicals that had apparently turned his system upside down.

“I know,” Jenna nods impartially. “Need to go to the office. Will you be okay by yourself?”

‘I wanna go with you,’ Josh almost says. Then, he thinks of Tyler.

“Merrick is going to kill him.”

Jenna freezes near the door.

“Who’s gonna let him do that?”

“But who’s gonna stop him?”

Josh feels dizzy.

“I’ll be right back,” Jenna says calmly, closing the door behind her.

And Josh just wants to destroy everything in this room just like Tyler destroyed his laboratory, wants to go and fight Merrick in advance — Josh is a little surprised that he hasn’t jumped from underneath the bed just like a clown out of the music box.

Merrick can be the one to pull the trigger.

The door cracks open and Tyler hobbles into the room, limping to the couch and throwing his head back; he looks even worse than in the morning. His eyes seem bigger, purple bruises like makeup; Tyler didn’t look good on the tape, in the forest, and his current state just sums up his anguish. Josh wants to comfort him, to say these it’s-gonna-be-alright and it’s-not-your-fault phrases, but he’s too crestfallen to be himself.

Josh falters before sitting down beside him.

Josh’s nose wrinkles at the acidic scent.

“You smell like barf.”

“I’m sorry. There was no mouthwash. I tried to rinse my mouth,” Tyler massages his eyelids with his fingers. “I was about to swallow a bar of soap.”

It always comes like this: a headache or a migraine, then a nosebleed, and then he starts throwing up; this time, though, Josh is sure it wasn’t only the migraine that made Tyler sick.

“Do you remember something?” Josh asks.

Too rude, probably. Tyler can’t even talk, eyeing the wall in front of him; but Josh needs him to think, to speak, to —

To apologize. Josh hates it; Josh hates the tape and BUTCH and hates the way Tyler’s brain works. It’s just out of service.
“I don’t know. I think, yes, it was som-mething vague, and I wanted to tell you about it, but,” Tyler catches his breath. “I couldn’t. My mouth was full of slime.”

Tyler’s skin looks grey in these lights.

“And now?”

“It’s gone,” Tyler wipes his face on his sleeve. “I thought I was going to die in that restroom, shit, it was so bad,” he groans out, trying to curl into himself. “Like a punishment.”

Life on Earth is a punishment itself.

“It’s gonna get better,” Josh says though he doesn’t feel like doing so.

Tyler looks even woozier.

“Y’know,” he slurs. “If it's gonna go like this, I don’t want to remember anything.”

Josh remains silent.

*Minus one*, dings in his head.
It gets scarier when it gets real.

Jenna nods shortly.

“Sometimes, the best way to hide is not trying to hide, so,” she points at the laptop. “Welcome to VESSEL archive, bitches.”

Josh is waiting, and waiting, and waiting until Jenna comes back; he passes out a couple of times, and Tyler is half sitting beside him, eyes closed. Tyler’s head rests on Josh’s shoulder, Tyler’s eyeballs twitch underneath his reddened eyelids; Josh pats his damp hair, breathes in the scent of his skin.

He isn’t sure if Tyler is sleeping.

Tyler groans again.

“Tyler,” Josh slaps his thigh slightly. “Are you okay?”

Tyler doesn’t stir.

“No.”

This reminds Josh of their first trip to VESSEL. Josh wonders if Tyler will ever feel fine surrounded by these walls. This place just kills his health. Tyler stretches lazily and opens his mouth to say something, but that’s when Jenna enters the room with a sad look on her face.

She’s sad. Not angry anymore.

“I think it’s pointless to keep asking you about the tape,” she says.

Tyler blinks, perplexed.

“Okay,” her okay is clearly not what she means. “You’re lucky they didn’t capture you.”

“Capturing me is VESSEL’s prerogative,” Tyler retorts.

Jenna locks the door.

“Right.”

Josh thinks they will never come back home.

“Are they overhearing us?” he manages. “What if Merrick is working for BUTCH?”
“It’d be a cool motive for killing him,” Tyler agrees.

The flow of Tyler’s hate for Merrick is endless. Tyler is just the one who holds his grudges for forever, and Josh is somehow proud of him.

“Merrick hasn’t seen the tape yet,” Jenna responds.

Tyler places his palm over his heart.

“Thank you.”

“Why does everything you say sound sarcastic?” Josh nudges him with his elbow. “Or is it just me?”

It’s not that Tyler’s behavior can affect the way Jenna treats them, but it’s still irritating.

“Lovely,” Jenna sits down onto the couch, between them. “We’re saving the recording, copying it along with the files; BUTCH is going to predict our intentions so we need to trick them. To do something they wouldn’t expect.”

BUTCH is definitely not an agency that craves to get fooled.

“Like, employing us?” Tyler raises his eyebrows.

Jenna freezes with her mouth agape.

“What on Earth…”

It’s not the solution at this point, but it can be. Well, if Tyler wants to end up strapped to an operation table on the isle.

“We don’t know anything about VESSEL structure,” Josh protests. He means, *he doesn’t know* anything about that. But Tyler definitely does.

“But butchers wouldn’t expect that,” Tyler smirks. “Plus, you didn’t see the emails VESSEL had been sending to me, you know, they wanted to employ me so bad.”

It was just one of the snares — and they could hold Tyler close, they thought they could control him; everyone thinks so — Jenna, Blurry, butchers, even Josh himself — everyone. Except Tyler.

Meanwhile, Jenna doesn’t look happy and satisfied.

“We were sick of you hacking our database so we needed you to protect it,” Jenna says. “A genius with amnesia, what a wonderful combination.”

“…and I was so stupid I didn’t notice there was something wrong with you,” Tyler continues.

“With me?” Jenna fumes. “Everything was wrong with *you*, and still is!”

It’s like throwing a bomb.

Tyler is riled up.

“I’ve already said I was stupid,” he spits. “Wanna keep blaming me? Come on! But you weren’t the one who woke up in the middle of fucking nowhere, you know?”
Jenna’s glance softens, but something in her eyes makes Josh shiver.

“Have you lost your powers?” she asks.

This somehow crosses the line.

“Tyler?”

Tyler huffs like an annoyed kid.

“No.”

“Can you prove it?”

Josh doesn’t like her tone.

“Gonna punch him and watch the bruise disappear?”

“Something else,” Jenna scowls. “You won’t like it.”

“Of course I won’t,” Tyler mirrors her grimace.

Josh is about to start hating both of them.

“Show me?” Jenna offers, her hand is hidden in her pocket.

It’s Tyler’s turn to roll his eyes.

“Because my words mean nothing?”

“Because your words are all you have,” Jenna fends off.

And when Josh sees what she’s doing, he thinks she’s crazy.

“Are you crazy?” Tyler voices his thoughts.

Because here’s the razorblade clamped between Jenna’s fingers.

“Calm down,” she says. No, she orders.

“Are you serious?” Josh wants to stop her, to take a piece of metal out of her hand.

Tyler’s face is blank.

“A test,” he utters. “Again, another one, just because you want to show us how smart you are,” he continues, and yes, it does sound sarcastic. “Don’t do it.”

But she does it.

It’s just a small cut near her thumb, the smallest one Josh has ever seen — but the line is full of blood, Josh can spot it from where he sits on the couch.

“You’re silly,” Tyler states.

Josh can’t disagree.

Josh can’t look at the blood.
Jenna outstretches her hand, holding a few drops of her blood in her palm.

“I thought it was my weapon,” Tyler comments.

“I didn’t want to break my finger again,” Jenna shrugs.

Josh thinks they’d be a perfect couple; Josh is glad they aren’t.

Josh watches the following scene, with Tyler sighing and holding Jenna’s hand and looking right through her; he’s concerned, squeezing her fingers and Josh is concerned too. Tyler quivers and closes his eyes and jerks his head with a slight crack in his neck.

Jenna winces.

“Ouch.”

“Think twice before playing with this thing,” Tyler scolds her, taking a tissue out of his pocket.

“Don’t cut yourself anymore,” he says, holding it above Jenna’s palm. “Wait. It’s stained with my blood,” he turns to the trash can and tosses the razorblade and the tissue into it. “I d-don’t want to poison you. Or anyone.”

But Jenna has her own pack of tissues, and she uses one of them to wipe the leftover blood. And Tyler’s sitting on the edge of the couch, ankles crossed and his hands tucked between his knees. The injury was so tiny it couldn’t take much of his powers, but he’s still pale.

“You have to start taking meds for those migraines,” Jenna points out.

“Just because I’ve thrown up again?” Tyler drops his head on the back of a couch. “It won’t help. I’m screwed up, I know I have to say something, but it knocks me out when I think of it,” he swallows. “Something in m-my head bursts each time I try to remember.”

Josh imagines he can hear Tyler’s blood vessels erupt.

But, most importantly, he’s sure Tyler is telling the truth. Josh knows the feeling of emptiness, when a chunk of the information is taken away — he’s been there. He’s had a few unpleasant talks with a child psychologist, who was saying that Josh’s head was just joking, and he hadn’t seen the light, he hadn’t been levitating, and —

His parents did it to him. That story, that part of Josh’s childhood had been banned, because they didn’t want to have a mentally ill son. After all of the manipulations, Josh was told he wasn’t sick anymore. And it was like painting white all over the blood stains on the wall, all over the blood stains in Josh’s mind.

Jenna sits on the table, glancing at her hand in disbelief.

“You haven’t lost your powers after all.”

“Please, don’t block it,” Tyler mutters, eyes closed. “I won’t be able to take it.”

They can’t open Tyler’s mind, and Josh feels just terrible for him, because Tyler’s existence has never been easy; Josh can even decipher the way Tyler blinks — his right eye doesn’t see properly when the headache torments him. The thought of losing his sight sends chills down Josh’s spine.

Tyler covers his forehead with his palm.

“You shouldn’t have done it,” Josh tells to Jenna.
“I just wanted to check it,” Jenna responds.

They’re in danger.

“Are you going to keep us here?” Josh asks while Tyler tries to make himself comfortable on the couch next to him.

“No,” Jenna shakes her head. “We’ll take you home next morning. But I… I think I have to make a note about blocking Tyler’s powers, just in case.”

Tyler chortles.

“Just to make me less appealing for the butchers?”

“Exactly,” Jenna gets back to her friendly state. “It’ll give us some time.”

That doesn’t actually help Josh fight his anxiety.

“A time before the war?”

It gets scarier when it gets real.

Jenna nods shortly.

“Sometimes, the best way to hide is not trying to hide, so,” she points at the laptop. “Welcome to VESSEL archive, bitches.”

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Jenna doesn’t send them back home until the afternoon, sharing her theories and making them drink some kind of a tea from big cups. Josh’s hands are shaking, Tyler’s teeth are clanking against the edge of the cup, and it’s ridiculous.

They’re vulnerable.

“So, when I repeat the facts, our future gets less and less positive,” Jenna says, somewhat optimistically.

It’s like she’s happy that Tyler’s powers haven’t betrayed him again.

Josh wishes he could get rid of his newfound abilities, it feels like a disease under his skin. Josh pokes at the bulged vein on his forearm, malleable and full of blood ready to spill out of it like out of a garden hose.

“We have no future if it goes like this,” he mumbles.

What if his blood is going to play dirty and kill him?

What if there’s the code in Tyler’s head that will re-program his brain even more?

Josh hates these what-if’s.

They haven’t even left the room, and Josh wonders if they ever will; VESSEL is eating him out of the inside. It’s something wrong with the air here.
Tyler sets the cup onto the table.

“I’m afraid it might start again,” he says. “It was even worse than that time when I got Kelly’s mark,” he pinches his sleeve, rolling it up.

“Can you show me?” Jenna leans over the table with a glimmer of interest in her eyes.

Josh expects Tyler to bristle.

“Yeah,” Tyler unties the laces.

He drops his hoodie on the couch while he raises his hand up for Jenna to inspect the new tattoo.

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Josh will never forget Tyler’s seizures and the foam dribbling out of his mouth, he will never forget a frenzied Chris and Maddy’s tears.

“It’s just… wow,” Jenna licks her lips, tracing her finger down the line of Roman numerals.

“We don’t know what it means.”

They have just theories, nothing else.

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble,” Jenna recites.

Tyler retracts his hand, but it’s still in Jenna’s grip.

“What?”

“John 16:33,” Jenna explains.

“We thought of Martin Luther,” Josh interjects.

“Though that quote describes me so well,” Tyler sighs. “Aliens have a style.”

It strikes Josh again — Tyler is sick and no one can help him, no one can protect him from getting marked, and this thing is so random since some of the Contactees don’t even remember their contacts.

And Josh is one of them.

“Guys,” Jenna hands Tyler’s hoodie back to him. “I can send you back home for now, if you’re feeling better, and the helicopter is—”

“Is it necessary to use a helicopter when there’s the storm in my stomach?” Tyler grumbles.

Josh feels guilty again.

Riding a car takes so much time.

“And the agents will keep chasing us?” Josh asks warily.

“Yeah. Definitely.”

And Josh’s imagination is restless — he pictures butchers cracking the window and getting into
their room on the ropes hanging from the roof, and honestly, sitting in one of the VESSEL’s rooms seems more appealing right now.

Josh is not ready for the flight.

“I think I’m ready for the flight,” Tyler drawls.

Jenna smiles.

Jenna always smiles when her boy Tyler is doing better. Josh gives himself a mental slap because Jenna never calls Tyler like this — just in her head, probably, but her eyes are so big Josh can read her thoughts.

He can also read that she’s afraid.

And so is Josh.

And Tyler.

But well, maybe a true friendship means being anxious together.

***

Josh drives past the familiar neighborhood. He’s almost done with the last address, and the woman in an extremely bad mood has finally gotten her DVD player; Josh only rolls his eyes while she signs the paper, scolding Josh and the delivery service, because the box is a little crumpled.

“It’s not my fault,” Josh tries.

“It is your fault,” the woman cuts him off.

Josh decides to not backchat no matter how bad he wants to. When the woman slams the door shut without any thanks or goodbyes, Josh looks at the clock on his phone — it’s still too early to come and pick Tyler up. Here’s even a message from Tyler, ‘im fine dont worry’ which makes Josh sigh sadly and reply ‘good. Can’t wait to get back home’. Because he can’t wait. Because he knows that Tyler would prefer to lie facing the wall all day rather go to work, back to the bright lights. He doesn’t say anything about migraines anymore, he tends to try and endure the pain until he can’t anymore. And maybe then, he starts to whine.

And Josh tends to start whining in advance.

He has three more hours and he knows where to spend them.

Josh drives down the street with perfectly-shaped trees lined down both sides and stops beside the house tucked between its cardboard twins. If he’s lucky enough, the door of this house is always open for him; Josh rings the doorbell, suddenly thinking it’s very stupid.

The door flies open.

Josh still feels out of place, even though there are warm greetings, a tight hug and a bright smile. A chunk of Jack’s hair doesn’t match Josh’s hair color anymore — it’s blue against black while Josh has stolen the sunshine.

“My man Josh looks good,” Jack exclaims, Jack is always too loud.
“You’re not bad yourself,” Josh responds with a labored smile.

Jack hasn’t lied about his hospitality.

“Come in, come in,” Jack chimes, and there are too many pats on Josh’s back, too many how-are-you’s; Josh’s brain struggles to recognize all the words Jack says. “Wanna drink something?” Jack offers. “Something like…” he points at the minibar in the corner of the kitchen. “Not this, of course. You’re driving. Coffee?”

“Yeah, coffee,” Josh cracks a smile. He sits in the armchair that is too slippery and probably as expensive as everything in this house.

Running away right now would be impolite. Here are pictures on these flawlessly-designed walls — models and Jack’s friends, and his model-friends as well. Clubs and private shows, and parties, parties, parties… So much alcohol and glitter, and, as a photographer, Jack is a professional at catching the right moment to immortalize it. Last time Josh was in this house Jack didn’t have a pool or a coffee-machine; but it seems that the fame hasn’t changed him, so Josh relaxes when Jack hands him a steaming cup that smells much better than all the coffee Josh has ever drank in his life.

“We’re paying the rent next month,” Josh says without choking on hot liquid.

“Forget about it,” Jack waves his arm and reaches for the bottle. “We should drink this vine together one day. I heard you’re getting married?”

Josh twists a black ring on his finger and suddenly feels like he doesn’t have a right to wear it — they’re not moving. Their relationship is frozen and neither of them tries to repair it; it’s gnawing at Josh’s heart, his heart gives him so many problems recently.

And Jack is so bright, so stylish, so confident. Sometimes Josh thinks he’s not real.

“So?” Jack is waiting, holding a glass of vine. “What about the wedding?”

Josh wishes he could drown his sorrows in a cup of coffee.

“Well,” he starts.

“Well?”

“One day,” Josh’s picking the right words that never seem right. “It’s gonna happen.”

‘If we won’t die tonight,’ his alter-ego prompts.

“Is everything okay?” Jack slumps into the opposite armchair, and their conversation takes a funny turn.

Josh has only some vague memories about the white and brown office, and about the man in a strict suit, and what bothers you today, Josh? Josh was struggling, but he had lost the fight; that psychiatrist did a good job along with the others, with Josh’s parents and forbidden topics.

Josh was a troubled teen, they said.

But Josh was taking his pills obediently.

And he understands the way Tyler feels now, with the black holes in his memory that will never be filled with the right information, with what he’s really missed. Josh is still confused, but his own memories hadn’t been blocked in such violent way. It was just a childhood accident that affected
his whole life.
Both of them are helpless.
“We’re helpless,” Josh doesn’t notice he says it out loud.
Jack takes a sip.
“What?”
Josh doesn’t want to stay in this house anymore.
Jack thinks he has a normal life.
“Nothing,” Josh sets the cup aside. “It’s just…”
“Tyler?” Jack guesses.
Not responding is a response.
“Tyler,” Jack confirms.
“Stop pressing,” Josh gets up. He’s almost forgotten about how sneaky Jack can be.
“Have you done something wrong? I mean, now you don’t know how to fix it?” Jack narrows his eyes.
“Not like this,” Josh cuts him off before he starts talking about cheating.
“Like what then?”
Jack never stops being Jack.
“I gotta go,” Josh pushes the cup, nearly spilling the contents. “Thanks for coffee.”
The price of his coffee sticks to his teeth, he can taste it.
“Quitting?” Jack smiles.
“No,” Josh simply says.
He still has enough time before the end of Tyler’s shift, but he now prefers to spend it in the park.
Fresh air and the lack of Jack; Josh thinks he’s being rude.
“I hope you’re having fun in your relationship,” Jack says, putting the bottle into a mini-fridge.
His house is a castle, he may as well have trapdoors hidden under the parquet.
“Oh,” Jack’s relaxed facial expression melts into concern. “He’s not a very healthy guy, is he?”
Tyler would kill him for discussing his health behind his back, but Josh isn’t going to be extremely honest.
He knows how to dodge.
“He’s getting really bad migraines and his nose bleeds far too much,” Josh winces. “It scares the daylights out of me.”

He’s afraid that one night Tyler will simply choke on his own blood because he rarely wakes up on his own when the nosebleeds happen.

“But does he… does he want a proper medical survey?” Jack frowns. “Like… do you need help? If you need help, you can always—”

“No, I can’t,” Josh stops him. “You’re doing enough. Seriously, man, I feel like a fool.”

Jack rolls his eyes.

Josh doesn’t want Jack to get murdered for a secret knowledge.

Maybe Josh just needs to cry on somebody’s chest.

“Hope you guys are gonna handle it,” Jack says when Josh is at the door.

“Sure,” Josh replies far too quickly. “We’re paying you next month.”

Josh needs to build up plans, he thinks it would help him not to die immediately.

“Forget,” Jack says again.

“Nope,” Josh smiles and gives him a hug.

He steps out of the front porch and maybe his life is getting a bit better.

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“It’s like you’re picking me up from elementary school,” Tyler grumbles as he gets into the car. “You just need to start asking Michael about my behavior.”

“I’m actually about to start doing so,” Josh grins because Tyler’s mood is not that bad.

He doesn’t want to spoil Tyler’s attitude with the talk about Jack.

“I ate and my head didn’t hurt,” Tyler says trustingly.

“You’re doing good,” Josh replies as the car races down the trees-contoured highway.

Tyler stares at the road right in front of them, at the yellow line on the grey asphalt; Tyler gets hypnotized easily.

“Ty,” Josh says. Nothing else comes out of his mouth.

“I think I’m about to get fired,” Tyler responds, chewing his lip.

Josh slows the car down.

“Is something wrong?”

Tyler scratches the back of his head.
“Maybe. Yeah. I think I’m failing, and M-michael gives me those looks, and—” his speech is a babbling as the car drifts. “I think he’s going to—”

Josh listens to him, the only thing he’s really good at, but it’s definitely not his day, no matter how hard he tries to ignore these tiny bells ringing in his ears. He almost swallows the gum he’s chewing.

“Fuck,” Josh spits, turning the steering wheel and striking the car to the left to avoid the collision with the truck crossing the road.

“Fuck,” Tyler echoes, nearly thrown off his seat.

The truck blocks their way now, the forest surrounds them, and now Josh can be sure that this Bermuda Triangle never brings any joy. He gets even more nervous when the back door of the truck spits out two people in familiar VESSEL uniforms; they’re holding their guns, rushing towards Josh’s car.

“Turn back,” Tyler whispers.

Josh nods, trying to put the car in reverse, but that’s when the shot pierces the air.

“Not a good plan, okay,” Tyler shudders.

Josh can only feel the pain in his abdomen, in his left side where the bullet once was.

“A terrible plan,” Josh whispers back.

As if his voice can be the bait for the predator.

His hands are still on the steering wheel as the silhouettes are getting closer and closer; Josh can’t see their faces yet, which doesn’t drown out his fright. VESSEL is having some major problems, and Josh thinks he recognizes the truck even — he knows how it looks inside, he remembers that smell of burnt rubber, the stench of kidnapping.

“Get out of the car,” a knock on the side window from the driver’s side.

Josh can’t believe his eyes, his ears, but it doesn’t matter when he’s about to get shot for the second time in his life.

“What’s going on?” Tyler asks, and at the same time Josh can’t hold his own question back —

“You?”

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

Josh has had too many negative experiences.

“But I can’t get back my memories that have been taken away. It’s like a mental amputation,” Tyler glances at his fingerprints on the table. “What if the butchers have performed the lobotomy and we’ll never find out?”

The worst part of this talk is, though, that Tyler is right. Again.

“Halsey?”

The girl on Josh’s left looks tired, her head is shaved, but it doesn’t make her less identifiable.

“Me,” she nods.

Josh and Tyler came to her house once, just by Blurry’s order. That was an awkward night. These circumstances are even more awkward, terrifying, they reveal the darker side of VESSEL.

“Where’s Jenna?” Tyler asks but his question just hangs in the air.

Josh gets out of the car first, hoping he can figure out how to get out of this illogical situation. The other agent is Mark, he stands with an extremely bored look on his face; he doesn’t even run to help Halsey as she keeps pointing her pistol at Josh. As if Josh can shoot her dead just using his finger. It’d be a nice superpower. Or maybe, lasers from his eyes, but unfortunately, it’s an unaffordable one.

“Who’s the head of the operation?” Josh inquires. There’s no way they can hide in the forest; it never works.

“Too many questions, dudes,” Mark takes a step toward them, his rifle hangs behind his back like a broken wing. “We were given an order to come and get you, so that’s what we’re actually doing.”

It’s not Josh’s trademark style but he pushes Mark away when he thinks he stands too close; all he gets, though, is a painful poke in his side with the butt of the rifle. The ache strikes through the flesh, and Josh lurches forward and waits for the next punch or for the shot.

“Hey!” Tyler shouts out. “What the fuck are you—”

Josh is still bent over, but the sound of Tyler’s yelp is muffled as if somebody has clamped a palm over Tyler’s mouth.

“Shut up or I’ll shoot a hole in your skull,” Halsey hisses out. Josh raises his head up.

Tyler’s gripping the hood, his fingers leave wet shades on the metal while Halsey holds her hand covering a lower half of Tyler’s face. The tip of her pistol is pressed under Tyler’s chin. Tyler’s brain is too precious to get blown up like this, Josh’s emotions are all dead now. Josh’s jaws keep moving though the mint gum tastes like rubber.
“I’ll pull the trigger faster than you blink,” Halsey warns. Tyler gives her a slight nod. She removes her hand from his lips.

“Sure,” Tyler coughs up.

“Get into the car,” Mark sighs as if he fails at being a good agent.

“We haven’t done anything,” Josh grumbles. He lies and everyone knows it.

“Stop chewing when I’m talking to you,” Mark says.

Josh tilts his head down and spits the gum out, not caring that it accidentally sticks to Mark’s boot, a small piece of green is like alien goo. Behind Josh’s back, Tyler giggles nervously.

“I can kill you, you know,” Mark points out, still calm.

“Do it, then; I’d rise from the dead only to watch how Jenna shoves your rifle up your ass.”

“You have weird kinks, Dun,” Mark sighs again.

They walk too slowly, the truck blocks their way; Josh tries to look into the driver’s cabin, but here’s only a figure with a black ski mask on. This black ski mask reminds Josh of Blurry, he shudders involuntarily. He sees nothing except it.

And probably, Tyler sees something in his imagination; he stumbles and stops.

“Are you gonna sell us to the government?”

This sounds more like ‘are you gonna dismember us?’

“Dammit, let’s use chloroform to knock them out?” Halsey pipes up.

“I can’t handle any chemicals in my system,” Tyler huffs. “So sure, use it.”

Josh hits his toe on the stone.

“For God’s sake, shut up,” he growls.

He thinks that some random thief is going to steal his car, because the door from the driver’s side is open, and the keys are still inside. Then, Josh thinks it makes no sense since he’s going to die anyway.

And yes, he remembers this truck. It still smells the same, it has a tarpaulin-covered door that slams shut as soon as all the four of them get inside. The first thing Josh sees here is a small bottle with the word chloroform written on it.

“Come on,” he kicks the bottle. It rolls with the liquid sloshing inside. “You weren’t going to use it.”

“That was a drastic measure,” Mark sneers.

“Your rifle was a drastic measure,” Tyler retorts and sits in the corner.

It’s strange that they don’t have any benches here.

Here is just a dirty woolen cloth on the floor, and Josh feels like a dog in the shelter’s cage, waiting
for a probable owner to save him. And Tyler is just another dog, a bit younger and a lot more confused than Josh. Josh crawls to him while Mark pretends he doesn’t notice their harsh moves.

“No interaction!” Halsey starts.

“We have guns and tranquilizers,” Mark shakes his head. “We can stop it.”

Josh is grateful they didn’t use anything beforehand.

He feels like he’s chronically drugged — his life is just a bad trip. And Josh is on his knees no matter how he hates it, too afraid he might do something wrong and get sedated. The truck races, the tires flatten out the asphalt and dirt; the wall is cold and the cloth on the floor feels humid as Josh creeps to Tyler who’s fallen back into the state of apathy.

“Tyler?”

Silence is a torture.

“I think they know,” Tyler breathes out.

“About what?”

He thinks Tyler is talking about the tape.

“I’m…” Tyler ducks his head. “What if…” he points at his ear. “I can’t.”

Josh gets it — Tyler can’t talk about it while he thinks they’re being listened to by butchers.

“Then don’t do anything.”

“I’m not that stupid,” Tyler smirks sourly. “Do you think they’re taking us to the prison?”

That’s exactly what Josh thinks. He’s had these thoughts before, he needs a call, he needs to talk to his family and apologize.

“I’m scared and not fucking ashamed to admit it,” Josh says. “No, I’m— I’m terrified.”

His bones hurt when the truck vibrates, drifting unsteadily.

“Same,” Tyler agrees. “My bravery is a fake. I used to fake everything, you know? But it’s kinda hard to pretend I don’t feel like I’m about to black out like five times in a day.”

Tyler’s teeth are chattering as he speaks.

“Are your headaches getting worse?” Josh asks. He asks it as if he’s Tyler’s personal doctor who has no idea what he’s going to do if something in Tyler’s head actually explodes.

But Tyler said his day was fine.

Tyler didn’t look like his day was not fine.

“Not just my head. It’s about my condition in general,” Tyler says. “Like. I’m holding a spanner and then my fingers feel weak and it falls. It’s embarrassing,” he sniffs. “Don’t even wanna think which of my bodily functions are gonna fail next.”

The truck jerks violently, and Josh curses a person that drives it; he rocks forward, hitting his side
on Tyler’s bony knee. It’s Josh’s unlucky side, the butt of the rifle was about to make a dent here. Josh hisses, rubbing his hipbone, and Tyler reaches his hand for the waistband of Josh’s jeans. Josh doesn’t let him touch his bruised skin with a bit of a swell on his stomach. Something’s pulsing there.

“Don’t you dare,” Josh covers the bruise with his palm, protecting his pain.

Tyler shoves his hand into his pocket.

“I am hurt too,” he sighs humbly. “I feel you.”

Josh turns around; Halsey squints her eyes at him. She sits next to Mark, holding her pistol between her knees.

“What?” she asks. She’s not that friendly girl from the house on the outskirts of the town.

“Nothing,” Josh shrugs.

At least, Halsey and Mark don’t try to separate them.

He wonders if the agents know how to attack a person and cause a rupture of an internal organ with just one well-aimed punch. The truck moves, his guts ache, but he doesn’t want to share his injuries with Tyler. Josh loses the track of time, it always happens when Josh is trapped and maybe it’s dawn already — it’s always dark inside of this damn vehicle, square lights on the ceiling are too greedy to give them enough light.

It’s gonna be a long ride.

Maybe the time would flow faster if they were unconscious.

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Everything has its end, Josh is aware of it, but he’s not prepared for a sudden stop in the middle of a godforsaken forest; he’s used to a measured swaying of the truck, so when he doesn’t feel it shake anymore, he panics. Josh doesn’t want to get up, the cloth underneath him feels a little warmer, but itchy goosebumps don’t stop appearing on his skin.

“Where are we?”

Tyler’s teeth are chattering again.

“None of your business,” Halsey spits.

“I think Merrick is a bad influence,” Tyler says, uncurling from his fetal position.

“Do you know how he calls you?” Mark joins them in their dialogue. “That unpredictable asshole Joseph. I think it describes you so well.”

They’re giving them time, Josh guesses.

“And what did he say about me?”

“Nothing,” Mark shrugs. “Tyler is the only person Merrick is talking about.”
“Such unhealthy obsession,” Tyler deadpans.

Merrick is gonna be pissed if he finds out the details about Tyler’s adventure, and Josh has no doubt that it’s gonna happen soon.

“Write testaments, kiss goodbyes to your families and all that jazz,” Halsey tucks her pistol into a holster on her belt.

Mark throws the door open, letting the chilly air flow inside and curl the dust into a small tornado on the floor — the storm is coming. Josh feels a spark of tingling in his fingertips but it passes quickly, just a ghost reflex, a desire to fight the agents. Apart from the bruise on Josh’s side, this doesn’t resemble a regular kidnapping. Josh isn’t sure what he expects to see outside; mostly, there’s the wood, the trees are like tall silent sentinels whispering their secret codes to each other. Mark is the first who jumps out of the truck, lifting up his rifle when Josh comes to the door.

“Gonna shoot me right now?”

Josh doesn’t mean to sass.

He really wants to know.

“If it’s necessary, amigo,” Halsey murmurs into his ear, standing behind him.

“Back off,” Tyler tenses up, words addressed to her.


Josh is half grateful to feel a solid ground under his feet and half petrified, because he’s never seen this part of a forest before. Tyler holds his hand on his forehead as he steps out of the truck; Josh even thinks he’s missed the moment when Mark punched him, but Tyler proves him wrong pretty soon.

“I know this place,” Tyler utters. “I. Know. This. Place,” he syllables.

Mark ruffles his shaggy hair.

“What?”

“These coordinates,” Tyler looks up at the sky. The stars are just tiny buttons. “Your satellite…” he pauses. “Don’t tell Merrick,” he puts his forefinger over his lips. “Whatever. He knows.”

Tyler marches down the forest, between the trees, and Mark aims a rifle at his back; it stops Josh, but it doesn’t stop Tyler.

“It’s the place, right?” Tyler folds his palms as if he’s in a prayer. “Dammit, I knew it was real!”

Tyler rolls up the sleeve of his sweatshirt, an iridescent gleaming exposed; golden shades cover his skin, permeating his marks and mirroring the starlight.

“What the heck is that?” Halsey looks dumbstruck.

“I have no idea,” Josh says lowly. “But he’s not lying.”

He’s heard a story about Tyler hacking VESSEL's satellite that was close to the UFO the night Tyler got abducted and ended up with a microchip embedded into his neck.
“It happened here,” Tyler concludes. “Your satellite came from here, I feel it.”

“I don’t know what it means, but you’re scaring me, dude,” Mark responds, gripping the strap on his shoulder. “And I might fire this thing when I’m scared.”

Tyler shrugs but keeps his comments to himself.

Josh walks right beside him to prevent him from doing something stupid.

“Tyler,” Josh nudges Tyler’s side. “Stop showing off.”

Tyler doesn’t answer, distracted by the fallen leaves on the ground. The footsteps of the agents keep hunting them, but they don’t lead them anywhere — Tyler guides them through the woods, furiously tugging at his sleeves not to let the gleaming leak out.

But then he stops and so does Josh’s heart.

“It’s here,” Tyler states.

“It’s here,” Mark approves.

Mark looks at Tyler with respect.

Josh looks at the ground, at the grass and brittle brunches covering something; this thing is not noticeable, not until Halsey turns on a flashlight and reveals a small white patch peeking through the dirt. Halsey crouches down, searching for something in the mess of leaves and other trash, then finally finding a handle. Josh narrows his eyes, staring down at the small black object, the white spot around it seems to be a little wider than he’s thought before. He sees it, a hatchway, and then it turns to a hole in the ground, as soon as Halsey presses a plastic card to a tiny slot.

“Technologies, everyone,” Mark exclaims, pointing at the open hatchway.

It’s like a chimney with a monster lurking inside, and Josh didn’t sign for it. He didn’t sign for anything, but no one seems to care.

“I’m going down first,” Halsey says, swinging her legs in darkness.

She adroitly climbs down, she’s so fast Josh can’t even focus on her shaved head disappearing in the tunnel.

“Dun,” Mark nods.

Josh doesn’t need him to say his last name twice; he steps into blackness and follows Halsey on their way down; cold metal bars glimmer faintly, they’re so smooth the sole of his sneaker almost slips from it. The tunnel is long, these tight walls make Josh feel claustrophobic. He sees the door of the hatchway, a small square window right above his head, and he gasps for breath.

There’s no air.

Josh opens his mouth but the pressure is too big, he’s too underground to think straight. He feels the concrete under his feet, the smell of the fungus tickles his nostrils.

“There’s no need to play a badass anymore,” Halsey breathes out.

Josh wants to ask what she means, but that’s when Tyler falls out of the black abyss, barely managing to grab at the last bar.
“Shit,” he cusses, rubbing his palm on his thigh.

“Happy landing,” Halsey smiles.

Her flashlight is powerful enough to light up their surroundings — it’s a hallway, and Josh blindly reaches to take Tyler’s hand. Mark gets down gracefully, just appearing next to Josh like a phantom.

“It’s our little surprise for butchers,” he says. “Do you know where we are?” he asks Tyler.

Tyler shakes his head.

“I just know the coordinates.”

“How the hell did you know the coordinates?” Halsey pokes his back with her finger.

“The stars told me,” Tyler frowns. “I’m an ufologist, don’t forget about it.”

“Cool story,” Mark laughs quietly.

Although Josh is sure they’ve seen Tyler’s files, he’s sure they take it like a joke.

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Here’s the room, then another one, then another; it’s almost like an underground city which is deserted due to a mysterious ecological disaster. The agents are using only one flashlight; it reminds Josh of their walk through the night from VESSEL, the voyage that had nearly cost them their lives.

“What’s going on?” Tyler tries couple times but everyone is wordless.

The only thing Josh knows is that VESSEL has probably been ruined completely. There are no any scanning systems, no identification; Halsey opens all the doors with that plastic card. The doors are heavy and metal, but these manipulations with a flat electronic key make them beep and crawl. The final stop is the office, a regular one, hidden behind a grey metal door with tiny lamps on the top panel; the lights turn green when Halsey presses the card, and the door opens with a certain sound of the lead being dragged across the concrete.

“It’s here,” Mark says.

Mark is oddly friendly.

Josh scratches the X mark behind his ear, the one that has an extraterrestrial origin.

The dust swirls in the air, Tyler coughs.

“All the doors,” Halsey sighs, ignoring their nervousness and a convulsive jerking of Tyler’s chest.

And they obey, they step inside a miniature copy of VESSEL’s main office with the round table in the center of the room, with empty chairs around. The first person Josh sees here is Jenna; he’s about to exhale a weak ‘thank God’, but the look on her face is unreadable so Josh loses his courage. She’s wearing her uniform, too, pant legs tucked into the boot-tops of her black martens shoes. She looks at Tyler then focusing on Josh and crossing her arms over her chest.
“Operation complete,” Mark reports, stopping at the door.

“Good,” Jenna nods. “You can go now.”

When the agents leave the office, the door slides shut automatically; an annoying beeping can be heard again. Josh waits for the explanations, for the instructions at least, but Jenna just rushes to them, hugging both of them and muttering *I’m sorry* and *it’s fine.*

It’s not fine.

If Jenna’s face wasn’t pressed to Tyler’s neck, Josh would have said she has started crying.

“I couldn’t coordinate it,” Jenna mumbles. “It was the only way to save you — to capture you. Some information leaked and BUTCH was planning their own operation, so we had to improvise,” she finally stops squeezing Tyler and looks at Josh. “We can’t let you go. I’m sorry.”

And Tyler’s words don’t make these terrible news any better.

“I know this place,” he swallows. “I mean I…” he looks around.

“This room is soundproof,” Jenna responds his glance.

The walls begin to stretch and move around Josh so he sits down onto the table.

“I f-found the plan of this bunker in your… archive, yep,” Tyler blurts out, twisting his thumbs as he speaks. “Like. I mean, I’m sorry, it was just an accident, and I think I should’ve told you earlier, but… if I know about this secret place, what stops butchers from finding it too?”

Jenna slumps into the chair, aghast.

“We re-constructed the access system since your invasion,” she says. “Nice try, Tyler.”

Tyler shrugs.

Josh is sure these two are going to give him a heart-attack one day. At the back of his mind, Josh is still worried about his lonely car abandoned on the road; he wonders if Jenna is going to send somebody to take his car to the parking lot next to his apartment complex. But well, it seems that this problem is just nothing.

“And we’re here because of BUTCH,” Tyler clarifies. “Wonderful.”

Jenna nods cautiously.

“I need to tell you the truth,” Tyler scrapes the bridge of his nose. “Hope I won’t die right after.”

“You can tell me,” Jenna says, voice soothing.

Josh can only imagine what’s going on in Tyler’s head if it leads to these thoughts. Josh’s legs still don’t want to hold him upright as the first bout of panic wears off. Tyler lingers, twitching and biting his lips and getting ready to say —

“I think I remember something.”

“Like what?” Jenna leans over her chair.

Josh is terrified that Tyler is going to start convulsing again, that his head will kill him.
“What do you remember?”

Tyler always says that Josh is a pro at speaking softly.

“Not much, really,” Tyler replies. “Just some parts from the tape, mostly. I remember the smell — s-something bitter, and, and…” he acts like he doesn’t know the word he’s going to say. “Chlorine. It doesn’t make sense.”

Jenna doesn’t look satisfied.

“That’s all?”

Tyler nods uncertainly.

“I also remember their voices, but I don’t remember what they were talking about. One of them was yelling at me, but then I think I passed out,” Tyler’s finger draws patterns on the shiny surface of the table.

“Do you remember getting beaten?” Josh asks. Tyler’s well-being is something he never stops caring about.

“Not really,” Tyler sniffles. “I couldn’t stay awake; I’m telling you, I only remember the things I saw on that tape, but like, POV first person.”

Josh notes that he sees no equipment here, no chairs with the leather straps. No helmets to scorch Tyler’s brains. Nothing like this.

“Maybe your memories will get back here,” Jenna hums.

“It just hits me rather suddenly,” Tyler replies. “I mean, it feels like a physical punch, but it’s just a short flash, and I’m afraid my brain won’t be able to take it next time.”

“Don’t think of it then,” Josh comforts him.

“I don’t know how to control it, I just want to prevent the migraine because when it happens it’s the death of me,” Tyler says. “Years ago, I hadn’t even thought I will be so helpless at the age of twenty-five.”

Josh doesn’t want him to feel like this.

“You’re not helpless.”

“My system’s falling apart,” Tyler cracks his knuckles. “People just catch me and re-program me like a machine, and I can’t. Resist. It.”

Josh recalls their past again.

“You resisted the urge to kill me. Like, twice at least.”

Josh has had too many negative experiences.

“But I can’t get back my memories that have been taken away. It’s like a mental amputation,” Tyler glances at his fingerprints on the table. “What if the butchers have performed the lobotomy and we’ll never find out?”

The worst part of this talk is, though, that Tyler is right. Again.
Basements give Josh anxiety.

A certain, dark sensation wraps around his very being; they’re being led to the next point, Jenna doesn’t look back at them, just fumbling with the holster on her belt.

“You have to wear our official uniforms,” Jenna says as she guides them toward the door made of steel like everything else here.

“And then you’ll tell us your plan?”

With Jenna, Josh doesn’t feel so insecure, but at the same time he’s impossibly embarrassed.

“Sure,” she nods. “You’re here because VESSEL was smarter for once and prevented the kidnapping; we’ve already fed the butchers with the false facts about your relapsing and informed them that we took our objects to the laboratory.”

Josh’s mouth gapes.

“You belong to VESSEL, first of all.”

That’s when Josh realizes he’s not going home anytime soon.

“And you’re gonna keep us locked here until—” Tyler starts, shivering when the door opens.

“Until it’s over. We have some time, maybe, we’re gonna give you different names,” Jenna rummages in a cardboard box on the floor, and God knows what she’s searching for.

The words get into Josh’s brain slowly, bringing even more fear and making his palms sweat.

“What a nice day to ask us about a collaboration again,” Tyler quips, looking around.

“It’s not a collaboration,” Jenna turns to him, eyebrows frowned. “It’s the way to save you.”

She holds two sets of the uniforms, similar to her own, and hands them over to Josh along with plain black t-shirts and combat boots.

“If you’re staying here, you’re gonna wear this,” she waves at Josh; he finally takes the clothes.

“Wait,” Tyler makes Jenna trail off promptly. “Slow down. We’re not going to work for VESSEL or for BUTCH. And you know what I’m gonna ask you for,” he folds his arms on his chest. “Again.”

Josh can definitely get what Tyler is talking about.

“For what?” Jenna eyes them mistrustfully.

“Protection,” Josh says. He’s so good at understanding Tyler’s non-verbal signs. “For the Duns and the Josephs. Help them make it to the safe place if it’s necessary.”

“Exactly,” Tyler nods. “If our death will help us save them, then it’s better to die right the fuck now.”
Josh nearly drops the uniforms.
Jenna rolls her eyes.

“That’s…”

“Impossible? Then we’re not using your plan,” Tyler cuts her off.

“Let’s avoid this ‘undercover agents’ shit,” Josh grumbles.

“It’s not about undercover agents, Josh! It’s just the only thing we can do now, believe me, this way is much better than those methods the butchers were going to use,” she’s an erupting volcano, yet good at holding her lava back.

Josh mentally counts the ceiling lights. Four. All of them are ugly.

He’s not surprised.

“I remember the day when your agents flattened me out like a pancake.”

“But you tried to use your telekinesis!”

“And then they hurt Tyler just because they knew he was able to heal himself,” Josh continues. “But then they did it again though they blocked his powers. Believe it or not, but it will always be your fault.”

Josh doesn’t know why he’s so eager to bring it back, and, even though Jenna has helped them so many times already, that one time will always be a splinter in their friendship.

“Josh, stop it,” Tyler pulls at Josh’s sleeve.

“It is my fault,” Jenna says calmly. “And I will never forgive myself for that. I’m not asking for a partnership, I just want to trick and defeat our common enemy which is way too powerful,” her eyes glimmer wetly. “It’s the only place they haven’t found yet, but I don’t know for how long we’ll be able to keep this secret. And… you.”

It’s a short speech that doesn’t fill a hole of distrust.

“And, I’m not gonna lie — your families are the next victims. Tyler was right, you shouldn’t have found his parents and siblings, they have only brought more problems to this case,” she sighs. “But I promise, we’ll protect them. It’s easier than protect you.”

Josh feels like he’s signing a paper with his own blood.

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Josh’s brain falls into a fogged desert by the time Jenna shows them their new room, it’s so underground Josh can’t breathe — who knows, maybe it’s Satan’s office right next door.

Maybe VESSEL is actually a subsidiary of Hell itself.

The room is small, the walls are brown — the smears of blood won’t be noticeable on them. Everything is a brown-grey palette, even the ugly-looking beds covered with blankets that look scratchy.
“We, um,” Jenna falters. “Last year, we made this room for you, because... Just in case,” she sounds apologetically. “The tests start tomorrow.”

Josh throws the uniforms onto the bed.

“Tests?”

“Just some regular things,” Jenna dodges Josh’s question. “But right now, you have to go to sleep. To clear your mind.”

“Is it even possible?” Tyler smirks.

Tyler doesn’t seem to be bothered about the tests.

Tyler never cares about his family.

Josh is nothing like Tyler.

And Jenna holds two white pills on her palm.

“Take it and I’ll leave you alone,” she insists. “Come on, they’re just sleeping pills, nothing dangerous.”

Tyler is usually the one who refuses to take any meds, so Josh is surprised that this time he is the one who takes the pill first. He swallows it dry, tilting his head back slightly. Josh hesitates to follow him, but they’re on one team, so he pops the pill into his mouth and lets it slide down even though it almost sticks to the inside of his throat.

“Good,” Jenna smiles.

Smiling in the situation like this is weird.

“Satisfied?” Tyler flops down on the bed and leans against the wall.

“For now, yes,” Jenna responds. “Get some rest.”

“Uh-huh,” Josh fakes a smile back at her.

She’s a friend, he tells to himself.

“See you tomorrow,” Jenna says politely and quickly gets out of Josh’s comfort zone — out of the door.

She doesn’t even close it properly, and the irrational fear of getting attacked and murdered in their sleep keeps taunting Josh.

“Good night,” Tyler mutters, still half sitting on the bed.

“Yeah,” Josh responds. “Good night.”

He’s not sleepy yet, so he just waits for the pill to kick in.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

“You guys are crazy,” Jenna whispers.

And Josh has nothing left to say except —

“That’s why we’re here.”

Josh is awake, but he doesn’t open his eyes immediately; he wishes he could magically teleport back to his bedroom, he really does, but this bed is still not his own. He’s lying on his side, he feels cold. The thought of Tyler makes him crack his eyelids open and recognize the mist-covered outlines of the furniture in the room — here’s one more bed a few feet away, and Tyler is sleeping on top of the covers, breathing steadily.

Josh is about to sell his soul for a glass of water.

“The side effect of this shit makes you feel like you’ve been drained out,” Tyler mumbles into the pillow. “Stop staring at me.”

“Indeed,” Josh rubs his forehead; his brain is a mud in his brainpan.

The sensations get back to him slowly, and the next thing he understands is how badly he needs to use the bathroom. He hopes he’s going to start with solving this problem, at least. Josh gets up and stretches, vaguely remembering falling asleep on the opposite bed because sleeping together was uncomfortable, for the first time probably.

These beds are shitty.

Their life is even shittier.

Tyler winces and glances at the uniforms on the floor.

“Does anything hurt?” Josh asks, arching his back and hearing it crack.

“No,” Tyler says. “We’re just objects again. Do you really think VESSEL is able to save us this way?”

“No,” Josh says honestly.

“Same,” Tyler nods and finally sits up. “I hate taking sleeping pills.”

Josh still can’t focus on anything, and actually, falling back asleep seems so appealing right now; his full bladder is the only thing that keeps him awake. It’s a new day, probably, and Josh scolds himself for his stupidity, because he left his phone in the glove box, his only chance to reach for his family and warn them. And Josh thinks back of Jenna’s words, of the tests she’s going to perform; the last time it was an interrogation where Jenna was checking Tyler and Blurry’s reactions, and Tyler was the one who left the office with the blood gushing out of his nose.
“I have to pee,” Josh says out loud. He doesn’t know why. It’s embarrassing.

“I think Jenna said something about the bathroom down the hall.” Tyler yawns.

Josh doesn’t remember it.

“Really?” he slowly goes to the door, finding it unlocked.

“Want me to go with you?” Tyler offers.

Josh peeks outside, seeing one more door and zero agents. He hopes the bathroom doesn’t require any special accesses. Josh shakes his head as the response to Tyler’s words and hurries down the hallway, so dramatically dark and cold. He doesn’t get shot on his way, so the morning pretends to be a good one. Here’s the latch inside, and Josh locks it, unzipping his pants and turning to the toilet; when he finishes, he thinks that this day is definitely better than it could have been. He stumbles to the sink, cupping his hands under the stream of cold water and drinking until his stomach feels bloated. Dehydration is a bitch. Though, Josh’s unsteadily good mood gets ruined pretty fast. When he gets back into the room, Jenna is here, partially hiding behind Tyler.

“Do you still hate me?” she asks bluntly.

Josh doesn’t know a thing about talking to women.

That’s why he says no.

“BUTCH is gonna get you anyway,” Jenna says. “Do you hate me now?”

“Help,” Josh responds. He’s still delaying the moment when he’s going to actually wear VESSEL uniform.

Maybe it’s a bit better than those red coveralls he and Tyler hated so much.

“I’m trying!”

“So you literally kidnapped us and brought us to—” Tyler stops for her to continue.

“…to a hiding place,” Jenna utters. “Future agents spend weeks upon weeks here to become… actual agents. Training here, learning stuff about the whole thing. Doing their job.”

“And you started here, too?” Josh gestures at the door.

“Yeah. Thanks to my Dad,” Jenna replies, reluctant.

That’s what Josh always forgets about — Jenna has her own life, too, she has parents, and for some reason Josh is sure that Tyler has met them in his past. Josh’s tongue itches to ask him about it right now.

“Thanks to your Dad,” Tyler repeats blankly.

Well, maybe, Josh is a little wrong.

“I need a call,” Josh sounds like a little kid asking his mother to allow him to stay overnight at his friend’s. “Please.”

Tyler kicks the combat boot with the toe of his sneaker.
Jenna doesn’t say anything.

“I can’t just disappear,” Josh continues, anger rises up in his chest. “I need my parents to know that I’m alive, at least!” he doesn’t care that he’s shouting. No one cares too. “I had to lie to them last time, it can’t just keep going like this, dammit, why don’t you think about it beforehand? I’m not an orphan, you know,” he spits.

He doesn’t know how he’s going to explain the situation anyway.

“He’s right,” Tyler quickly takes his side.

Tyler’s support is nothing.

“Josh,” Jenna raises her hand. “We’ll figure something out.”

“No,” Josh smirks, suddenly pessimistic.

No one gives a shit about him.

“No one gives a shit about me,” he voices his thoughts.

He wants to cry, but, as a grown up man he just lets his tears burn his eyes before blinking repeatedly.

“Okay,” he sniffs, going to the bed and plopping down onto it.

The urge to fight back drains out, leaving just devastation. Josh immediately feels guilty for his short nervous breakdown. Tyler’s palm slides up and down Josh’s shoulder blades, but it only irritates him; Josh takes a couple of deep breaths to hold his rage back. There’s something in the atmosphere that makes him angry.

“It’s fine,” Jenna tells him.

Josh doesn’t want to stay here, or he just doesn’t want to stay.

“What are we gonna do now?” Josh looks up at her, Josh takes his fate from her hands.

“It’s okay to be scared,” Jenna coos. She even tousles Josh’s hair, making him huff.

“Yeah. I don’t deny.”

Josh is scared of his future, of his parents’ reaction.


“Why?”

“We’re just confessing our fears, it’s so sweet.”

But Jenna’s words take the sweetness away.

“Change,” she sighs. The uniforms are lying like sacks on the floor. “I’ll be waiting outside.”

And she doesn’t encroach on their privacy anymore.

Josh peels his clothes off, but it feels mostly like he sheds off his skin, his old life. He blankly presses his palm to his side, decorated with a beautiful shade of purple and surrounded with a grid
of smashed capillaries. Josh pulls his boxers up to hide it from Tyler, but the bruise is still like a spotlight above the elastic waistband. Dang it. For Josh, here are just two categories of pain: ‘a gunshot wound’ and ‘not a gunshot wound’ so he can definitely bear this one. He zips himself up into the uniform, he tugs at the leather belt that is too hard, these new boots are heavier than he expected. They’re massive enough to break a bone with a good kick.

“We look like we’re just rookie agents,” Josh concludes, eyeing Tyler on his left.

Tyler adjusts his collar then bending to tie the laces.

“We are.”

Josh doesn’t enjoy this dress-code.

“I still don’t understand what they’re expecting us to do.”

“I think we’re going to find out soon,” Tyler mutters.

Josh suspects that VESSEL informed Tyler about the kidnapping though he mentally slaps himself for these thoughts. Jenna’s standing in the hallway, leaning against the wall and perking up as she sees them wearing this regular VESSEL stuff.

“Do you want to send us to BUTCH and destroy it?” Tyler asks as soon as he walks out of the room.

“No. But I want you to be ready for it,” she says.

Josh grimaces as his boots screech.

“Wanna train us?”

“Something like that,” Jenna responds.

She then just goes forward, not even offering them to follow her, but it’s just a reflex. It gets into Josh’s head — VESSEL is trashed, their personal files are stolen; BUTCH is working on getting them like their laboratory rats, getting ready to steal Tyler’s blood and turn more soldiers to those ugly predators, and the time’s running out. It’s their new mission, probably, and they’re gonna die within the first day on the isle. Well, if they happen to travel to the isle.

“BUTCH gives us the time to finish our tests,” Jenna explains. “But here’s the thing — we’re not gonna do any tests except checking your vitals, and then… I don’t know. We can try and fake your death, or…”

“…or we’re taking the rules,” Tyler says.

“What?” Jenna asks. Politely. But Josh can see her desire to shut Tyler up already.

“They’re gonna get us — and they will get us, but like, you can give us weapons or something, I don’t know,” Tyler chews his lips. “I can play a brainwashed vegetable and then hack their archive. I m-mean, I don’t know if it’s gonna work, but I can try.”

That makes Jenna think.

“Give us our legends,” Josh says firmly. “Show us the maps if you have them, teach us some basic combat stuff and we’ll try. We will not be able to destroy BUTCH just by ourselves, but we’re not that useless, yeah?”
Josh thinks he will never know what exactly encouraged him to perform this fiery speech.

“You guys are crazy,” Jenna whispers.

And Josh has nothing left to say except —

“That’s why we’re here.”

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The worst part of Tyler’s offer is that Jenna doesn’t cross it out. The best part of it, though, is that she doesn’t send them to the battlefield instantly. As she said, she starts with just basic tests.

“Is your blood pressure always that low?” she asks Tyler as he sits on the chair in the room that looks a bit like a medical office.

“I don’t know,” Tyler shrugs.

“Is it dangerous?” Josh swallows hard; he’s heard that low blood pressure might lead to some adverse consequences.

“Depends,” Jenna frowns. “I just need to know for how long he’s been feeling like that.”

“Well,” Tyler inhales. “Since I got a new mark? I’m not sure,” he looks around the room. “I feel like I’m about to black out when I get up too fast.”

“And your head hurts far too much, your eyesight is going bad, and you’re nauseous all the time,” Jenna continues. “Congratulations. You’ve managed to give yourself a hypotension, but how could that happen?”

“I think it’s all butchers’ fault,” Tyler squirms in his seat. “It gets even worse when I get nosebleeds. I don’t know how that could happen, either. It can’t be a hypotension since my nose bleeds too often.”

“I think his blood pressure just jumps from too low to too high mark,” Josh interjects. “And it makes Tyler a bit… bitchy.”

“And nervous,” Tyler adds.

“And nervous.”

Jenna presses the heels of her palms to her eyes.

“Okay then. I need to observe you for a few days to comprehend how we can fix it,” she says confidently. “My luck you’re recovering pretty fast.”

It’s their common luck.

Josh knows he should’ve taken Tyler to the hospital weeks ago, but the fear of revealing the secret of Tyler’s blood has made him do a whole nothing and just wait until Tyler gets better. And Tyler was getting better, then spiraling down to a quiet depression. Josh can only guess how much both of them are fucked up. The dark part of Josh hopes they won’t be able to enter the butchers’ territory.
“He doesn’t eat regularly,” Josh points out. Tyler’s losing weight. “I can’t make him eat.”

Tyler looks at the blood pressure monitor.

“I can’t contain it.”

“You’ve gotten brainwashed,” Jenna says, taking the cuff off Tyler’s bicep. “I’m not surprised your system acts like this.”

“It rebels.”

Josh knows pretty well what it feels like when your body is under siege, when the unfamiliar processes take over; he’s not telekinetic anymore, but he’s not going to forget those feelings. Josh scratches his temple to get rid of any thoughts.

“Are we gonna spend months here?” Tyler asks.

“You need a medical survey,” Jenna responds.

This doesn’t sound right — God knows what else they can find.

“I’m not sick.”

“You’re not immortal,” Jenna points out. “You’re not a robot. It’s okay not to feel good from time to time.”

This ‘from time to time’ slowly turns to ‘all the time’.

Josh gulps down a lump of anxiety.

“Sometimes I think he’s back,” he manages. “Blurry. We all know that he’s injured Tyler, his mind and his body, and we can’t just ignore it, right?”

Blurry is just a ghost, a hologram that pops up on the layers of reality.

“He’s always here,” Tyler pats his forehead. “He dug a f-fucking hole there, and butchers have taken a part of me.”

He shakes as he speaks, sweat gathers above his eyebrows, he keeps tugging at the collar of his uniform. Talking to Tyler is like interviewing a patient of a mental institution.

“You need help,” Jenna states.

Josh wonders what this underground laboratory can give them. It’s all concrete and dust, it’s a very uncomfortable crypt covered with tons of dirt and stones; they’re hostages, they’re prisoners again, and it will never be erased from Josh’s nightmares featuring this place.

He shares Tyler’s nervousness, but Tyler says —

“I need help.”

***

Accepting their weakness doesn’t make them stronger.
Josh forgets how to breathe freely while he plods after Tyler on their way to another room; if VESSEL’s main building was made of glass and metal, its smaller copy is all cement and plastic. It looks cheap, something like an air-raid shelter that won’t protect them from the rays of death the aliens are about to use. It’s their second day here, the time flows in the wrong way — Josh is sure the clocks are lying and the time is actually frozen.

And butchers can kill his and Tyler’s families.

And Josh’s heart falls apart each time he thinks of it.

He’s not interested in expeditions across the bunker, he prefers to sit in their room and stare at the blank wall. Or, he prefers to stare at Tyler. Tyler doesn’t talk much since Jenna starts stuffing him up with those new meds, and Josh hears him choke in the bathroom two hours later.

“My stomach hurts,” Tyler says as he sits down onto the chair. “I can’t eat,” he turns away from the two yellow pills lying on the table. “Don’t test this shit on me.”

Josh fights the urge to turn the table upside down. The sight of a sick Tyler makes him nauseous.

Jenna flicks the pills across the tray.

“They were just supposed to calm you down.”

Tyler pulls back along with the chair.

“Well, they don’t work.”

There’s something about this place in general — Josh is not that sensitive, but he feels like he’s being trapped in an energy grid, hot waves spike through his muscles like knitting needles. Maybe, Tyler feels the same.

“You’ve got a fever,” Jenna says.

Tyler shakes his head.

“I don’t think so.”

“Something’s happened there,” Josh utters, cutting them off. “Is it a place where They dropped Tyler?”

Thinking only makes his head hurt more.

“No,” Tyler narrows his eyes. “I woke up by the roadside with the blood trickling down my neck, and there were, you know, sharp rocks and I had the sand in the wound—”

Josh’s stomach lurches.

“Okay, stop.”

He’s heard this story before, but he shudders whenever he hears it again.

“Teleportation sucks.”

“It does,” Jenna agrees. “I need to know that you’re not gonna die, at least. The equipment is kind of ancient, but we can still use it.”
She goes to the locker in the corner of the room and takes a plastic key-card before turning back to Josh.

“We still have some time, so let’s grasp onto it.”

This is the most optimistic thing Josh has heard over the course of the past few days.

***

As they go, they don’t meet any agents on their way — and it’s not VESSEL’s style; it’s just a dusty basement equipped with antennas and sensors. It doesn’t remind Josh of a space station, it doesn’t even look like somebody’s workplace; or maybe, people aren’t working here — they’re just hiding. Jenna inserts the key into the slot, and the door responds with a slight beeping as the red lights turn to green. It’s so dark in this office that Josh steps onto somebody’s foot, recognizing Tyler by his ‘ouch’.

“Sorry,” Josh whispers.

The lights get back to life so suddenly Josh throws his palm over his eyes to protect them from violently-white rays streaming from the round lamps on the ceiling.

“Welcome,” Jenna greets them before coughing into the cloud of dust curling in the air.

Josh sneezes, covering his mouth with his sleeve.

“Wonderful,” Tyler comments.

When Josh’s eyes stop hurting from the amount of the light, he looks around the office; it looks like an operation room, all the whites have turned to grays, but it doesn’t alleviate the brightness. Here are a few IV stands, a heart monitor covered in dust and cellophane, an oilcloth-draped bed beside the wall and a single crooked chair. The floors are soft, the linoleum sticks to Josh’s boots. Even with all the filth-stained walls, this room doesn’t look dirty; it doesn’t even look abandoned.

And, here’s a weird-looking equipment.

“We need this one,” Jenna points at the long white tube in the center of the office. “It’s a scanning capsule.”

It looks like a hybrid of a coffin and a CT scan connected to a black scoreboard on the wall; here are dozens of multi-colored buttons, tumblers, switchers and dead diodes. Some of them are cracked, looking like smashed bugs with crooked tendrils.

“I don’t want to get inside,” Tyler blurts out, swiping the layer of dust with his palm.

Jenna’s rummaging in the cupboards, throwing away the sticky notes, folders and schemes printed out on the yellowed paper.

“It’s the best way to check you out,” she replies, peering into one of the books she’s taken from the shelf.

“What if it’s gonna kill me?” Tyler looks into the book over Jenna’s shoulder. “We’re not immortal, remember?”

This capsule looks like it can just fry a person alive.
“Do you know how to operate it?” Josh asks.

“No,” Jenna hunches over the book, her hair touches the pages. “But I’m gonna learn. Wow, it can even perform a quick blood test by taking a sample.”

Tyler lets out a raucous laughter.

“It’s gonna puncture my vein using a rusty needle,” he rubs his wrist. “I’m not participating.”

“We can call Merrick and lock him inside,” Josh offers.

Jenna raises her eyebrows.

“He knows how to make this thing work, by the way.”

It’s like a kick in the balls.

“Cool. We’re not letting him control it while I’m inside,” Tyler pokes the side of the capsule. “Really. Let’s maybe clean it at least?”

“Yes,” Josh agrees, wrinkling up his nose. “I’m not eager to get killed by the lack of hygiene.”

It’s true; the water trunk is right here, and it’s a miracle that the water is clean. Jenna takes a cloth and wipes the dust off the white construction, trying not to touch the wires and cords. There’s some sanitizer, too; Tyler looks at the bottle before handing it over to Jenna.

“Nice. Thank you,” she gets back to reading the book that seems to be an instruction while Josh polishes a scoreboard that is just a dead TV set.

He doesn’t even want to know what it’s gonna show to them.

When the equipment is relatively clean, Jenna works on the switchers to resurrect the machine; it hums, then purrs, sending the waves of vibrations down the floor.

“Well,” Josh avoids looking at this mechanic coffin.

Jenna nods to herself, still reading.

“I think I know what to do,” she says. “We just need to decide who’s gonna be the first.”

The capsule still doesn’t look friendly — here’s the round hole in the end of it, something resembling the stretcher with a brown mattress. Josh bends to look inside, here are the yellow lights creating a warm aureole in the capsule’s belly.

“I’m going,” Josh catches Tyler’s hand when he’s about to touch the light. “Start with me.”

Tyler rolls up his sleeve — there’s a golden illumination on his skin.

“Wow,” he’s amazed, rubbing it off, but the gleaming streamlets run up his forearm.

“See?” Josh points out, impatient. “We don’t know why it happens. It’s not happening to me, so I’m going first,” he’s suddenly angry as Tyler blocks his way. “If they lock you here, you’re gonna live inside of this monster,” Josh spits. The skin behind his ear feels hot even though the light hasn’t touched it yet.

Jenna waits wordlessly, rocking the tumblers and pressing the buttons until the black scoreboard
gets less black, greeting them with the VESSEL logo.

“I’m ready,” Josh says.

“It’s like… isn’t it dangerous?” Tyler wonders. “I don’t want you t-to get inside, but just promise me you’re gonna turn it off if something goes wrong,” he tells to Jenna.

“I’ll try,” Jenna replies.

Jenna doesn’t say any are-you-sure’s or what-if’s, standing beside the scoreboard and checking the instruction again.

“Is it a long procedure?” Josh asks.

“I don’t think so. You better take off the belt,” Jenna adds. “The capsule doesn’t set well with any metals.”

Josh does as he told, also taking his ring off his finger, taking out his silver nose ring and his gauges, trying not to be bothered about how ugly the holes in his earlobes look without them. Safety comes first.

He barely manages to jump away when the stretcher rolls out of the capsule’s entrance.

“Lie down,” Jenna commands.

“Good luck,” Tyler says at the same time.

Josh is grateful he doesn’t have to strip down to his underwear now. He closes his eyes and lies down, holding his hands by his thighs as the stretcher rolls back into the machine.

“Don’t open your eyes!” Jenna shouts, voice muffled by thick plastic walls.

Josh isn’t going to open his eyes anyway — the lights are so blindingly-bright they might burn his retina; he lies there motionless, focused on his own breathing.

“Is he allowed to speak?” he hears Tyler ask.

“Yes,” Jenna says.

“Good,” here’s a knocking against the top of the machine. “Josh, how are you doing?”

Josh isn’t sure if he has the words to comfort a panicking Tyler because he’s panicking as well.

“It’s gonna squeeze me,” he croaks out.

The walls are wrapped around him tightly, it’s too hot inside, too bright.

“It’s gonna scan you,” Jenna warns.

There’s a different dimension outside, and Josh feels like a lonely astronaut who’s getting lost in an endless space. He’s dreaming of it, but his eyelids are as thin as cigarette paper, and the light causes the pain in the back of his head.

In addition to everything, he gets sleepy.

Tyler knocks again.
“Josh?”

“Yeah,” Josh’s dry tongue sticks to his palate.

Yellow lights change to green, swishing up and down his frame and making him quiver; he wishes he had sunglasses to block the flashes out. It’s getting hotter, Josh’s uniform clings to his sweaty body as he trembles, he shivers when the green rays pierce his muscles over and over again.

“It’s making a virtual model,” Jenna sounds bewildered.

His skin prickles from the top of his head to his toes, and Tyler punches the capsule to know if Josh is okay. Josh doesn’t know.

“I’m fine,” Josh gasps out. “Fine.”

His bones are still buzzing when Jenna says the procedure is complete.

“You’re doing just great,” she encourages him. “It needs to take a blood sample and we’re done.”

Josh is all sweaty and his eyeballs are sore; he hears a slight rumbling on his left.

“It’s the needle,” Jenna responds to his thoughts. “Don’t be scared.”

The needle bites at the bare skin on his forearm, the metal is cold against his vein, and Josh blinks. His eyes are open for a millisecond, but it’s enough to spot a long tube connected to his arm. His blood is flowing away, feeding the beast. Josh feels queasy.

“Josh?” Tyler’s voice bothers his fuzzy mind. “Josh, talk to me.”

His eyeballs hurt, he’s so unprotected in this capsule he wants to howl; when Josh is about to say he’s not doing fine on his own, the system beeps and probably stops, remain vibrations die in Josh’s flesh.

“Josh?”

One knock, two, three, Josh is aware of them, but he can’t muster his energy to answer. The stretcher is moving, Josh’s feet are cold, and then there’s a hand patting his knee; when Josh is out of the capsule, he still keeps his eyes closed tightly. Josh breathes, he’s happy to inhale this dust-soaked air, he’s happy to hear Tyler and Jenna’s voices clearly.

“You’re pale,” Tyler states.

Josh opens his eyes.

“Is everything alright?” Jenna is right beside him, holding him by his shoulders as he sits up and swings his legs over the side of the bed.

“Yes. No. I don’t know,” Josh shakes his head, giving up to dizziness. “Yes. I think I’m fine.”

“Okay,” Jenna gives him his belt and his piercings back. “The system’s gonna print out the results of the examinations automatically. At least, that’s what the instruction says.”

Josh feels much better by the time he gets up from the stretcher; it means he’s the first to check the machine’s effectiveness, but it also means it’s Tyler’s turn to take a vacant spot.

“Did it hurt?” Tyler looks at him as they change their positions.
“Not really,” Josh shrugs.

Being outside the experiment makes Josh more nervous. He talks to Tyler when the capsule sucks him in, he stays close to him while Jenna is preoccupied with operating the machine.

Josh looks at the scoreboard when the scanning starts.

“It stings,” Tyler comments.

“Yeah, I know,” Josh agrees, unable to tear his eyes away from a 3D model forming on the screen. It has Tyler’s proportions, his long legs and skinny frame, but it’s mostly just a green contour of a body, hairless and eyeless.

It looks creepy when it’s finished.

“Now, your blood,” Jenna says, turning the handle on the side of the machine.

“Okay,” Tyler responds.

The capsule shakes and hums, here’s the sound of buzzing and a scale on the screen; it apparently shows how much of Tyler’s blood the machine is going to take. When it’s just 1/3 of the recommended amount, it stops.

“Tyler?” Josh calls for him.

The machine doesn’t show any signs of life.

“Yes?” Tyler says weakly.

“What’s going on?” Jenna asks, tapping at one of the buttons.

“I don’t know, my eyes are closed,” Tyler quips. “The n-needle is stuck.”

It makes Josh jump, because there are small sparkles all over the scoreboard, it smells like burning plastic.

“It’s a short circuit,” Josh frantically searches for a button or for a handle to turn the system off.

VESSEL equipment hates Tyler’s guts.

“Open it!” Tyler screams. “Jenna!”

Something pops in between the layers, and Josh hopes it’s not Tyler’s head. Josh doesn’t know how to open the capsule that is a death itself, but Jenna storms into the corner of the room, tugging at the red switcher on the wall.

Everything goes black.

The scoreboard isn’t flashing anymore; the stretcher gets rolled out easily.

Josh hears Tyler’s harsh breathing as he and Jenna take him out of the capsule; Jenna fixes the power outage she’s just caused, and Josh can see how terrified Tyler is. Some of the wires connected to the tube are still sparkling; Tyler scowls as he takes the needle out of his arm. Josh can only sit down next to him and hug him. Tyler is unique, but he doesn’t have to do anything to prove that. He just exists. And, for some reason Josh is happy that they exist in the same timeline.
Josh can’t let him go, can’t let him be gone.

“What the f-fuck was that?” Tyler inquires. Josh wants to kick’s the capsule’s dead ass.

“The system didn’t recognize your blood,” Jenna explains. “It’s not familiar with your blood composition.”

Tyler buries his face in his palms.


Josh tries to banish any thoughts that are about to flood his head.

***

They cover it up.

In fact, they cover up everything — Jenna keeps saying same things about sending the results of the examination to BUTCH, because T-21 has relapsed.

“It wasn’t a relapse,” Tyler protests.

“I know,” Jenna nods. “But they don’t have to know.”

They need time, they fight for time, and Jenna buries herself into a pile of papers the machine has spewed out.

“Did you find anything?” Josh asks. He can’t take it anymore.

And Jenna says —

“Tyler’s blood is special.”

It heals, it destructs. Add it into a victim’s bloodstream and you’ll get an obnoxious monster. It’d be obvious if it wasn’t.

“It’s a cancer we can’t cure,” Jenna drawls as she reads long lines of numbers on the paper. “It’s impossible.”

The butchers hacked Tyler’s mind, but they couldn’t hack the code of his blood — it takes revenge. It kills.

“I can try to repair the capsule,” Tyler offers. His hair still smell like fume.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Josh says. It was Tyler’s fault.

Tyler could be a good engineer.

“You can try,” Jenna smiles at him. Fake, like Tyler’s entire life. “Later.”

Josh feels sick.

***
When Josh wakes up, Tyler isn’t there.

He still can’t shake the sleep out of his head when he gets up and totters to the door which is open. The corridor is dark, a nightmarish creation; Josh sneaks into it, blinking at the dim ceiling lights blinking back at him.

“Oh well.”

Tyler’s silhouette is way too recognizable.

“Tyler?”

Silence.

“Tyler?”

They’ve been there before, when Tyler was leaving their apartment in the middle of the night, or, or hurting himself in the shower —

Tyler is gleaming, all the light is gathered in the ornaments wrapped around his skin. Josh doesn’t want anyone else to spot him; Josh runs, overcoming the distance, Josh’s fingers dig into Tyler’s shoulder as he yanks him backwards. The only thing he manages to understand is that Tyler’s eyes are closed, his eyelashes drop the shadows over the bruises under his eyes.

Josh still doesn’t want anyone to see.

“Tyler,” he repeats, he calls; he’d like to see a thing Tyler is seeing at the moment.

As a sleepwalker, Tyler says he rarely remembers his episodes. But Josh’s memory is a pantry full of trash.

Josh wants to wake him up, to make him move but he doesn’t want to scare him. A dense fabric of Tyler’s uniform ruins the gleaming, but golden sparkles fight their way out through the cobweb of threads.

“Tyler,” his tongue barely moves. “Wake up.”

Josh’s hand is still placed on Tyler’s shoulder when he falls, he crushes down like a tower lacking its carcass; Josh is dazed but he catches him, his hands under Tyler’s armpits as he stumbles backwards to keep their balance. Josh bends, Josh crouches down, holding Tyler’s weight in his arms and feeling a damp coldness of the floor.

“Tyler?” Josh whisper-shouts.

From his position, he can see Tyler’s face, his pale lips with his viscous saliva dried on them.

“M?” Tyler is incoherent, he goes limp in Josh’s embrace.

“You’ve been sleepwalking,” Josh informs him.

“I kn-know,” Tyler breathes out. “M’cold.”

Tyler’s skin is abnormally warm; the front zipper is pulled down, revealing the lightning on his chest. Josh fumbles to lift him up, partly dragging Tyler down the floor; Tyler can stand again, leaning on Josh as he leads him back into their room.
Josh is glad there were no alarms this time.

Tyler huffs into his ear, Josh drowns in memories about Tyler’s previous black-outs. When they enter the room, Tyler sleepwalks again — he’s weaker this time, he doesn’t try to get back out, just falling face first onto the pillow.

Josh doesn’t bother him with questions, he’s going to do it in the morning —

And Tyler is mumbling, a mess of words, swallowed by the pillowcase.

“They’re calling for me.”
He’s sorry, he’s sore.

“…and then he fell on me,” Josh continues. He can’t keep covering up Tyler’s night activity.

Tyler’s sitting on his bed, hands placed on his lap as he grimaces at Josh’s every word. Jenna grimaces too, too similarly, rubbing her hands in a nervous gesture.

“What did you hear?”

“I don’t know.”

Tyler’s incoherent, with the veil of the lack of sleep shrouding his eyes.

Josh still can’t make him talk.

“Can you try to remember?”

Tyler’s not allowed to remember, Josh is sure —

“Just buzzing,” Tyler says. “It woke me up and I felt like I had to check it out.”

Josh has heard the buzzing a couple of times — when his first Contact happened, and later, when he was hanging out with Tyler in the forest. When it happened for the third time, they had almost died — Josh lost his powers, got pneumonia and something like a mental trauma.

“Any UFO sightings?” Josh asks.

“All clear,” Jenna reports.

Josh places his hand on top of Tyler’s.

“He was gleaming. It never happens with no reason.”

Jenna’s fingers freeze an inch away from Tyler’s palm.

“Yeah,” she hesitates. “I have no idea how you guys are gonna survive on the isle.”

Josh’s throat goes dry.

“I need to call my Mom.”

Tyler groans.

“What are you gonna say? Hello?” he turns away, away from the conversation. “I hate it.”
“I don’t know,” Josh says honestly. “I can just say that we need to be alone. Like, to travel.”

It sounds terrible.

“Fine. But don’t you dare use my condition or my mental health like an excuse,” Tyler huffs, iritated. “I know you pretty well; talking to your parents, you always turn it the way everyone thinks I’m the only one who has troubles. I hate your ‘we’re doing this because Tyler needs help’,” he spits. “I’m not the only one who’s stuck in this shit.”

Tyler’s words are like darts flying straight to Josh’s heart.

“Your sister asked me if I’m dying of cancer,” Tyler informs him. “That lovely day when we met your parents.”

The fight is about to consume them, but Josh still tries to hold onto the metaphoric surface.

“They liked you.”

“I liked them too,” Tyler fends off. “I just wanna like them away from me. The end.”

Tyler tucks his hands under his armpits, staring blankly at Jenna in front of him. She doesn’t participate. And Josh is sure that telling the truth to his parents would threaten him to end his life in a small cell with soft walls and wearing a straitjacket.

***

Josh lives two more days without a phone.

Two more days with Tyler whose apathy has reached a critical level. Josh tries to talk to him, he really does, but something in his mind has changed again; he’s so into basic motions, he’s so into this bed-bathroom-bed circle Josh can’t handle it anymore. He wants to punch a wall, to call Tyler egoistic, to sort the things out.

“Ty,” Josh pokes his side with his finger. Tyler’s eyes are closed. He can lie like this for hours, as if he’s taken strong antidepressants.

“What?”

He doesn’t usually respond.

Two days ago, he ignored a kiss placed on his cheek; his stubble doesn’t look healthy and neat. Josh doesn’t look any better than him — he’s sure the mirror is about to crack in fright, seeing their reflections.

“How are you doing?”

“Well,” Tyler rubs his eyes. “Insomnia is a bitch.”

That’s how Josh feels at the moment, getting up from Tyler’s bed and going to his own. They’re still waiting for the results of their examination, for consequences of breaking a scanning capsule. Tyler isn’t being any helpful, and Josh loathes it.

He’s almost sleeping when Jenna opens the door with a gentle knock.
“Josh?” she calls.

Josh props himself up with his elbow.

“Can we talk?” Jenna hides behind the door, urging Josh to get up and follow her.

He leans against the wall, shivering at the contact with cold concrete.

“We solved some problems,” she starts. She plays with her hair, one blue strand added. Josh doesn’t remember seeing it earlier. “Your car, Mark drove it back to your apartment complex.”

Josh breathes out a sigh of relief.

“And my phone —”

“No, no,” Jenna shakes her head. “It wouldn’t catch a signal here. But I have this one,” she hands it over to Josh. It’s an old bulky model with buttons and a small cracked display. “The number’s hidden from all the databases. You can call your family, but try to be original and don’t tell them the reason why you’re disappearing. They’re gonna find it out anyway.”

Grateful, Josh takes the phone and dials the number immediately, his memory just screams digits at him.

“Hello?” he hears a familiar voice.

“Hey Mom,” Josh licks his lips.

“Josh? Finally! It’s been a while since we last talked, and even Jack didn’t know what happened, and —” she’s just babbling into his ear.

“It’s okay,” Josh tries to sound happy. “Life’s been tough recently, well, it’s about me mostly,” he pauses.

And his mother starts panicking.

“Are you and Tyler breaking up?”

“No,” Josh almost shouts. “We’re not breaking up. It’s just a big deal, and we want to spend more time together, to be a family.”

“Are you adopting?”

“Nope,” Josh cuts her off. “Mom, don’t even think about it. We’re not ready.”

She’s still dissatisfied.

“How’s your relationship?”

“Healthy.”

Josh notes that Jenna has already left him alone.

“We just need some time, we have a plan,” Josh says. “I can’t dwell on details, but we’re leaving the states. Together.”

He can hear tears through the dynamic.
“I hope you know what you’re doing,” his mother gulps down a sob. “Call me whenever you can.”

Josh’s knees shake.

“Sure. Just don’t worry, Mom, don’t worry.”

A few awkward lines and he hangs up first.

Well, it’s easier than he thought.

His Mom doesn’t believe him.

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“We need to hire you,” Jenna points on the pile of papers, stapled together. “Literally, we need to have your agreement with getting transferred to the isle. To BUTCH laboratory,” she exhales loudly. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

There are two pens — black and golden — they’re probably more expensive than Josh’s entire life. He takes a black one, twitching it between his fingers then dropping it on the floor. Josh blushes, bending to pick it up.

Tyler rubs the bridge of his nose.

“So?”

“Butch sent it to us,” Jenna says. “They have the authority to inspect and use you once VESSEL is done with its own examinations. It’s official now.”

Josh winces.

“It’s just a formality.”

“Yes.”

They were told it so many times — they’re gonna get caught and then — and then they’re gonna have to deal with the troubles their blood has caused. The monsters are most likely still there, still waiting for the fresh meat, and no one knows how many of them butchers have created already.

“Read it,” Jenna taps her finger against the table. “It’s a contract made by both VESSEL and BUTCH, because we need you to know what you’re signing for.”

“Gonna hire us as janitors?” Josh poorly attempts to joke. This building is way too dirty.

“It’d be cool,” Jenna tries to smile but her mouth is just a hard wire. “It’ll be a part one of The Deal, and that’s when all the tricking begins. We have plans, sure we do — we’ll show you the structure of BUTCH, their offices and servers and we have also managed to find three passwords for their databases.”

Tyler perks up.

“Can I see?” he rubs his nose again, then loosening the collar of the uniform. The collar’s not that tight.
Josh is bothered by Tyler’s fussiness; his mental state is like the swings.

Jenna turns the page.

“I’ll give it to you when you sign the contract.”

The pen burns Josh’s fingertips.

“We need to read it.”

A stupid request since it doesn’t change anything. But Jenna doesn’t get mad at it, just letting the papers slide across the table. Josh grabs them, eyes peered into the word Agreement typed out in a bold font.

Tyler looks over Josh’s shoulder, reading along with him.

It’s mostly about the dates and places, it doesn’t say what BUTCH is going to do with the objects. In fact, this agreement doesn’t say anything — VESSEL is obligated to get the tests done by the end of the month then transferring them to the isle along with this Agreement and other agents as guards. Butchers meet them and start their own examination.

The Agreement is written so monotonously it makes Josh yawn.

“And you’re gonna let him use their ‘specific equipment’?” Tyler quotes the line. “Take samples of all the kinds of biological material and bodily fluids. Thanks.”

Josh glances at that paragraph.

“ButCH is allowed to use sedatives if The Objects offer resistance, use stun guns and Tazers,” he scratches the back of his head. Stun gun bites sting like a killer, but he’s never gotten attacked with an actual Tazer.

“We’ll teach you how to fight,” Jenna doesn’t sound persuasive.

Tyler throws his thumb up.

“We wanted to let you stay at VESSEL for a while, but BUTCH made its own rules,” Jenna explains. “So… They can do whatever they want, you’re right. And my duty is to prepare you. Don’t even try to act aggressively, it’ll be a fatal mistake,” she lands her palm on the paper. “Sign it.”

“But what’s the point in training us if —” Tyler sounds confused.

Jenna’s fist slams against the table.

“Sign it!”

Tyler shudders and aims his pen for the line.

“Sorry,” Jenna whispers.

She shakes, too, her nails leave marks on her skin as she nips at her wrist. Josh stares at the empty spots where their signatures are supposed to be. They have at least three weeks to finish the investigation they haven’t even started yet, but it only kindles up Josh’s anxiety.

“I hope we’ll destroy BUTCH,” Tyler grumbles.
A drop of blood hits the paper before he starts writing; Tyler throws his head back before Josh comprehends what’s actually happening. Tyler throws the pen away, pinching his nostrils.

“Shit.”

Josh leans in to check if Tyler’s nosebleed is as bad as usual.

“Let me see.”

Tyler reluctantly unclenches his fingers, letting a crimson rill slide down to his lip and roll down his chin before throwing his head back again not to stain his uniform.

Jenna looks at them, then at the dark specks on the contract and chews her bottom lip.

“Do you need an icepack?”

“N-no,” Tyler says nasally. “It’s gonna stop soon.”

It doesn’t matter for Josh; it makes Tyler suffer so he closes his eyes, holding his fingers pressed to the tip of his nose. Josh can’t tell if it’s Tyler’s nervousness that has made his nose bleed or it’s a prediction of the adverse events. Tyler’s condition yells DON’T DO IT but Josh does it — he scribbles his last name on the paper, his signature looks ugly. He sees Tyler nod and do the same, black ink is smeared against a drying red spot. Their initials are half-covered in blood, soaked deep into the Agreement.

It’s either ruined or highly verified.

***

Their next stop is reading a bunch of secret files from BUTCH. Well, they’re not so secret — the results of their experiments, a few pictures attached. These are the photos of badly mutated people, of their crooked limbs and bugged out eyeballs; they look like radiation victims.

“That’s where they start,” Jenna says. “Of course, they don’t want you to know about it.”

Josh feels queasy as the images flash in front of his eyes.

“Have they ever succeeded in something like that?”

“They didn’t have enough time and supplies,” Tyler takes the folder, pages rustle. “Until they got me.”

Getting Tyler didn’t help, Josh wants to say — they took his blood and left him in the woods.

“Butchers either injured or kidnapped sick people to test you,” Josh utters.

The tape has imprinted itself into his brain, he will never forget the way Tyler was stumbling in between the cots, absorbing people’s pain non-stop. Butchers have definitely used something to make Tyler’s healing powers endless; he’s been so frazzled afterwards. It’s not that far until they get kidnapped again. They’re going to know a thing or two about their enemy’s activity — and there’s nothing good about it. Josh’s nape hair stands on end when he thinks back of the demands butchers have made. It’s like they’re just giving up, all mindless and spineless.

“Here’s the plan of BUTCH buildings, it’s a complex connected with hallways and with ventilation
systems,” Jenna unfolds the map. “It’s important, you will never know when you’ll be in need of hiding. Here,” her finger draws an invisible line. “Here’s the lab, here’s their personal data center, and it’d be so freaking amazing if you could get there and re-program the main computer. Or put the server down,” Jenna’s suddenly encouraged, looking at Tyler in awe.

Tyler still holds a napkin against his nose.

“Well. Do you want me to sabotage their work and protect the files they’ve stolen from VESSEL?” he asks, straightforward. “Am I right?”

At least it’s something resembling a new mission.

“Yes.”

“Don’t forget about monsters,” Josh remarks.

Josh doesn’t crave for getting eaten by angry, blood-thirsty mutants that look so alien-like.

“And I’m sure it’s just a maze with hundreds of hallways and turns, really.”

“I bet it looks differently in person,” Josh adds.

He takes the map, trying to connect the dots with the words written next to them — main office, data center, lab 2, lab 2, storage room, cells 0-42 and more.

“I’ve been there just once,” Jenna says cagily. “There were the times when BUTCH wanted to work with us, they shared some information with us. But now, everything’s changed. If you go into these hallways, you’ll get into traps, you can’t avoid it. Maybe, they will even pretend they’re letting you escape; you’ll be just Objects, don’t forget about it — they know everything about you.”

And all they know about BUTCH is nothing, except their violent experiments. Except the way they used Tyler’s blood, turning it to a kind of a biological weapon. Josh isn’t seeking for getting comforted, he really needs to know.

“Do we have a chance?”

“Yes, you do,” Jenna replies. “You can be helpful for BUTCH and therefore they’ll let you stay alive. Maybe,” she points at the scheme where the cells are drawn. “I’m sure they’re gonna lock you here and here, be ready to get separated.”

Her intonation is automatic as if she’s practiced to perform this speech in front of the mirror.

The news about getting separated hit Josh really hard.

“I need you to learn how to work in a team and on your own; you can choose your preferences,” Jenna takes a pencil. “Josh breaks the real locks, Tyler breaks the virtual ones, but it doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be capable of performing your partner’s duty.”
“Do they use microchips?” Josh asks. “Methods of deactivation?”

“Depends,” Jenna glances at them, holding a crumpled map on her lap. “They need to use your powers, so I don’t think they would block Tyler. And you don’t have any powers to block.”

This somehow sounds offensive.

“I have an antidote in my blood,” Josh says proudly.

“. . . so don’t let them take all of it,” Jenna continues in the same tone. “You won’t be able to handle such a big blood loss. This is the case when you’re allowed to fight back,” she tilts her head. “But I don’t know how.”

“It’s not a Biologically Unique Technologies of Controlling Humans,” Tyler lets out a shaky laughter. “It’s more like Blatantly Unethical Tactics of Catastrophic Harm*. I mean, they’re bitches. That’s all.”

It’s one of the mind games Josh can definitely enjoy.

“And then VESSEL is more like STRESS-EL,” he chuckles, ignoring Jenna’s huffing.

“How would you explain it?” she asks skeptically. “VESSEL.”

Tyler thinks, rubbing his chin.

“Something like… Vulnerable Egotistical Selfish Screwed-up Exploiting Lunatics?* I like this one,” he smiles with the corner of his mouth.

“That’s pretty… accurate,” Jenna admits.

Jokes have relieved the tension but not completely. Every move’s strained up, muscles ache from both physical and mental exhaustion, Josh’s brain buzzes too. Maybe the thought that they’re gonna spend this night here in their beds warms Josh’s heart up.

***

Tyler doesn’t get nosebleeds for the next three days and Jenna decides that they can actually start training along with their personal coach.

“What’s the catch?” Tyler asks.

At the same time, Jenna asks —

“Do you know who our best fighter is?”

Things can’t get more obvious.

“I’m ready for this shit,” Josh cracks his knuckles. “Is it Merrick?”

Jenna’s eloquent glance is the only response.

“Amazing,” Tyler moans chokingly. “Wanna kill me before I even make it to the isle? Nice move, Jenna.”
Even though Tyler still has his self-healing powers, Josh is terrified by the damage Merrick can cause. He'll never forget those bruises.

Jenna holds her hands in front of her like a shield.

“Don’t even try to tell me it’s stupid. I already know. I swear he’s gonna be… gentle.”

“So, he’s going to kill me gently?” Tyler smirks. “Kill me gently. Sounds like a title of the love story about Stockholm Syndrome.”

“You don’t know what’s gonna happen,” Jenna starts, but when Tyler gets angry he turns to an uncontrollable tornado.

“What’s gonna happen? Really? Merrick is going to sprinkle me with his testosterone and leave me die on the sandlot before I’ll get a chance to recover.”

Josh hates it already but he also tries to think rationally.

“We’re about to meet people who’s much worse than Merrick.”

“Thank you so much, Josh,” Tyler’s voice bleeds with venom. “That’s why I love you, you know. For your support. Thanks.”

The way Tyler says the word support makes Josh want to crawl underneath the blanket and sit there until the storm passes.

“Okay,” Tyler seems to slide back into neutral mood. “Okay. We’ll let Merrick train us, we’ll let Mark teach us how to shoot, and what else? Halsey will show us how to mask, I don’t know, I don’t know!” Tyler shouts again, a dozen emotions in a millisecond.

Josh feels bad for him, stress never works miracles on one’s damaged mind, and when it comes to Tyler it might lead to unpredictable aftermath. And they need to learn it, to be a part of it, to be inside of it.

“I can train you, too,” Jenna says matter-of-factly.

She knows perfectly where to press to make Tyler cave.

“No,” he says.

Nothing more.

Jenna’s sincere smile makes Josh shiver.

***

Josh is not that optimistic about letting Merrick kick his ass, so when they stand in front of each other, he just stares at the ground like a dumb senior on his first date. He’s been there, he knows. He’s completely disinterested, just like that time. All three of them enter the room that partly looks like a boxing ring and a gym. Josh wonders if Merrick is allowed to fight already or he’s gotten instructed.

“I don’t have that telekinetic power anymore,” he clarifies. Just in case.
“Okay. I know about the capsule,” Merrick says. “And about the short circuit.”

“Gonna use it as a catalyst for punching me?” Tyler backchats.

“Yes, if you’re not gonna shut up.”

“Stop it,” Josh stands right between them. “Let’s forget about it for the rest of the day, okay? We’re… we’re just freaking out, come on,” he’s not good with words, he just wants to prevent them from killing each other.

Merrick nods shortly.

“I accept it.”

Josh turns to Tyler who’s about to start fuming like that scanning capsule.

“Tyler?”

“Okay,” he shoves his hands into his pockets. “Let’s start.”

Merrick glances at the boxing ring.

“What’s your style of fighting?” he asks Tyler.

Tyler scratches his nose.

“My style of fighting is getting knocked out within the first two minutes of the battle,” he says bluntly.

Merrick’s face falls.

“Specific,” he states sarcastically. “Dun?”

Josh has expected it, but this question still catches him off guard.

“Five minutes maybe?”

He’s never had enough time to check it.

“I think it’d be easier to work with you,” Merrick gives him an appraising look. “You’re more muscular. Strong shoulder girdle, a massive chest, you’re tougher than… him,” Merrick waves at Tyler. “I don’t say he’s weak, I just say his tactic would be more like avoiding any physical confrontation.”

“I knocked out a guy once,” Tyler pipes up. “And it was a huge asshole.”

“Just once.”

Merrick doesn’t bring up the other times. Yet. When he does, though, Josh can’t help it.

“Why can’t you just admit that you’re the most useless creature on Earth?” Merrick asks. “You’ve been sent as a killer, you’ve brought a shit ton of mayhem, you’re a terrible fighter —”

And Josh can’t help it when Tyler’s fist slams Merrick’s mouth shut. It’s just an offensive provoking, a dirtiest way to fight, but the sight of blood spilling out of Merrick’s split lip somehow satisfies him.
“Little bitch,” Merrick sputters.

Josh is here to block his punch, to twist his arm and push him away, but Merrick is just a battering ram flying back at Josh, knocking him off his feet so hard his back hits the canvas-covered floor of the boxing ring.

“Fuck,” Tyler hisses, kicking Merrick’s ribs until he rolls off of Josh, managing to land his fist on Josh’s nose a couple of times.

Josh knows this sound of the cartilage getting cracked, blood flows down his throat as the dinging in his ears grows louder. Now Merrick is the one who’s on the floor; Tyler is about to pounce on him, but Josh gathers his strength to lash out and jump up on him, sitting on Merrick’s stomach and letting all of his anger out. He doesn’t care about the wheezing sounds Merrick is making, he doesn’t care about Tyler trying to drag him away or about the blood that wets the front of his uniform and Merrick’s face below.

He. Must. Win. The fight.

Merrick laughs as Josh’s balled up fist jabs his chin, his knuckles are on fire, and Merrick laughs again — it’s so degrading Josh wants to pull out his blood-stained teeth, one by one. His left eye is swollen, his shoulders are pinned down to the ground and Josh doesn’t care about the rules they never set up.

“Josh!”

There are hands on the back of Josh’s uniform, the collar almost slashes his Adam’s apple, cutting off the air. Josh gasps and chokes and Merrick’s laughter melts into a giggle until Josh right-hooks him once again.

“Josh, he’s not worth it.”

Tyler is the one who didn’t get hurt.

Josh gets distracted by his voice, promptly getting thrown off by Merrick; his head hits the floor, his brain hits the tight walls of his brainpan, bloating inside.

He doesn’t close his eyes while Tyler kicks Merrick’s torso.

Merrick flips him off instead of getting up and killing him.

Josh leans on Tyler’s shoulder as he drags him away from the defeated Merrick; Tyler crouches in front of him while Josh slouches down next to a corner padding, as red as his blood.

“He broke my nose,” Josh says.

An ugly bump obstructs his vision but he can still see Merrick standing on all fours a few feet away and spitting blood on the floor. Josh is about to black out, the pounding in his skull gets worse; Tyler’s fingers are hot as the pain goes away, Tyler winces and holds his own nose with his free hand as he fixes Josh. The ripple in Josh’s brain goes away, too.

Tyler swallows hard.

Josh suddenly wants to apologize for screwing everything up.

Josh opens his mouth, still full of blood that glues his words into a jumbled mess.
“M’ sor-ry.”

He’s sorry, he’s sore.

And Merrick finally gets up, limping to the exit door; Tyler follows him with his gaze, blankly pushing Josh’s hair back, away from his busted forehead. Josh watches him, too. Merrick stops when he’s at the door, leaning on the doorframe and lacking of any frenzy.

His smile is mostly a tattered skin, but his speech is still recognizable.

“Hey, Joseph! Dun!” he hollers, making Josh’s mashed innards shrink. “Thanks for a good fight.”

Chapter End Notes

* it came from this comment thread
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Tyler is not the only one who holds a monster inside.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They don’t have a washer to put their uniforms inside; Josh sits on a plastic box while Tyler holds his clothes under the stream of water, rubbing the fabric furiously. Josh’s face is pulsing, all the senses come back like a tricky punishment; Tyler is restless, scolding him, shaking the uniform and sprinkling Josh with cold splatters.

“He could’ve killed you. What have you been thinking about?”

It’s like they’ve switched their roles.

“You started a fight,” Josh says. Josh doesn’t try to blame him.

Tyler drops the soap into the sink.

“I didn’t want you to stand up for me.”

Pink water doesn’t look pretty.

“I get angry sometimes,” Josh admits. “And the words he was saying —”

He gets it, Merrick was just testing them, it was an abusive maneuver and both of them have actually lost the fight. That’s why Josh looks like a mad raccoon and Merrick’s face should actually be a blossoming garden — the winner never gets this degraded.

Tyler slaps the faucet; he peers into the foam, breathing heavily.

“I’m not weak.”

Josh feels insecure debating such important stuff sitting there in just his socks and boxers. And Tyler sees all of his bruises. Tyler scrubs the front of the uniform with a washcloth, iridescent bubbles flow into a puddle on the floor.

Josh sighs, pain strikes through his ribs.

“I’m done with this shit,” he says as he closes his eyes.

He’ll never forget Jenna’s facial expression when she met them after their ‘training’; they didn’t even have to explain anything.

“I’m gonna talk to Merrick,” she spat.

And now, Josh doesn’t know if they’re gonna keep going this way, he’d like to stop battling for a day, for an hour, at least. Tyler turns off the water and twists the uniform, letting crystal-clear
droplets leak out.

“Not stained,” he states, satisfied.

“Good.”

It’s weird to perceive Tyler as a caregiver. Usually, Josh is the one to wash the pillowcases and Tyler’s blood-stained shirts, he’s the one to take a mental pain away. But now, Josh just aches. It’s the only thing he’s preoccupied with. Again, Tyler’s powers help a little — at least, Josh doesn’t have to wait until his broken nose heals by itself. Merrick should be envious. And, here’s one thought Josh hates himself for — subconsciously, he knew Tyler would be able to fix him, he wanted to fight; he knew Tyler wouldn’t do the same for Merrick.

He wonders if this is a type of a psychological pressure.

“You scared me,” Tyler continues while Josh pokes the scratches on his knees. “It wasn’t you. I know you’d n-never hurt me, but now I know what you look like when you’re hurting an enemy. Merrick deserves every single punch you’ve landed on him, but I’m not sure if I deserve to see you this mad. You scared me,” he finishes, rounding his lament.

There’s something Josh can’t deal with.

“I lost control over myself.”

Tyler said that Merrick could’ve killed him, but Josh knows that this was meant to be opposite — he could’ve killed Merrick.

Tyler is not the only one who holds a monster inside.

***

Next day, Mark leads them to the shooting range, as underground as everything else in this version of VESSEL. Mark hands them their ammunition — ear and eye protection and two handguns, slick with oil and probably ready to kill these cardboard targets. Josh is the first to go to the line, squinting at the human-shaped template; he thinks of his past — his father took him to the shooting range once, as a present for his eighteenth Birthday he never asked for. Josh was a terrible shooter back then. But his father said he was proud of him anyway.

“You can imagine that it’s me,” Mark chuckles, patting Josh’s back.

Josh’s heart is thudding in his ears; his hair is damp and matted with sweat. He stands near the yellow line and points the gun on a target, his finger feels heavy on the trigger. He doesn’t imagine Mark as he fires for the first time, the bullet is a lightning bolt. It doesn’t make it to the cardboard silhouette, sticking in the wall behind it.

“Nice one, Josh!”

Josh can’t tell if Tyler sneers.

“You’ll get there,” Mark says, showing Josh how to hold the gun right. “Don’t let it dislocate your elbow, keep it this way,” he makes Josh bend his arms. “Think. Aim. Shoot,” Mark shoves his foot between Josh’s boots. It is way too intimate. “Legs there.”
Josh hypnotizes the target as Mark stands behind him; Josh breathes, focusing on his in-and-outs, his palms are trapped in Mark’s hands, he feels him exhale into his neck.


If he decides to point the barrel at Tyler and fire, Josh will not have time to prevent it.

“Guys?”

Tyler is still unarmed, and Josh suddenly wants him to wear a helmet and a bulletproof vest. But Mark doesn’t try to force Josh to shoot him, just aiming for a lifeless target. Mark counts to three, the gun vibrates; Josh shudders and closes his eyes instinctively as the target keels over.

“Something like this,” Mark shrugs, stepping away.

Josh wipes his plastic glasses as if they got stained with blood.

“I wanna try once more,” he can barely hear himself. But being temporarily deaf is better than being permanently dead.

“Sure, buddy.”

Mark isn’t wearing any kind of protection, it disgusts Josh. Mark is probably able to break Josh’s arm before he even manages to pull the trigger. Josh turns back, feeling almost claustrophobic inside of this relatively small shooting bay, and —

He thinks, he aims.

He thinks back of that creature with glowing eyes, with black hands and black neck, all paint and blood.

He thinks some more, he aims again, he fires the gun.

A miracle doesn’t happen. The bullet makes a hole in a cardboard sheet, dangerously close to the target’s head.

“Dang it, man,” Tyler sounds disappointed. Josh’s father didn’t sound disappointed when Josh missed the target a dozen times straight.

“Fuck.”

Mark takes a glance at his wrist watch.

“What about getting some rest?”

“No!” Josh screams out.

He doesn’t hear if Mark shouts back at him, he just turns back to the target and fires, and fires, and fires, watching the string of flashes until the gun feels empty. Josh throws it on the floor, kicking it until it slides and stops in the corner.

“I hate it,” Josh exhales, plucking off the glasses and earmuffs. “I hate this damn place.”

He wants to pull and tear his hair out while Mark checks the target.

“You killed it,” Mark informs him. “Like… This dude’s dead four times.”
Josh sits down onto the table with ammunition. He doesn’t want to kill anyone anymore, he’s afraid when things get out of hand. Tyler understands it, nodding at him wordlessly and getting to the line.

“I’m fine,” Josh whispers.

Tyler blows him a kiss.

Josh blankly watches Tyler missing the target, then missing it again and starting to lose his temper; Tyler is way too impulsive when his abilities don’t match his expectations.

Josh is not that passionate about shooting.

Tyler jumps like a crazed bunny when the bullet flies through the target for the first time. Tyler throws his hands up in the air, looking at Josh with a glimmer of joy in his eyes.

Josh smiles back at him, applauding loudly.

“You’re gonna practice every day,” Mark says. “We don’t have much time and you should know how to shoot the enemy to death.”

“Just like you shot me?” Josh asks. This scar is a notch.

“Yeah,” Mark agrees. “But they don’t have Tyler by their side to stop the bleeding.”

“Also, don’t forget that you were holding me while Merrick was beating the crap out of me,” Tyler says, reloading the gun. “I didn’t like it, you know.”

Tyler has probably confronted every agent at VESSEL. Such a questionable achievement.

“That was our Head’s order,” Mark responds. “Sorry, comrade.”

Josh is interested in knowing the name of this asshole.

“Who’s the Head?”

“Sorry again,” Mark shrugs. “I’m not allowed to talk about it.”

Josh wants to roll his eyes until he sees his brain.

“Are you allowed to have a pocket knife?” Tyler asks to everyone’s amazement.

Mark falters.

“Yes?”

“Good,” Tyler sticks his hand out. “Gimme.”

Mark doesn’t hesitate to give him a knife while Josh thinks if Tyler knows anything about the Head of VESSEL; the blade is all shiny and pristine as Tyler takes a few steps to cross the line. He doesn’t even look at the weapon in his hand just throwing it at the target.

It gets stuck in the silhouette’s dotted chest.

“See?” Tyler grins. “It’s the only thing I’m good at.”

Josh has never known anything about Tyler’s hobby. Meanwhile, Tyler takes the knife out and
blows off the cardboard flinders before getting back to the line. He makes another throw, seemingly without aiming and landing the knife in the head of a printed out victim.

Mark doesn’t take his knife back.

“Where did you learn it?”

“In the woods,” Tyler says unflappably. “I was just bored.”

“Excellent, now we know what to do with you. Great skill, bro. I’ll bring you hunting knives tomorrow,” Mark promises. Tyler nods. “And Josh,” he whips around and grabs the gun from the table. “Josh is gonna learn how to treat this babe right.”

Josh nods, too, he wants to break the chain of his meltdowns.

The gun is cold and dead, Josh needs to feed it with bullets to satisfy its hunger.

And so he does.

***

They’re gonna die among professionals, but VESSEL agents are so fake-friendly Josh is about to believe this illusion. Jenna gives them instructions once again, they read the map until it’s just a mess of signs and rooms and they’re training every day. The time is an unstoppable flow; Josh makes one more call — his sister answers, worried but happy to hear his voice. And Josh is happy too.

“Hey Ash,” he says. “We’re starting.”

She smooches the phone.

“I’ll cross my fingers for luck.”

It doesn’t make him feel better, and Tyler still refuses to let his family know he’s alive.

“I don’t want to keep in touch with them,” he only comments.

Josh doesn’t insist.

The Meeting-The-Josephs Day was one of the worst ones in Josh’s life: it consisted of Tyler’s seizures and marking, his terrified parents and siblings.

“I just wanted to help.”

“You’re helping, Josh.”

They spend so much time in their room, long evenings are full of pointless conversations; the papers are too old, the files lack major parts, facts are jumbled. It’s like BUTCH has provided only the insignificant information.

Or, it hasn’t provided anything at all.
“We need to get this shit done.”

Josh fights the urge to slam his fist into Merrick’s face. But well, he’s not looking great — his left eye is still swelling, the bruise hasn’t faded yet. His split lip keeps cracking as he speaks, wiping the blood that leaks out of the sore. Josh wants to disappear. He has suspected that Merrick is going to continue using his barbarian methods, but Josh hasn’t expected to see a defeated agent in their room.

“What kind of shit?”

“You’re a good fighter, Josh.”

Tyler only laughs at this.

“But you say I’m useless—”

“Get back to the gym,” Merrick cuts him off. “It’s not an order. It’s like — I have to do it, you know? No matter how I hate both of you. So, stop bitching and let’s go.”

“Tyler is a pro at throwing knives,” Josh says.

“I know,” Merrick responds and licks up the blood. “See you at seven.”

He leaves the room without adding anything else.

***

Their next training session starts with a handshake. Josh gulps down his rage as he squeezes Merrick’s hand framed with skinned knuckles. Tyler does the same; he looks at the floor while Merrick shakes the life out of his hand.

“Enough,” Tyler wipes his palm on his pant leg.

“Okay, I’m gonna show you some simple self-defense moves,” Merrick claps his hands to draw their attention. “Let’s try to do something.”

He’s just a teacher now, not a soldier — and Josh can tell that he likes to talk about fighting stances and techniques, about boxing styles and are you a slugger or a boxer-puncher?

“Who the hell needs these categories if the majority of fighters don’t fit into them?” Tyler interrupts his lecture.

And Merrick doesn’t punch him, just saying —

“They’re just more common.”

Josh stands as straight as a rod for Merrick to see him in all his glory.

“And who am I?”

He probably fails.
“You’d be a good boxer-puncher, I think. Mobility, hand speed, good counter-punching skills,” Merrick comes closer and squeezes Josh’s bicep. “I’d say yes, you’re pretty close to it. The best match for a swarmer. For me,” he then turns to Tyler. “He’d be the out-boxer, the don’t-come-close-to-me type. I have no idea what he’s like when he’s fighting back, but keeping the distance between him and his opponent is definitely a thing.”

“I don’t like any physical contacts,” Tyler deadpans.

“Sure,” Merrick says sarcastically. “You’re quick and it gives you an opportunity. But seriously, listen to my advice — don’t waste your time on a fight with butchers. Better try to run and cause a power outage. You’re good at it.”

Merrick crosses his arms over his chest.

“And Zack Hall would’ve been a great slugger.”

And the air smells like fight again.

“I’m sorry,” Tyler utters. “About… what happened to him, I saw it. It was horrible, but I swear I couldn’t do anything. I didn’t kill him,” he looks up at Merrick. “The other guy did.”

Josh still thinks they can start their usual fighting, all words and fists, but Merrick seems to be calm about it — it’s been two years, more than that, but Josh isn’t sure if this war will ever stop.

Merrick nods.

“Okay. But self-defense is not only about boxing, as you know,” he continues as if nothing happened. “I need one of you to go to the ring with me. I promise to fight fair.”

“I can’t promise the same,” Tyler smirks. “Unless I see you’re not lying.”

“I don’t want to beat you up, I just wanna make you less pathetic,” Merrick says firmly. “Josh wasn’t that pathetic, by the way.”

This is the weirdest compliment Josh has ever gotten in his life.

He doesn’t say thank you.

“So. Who’s gonna be my partner?” Merrick asks again.

Josh lacks of any elation.

Needless to say, both of them volunteer.

And well, Merrick doesn’t break his promise, gently showing and explaining basic tips of a safe wrestling. Everyone is going to fight dirty when it comes to a real battle, but they still have to learn the lesson in a best way.

“A neck crank causes hyperextension,” he pins Tyler to the floor. Tyler winces, Merrick is twisting his arms and bending his head to his chest. “And you have to get out of it safely. Just in case.”

He lets Tyler go even though Josh’s heart aches at the sight of Merrick’s fingerprints on Tyler’s wrist. They’re fading promptly, just a light smear on his skin. And Josh is the next to taste it when Merrick talks about the types of grappling holds, chokeholds, clinch holds and armlocks; Josh’s elbow almost cracks when Merrick restrains him and slowly turns it in a wrong way, constantly asking Josh if the pain is too sharp to bear it.
“Have you gotten brainwashed or something?” Josh asks as Merrick helps him get up back on his feet after a hip throw.

“Yes,” Merrick simply says. “If any of you gets hurt after working out with me, I’m losing my job. I’ve got two warnings out of three, so let’s stop ruining my career.”

Tyler lets out a slight whistle.

Hearing these news, Josh decides he’s ready to spend one more hour at the boxing ring.

***

They slowly make their way to being something resembling real agents; they run on treadmills, they shoot and throw the knives; they try to hack VESSEL archive by Jenna’s request. And so Tyler does, sitting in her office in front of her computer and reading the files about VESSEL’s past investigations.

“Your security sucks,” Tyler says, locking his hands behind his head.

It took over forty minutes for him to find three passwords.

“It will not be this easy with BUTCH,” Jenna fends off. “This time, you weren’t fast enough. You can do it better.”

Josh peers into the lines and green digits on the screen and sees just lines and digits while Tyler explains how he found a gap in their code.

“I was just protecting Josh’s files,” Tyler is getting angrier as he taps on the keys again. “Somebody added them to your database again, and I swear I’ll find out who it was and kick their ass.”

Josh doesn’t want their foe to get to his clueless relatives, but the life never cares about what he wants.

“I think BUTCH is gonna be ready for welcoming you to their family,” Jenna sighs. “They’re definitely gonna ask you to work for them out of your free will.”

This is another detail Josh is afraid of — butchers will definitely be trying to recruit them, to break their independence and smash their dignity. And Josh still hasn’t learned how to wear a mask; he has his emotions written across his forehead while Tyler can be a sly fox. This is the difference, and Josh doesn’t want to be a splinter in this deal, but he doesn’t know when he’s actually sabotaging the operation. They don’t have a single right to make a mistake when they make it to the isle. It’s another day tomorrow, full of shooting and exercising, full of secret knowledge they’re most likely about to forget as soon as they step on a foreign land.

And Josh is still not ready.

And Tyler is still playing a smartass.

He’s about to log off when Jenna gives off another warning.

“If the situation gets critical, be ready to sign the agreement again.”

The balance between risk and stupidity is almost intangible.
But it’s not only them who’s risking.

Chapter End Notes

it's time to wake up
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

“We are a perfect team,” Josh says. “Young, desperate and dumb as fuck.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Josh doesn’t believe the calendar; all of the X marks and dates should better be lying. Josh spends hours upon hours pummeling with a punching bag, striking solid punches and kicks until his sweat leaves giant stains on his clothes. The tape wrapped over his knuckles is red-speckled, his skin is on fire. He’s so into this kind of physical activity he almost elbows a person behind him; it takes a full 360° turn to recognize Tyler with his raised-up hands.

“Come on, Rocky Balboa” Tyler says. “Enough.”

Josh ignores Tyler’s offer.

He refuses to wear boxing gloves, his fists are numb although the pain is about to devour them soon. It’s not that bad, Josh thinks, it’s not that bad. Josh is certain he hasn’t accomplished anything during the weeks of training — he can move faster, but changing the location is going to kill his newfound ability of crashing his enemies down like bricks. At the moment, his only enemy is this punching bag. And Tyler’s glare maybe.

Josh unwraps the slippery tape, revealing a few sores on the back of his hand; round-shaped, they’re like lakes wetting his skin with blood and sanies. They aren’t going to shrink anytime soon, but Josh’s brain probably does so — here’s one and only thought that tortures him.

“We’re leaving tomorrow,” he says.

“Really? I didn’t know.”

Tyler fumbles with a plastic zipper on his uniform, tugging at the collar of a black t-shirt underneath. His intonation lacks of any sarcasm when he asks —

“Do you think they’re gonna undress us?”

“Do you think they’re gonna kill us? Throw us out like a toilet paper?”

“Or like a radioactive waste,” Tyler pats the side of a punching bag. “They can blame our powers on radiation if aliens don’t fit for the deal anymore.”

Josh looks at the blood on his hands. He hasn’t broken anyone’s bone, he’s never killed a man. He’s only hurting himself. And Tyler’s calmness is only a disguise, his attitude is just a part of the show; Josh stoops down under the weight of the ground above them — butchers are preparing labs and rooms, they feed their monsters or keep them hungry, nobody knows.

“I will keep asking myself why and how I could end up like this,” Josh scratches the skin with his fingernail, mangling it even more. “It’s like the curse of my stars or something. This shit started
when I was thirteen and I had no idea just because my family resorted to therapy and stuff. Do you think I’d be happier if my parents believed my story?"

On this side of the line, he thinks he made the wrong choice.

“No,” Tyler says. “It’d be better to never get back to it. Maybe, they’d never get you. And yes, I regret I made you remember your Contact. I should have used a different delivery service.”

There’s no repentance in Tyler’s words. Only a cold cynicism.

Josh chuckles dolefully.

“It’s too late to fix it, you know?”

“I know,” Tyler takes Josh’s hand, rubbing his thumb over the graze. “It punched you back, I see.”

Josh sees it too.

The drop of blood leaves a trail and stops by his wrist like a single red line on his intact skin.

***

This chocolate pudding with whipped cream and cherries looks ridiculous compared to all the ready-to-cook food they’ve been eating until today.

“What is this?” Tyler pokes it with a spoon. “Is it your new hobby?”

Jenna’s office hasn’t turned to a restaurant since the last time they visited it so Josh didn’t expect her to start flaunting her cooking talents in such inappropriate moment. And she’s just sitting at the table, their company, waiting for them to taste her little piece of culinary art.

“It has always been my hobby.”

And she smiles.

And Josh wishes he could teleport to the isle already not to witness another fight. Jenna wants to be nice, she tries, she really does, but Tyler checkmates her anyway.

“Do you want me to die of extremely high blood sugar?”

Tyler doesn’t even sound angry. Just disappointed, mostly.

“It’s weird,” Josh eyes the dessert. “But thanks.”

“Just found the ingredients in the storage room and decided to use them before they reach their expiry date,” Jenna casts a heavy glance at Tyler. He finally brings the spoon to his lips.

“It looks like the prisoners’ last meal,” Josh bites his tongue immediately but Jenna doesn’t seem to kill him for it.

“That’s what I thought. But let’s be honest — I’m not sure if I will ever see you again, and maybe it’s stupid but I… I just want you to know that I’m gonna control everything: your location and the way they treat you. I’m gonna do everything I can, but I can’t go to the isle with you. I can’t.”
“…which is sad,” Tyler adds. “I’d kill for you, you know, but I’m not sure if I’m ready to die for you.”

Josh shoves a spoonful of pudding into his mouth, whipped cream melts on his tongue and all the chocolate and caramel turn to sugar-bombs for his teeth.

Tyler leaves the plate empty.

“I like it,” he says.

“Sure you do.”

“But it’s too sweet anyway—”

“Fine,” Jenna blurts out. “Next time I’ll cook chili.”

Josh swallows the aftertaste down.

There’s a slight hope that they’re gonna meet once again.

***

“One more thing before you go.”

This phrase is addressed to Josh so he nearly walks into the wall.

“What?”

Josh squints his eyes at Jenna’s silhouette in the dark; she comes closer like a local ghost.

“Your hair.”

“My hair, and… what do you mean?”

“Wanna look like a neon alien on butchers’ CCTV cameras?” Jenna tugs at a faded-yellow strand. “Or do you want them to shave your head?”

Josh still remembers Blurry.

Shaved head means defeat.

“No,” Josh brushes Jenna’s hand off.

“Good. I have something for you then,” Jenna takes a box out of her bag. “I had to ask Hayley to get it for me. For us. I knew you wouldn’t mind.”

It’s obviously a pack of hair-dye. Josh hasn’t planned to get back to his natural color anytime soon, but he hasn’t planned his life this way either. And that’s what he’s gonna do while Tyler is busy throwing knives with Mark.

Getting less noticeable is a smart decision.

He just hopes the butchers don’t make a list of his hair metamorphoses.
Their uniforms have personal nametags now — *Dun and Joseph* — one more necessary detail before leaving VESSEL. They stand in front of a full-length mirror, sprinkled with dust all over the frame.

They’re like soldiers resting before getting back to battlefield.

“Still can’t get over it,” Jenna presses a briefcase to her chest. “I’m about to hand it over to you, and then… I’m sorry, I can’t go. I’ve said it so many times, but I’m still sorry.”

Tyler turns away from the mirror.

“Yeah. It’s sad. You’d kill them with your awesomeness, and I’d be your ugly friend, Jenna.”

Maybe he’s flirting, maybe Josh is too attentive.

Jenna punches Tyler’s shoulder.

“Your compliments are the worst.”

This place is the worst.

“We are a perfect team,” Josh says. “Young, desperate and dumb as fuck.”

The new color of his hair is a bit lighter than it’s supposed to be, but the yellow explosion on his head has been destroyed completely. It’s an odd tradition, but at least BUTCH won’t recognize him by his hair color.

“Guys, stop it, please. Oh my—”

The walkie-talkie on Jenna’s belt hisses and sizzles, and there’s no need to catch a signal to decipher the meaning.

“The helicopter is waiting.”

This is it.

They get back to the exit through the corridors, they climb back up all the metal bars — and here’s a humid air, a rain of twilight pours down onto the ground. Josh breathes, filling his lungs with the smell of a forest; emerging feels good. He doesn’t know if he will ever feel *this* good.

Josh was happy when he met Tyler. It makes his heart go *soft* now.

Tyler pats Josh’s shoulder before caressing Josh’s jaw and making him turn his head — they almost kiss, almost. The stars scatter across the sky, but Tyler’s marks don’t get soaked with the light; he rolls his sleeve up to check. They can’t hear each other through the roaring of the engines, but Jenna keeps shouting, spitting her hair out of her mouth repeatedly.

“Take it!”

She shoves a briefcase into Josh’s hands.

He blankly whips around; there’s Mark running towards them. He quickly nods at Josh, he doesn’t have a rifle; he doesn’t even stop, jumping into the open door and waving his hand.
“Get in!”

Josh shivers at a chilly wind before hugging Jenna. She’s bewildered, but she hugs him back, pushing him away quickly. Tyler then catches her into an embrace, but it doesn’t last long.

“Okay. I’m not this sentimental,” he says.

They say their rather awkward goodbyes; Josh squeezes Tyler’s hand as they go towards the helicopter a few feet away. Josh tosses the briefcase onto the bench as soon as they get inside. Mark is waiting, Chris is waiting in a pilot’s cabin; Josh sees him nod through the glass before getting his hand back on the cyclic stick. They don’t lose a second before the helicopter takes off, taking them away from their almost-prison, almost-home. Looking through the porthole, Josh can only spot Jenna in the forest, a lonely frame with a thrown-back head. Motionless, she keeps staring at them until it’s too dark and too far-away to identify anything.

Tyler sighs heavily, leaning his back against the khaki-colored panel.

The sky welcomes them.

***

An endless flight obfuscates Josh’s mind, all the lessons he has ever learned seem to be forgotten all at once. He only tries to keep the map in his memory, but it’s only a scheme that probably doesn’t match the buildings in reality.

Josh wants to stop the time.

“How long will it take?”

“I have no idea,” Mark responds.

Tyler rubs his eyes with his palms.

“Nice.”

Seconds settle on the bottom of the invisible sandglass, and Mark isn’t helping.

“What’s wrong, buddy? Wanna play the games during the flight?”

“I’d start with the one called Shut The Fuck Up, honestly,” Tyler snarls.

It works.

If Mark has any comments to say, he prefers not to let them pop up.

Josh isn’t that talkative either.

The helicopter slices the stormy sky, but there’s nothing outside the porthole; they might still get chased by the spaceship and the light gobbling them, Josh will never be prepared for it. But the darkness only brings calmness before the tempest; a measured swaying sends warm waves through Josh’s muscles, rigid from sitting on a hard bench.

“It’s gonna be okay,” he says, he’s not a Believer anymore.
Tyler either doesn’t hear him or pretends he doesn’t. There’s nothing new about him putting shackles all over his personality.

It’s a secret operation, some of the butchers’ files has been declassified; but BUTCH can still predict all of their gestures, because VESSEL is a team of losers, almost comical ones from the movie about superheroes — a group of nerds against the world. They survive, every move feels like giving up, they’re rushing to meet their death, and Mark is a little Satan’s helper. Mark is not staying with them, and Josh has just reached the point where he needs a friend. A real one. A friend who will not jeopardize him with their quirky improvisation — he needs somebody who’s not Tyler.

Josh wishes he could be a telepath, again and again, but it’d be probably too painful in this twisted universe — nothing comes easy these days. Their superpowers are super screwed up; Josh lets his thoughts grow and consume his energy and time. He’s all worn-out as the helicopter careens to the side and Mark hobbles to the door.

“Come on!”

Loud noises increase before subsiding; they’re still weaponless — they don’t have anyone to cover their back from now on.

“I hope we’re not going to die today,” Tyler says, peeking out of the aperture.

The night has passed during the flight, leaving them cold and disoriented. Josh looks up at the grey sky as he gets out, searching either for aliens or for God, but the clouds cover the rays of sun like chunks of cottonwool would cover the wound. It looks greasy and unkempt.

Josh expects to be met by people with rifles and stun guns, but there’s no army as they land — there’s only one car nearby, a shiny black Mustang that probably costs a half of VESSEL budget. Still wordless, Mark guides them towards the car, crossing the sidewalk, it might as well be the edge of the rooftop. This is the isle, that legendary one — there are miles and miles of water down the horizon, there are a few constructions within eyeshot where the sky collides with the ocean. Since they’re in the middle of it, they’re gonna live in constant fear of getting plagued, thrown into the water with the stones tied up to their legs.

The wind slaps against Josh’s unshaven cheek; the climate has changed as much as the timezone, the air is so salty he begins to cough. Dying of asthma attack he’s never had before would be a great ending for a hero manqué.

He’s just being sold, but he will never know the price.

The passenger door of the car opens; Josh is about to bounce away, waiting for the monster to appear. But instead of a mutant, a man in a strict suit gets out and grins like a supermodel as soon as he sees their troop and especially the briefcase in Mark’s hands.

“Good morning.” the man doesn’t stop smiling as he gently takes the briefcase and opens it. “Welcome to BUTCH.”

He stares at Josh, then at Tyler, but neither of them says hello.

“Neither of them is bleeding,” he continues. “They aren’t even handcuffed. I’m impressed. Have you changed your methods?”

He turns the pages of the agreement, making it to the last, bloodied one and nods to himself.
“Good,” he puts it back into the briefcase. “Tim Skipper. The Head of everything — just kidding. The Head of this little friendly organization. I’m incredibly glad to work with you.”

He doesn’t offer a hand to shake. Otherwise, Josh would like to break it.

Josh balls his fists up as his animal instincts tear him apart — this is the man who started the war, who ruined the lives of soldiers and even VESSEL agents. This is the man who killed VESSEL, who might hurt their families if they will not be able to figure out how to fight back. How to destroy their servers and save the people who are about to get vaccinated.

Tim Skipper plays a clown, with a charming smile that might turn to a violent fleer any second. Josh stays in place when Mark signs the paper Tim gives to him — he has just transferred them there, his mission is complete; he can even die right now, with the barrel of a gun in his mouth. But Tim just lets Mark flee back to a helicopter. It roars again, and they watch in turn to a dot, dissipating like their last hope. It’s quiet for a while, but the first question Tim asks Tyler is —

“Are you Black’s lover?”

Tyler is as emotional as a rock.

“Excuse me?”

“Come on,” Tim hooks his elbow as they go towards the car. “She’s always had a soft spot for weirdos.”

Tyler clenches his jaws while Tim keeps unstitching his badly healed mental scars.

“Do you feel betrayed, Tyler?”

Tyler doesn’t respond.

And Tim finds another victim.

“And you, Josh? Do you feel like an outsider?”

Tim has a glance of a madman as he looks into Josh’s eyes, his hand reaches for Josh’s neck; Josh snatches his wrist to keep distance.

“You’re dangerous,” Tim’s face splits into a grin again. “I like it.”

He probably doesn’t stop smiling when he turns young guys to beasts. He pulls away from Josh, opening the car’s door for him and Tyler with a sickly-sweet welcome.

The driver’s side is closed from Josh’s sight, but Tim’s head is right in front of him as they race through the miniature city on the isle — it is a puzzle of buildings and small houses where the butchers supposedly live. The headquarter is different from them — it’s a glass box with a metal carcass and with automatic doors that get opened by a plastic card, similarly to VESSEL’s one. Inside, here’s another world, every tiny detail screams about hi-tech — they enter a huge hall with holographic screens on the walls, BUTCH logo turns to a butterfly with burning wings. The lights are bright, the glass surfaces are squeaky-clean and the hallway is full of a fluorescent glow, light-violet and blue, coming from too-stereotypical lava lamps in the corners. Here are the tablets next to each door down the corridor and a receptionist stand where Tim says their names for the registration.

“You spend your money on special effects instead of spending them on inventing something
specifically effective? Like your vaccine? I’m disappointed,” Tyler comments as he looks around the room.

Tim turns around on his heels.

“You’re about to befriend our equipment, kid. And you can’t even imagine how effective it is.”

“It’s gonna turn me to a butterfly?” Tyler inquires. “Tell me, because I’m starting to think that you’ve stolen your logo from Cicada 3301.”*

Tim dodges the talk about plagiarism.

“Do you like quests?” he asks.

“Hate them,” Tyler replies with the same intonation.

“You’re gonna love our energy strings, or our shields of invisibility, or—”

Tim brags for a little too long.

Josh loses his temper.

“Shut up, Tony Stark.”

Tim pouts.

“You’re right. It’s better to see it once than hear about it a hundred times.”

He then turns back to the girl at the table with the request of printing out the schedule of the tests they’re going to perform. She smiles and fixes her hair, glancing at the monitor of the computer. All the whites on the wall compress Josh’s body as much as these repeatedly changing pictures on the screen.

The piano music plays in the background.

The butterfly sets itself ablaze.

***

BUTCH access system doesn’t have a lightning grid or red alarm lamps. As an alternative, there is a metal door with a touchpad; the password, then the card works just right — it becomes a routine. Next round is a hallway with the floor made of glass, little cracks criss-cross some of the areas and Josh stops, eyes downcast; there are people swarming on the level below. Looking up, he sees their heels and soles on a transparent ceiling. Josh has never experienced this kind of fear; the floor might break right now, and their career will be over right there and then. He stomps his boot on the glass before taking a step.

“What about your powers?”

This question is a jeer slipping out of Tim’s mouth.

Tyler is the one to answer first.

“VESSEL can’t block it.”
“Great.”

“Wanna stab me to know the truth?”

“For God’s sake, no,” Tim raises his hands. “We’re not going barbarian ways. We just want you to work with us.”

“You’ve got us already,” Josh hisses out, avoiding another crack.

And Tim keeps showing off —

“It’s just the beginning, boys.”

Their next stop is an office with computers and monitors; the cameras on the ceiling are as noticeable as the videos on the screen — BUTCH has eyes everywhere, there are at least fifty squares with the locations, each numbered. It’s something of a security center of BUTCH, Josh remembers seeing it on the map. There’s no way to escape from this Alcatraz if they’re not able to hack the cameras. Tyler stares at the glassy globe right in front of him, then turning to a man at the table.

“You’re doing a good job…” he leans to read the words on the badge of his black uniform.

“…Agent K. Harris. But camera thirty-five isn’t working,” he points at the screen with a white noise where a picture should be.

It is like an empty socket.

“You passed the test,” Harris laughs. “You see things no one else thinks about and you can’t keep your mouth shut.”

He hits the key; the image of the garden appears on the screen. Butchers like flowers and probably have a gardener who can also be a killer — it’s all old detective movies’ influence.

“Do you know how to work with them?” Tim nods at the cameras.

“I’m not this great,” Tyler reports.

“But you’ve hacked a satellite.”

“But I’ve never hacked a camera.”

“Okay,” Tim looks at Harris as if he’s already thinking about firing him. “Give them collars and let’s go.”

“Collars?”

Butchers aren’t going to treat them delicately — they’ve done enough. Harris enters another password and opens a drawer in the wall; Josh tries to memorize the sounds of the virtual keys and Harris carries a box, big and grey.

Tim can as well poison them already.

“We need to observe you daily and nightly,” Tim says, taking the box from Harris’s hands. “You can go now.”

Harris leaves his post with a short nod.
Tim opens the box.

There are two black collars, as thick as Josh’s finger with a diode next to the lock; Tim takes one and wraps it around Josh’s neck with a slight clicking. He throws his head back, cold metal contacts with his Adam’s apple as he swallows. There’s a quiet beeping signal, the collar gets a little warmer consuming his body temperature and prickling his skin. Josh feels like a slave as soon as Tim shoves his finger in the gap between his neck and the collar, tugging Josh forward to speak directly into his face.

“It suits you.”

Josh wants to spit at him.

“I’m watching you.”

Then he smiles.

When the same manipulation is done with Tyler, Josh sees the collar from his perspective — the diode shines blue, the light comes in flashes so strictly he can count the seconds, using it. But also, it’s impossible to be invisible in the dark now — the glowing is rather bright even when Tyler tries to cover it with his palm.

“I think I should mention the way this thing works,” Tim says in official tone. “It’s the newest GPS-equipped model that can only be opened by a special key card. The card can only be used by the person who has a special access, so I’m very sorry, but you’re gonna wear these beautiful collars for over a year? Two? Ten? Do you really care?” he chuckles, his speech turns to a cascade of mocking. “I. See. You. We’re gonna find out your moving trajectory anyway, so you don’t even need bodyguards to hold you back. It’s not as good as microchips, but we’re about to figure out the alien technology, and these collars are the closest things my engineers could construct. Here,” he takes a tiny controller out of the box and presses the button.

A spike of electricity pierces Josh’s neck.

“Fuck,” he gasps out, blinking and seeing Tyler rubbing his jaw above the collar.

Josh’s skin burns, shapeless outbreaks of pain coil there.

“See? It’s not worth trying to take them off. It’s a self-defense mechanism that is gonna be activated in case you haven’t learned the lesson.”

His lecture is interrupted by a standard iphone tune. Tim pulls it out and swipes the screen.

“Yes? What? Why doesn’t it work? What the hell, Harris? No, no, I’m coming. Fuck the IT-service.”

Irritated, he puts the iphone back into his pocket.

“Come on,” he waves at the door. “I need to go. We haven’t finished the verification procedure, but we have an hour or so, go, go, go, I’m gonna tell my people to lock you in a temporary room before putting you in separate ones.”

This sudden bustle is rather hilarious — bringing them to the isle has also brought their troubles to BUTCH.
A temporary room is all white with soft, psychiatric ward-like walls and a single chair from IKEA in the corner. Tyler hits the door with his fist as it gets locked with a monotonous signal, cutting them off the real world. Josh’s goosebumps itch underneath the collar, he’s sure he’s about to get scratches all over his neck.

Tyler watches him with a sad look on his face.

“It’s so…”

“Kinky,” Josh finishes.

“Exactly.”

Josh wants to say a lot of things — about the cameras, for example. All the visible ones were fake; they weren’t even turned on, just fooling the newcomers. The real ones are hidden in the doorknobs — just like the one in this room. Josh touches it with his finger then standing in front of it so the camera mostly films his ass. He hopes butchers wouldn’t mind this sight. He pats the door then poking at his eye.

Tyler nods.

“I remember this bitter smell,” he says. “It’s everywhere.”

Speaking is dangerous, they can’t discuss their plans for the future, sign language could be the only option but neither of them has learned it.

“Anything else?”

“No.”

Tyler takes the chair and sits down onto it; Josh is lucky enough to sit on the floor with the top of his head accidentally covering the camera. Butchers let them spend the last moment together to overhear more facts about them, about their collaboration with VESSEL maybe. Every single conversation is a taboo. The silence gets on Josh’s nerves with every flash of the diode in Tyler’s collar. He wishes he could have him during the operation to keep the track of time.

Getting separated is like getting dismembered.

Chapter End Notes

Cicada 3301 is a mysterious group of hackers and cryptographers; an organization that has posted a set of puzzles and alternate reality games to possibly recruit codebreakers/linguists from the public. Logo
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

There’s the future, a machine-operated corporation with selfish ambitions.

There’s the future, but there are no flying skateboards.

There’s nothing that can be used by the middle class.

Josh keeps counting the flares while Tyler picks at the cotton fabric on the wall with his fingernail; a little radiance is like a clock ticking, like a time-bomb — embedding a little explosive device into the collar would be a smart decision. The skin on Tyler’s chin and on his neck is all reddened as he keeps grazing it; BUTCH has made something similar to a microchip that irritates the dermis, and it’s a mystery whether it can as well manipulate their minds or not. They’re gonna find out.

“It’s been two hours,” Tyler says.

Josh is not the only one who counts the blinks though he yet hates the numbers. The hole in the wall grows wider.

“Yeah... What do they— fuck!”

Josh skids across the floor when the door opens with a wheezing signal, letting Tim in; Josh gets up on his feet immediately and straightens his back up to look taller while Tim inspects him closely. To look braver while Tyler doesn’t even stir, his facial expression is a pure indifference.

Tim stands in the doorway like a vampire who needs an invitation.

“Ready?”

It’s a mockery since they don’t have a chance. Yet.

“Sure,” Josh cocks his head as much as the collar lets him. “This place is so boring.”

His muscles strain up in anticipation, but electric discharge doesn’t happen. Tim leaves the room as if he’s completely disinterested.

“Let’s go.”

They still haven’t gotten knocked out within their first hours in BUTCH, which means they should be aware of how vile the enemy truly is. They punched Tyler, they did it — it didn’t hurt him as much as the blood loss did, but it could’ve been a gameover. And they walk down the opposite path now; there are agents with the abbreviation BUTCH on their backs, whites on blacks, they’re too strict — some people on their way wear white coats just like VESSEL lab-workers but most of them are dressed in tuxes and skirts with fancy blouses.

The inside of BUTCH building is Utopian World. Silvery-white panel walls are made of cold plastic — Josh checks it and doesn’t end up with a broken finger. He hates this decor, but he stares at it, at tall pillars with the lamps on top of them; there are the newest air-conditioning systems, and
all the railings are chromium-plated, shimmering surfaces clean themselves after the touch. Maybe they scan the fingerprints even.

There’s the future, a machine-operated corporation with selfish ambitions.

There’s the future, but there are no flying skateboards.

There’s nothing that can be used by the middle class.

They’re not alone there; two guys in uniforms follow them despite Tim’s words about the guards. Tim stops beside the door, pointing his thumb at it; Josh gets pressed to the wall immediately — Tyler gets shoved to the opposite door. Josh hears him gasp but he doesn’t see him from behind the man’s body. Josh’s guard steadies him in front of the camera that is masked like a peephole — he knew it, he knew. The news ticker above the door says that *J. W. Dun* has been just registered on the list of examinees.

The letters are red.

Josh’s head swims.

III*

The guard doesn’t use his Tazer, he doesn’t activate that collar-punishment. Josh wants to crack a metaphorical strongbox open and get the card to get rid of this pesky choker.

A polite ‘*come in*’ is a whisper behind Josh’s back.

And he comes in.

The room is white and bright as the lamps in the corners make the floor and ceiling merge together. Josh brings his palms to his eyes not to get them singed; he felt the same way when he entered the scanning capsule at VESSEL. The light is blinding, the rays impale Josh’s brain, causing a paralysis.

There are hands on his shoulders.

“Show me your face.”

And Josh does so, the voice is so smarmy; Josh is quite disoriented as he’s being pushed to an object that can be recognized as the height scale, then the digital scales. There’s somebody wearing a white coat in front of Josh and he hates white.

“Let your eyes adjust, blink.”

Josh wipes the tears with his sleeve before narrowing his eyes to focus on the man who’s talking to him. Everything drowns in a white twister, Josh is drowsy and his vision is doubled — he’s vaguely aware of a hipster-like agent in front of him; Josh is surprised he can still read the nametag — *Rigsby* — after the light-torture.

“It’s shocking at first. It’s gonna get better after a while,” Rigsby says.

Josh blankly looks at him through the white riddle; micro particles of dust glimmer like crystals, too sharp for Josh’s eyeballs.
“You’re doing good.”

Here’s an armchair in the center of the room, as white as everything, it looks like a dentist chair but softer. Almost squishy. There are no typical tools, no scalpels or probes — there are wires with sticky patches that are lying on the seat abandoned. Or they’re taking their time.

Josh needs to sit down but he’d prefer a regular stool.

“What is this?”

He can still talk though the pain in his head makes the words jumble together.

“Let’s call it a polygraph.”

Rigsby points at the armchair and Josh obeys, awkwardly fidgeting on the seat and throwing his head back onto the headrest. It’s oddly comfortable. The lights get dimmer, the sleepiness is about to swallow him again, but his eyes snap open when Rigsby takes his wrist and puts a metal bracelet around it. Josh’s pulse begins to thud in his ears, the collar on his neck gets warmer.

“Breathe, just breathe. You don’t have to panic,” Rigsby says as he types something down in his tablet.

“Do you know anything about the artificial intelligence?” he asks.

Josh’s pulse hits the hundred mark.

“No.”

It’s gonna be a massive invasion into his head.

“I want to introduce you to our assistant,” Rigsby says. “Our new invention.”

The doors in the wall slide open and a creature wheels in — its face looks like a fencing mask and its arms are metal tubes, uncommonly flexible with the hinges in its elbows and wrists. It is almost as tall as Rigsby, its carcass is white with the B printed on the front; it moves towards Josh, it doesn’t limp and doesn’t stumble as it rolls over a small threshold. Josh doesn’t believe his eyes. His heart rate is an unsteady staccato as the robot stops beside the armchair, its fingers connect with the bracelet on Josh’s hand. Josh watches it clipping the bracelet and then, there’s the needle popping out of its finger; Josh thinks it’s a sedative at first, but B doesn’t inject anything into Josh’s blood, taking it instead.

“Shit!”

Josh jerks in fright as the needle pokes his ring-finger, quickly hiding back in the metal and drawing Josh’s blood, a single droplet falls onto the robot’s palm. B’s chest transforms to a screen that shows the results of the test instantly, like an information stand.

Rigsby reads it, the number of Josh’s leucocytes and erythrocytes; he claps his hands when he’s done.

“Great, just great!” he exclaims. He doesn’t say anything about how special Josh’s blood is.

“Wow,” Josh exhales.

It’s been awhile since he last checked himself at the hospital.
“Good,” Rigsby checks Josh’s pupils. “I think you’ve come back to your senses. To prevent any questions: B is just learning how to work with us, but it’s self-educating quickly, and, as a lead engineer, I’m envious.”

B doesn’t say anything, just nodding and showing a green checkmark on the screen.

“You’ve got the antidote,” Rigsby says. “We just need your blood to finish the second experiment.”

“The second?”

“Yes.”

Rigsby leans to unzip Josh’s coverall.

“Hey!”

“Sorry,” he pulls back instantly. “It would work better on bare skin.”

_Bare_ skin hurts more.

Josh wiggles out of the upper half of his uniform, leaving the sleeves lying across his lower stomach like broken arms. Rigsby brings a wet cloth that slightly smells like chemicals and leaves dense droplets on Josh’s torso, glue-like. The patches are sitting tightly right above his nipples while the agent works on sticking another set to his temples.

He can’t probably take them off without damaging his skin.

Then, there’s a metal hoop on his head, almost like the crown with thistle thorns on the inner side, softened with the same material he’s seen in a _temporary_ room.

The collar burns Josh’s neck.

“Examinee Dun is ready for the test,” Rigsby says, fumbling with the sensor screen on the machine connected to Josh, the wires are creating the neural network.

Josh breathes rabidly, bracing himself for a bout of pain, but the round patches just get hotter as the temperature of his body rises up. It doesn’t hurt. It’s absurd, but BUTCH agents haven’t injured them yet except the demonstration of the collar’s powers. But the collar is defenseless at the moment, Josh isn’t even sure if it’s still working. B’s metal arms are placed on the headrest; the robot can definitely twist Josh’s neck if the agent snaps his fingers.

“You can’t run away so the Machine takes the energy from the security collar, if you don’t mind.”

Here’s probably one of BUTCH things — everything turns out to be connected. The armchair sways, being pulled backwards so Josh is half lying in it, sweat runs down his temples, making his fears bloom again. What if his blood is gonna ruin the terminals and cause another short circuit?

“Where’s Tyler?”

“He’s with our agents, of course.”

His answers are so polite it’s almost unbearable.

“Are they hurting him?”

“No.”
“Are you and your C-3PO gonna disembowel me?”

B’s hand trembles as it bends over Josh; Josh would be able to hear its breath if it was breathing. ‘I’m B, BUTCH assistant. I’m not programmed to hurt. Just help,’ Josh reads on its chest.

“How the fuck did it know I was talking about it?”

“B is good at analyzing,” Rigsby says. “Why do you try to stop us?”

He’s out of Josh’s sight, Josh can’t turn his rigid neck.

“Because you’re creating mutants? You wanna use me? You’ve already used Tyler, but it wasn’t enough for you, you greedy bastards—”

“Who isn’t greedy? It’s a rhetorical question,” Rigsby presses the button on the Machine. “But we’re gonna give you the truth. If you want to. You can work with us, you can make great discoveries and be on top of the world. There’s no need to resist.”

“You’ve stolen Blurry’s corpse,” Josh spits out. “And now you’re gonna talk to me about morality?”

Rigsby caresses the dashboard of the Machine lovingly.

“We’re always on hunt for a precious material to work with. Now we’ve got the holy trinity to finish the experiment — here’s a thing, Josh. Just like a chain, and if one part is missing the whole work loses its value. We got Tyler’s blood samples from the lab, we thought his blood was prepared enough to become an ingredient for the serum, but boom — we accidentally created a monster. Then another one, because his blood was fighting the good cells — it was smart, it was interesting. We thought that the reason was hidden in the way the blood was kept, we thought about the climate, so we got him once again to get his real blood — we were sure it was over, we didn’t need to keep him like a hostage with no reason — we’ve done everything we wanted, we filmed that tape to show VESSEL what we can do to him. He didn’t want to heal people, he wasn’t able to do that, but we had a rabbit in our hat, the serum that was supposed to improve his powers. And it worked.”

This is the creepiest fairytale; Rigsby could be a great storyteller.

“We took his blood and sent him back home in a bit twisted way, but we pulled the right strings — you were too distracted by a brainwashed Tyler while we were working on a serum 2.0,” he pushes his round glasses up his nose. “And VESSEL was helpless when we used everything you could believe to steal the files, and yes — the body from the shock freezer. He had an important material we couldn’t get from Tyler and we combined it, we did, we thought it was a perfect one, but the sets of their genes were similar but also too conflicting,” he gives himself a fist-bump. “That’s when we found a missed part — you. You’ve shown your abilities when you cured that military boy — Tyler’s brother, right? Using relatives is a great bait, and you swallowed the hook. We let him go. And the way your blood fought our serum was the greatest discovery. You can’t even imagine, Josh. Your veins are full of gold.”

“And your head is full of trash,” Josh sputters.

This is the truth-excruciation.

While Rigsby speaks, the hoop on Josh’s head sends the images straight to his brain — the events they caught on tape, the day after, the beginning of the story where Tyler was missing and then
found. He re-lives it over and over again until he feels bilious.

Josh doesn’t see where they keep the serums.

Josh doesn’t see anything that can have a bit of logic, anything that can help him move on; the monitor is right in front of him, full of multicolored spots that change their shades when Josh moves his finger or when his fear gets replaced with anger.

His emotions have colors, they’re represented to him while he’s being morally gutted out. Josh tries his best not to show them his mood, but his brain activity is getting conveyed straight to the Machine along with his heart rate and with the count of his breathing. Rigsby tells him the truth about Tyler’s experiment to check his reactions; VESSEL has done a similar thing, but Josh was just the witness of it, and now he’s feeling like Blurry, like an enemy. They want him to blabber out the secret he doesn’t know he keeps. VESSEL’s assumptions has just been proved correct, they’ve been going the right way at their guessing game, including the power-improving serum.

“We didn’t want to kidnap him, but it’s too hard to be his friend,” Rigsby looks at the screen along with Josh. “You’re holding so much rage inside. One day, it’s gonna break you, and you’ll kill the reason of your troubles.”

The Machine lets out a slight beeping.

Josh’s intuition yells at him.

“That’s what I’m dreaming about.”

The polygraph doesn’t tell if it’s a lie — Josh is sure Rigsby was talking about killing Tyler, and Josh was talking about killing butchers. But Rigsby looks confused.

Josh has played his role successfully.

“This test is stupid,” Josh says.

B mirrors these words on its chest.

Shapeless spots disappear, and Josh finds himself being unable to remember what Rigsby was talking about. White lights are too bright again; Josh squints his eyes to see the triangles drawn on the screen.

“You have to find matching figures,” Rigsby says.

“What?”

Josh is baffled, it is the first grade-like task. But he pokes in them with his fingers until they form a monolith triangle. Then go the squares, hearts and zigzags, and Josh’s brain turns upside down in a white room where the floor looks exactly like the ceiling. B spins around the armchair, the phrase on his chest says ‘you’ve passed the test’. Josh feels like a fool when Rigsby removes the patches from his torso, red circles underneath them look almost like cigarette burns.

“We’ll fix it,” Rigsby promises.

Josh nods, suddenly aware he’s half naked and his head feels heavy.

“What do you remember, Josh?”

Josh asks himself with the same passion like Rigsby does.
“Helicopter.”

The only quality Josh knows is that the helicopter was big and purring. B pulls the hoop off Josh’s head.

“You’re stressed,” Rigsby holds Josh’s shoulders as he leans forward to slip his arms back into the sleeves. “You don’t have to worry. Wanna see Tyler?”

Josh wants to scream about how much he wants to see Tyler, but something whispers at him that he needs to keep his head cold.

“Yes.”

Josh’s voice doesn’t waver.

He’s just experienced the weirdest and the worst psychological trick.

***

Tyler’s experiment is nothing like Josh’s.

Josh feels like he walks in in the middle of a ritual that wasn’t meant for him to see. At first, he thinks it’s a deactivation — there’s a plexiglass chamber and Tyler is already inside of it; he looks just like Blurry the day he died.

He died and now it’s Tyler’s turn.

Josh gasps, but Rigsby behind his back says —

“Agent Heaton’s controlling everything.”

Josh doesn’t believe.

Rigsby leaves.

The room is grey, with black and white checkered flooring; rays of light form puddles on mirror-polished tiles. The chamber is like a transparent coffin with Tyler laying in it, with a bluish fluid that fills it up, there’s no air. But Tyler’s chest raises and falls, there’s a big plastic mask with tubes like a muzzle on his nose and on his mouth. His eyes are closed under massive glasses, his hands are relaxed, and there are already familiar patches on his naked torso. Tyler’s boxers are hanging low on his hips, he doesn’t seem to care, isolated from reality. He’s floating, and Josh can almost touch him, but a thick layer of glass is like a concrete wall between them, the water is too thick.

Josh gasps again.

The chamber is plugged to a set of monitors building a mountain, cameras show Tyler’s body in different angles. The operator doesn’t have a nametag on his jacket, he’s wearing a beanie and looking more like a movie director. Josh doesn’t feel like he belongs there.

“Sit down,” the man points at the chair beside him.

“Heaton?”

Josh doesn’t know how to not piss the agent off.
“Yes, it’s me. Wanna know what I’m doing? Dun? Good. It’s a sensory deprivation tank,” Heaton scratches his beard in a haste motion. “There’s a salt water at his skin temperature.”

There are a few people flocking in the corner of the room.

“Wanna him to see the future?”

Josh’s question sounds suddenly aggressive, but Heaton doesn’t dwell on it.

“No. His past.”

Josh almost laughs.

There’s no past.

There are black cords coming from a metal tape wrapped around Tyler’s head, there’s one more screen next to it — something like ultrasound examination, shapes of a picture are vague.

“It’s a projection of his thoughts,” Heaton explains. “We try to film his memories. It comes as an impulse and gets fixed like an image. You know, rats were thinking of boxes and cages. Just boxes and cages. Human brain is more interesting thing to work with.”

_Human brain_, Josh notes. They consider Tyler a human, not an alien.

An assistant of the experiment is not an android.

“Keep focusing on my voice,” she says. She’s got a nice voice. “Keep focusing, Tyler. I need you to remember what happened seven years ago, what do you remember?” she then looks at the grey-white abstractions on the screen. “Nothing.”

Josh hopes that Tyler’s mother won’t end up there one day.

“Think of a spaceship,” Heaton brings a microphone to his lips. “What do you know about extraterrestrial technologies?”

Questions like this are usually followed by the punch; Josh thinks it’s electricity in Tyler’s collar, the flashes get more frantic, oscillating. Tyler’s fingers jerk, trying to grope the water; Tyler thrashes convulsively and hums underneath the airproof muzzle, coughing, choking.

“Drain it,” Heaton orders, turning to the assistant. “Valerie, drain it immediately. He’s not lying.”

Tyler is still in a trance, and Josh is still dumbfounded when Valerie presses the button, and the liquid swirls next to the tube that probably leads straight to sewage. People in white coats rush to Tyler to take the mask and the glasses off; short tubes inserted into Tyler’s nostrils are red-coated, he looks faint in general. Josh’s breaths leave foggy outlines on the glass as he’s being led away, only catching a sight of Tyler sitting on the edge of the tank and covered with a big white towel.

“He doesn’t know anything,” Josh exhales. “I swear he doesn’t remember.”

“He’s going to be okay,” Heaton says, walking past the glass.

“But—”

“B, guide the examinee to his room.”

Valerie crouches down in front of Tyler and puts her hand on Tyler’s shoulder; Tyler shudders and
shakes his head, pressing a corner of a towel to his nose. It’s gonna get ruined.

Tyler doesn’t see Josh.

Josh turns away only to be met by B’s faceless face.

‘I’m gonna show you your room,’ the letters on its chest say.

“Yeah. I know.”

Josh’s eyes are suddenly itchy and he rubs, and rubs, and rubs them, smearing the dust from his eyelashes across his eyebrows. Tyler has probably gotten salt water into his lungs and panicked, because he wasn’t able to give the butchers what they wanted.

‘Follow me.’

Josh staggers past B blankly, his thoughts reel over Tyler and their plan — they need to make their enemy talk and let them save their memories. They’re useless. The only thing Josh knows is that he has to befriend somebody — maybe even B who can’t lie, Josh is sure. B is too fast, its little rollers clatter across the floor; Josh has to snatch it by its arm to stop it.

‘Don’t break me. It always upsets my repairman.’

B beeps sonorously.

Josh didn’t mean to hurt it.

“Sorry.”

The robot nods.

They don’t touch each other as they go down the wing and B presses its palm to a scanner to open a steel door. ‘You have to stay there,’ it signalizes. Josh enters the room expecting B to follow him, but he only hears the sound of the door sliding shut.

Josh scrunches up his nose.

“Great.”

***

He’s not surprised to find his room white-designed. Here’s the bed, the sink and the toilet behind the curtain. How lovely is that, not mentioning the fake camera in the corner. The real one watches him from the door’s top panel — Josh wants to show his middle finger to it. But instead, he checks the cell, thinking if he can dig a hole and escape from this horrible place. It reminds him of a hospital, of the emergency room he once visited when he needed to get his broken nose fixed. It hurt.

Josh wants to read his enemy motives — he checks the lock and finds it smooth, there are no cracks to get a knife into and open it; BUTCH isn’t bothered by having security guards on every step because their protection system is flawless. Josh lies on his stomach looking under the bed when the door opens all of the sudden; he feels ashamed, quickly getting up to his feet not to be a complete fool. The guy that comes in wears a regular BUTCH uniform and a red-blue snapback that is offbeat. His hair is long, that is offbeat too. He holds a ladder in his hands.
“Hi,” he says.

Josh touches the collar.

“Hi.”

“How much does this place suck?” the guy asks. “On the scale from zero to five? I’m Jesse,” he shakes Josh’s hand before he comprehends his words. “You’re Josh. I’ve read your files, so you can skip a part of introducing yourself. B liked you.”

The flow of information Jesse spews out is so thick it clogs up Josh’s head.

“What?”

“BUTCH sucks, Tim sucks in a different way, and I’m the programmer who created B.”

“You—”

“Don’t be afraid, these things don’t transmit the sound. Also, I can tell you whatever you want — if my colleagues think it’s necessary, they can just erase your memories. Believe me, they’re good at this.”

Josh doesn’t see the controller in Jesse’s hands.

“Why did you come to me? B isn’t here, I didn’t touch it, I swear.”

“I know,” Jesse smiles. “I came here to… to check the camera,” he unfolds the ladder and climbs up, peering into the lens and tapping at the corpus.

“And?”

“It doesn’t work anyway.” Jesse quickly gets down and flops down onto the bed. “I got one interesting file today — it wasn’t even anonymous, and I’m debating whether or not I should share it with you. You know, I got my degree, but my life went downhill, and I ended up being homeless — it’s a long story. And our corporation’s next step is starting to use homeless kids for their experiments. And our government doesn’t mind. I’m here to repair the robots and protect the archive, but I don’t wanna cover up the real plagues. And I told them I was going to stop working there, but they did a terrible thing. Did you see them? Did they look like humans? What if everything’s gonna break? Josh, please, I heard your blood is unique, please, stop this nightmare.”

Josh feels like throwing his speech back up.

“Did they vaccinate your close friend? Or your relative?”

“Yeah,” Jesse replies. “Me.”

“What?!”

“What? I’m my closest friend, and I have a couple of days before this shit works out. And then, I’m gonna have maybe two weeks before I turn to a beast. Dude, your blood is something I’m about to pray for.”

Jesse rolls his sleeve up and shows a little hole in his veined forearm. It looks like a regular injection yet lacking any manifestations of a mutation. Jesse might be as well bluffing to get Josh to talk, so he takes his statement with a good amount of skepticism.
“When did it happen?”

“Today.”

Butchers have definitely gotten ready for their arrival.

“They have plans for you, Josh. Think about it.”

Jesse grabs the ladder and gets out like a hurricane; B is waiting for him beside the door and Jesse smiles at it, rising his hand up in a highfive-gesture. They lock Josh up again — he hasn’t said if he’s in or out.

He has to save people.

Josh’s sagacity takes a vacation.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

“He keeps going,” Tyler says. “He’s dead, but he keeps going anyway.”

Josh loses a count of minutes and hours; they turn to \textit{days}, but he doesn’t have them listed. He should’ve used a pen to scribble the lines on the wall and cross them out, group them into \textit{weeks}. All of those are just atoms of eternity.

The crooks of Josh’s elbows are dotted with bruises forming black-purple galaxies on his skin — the agents keep coming and stealing his blood, little amounts, it gets more painful every time it happens. Each procedure is different, but all of them are equally tedious; sometimes, there are the days when he can barely recognize a person dragging him off his bed. He turns to an insomniac, because they pull him out of the cell as soon as he passes out, they don’t let him rest; the ache in his muscles and in his head never leaves him alone.

He needs to break the mold, but he’s the one who’s broken at the moment.

He’s being hauled to the offices; his vitals are checked twice a day — no one needs him if he is dead, this is the only advantage. Butchers don’t ask him questions, they show him the files about his first Contact, and the wires send his emotions and reactions to the machine that analyzes it and labels it as \textit{TRUTH}.

Josh’s unawareness is marked as \textit{FALSE}.

Even if he doesn’t remember all the screwed up facts, his subconsciousness does.

He wants to wreck the sensors that form a grid all over him, he wants to run away. They give him a plastic mask and make him breathe, the fog lulls him to sleep, but when Josh is about to doze off, a needle pokes his neck.

He’s not that resilient.

“It’s Monday,” they say. Then, they say it’s Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday — same phrases, same actions. He doesn’t believe them, he doesn’t have a calendar.

Josh sees B a couple of times, but its chest is empty of any words.

He doesn’t see Tyler.

Jesse visits Josh when he least expects it, he’s pale with his eyeballs yellowed; Josh doesn’t even know why he can still enter his cell, but Jesse’s every step radiates with caution. He never comes at appropriate moments — Josh has just gotten back after another experiment, frazzled inside and out. This time, butchers have made him watch flashing images of UFO sightings with an infrasound soundtrack; it’s just a part of their zombifying program.

Jesse is like a vampire, he’s not looking at the lights.

“They promised me an antidote if I keep working for them.”
Josh feels so drained and ruined after the tests. His heart rate is too slow.

“Gonna obey?”

“No. I need your help.”

Josh covers his eyes with his palm.

“Help me. I just need your blood and I’ll help you out.”

Jesse’s hair starts falling out.

“They closed the access to data center for me.”

It means: they changed the passwords and Jenna’s information is invalid. Josh isn’t sure if he needs a teammate like this.

“Did they erase your memories?”

“No.”

Josh accepts it.

“Do you know how they do that?”

Jesse’s neck is a deformed bone as he nods. A basic move takes a lot of his strength.

“Just a quick electric discharge. That’s all I know. I haven’t seen how it’s going. It’s not that painful, but the aftermath… When you think about things you’re not allowed to think about anymore, you’re slowly dying. Spewing out bloody puke, probably.”

This is it — Josh was about to partake in killing Tyler the day they forced him to watch the tape from BUTCH, when he said he couldn’t do it. Josh is one of Tyler’s murderers no matter how hard he wished him to be okay, great even. The destroying process has been turned on — just because he thought he was right for once. Josh didn’t know, Jenna didn’t know — Tyler was the one who felt it on a spiritual level, but their egoistic intentions had just pointed a gun to his head.

All the curses Josh throws at himself are useless. When he wants to ask Jesse about the tape, he’s not there, the door is hermetically closed; Jesse might as well be a hologram or Josh’s imaginary friend.

“Fuck,” Josh looks up at the fake camera. The one in the doorknob flickers with a green light.

The tape was a detonator.

They fried Tyler’s brain.

It’s a miracle he was still able to function normally.

***

They aren’t only pumping his blood out, they give him calories instead. It’s a synthetic and flavorless substance on a plastic tray, but at least, Josh isn’t going to die of hunger even though he doesn’t feel it. He’s almost sure there’s some kind of a drug in his meal, because when he eats, he
doesn’t want to struggle anymore. Maybe it’s the fault of psychedelic clips they make him watch on regular basis, maybe it’s the way they disinfect the needles.

They don’t vaccinate him with serums.

“Not to ruin the clarity of the experiment,” Rigsby says. “You are the future.”

Josh hates profound words.

He lies in bed dreamless; his eyes are itchy and dry, and the reality mixes up with the fantasies from his aching head.

B checks him with the word SLEEP on its chest.

But Josh can’t sleep.

He’s hypnotized.

His silent agony creeps up — he doesn’t have bedsheets to strangle himself, he doesn’t have a mirror to break. He can only curl into a fetal position and hit his head against the headboard as the fire in his veins tears his skin apart. He almost wants to cut it to let it out. He craves.

He tries to save Tyler from his habits but he loses him. He loses himself.

And that’s their universe, tangled in cords where their blood cells don’t belong to them anymore. Their genes are BUTCH’s laboratory property. That’s how it goes.

Josh’s room is bloody-red one day or night or it’s the same ten minutes on the loop. He blinks again, wiping nonexistent water off his eyes and staring at the lights that swirl all around the ceiling perimeter. White lamps are dead, and Josh stretches the corners of his mouth in a painful grin. There’s the sound of the alarm that is just a violent mechanic screaming; Josh covers his ears with his palms to keep his brain inside of his head.

Everything is a chaos.

It’s almost like a photographic processing, but there are no pictures.

His sleep-lacking mind shuts off, but he sits up and stumbles to the exit — there’s the crack between the door and the frame, almost as wide as Josh’s palm.

It’s heavy.

He can only see somebody’s hunched back as he peeks through the hole. Josh wishes he could find a crowbar to enlarge the gap — it would have been a good weapon as well. Then, there’s a hand within eyeshot, red in these ominous lights; Josh bounces away not to let them grab him.

“Sh, it’s me.”

Josh rubs his eyes with his fists only letting his sweat eat them away.

“Help me move the door? We have no time, you know.”

Here’s a smirk, Josh would sell his soul to see it again — and he’s apparently done it already, because Tyler is here, and Tyler’s fingers clip at the side of the door to set Josh free.

“I’m glad to see you alive,” Josh whispers.
And Tyler whispers back —

“Same.”

If the door slides shut, both of them are gonna lose their fingers. Josh applies more pressure, getting his foot in the corner of the doorframe, ramming it across the floor. Tyler yanks the door from his side so Josh can squeeze himself through the emptiness, his torso is all flattened under the weight of a metal; this situation resembles a decent prison break.

The first thing he sees outside is a corpse.

The man’s eyes are gouged out; his mutilated throat is sliced with four long scratches with ragged edges. His Adam’s apple is torn out, blood has almost congealed in a pool next to him, his fingers are twisted in wrong angles, his wrists are blue.

Josh banishes the thought that Tyler could do that. This thought is sickening him, he tugs the collar of his uniform up to cover his lower face; Tyler makes him turn away, his hands grip at Josh’s shoulders as they step away from the body.

He’s waiting for it to get up and sprinkle them with a fountain of blood.

“Don’t look, Josh, just don’t look.”

The sirens keep shrilling, their surroundings are still red, the guard’s blood is almost black as Josh jumps over the puddle; Tyler follows him. Tyler’s clothes are clean. Tyler can’t be this clean after killing a man.

“What’s happening?”

Josh hasn’t been aware of the events of the past few days.

“That dude was checking me, but then the power went off, and,” Tyler blurts out. “It’s our chance, we can go to data center, but shit. These collars.”

One second, two, three. They’re going so fast or maybe the flashes just match Tyler’s heartbeat. It’s like a bad action movie, the redness of the interior makes everything surreal.

“We have a chance.” Tyler repeats. “I’ve been listening a lot, and I heard that the mutants have GPS-equipped collars as well. They unlocked the cells, which means we can get lost among them.”

Joining a herd of monsters is Josh’s least favorite thing.

“They can use electroshock.”

“It’s too far.”

They walk a bit more, finding a dead middle-aged man slumped next to the wall in the corridor. Josh’s head feels bigger as the sound doesn’t subside, and the flares of Tyler’s collar on his right only annoy him.

“We need to take them off.”

“But how?”

“This is a problem, Josh.”
This tiny sparkle of a diode shines like a spotlight in the dark; Josh’s yellow hair would have multiplied their visibility. Changing the color was a wise decision even though it’s not the best disguise.

“Come on. Let’s go,” Tyler pushes him out of the bloodied zone.

They wade through the wing of the building, the floors are like huge windows so they can see miles and miles down — there are people, running and trying to get their job done as the signal lamps only shine brighter.

Then, Josh sees the predators — extraterrestrial ones, like a crazy zoo, breaking the furniture and these expensive screens on the walls, the halls are stained with human and their own guts — butchers are fighting their creation. They should’ve been destroyed like a waste, a failed experiment, but they’re still here, getting ready to take over the building. There’s a trace of caked blood on the platform, crimson footprints like a puzzle and an almost disemboweled body like a prize.

It’s one of the dudes who was assisting Tyler’s test.

Josh breathes out through his nose and locks his jaws until his teeth screech — he doesn’t want to be identified by his vomit if he loses it right then and there. He can smell the poison. The nearest body doesn’t have a gun, the holster is empty — if the mutants have learned how to fire guns, the whole isle will be deserted soon.

Tyler stirs Josh past the shattered area in the glass.

“Our plans aren’t this good, I’ll admit it.”

The voices from the end of a corridor make them round the corner and freeze, pressing their backs to one of metal panels; Josh doubles over, his hands on his knees as he learns how not to choke on his fright.

After a short break, they keep moving.

They manage to sneak downstairs where the railings are slick with blood, and the floor below is covered with long dark trails.

“There’s no one,” Tyler says.

No one who’s alive.

Josh doesn’t look at another body when Tyler empties the agent’s pockets and takes out a card. The corpses might become their Eldorado. This one wasn’t that mangled, at least; a wound in the guy’s chest shouldn’t bother him.

“I think he was trying to protect the basement,” Tyler wipes the blood on the corpse’s sleeve. “Which means it can be a basement key, and we can find a safe place to finally sit and think about the shit that’s going on.”

There are no safe places.

They don’t see any bodies as they make the rest of their way — there’s the door, staff only. Josh chuckles to himself. The card works, the basement isn’t painted red. The temperature is critically low, Josh’s teeth chatter.
“It’s not a data center, you know.”

“But they can keep the files here.”

“It’s stupid,” Josh huffs out. “We’ve started our operation early.”

Eerily early.

“It was the only available way. If I remember the map right, there should be a storage room, Josh, I swear, every corporation ever has a storage room where we can find weapons. Did you see their holsters? They’re f-fucking empty.”

Tyler roams the territory; there are long tables that feel cold to the touch.

“It’s not just a basement,” Josh says. He remembers these floors, these tables that were hospital cots before.

Tyler understands him.

“Wow. But the map said there was a basement.”

Well, maybe it is true. Tyler has been there before, he has healed those military guys, all of them, but butchers have turned his brain to a hamburger right after. He might start convulsing if his repressed memories emerge — he shouldn’t be there at all.

Josh puts the card into his pocket and goes to the fridges standing in tight rows. Josh opens one of them: there are vials with blood.

“Do you think it’s yours?”

“I think so,” Tyler shrugs.

“Can we like, take it?” Josh hesitates to reach his hand for the vial. He suddenly thinks of the Saw movie: about syringes, antidotes and razors in the box.

This whole building is a tricky trick.

“Do you think we can find something to undo the collar?”

“This card? Or an axe,” Tyler offers.

The rambling outside makes Josh jump up and slam the fridge shut. The door is closed, but somebody can use the card too, the GPS-sets in their itching necks make it obvious.

“And you wanna start with me?” Josh asks.

“The cards are double-sided.”

Josh follows the train of Tyler’s thought — they might either die together or get free. Or, nothing would happen.

“But it’s the wrong key,” Josh stammers out.

Tyler twists the card between his fingers.

“We’re like fucking flashlights in the dark, Josh.”
Playing with the unknown equipment never ends well. Their lives will not end well.

“Do it.”

Tyler doesn’t waste any more time; he leans against Josh, hugging him and putting his head on Josh’s shoulder to make the collars on their necks connect with each other. There’s probably a detector that lets out a short sound. Josh grips at Tyler’s belt not to let him pull away while he shoves the card in the tight space between the devices.

At first, there is nothing.

Then, Josh’s jaws clench, Tyler’s arms jerk, and there’s a crackling noise, almost like a firewood getting burnt. Doing it standing upright was a mistake, because they end up on the floor anyway, Josh feels like he’s survived a massive blackout, the back of his head aches after hitting it on the floor.

The collar is still wrapped around his neck.

Josh crawls to check Tyler who’s leaning on the table they’ve been standing beside. Tyler is conscious, his nose runs red; he laughs nervously, his whole body shudders at the force of it. Josh is about to clasp his hand over Tyler’s mouth.

The blue flash on his collar doesn’t bother Josh’s eyesight anymore.

“It didn’t work,” Tyler concludes, spitting out a few more giggles.

He wipes his nose, the bleeding stops.

“The diode,” Josh says. “It doesn’t shimmer anymore.”

Tyler raises his head up and massages his temples.

“Oh. Really.”

He sits down onto the table, clamping his hands over his face.

“We need to go,” Josh shakes him slightly. “Somebody’s behind the door.”

They dive underneath the table when the door unlocks — heavy footsteps reverberate through the room, and Tyler hisses out something like ‘count to one and run’ before yanking at Josh’s arm and rolling out of their improvised shelter. It’s not that far from the next door, a simple metal one with shiny bars as handles; Josh kicks it, shoving Tyler into the darkness and covering him from the rear.

There’s a gunshot.

Taken aback, Josh grabs the chair and thrusts its leg into the handles to block the door.

“If it’s the right way, it might lead us to the laboratory. If the password Jenna gave to me is correct, we’ll get inside.”

Josh looks around, seeing the outlines of the glass columns in the dark. There is no fluid inside, but they are full of ribbed tubes; if butchers are going to grow a garden of parasites, it is a perfect place.

“People should be there,” Tyler says. “Agents or guards. They’d never leave their posts even if
there’d been emergency."

There’s a bloody mush on the floor.

“Monsters made them run.”

But they didn’t make it that far.

There are only reserve lights so if the beast is waiting for the moment to attack them, it’s the right time.

Josh quivers at the possibility of revealing more and more dark secrets. They go down the room, staggering along the shelves and chairs turned upside down. Josh’s mind travels back to the conversation with Jesse — he said he wanted help them just to get saved; when the power went out, some of the doors unlocked automatically. But Jesse didn’t look like the dude who could have guts to open the cells with the experimental mutants just to let Josh go. Just to let Josh’s blood go.

There’s another door, there is an intercom next to it, and Tyler thinks hard before entering the password.

He barely manages to jump aside as the door opens.

And Josh’s mouth opens too.

The lights are dirty-green, dripping like slime from the ceiling onto a glass capsule. It’s smaller than the deactivation chamber, that one wouldn’t be suitable for transporting — there’s the body. Josh will never be able to handle the fact that he looks exactly like Tyler. Tyler’s clone, an alien murderer sent by his creators.

Blurryface, Blurry, T-21b — a violent hellish puppet.

Here he is, locked in between transparent walls and not giving any signs of putrefaction. He looks almost peaceful. Almost ready to open his red eyes. His marks are still matching Tyler’s, but he doesn’t have the one on his right arm, those Roman numerals, because he didn’t know that Tyler met his family.

Blurry would have killed them without thinking twice.

His hands and his neck are still black, his chest doesn’t move no matter how alive he seems to be. Tyler comes to the capsule, placing his palm on the front and staring, staring into the depths; it’s the creepiest meeting with a mirror reflection. Blurry is everything Tyler isn’t.

Tyler is mesmerized, his lips are slightly parted and his eyelashes flutter; he doesn’t blink while his fingerprints stain the glass.

“He keeps going,” Tyler says. “He’s dead, but he keeps going anyway.”

Blurry keeps living. He’s just a part of the chain. Just like them.

The liquid is murky, but it doesn’t cover Blurry’s traits. His back isn’t hunched, he was proud to die like this.

“We have same genes, but different powers,” Tyler says. “They wanted to get his strengths and add them to my regeneration, his emotionless to my logic — damn it, Josh, I don’t know. Blurry was unique. We are unique, but it doesn’t match. Something just doesn’t match.”
Blurry and Tyler are trying to kill each other even at the molecular level. And Josh is in the middle of their fight as the only peacemaker; he doesn’t know what kind of a result adding his genes to a mixture would bring.

“I bet they deciphered this fucker’s monstrous DNA,” Josh spits.

Insulting Blurry never makes him feel better. Blurry’s ribs are still fractured, but there are no cadaveric spots on his skin. It’s just impossible, it’s been two years — here’s the progress. He watches them even though his eyes are blurry. His eyes are closed.

Josh curls his lips into a derisive smile; he doesn’t feel like a warrior, but he has no fucks to give.

“What about our next stop?”

Tyler taps his finger against his forehead.

“All the information is here. And we’re heading to data center.”

Maybe, their empathy would do them a favor.

***

The back door lets them go out; the room is connected to a long hallway with the long lamps on the ceiling. And then, there’s a lab — there are open cells with metal bars and tables with the tools laying on them. Josh doesn’t lose his alertness, but it doesn’t save him from getting attacked as soon as he enters the foe’s territory.

“Look!”

He only hears Tyler’s shriek when he’s getting pushed in the chest, he’s flipped over like an ant; here’s a grey face above Josh’s, its mouth drools, and Josh throws a hand in front of himself to protect his skin from getting burned. But the monster takes this gesture its way; Josh cries out a violent don’t while his left forearm is getting tattered by the sharp teeth.

Blue flashes cut askew the darkness.

Tyler is here, four steps away, he takes the scalpel from the tray and tosses it into the creature’s neck. But it seems it dies before the tip of the tool hits the artery — it begins to sprout out yellow foam, and its eyes roll into the back of its head, Josh’s blood is dribbling out of its mouth. Josh covers his face; Tyler kicks the dead mutant, it thuds against the floor next to Josh. He doesn’t listen to what Tyler is saying; he’s all bloody, his hand is aflame; Josh moves like a robot as he heads to the nearest sink and turns the water on. The jet is so thin it barely washes his palms and his face; he’s not clean, he knows.

“It bit me and died.”

Josh feels like throwing up, his lips wobble.

“You’ve got an antidote.”

Tyler takes the scalpel out. The blood spurts at first, draining to a mucous substance on the floor.

“You need to get a knife,” Josh says.
He clutches at the wound in his hand, teeth marks sting, but the monster didn’t get him that deep. All the blood that coats Josh’s skin and his uniform makes his muscles shrink.

He’s a reservoir full of venom.

He is dangerous, and he gets his first gun all of the sudden — robbing corpses is not Josh’s style, but the body with a huge hole in the side doesn’t need the weapon anymore. Josh checks it, it still has four bullets inside, and now their lives rely on four motions.

Josh doesn’t want to shoot with no reason.

But he has to use the gun ten minutes later after Tyler’s hiss watch it — here’s a mutant crawling down the railing like a monkey, and when it’s about to pounce down on them, Josh pulls the trigger. Its head leaks with hideous slime, and Josh runs away with Tyler behind his back; he stops to change their positions, but it doesn’t matter since they have no strict tactics. This encounter has left Josh’s hands bloodied, his mind is dirty too — he’s just killed a former human being, in its evil form, but it was a human nevertheless. And the reason of its transformation is walking beside Josh; Josh wants to pity himself until he faints, he’s really close to it, he’s called himself a killer so many times before, but now it’s true.

He’s almost waiting for his hands and neck to blacken.

And BUTCH is coming through its worst times.

Josh wouldn’t expect running through corridors, away from demonic creatures; the dogs are barking without restraint — they’ve been chasing them by the smell of blood in their veins. And there’s nowhere to hide since they enter the operating room and get under the nearest countertop, crossing their ankles not to let the dogs bite them off. But they’re not just dogs — they’re German shepherds. Or they were German shepherds. They have truly ominous modifications, froth hangs from their bottom teeth as they shove their scrunched up muzzles in the corners. If butchers have Hell’s hounds by their side, Josh has no rabbits in his hat to distract them. He is that rabbit.

Josh kicks his leg as one of the dogs begins to chew his boot and —

It has two heads.

It has two heads and gleaming red eyes, its fangs are razorblades, and the handle of a gun is wet in Josh’s grip. Tyler sits beside and watches, holding the scalpel in a wrong way so it draws blood from his palm. It makes the dogs angrier, they are roaring, the agents are about to get them, but Josh still can’t force himself to shoot.

He can’t.

“Please,” Josh whispers. “Go away.”

He repeats it like a prayer, making their animal brains think.

Three dogs, four heads, all of them are wearing collars.

Tyler’s hand is still bleeding when the two-headed dog nuzzles it, he drops the scalpel onto his thighs. And the dogs stop barking as the mutated one licks a long and thin cut; it disappears underneath its tongue.

“Please.”
The dog licks him once again.

“Go away.”

It then puts its paws on Josh’s shins, its hot breathing burns Josh’s skin where it’s littered with the teeth-marks. The dog doesn’t lick at it, it might kill it. They all are in the same boat, they’re sinking. Josh’s heart races with abnormal speed when the dogs hide their tails between their legs and whine; they’re hurrying away and barking again when it’s safe for Josh to get out from underneath the table. The dogs are guiding the agents on the wrong track.

“They didn’t out us,” Tyler says. “They’re better than humans.”

There’s no cut on Tyler’s palm.

***

The map doesn’t lie about the data center’s location — there is a relatively safe way to enter it.

There’s the ventilation system above their heads, a grey and silver tube, and Josh isn’t sure if it’s a trap. They climb onto the table and then into the vent, Josh pushes Tyler up and then outstretches his hand for Tyler to lift him up. They make their way in silence, occasionally looking down and seeing dogs, agents and mutants, they can get into the tube too; Josh’s heart stops each time he hears the screeching noises. It might be one of them.

The hall below is empty.

Automatic door is like a half-lidded eye, bundles of wires are ripped out of the switchers, but green diodes are still indicating power. The server box is intact, there’s no blood on it. Josh leaves his questions to himself when he notices black boots peeking out from underneath the table. Here are legs, a corpse, its face is maimed; Josh can’t tell if they had long hair and a snapback when they weren’t a pile of dead bones on the floor. Tyler runs to the computer room; BUTCH logo on the monitor gets replaced with the ‘enter the password’ form.

Dull voices fill up the hallway, dogs bark in distance.

“I need to delete all the files,” Tyler mumbles, hitting the keys repeatedly. “And find the reserve copies.”

Aliens hacked VESSEL archive a few years ago and deleted almost 10% of their information; Tyler was the one who was able to stop it back then. Maybe today Tyler is the one who’s able to do it. He turns back to the door way too frequently, Josh does the same — everything about this place makes him insecure.

The barking grows louder.

There’s a gunshot, something lets out an inhuman wail.

“I need time,” Tyler sputters. The bar with 0% pops up then disappears. “Fuck.”

“We don’t have time, for fuck’s sake, Tyler!”

Josh’s next idea is go outside and draw the attention of their persecutors; he staggers to the door to keep an eye on it. The progress line doesn’t move, Tyler opens a black window, adding symbols to
Too slow. If they catch us, they’re gonna stop it, dammit, Josh, why do we always have to miss all the chances?!”

The image of a planet appears on the screen, the numbers drag to 0,02% and stop again. Tyler curses, chewing his lips and trying to reprogram the system, but the only thing he gets is a 0,03% so he bangs his head against the nearest wall.

“It’s going,” Josh looks around frantically. The monsters are coming, too.

Tyler clicks the mouse.

“I’d say no.”

Tyler wouldn’t have definitely said no if they have already deleted some files, but they haven’t done anything compared to what they have to do. It’s an automatic operation, but it still requires a vigilant supervision in case it fails. And they don’t have a spare infinity to control it.

“Come on,” Josh massages Tyler’s shoulders. He’s as tensed as a string.

“I just need more time to figure it out,” Tyler says.

His words open the gates to the Underworld.

“Holy…”

Josh shoves his fist into his mouth not to yell, his injured forearm throbs.

A crooked and gnarled hand with long claws scratches the door at the level of Josh’s neck. Josh bounces away before it leaves a gash in his throat; Tyler rushes across the room, dragging Josh along with him and seemingly forgetting about their interrupted mission.

The mutant gets stuck.

There’s a red button in the wall, and Josh hates it; some of them can make the whole isle explode, but who’d keep this one in the data center. Tyler hits the button with his elbow and locks his hands over his head, but the ceiling doesn’t fall down. The mechanism gets activated despite the monster peeking out of the frame; a heavy side strikes its chest, smashing it, cracking its ribs and leaving it pinned and breathless.

Tyler’s eyes widen; Josh barely swallows bile that gathers in his mouth.

Tyler punches the button two more times for the door to break the rest of its bones. He does it, cold-blooded and calm. And all Josh sees is Tyler’s emotionless face and a crumpled mutant pressed to the doorframe like a leaf hidden between the pages of a book; it is all bloody and muddy, its head hangs limply with its ugly mouth agape. The collar on its neck keeps winking. It’s not decapitated.

Tyler keeps pounding the button, but the door doesn’t move anymore.

The progress bar is frozen at 0,05%.

Tyler is reckless, he offers to get their job done, because there’s a sudden idea of how to speed up the process.
Josh doesn’t want to stay here.

Tyler never listens.

“We have a gun.”

“And like three bullets —”

“And a Mission.”

Josh picks at the scab on his wound. His torn sleeve doesn’t cover it, doesn’t cover the scent.

“I swear I know how to make it work, Josh.”

There’s still a dead monster by the door, there is a corpse, and the progress is at 1.03%. Tyler jumps at the table and makes one of those black system windows appear. Josh feels like a ballast, just watching Tyler raise his hands in a victorious gesture as the progress sprints to 5% and more. And that’s when the radio on the wall begins to spew out cracking sound along with the words. It’s not much of a secret that VESSEL still tries to watch them; their agents have probably been informed by their satellites.

“…el. One-two, one two three? BUTCH, BUTCH… check. It’s VESSEL, it’s VESSEL, do you hear me?”

The voice belongs to a girl, but it sounds nasally as the equipment refuses to work.

Tyler hypnotizes the 7% on the screen.

“…operation. Check. Check, we got a signal, emergency, code red. Code red.”

“Answer,” Tyler grumbles, not turning away from the monitor.

The signal is too weak.

Josh takes the old-fashioned handset next to the dynamics, presses the mic button and says the first words that get into his mind —

“VESSEL, we have a problem.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

“They annoy me those who employ me;  
They could destroy me, they should enjoy me.”

— The Servant, *Cells.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They have a lot of problems.

Mostly, it’s about the thuds of footsteps echoing from behind the door and Tyler’s choked up ‘fuck’ as they get it. Josh is still unsure if VESSEL agents have received their signal.

And, *the footsteps.*

They barely make it to the back door since an automatic one can’t be operated after killing the mutant, but it’s not the worst — the worst, in fact, is that there are two security guards, always on hunt for them. They instantly click the buttons on portative controllers, but the electroshock doesn’t work, neither in Tyler’s collar nor in Josh’s. Josh almost thinks this is the solution. But the agreement they’ve signed said that the butchers can resort to other methods of restraining their hostages. That’s what the agents use — Tasers — barbed probes fly out of the two cartridges, a shocking force bites their chests through their uniforms. A thumping sound from behind delivers more information than the words would do — Tyler has gotten knocked out first, as always, and it happens a second before Josh’s knees buckle and his head smacks against the floor.

He loses consciousness; he can’t be certain if his awakening would bring anything else except pain.

***

“Dun?”

Josh’s eyelids are vacuum-sealed, sticky membranes don’t let him get them opened.

“Holy shit, are you alive?”

The person keeps talking to him, they turn his busted head from side to side. Josh’s sternum hurts, his right hand is either numb or has been amputated already; his eyes are about to burst, the amount of white is too big to bear. He wants to ask them to stop prodding him, but he just blinks instead. There’s a thin ribbed tube connected to his outstretched arm, it feeds a buzzing compressor with his blood, the tube is red. Josh’s sleeve is rolled up, and there’s the IV stand with a bag of colorless fluid that drips into Josh’s vein through the catheter in the back of his hand. There’s a band-aid over it, it’s white. And a little red.
Josh’s shoulder is over-strained, the armrest is too hard, everything in his system is giddy. His internal organs are sleepy, his brain is. His blood gets replaced with saline; Josh’s dreamless slumber could turn to a terminal one.

“Look at me.”

His savior wears a white coat and a medical mask that covers a half of their face. White is disgusting. They turn Josh’s head again, they tell him to not look at the bloody tube, but Josh can’t ignore it. There’s his blood, and there’s a tingle in the crook of his elbow, a thin trail of crimson spills out as the needle gets ripped out not-so-gently. His skin is all bruised as the catheter falls onto the floor.

Josh feels sick.

And the person pulls the mask down.

“It’s me, it’s Mark, do you recognize me?”

Hardly, Josh wants to say.

It’s not his fault he’s almost gotten emptied and he’s gotten hit in his dumb head again. It’s about to split. Mark helps him sit up and pull his legs down the cot, his boots are way too bulky for him to swing his legs with ease.

And the IV stand is still there, and his blood is still outside of him.

“You’re pale.”

Josh is cold; his skin is like a lemon peel lacking any juice.

“Where’s Tyler?”

Josh’s tongue doesn’t want to move.

“Jenna got him. He was alone in the hallway, strapped to the stretcher when we found him. They moved to a safe place, and I had to find... You.”

Jenna. Of course. It was so stupid of Josh to assume that Jenna would stay away from the danger hovering over Tyler. Well, maybe Tyler is indeed safe even though Josh has no idea if there’s a safe place on the isle. Mark keeps working on setting Josh free way too diligently; he takes a flat flask out of his breast pocket and presses it to Josh’s lips.

“Drink.”

Josh pulls away, but Mark’s hand on the back of his neck doesn’t let him.

“What... is this?”

“Herbs.”

Josh doesn’t believe in herbs.

He swallows a warm liquid that is sweet and viscous, it drips off his chin; Josh wipes it and swallows again as it reaches for the bottom of his stomach and rises back up.

“Don’t puke,” Mark tugs at Josh’s hair, making him throw his head back.
Josh thinks Tyler would’ve definitely thrown it back up.

But he shoves his vomit down.

And Mark maneuvers him, Josh leans against, he’s either weightless or too heavy. The walls swim, and Josh feels almost like that one time when he took a dubious pill from the dude in the club a few years ago — he couldn’t make the floors stop leaking with various colors.

They carefully walk past the people lying across the corridor, and it’s too ridiculous considering that the labs have been captured by the monsters. B is lying on its side with the oil leaking out of its chest; it’s broken, and Jesse would be sad about it — Jesse. Josh’s promises are as broken as B is. He looks at the android, because it’s a better view than the bloodied assistants with the darts in their necks.

“They’re still breathing,” Mark says. “I got the job done.”

As they stagger down the hallway, Josh notices the outlines of a rifle underneath Mark’s white coat; he sheds it off and aims for the shadows. Josh hides behind, his gun has been stolen.

“Don’t fire with no reason.”

Mark doesn’t shoot anyone as they roam the lab territory, there’s no one.

“Some of the butchers have been evacuated when the emergency happened.”

Josh loses his ability to speak.

“Our satellite got a signal, and we tried to send it back — they sent a helicopter immediately, and I swear I’m gonna kill this fucker Skipper when I see him again.”

Mark keeps his finger on the trigger as they walk.

“Who strapped Tyler then?” Josh asks. He still can’t make himself think about it.

“Will it be odd if I say mutants?”

“Come on, they have claws.”

“They need serum in the moments of their sanity,” Mark guesses.

“There are still agents,” Josh argues. “They threw us out like trash. This whole isle is a trashcan.”

His speech is interrupted by the loud slap; Mark doesn’t aim twice before shooting dead the silhouette in the end of the hallway — a big head, long limbs, human traits are wiped off.

“We need to leave the building, the helicopter is waiting,” Mark informs him.

Josh rubs his neck, the collar is abnormally warm.

“I don’t know how to take it off,” he says blankly. Fuck BUTCH.”

He’s sure they’re about to step onto the bomb or something like that. No one is going to let them leave.

Mark smiles.
“Well. There’s no BUTCH anymore.”

***

Death doesn’t seem so scary anymore. Josh is glad he hasn’t puked yet; Mark knows the shortest way — there’s a basement and an unlocked door — and here’s the air that smells like salt and ocean. It’s early in the morning, the sun is still half hidden behind the horizon. Josh is ready to see Tyler if he’s already recovered after the faint.

But there’s no Tyler as they leave the building.

“Jenna?”

Josh didn’t expect to see her without him.

“I’m gonna explain, I’m—”

“Where’s he?!“ Josh shouts. “Where’s he?” he doesn’t care that it doesn’t help Jenna finish. He grabs her by the shoulders and shakes her, not getting what she tries to say.

“Stop,” Mark drags him away from Jenna.

Josh isn’t going to fight her.

“Where’s Tyler?”

“I couldn’t stop him, Josh, we can control everything, and it was his idea—”

“Stop blaming everything on Tyler!”

Josh looks around and doesn’t see a helicopter on this side.

“He went back to data center. Him and Merrick, because Merrick got a program that can delete BUTCH archive, and Tyler is the one who can install it. I wanted to go with them, but they pushed me out of the door and locked it. It’s not this polite, you know.”

“Why,” Josh covers his face with his hands. “Holy shit, why.”

“Because your families still need to live their lives when it’s over? No matter whether it’s a happy ending or not.”

“Dammit. I hope it’ll be a happy ending for Tyler.”

Josh doesn’t count Merrick.

He doesn’t trust him.

“How could you let him do that,” Josh spits.

And Jenna doesn’t try to excuse herself anymore.

“They said it’s gonna take less than an hour.”

“And what’s then? Gonna go and check it?”
Jenna keeps looking at the ground.

“Yes. We can’t lose him.”

Performing the mission when the isle and their organizations are dying is vile. Tyler once said he would kill for Jenna, and killing BUTCH is something that looks like a physical form of his words.

“We’re waiting ten minutes and then I come in,” Mark says.

Josh raises his head up.

“Me too.”

He’s still weak after the blood loss, and these black spots mottle his vision every so often. But no one says ‘you’re not coming with us.’

It’s their collective stupidity.

***

Their collective stupidity grows into a group hallucination. Tyler has already hacked the archive, but now they need to end its existence; it can stop Tyler’s existence as well. And Merrick is locked up there, VESSEL has always been using Tyler just for fun.

They didn’t count one more factor that is a fundamental one.

The sky is as bright as thousands of suns, it makes them cover their eyes at its majesty. The reality gets distorted again, and an invisible barrier pushes them away from the door, away from the building — Josh has felt like this before, the sense of his bones being pressed into his flesh, but he was able to fight back the last time it happened.

The ray of light can fight the gravity.

Josh doesn’t know people around him. He doesn’t know anyone, this is the light, as white as a stream of snowflakes with sharp edges. They burn Josh’s eyes, he cries unwittingly, but his tears come out dry.

Somebody pushes him and they run, the laser hits the place where they had been standing before. The asphalt bubbles up like an overcooked pie that’s lost its shape, and they keep rushing away from the laboratory. Josh falls but not because he’s clumsy — he trips over his thoughts about Tyler.

“He’s still inside!” Josh cries out.

Extraterrestrial roaring is the answer.

“He’s inside, let me go!”

Josh gets up and runs to the light but only hits the wall — it’s transparent and thick, and his face bumps into it, blood oozes out from his nose. He slaps the barricade with his palms, his skin is scorched; it’s a violent act of evacuation, they’re locked up inside of a huge dome along with butchers.

With people who have just been performing their tasks.
Just like Blurry.

The air is rippled and wrinkled; it blocks out some of the light so Josh can look up even though the knows what he’s about to see —

He sees a spaceship in the sky, a giant flat and round object slashes the clouds; it’s gray with the diodes lined up the bottom panel and with a shiny beam below. It’s radioactive probably. Josh wipes his blood, it stains the dome in front of him; he sees Jenna with her mouth open and Mark with his head thrown back.

They’re armed, but they can’t fight against these forces.

Josh squints his eyes in helpless hopes of spotting Tyler somewhere beside him, but there’s nothing, and Josh is paralyzed again. Then, there’s the voice inside his head, ringing in his ears like a telepathic bell.

“We thought your planet was a suitable place for colonization. We thought you were open for experimenting, but you’re not capable of keeping things under control, and our Mission has been failed due to your mistakes. We came with peace, but you were the ones who started the war. We were just obligated to fight back after all, now we’re taking back everything we’ve left there.”

With this being said, they aim the ray of light onto the building.

They’re going to destroy the laboratory along with the monsters.

Along with Tyler inside.

They’re still being kept outside of the plague.

“You didn’t save them, our spies and Contactees — their death would be their salvation. From now on, we’re going to work with different planets and civilizations.”

It goes straight to Josh’s head — they’ve been trying to kill Tyler before, they’re going to take up arms for killing Blurryface, and —

This is the end of the world, of their little world at least.

Josh thrashes inside of his hamster ball, his hands gets stuck in it, he’s one of the Contactees as well — everyone is now, Mark, Jenna, Merrick who is still in the lab — all of them are dead now, and the building begins to crumble as the ray of light hits through the glass and metal. Then, there’s the explosion, the building folds in on itself, entombing the monsters, corpses and the living ones.

“We are finishing our experiment.”

The aliens didn’t have to transmit these words into Josh’s ears, because everything gets so painfully obvious. They’ve ruined everything and they take the dome away, the air is dusty and hot, the fire catches the crooked side of the building — the spaceship is still there as it keeps shooting gleaming streamlets into what once was BUTCH headquarter.

Tyler’s reckless decision now seems even stupider.

Josh has never known that destroying the aggressor could be this easy.

He’s about to die when he catches a figure plodding out of the building — a man drags another one on his shoulders, using a fireman’s carry; they keep moving stubbornly as the ceilings above them
fall down and almost hit them with debris and metal.

“Tyler!”

Josh is not allowed to scream as Mark and Jenna try to hold him back, but he manages to cross the line, and his assumptions are proved correct. It’s Merrick carrying Tyler thrown over his shoulder, and there’s the blood on their uniforms; Josh can’t get it if Tyler is still breathing, because his head is a mess of red and black, both ashes and blood, and it gets onto his neck and on Merrick’s arms as if they’re trying to copy Blurry’s style.

He’s dead, but not forgotten.

“Tyler!” Josh keeps yelling, his voice goes hoarse.

And they don’t let him look at Tyler’s body in Merrick’s arms, they twist his head, and Josh feels betrayed. Something pops, and Jenna has one more scarf trick up her sleeve — this time it’s a glass capsule with the needle in the end of it; it punctures Josh’s neck while Mark holds him tightly. Josh doesn’t understand what’s happening at first, the world loses its legibility, and he sees Merrick shaking his head as he drops Tyler onto the ground.

Red, Josh hates red more than he hates white.

And the sedative kicks in, tossing Josh’s brain from side to side as the isle keeps burning. He chokes, he coughs, but he can’t scramble out of this blatant trap.

He doesn’t hear anything.

***

The wall behind Josh’s back is cold, his legs ache due to being pulled up to his chest for too long. He hasn’t changed his position in hours, speechless and empty, as he gazes at a grey panel in front of him.

“We couldn’t affect it.”

Jenna’s sitting beside him, her thigh touches his; her hand touches his, and she’s as cold as everything there. Josh vaguely remembers being transferred to the military hospital along with the agents, because when he woke up they were already above the ground. He panicked.

And he’s still panicking, on silent mode.

There’s the backpack that used to be Tyler’s when they were still hiding at VESSEL; the agents grabbed their things when they came to rescue. It didn’t work, and Josh can’t even look at Tyler’s things now, at this a little ripped off strap and old bloodstains. Tyler had never washed this bag, it holds too many memories.

Memories.

Josh’s brain is a pus-coated wound.

“It’s over.”

Everything has changed.
Josh wants to hug Tyler’s backpack and sob. He doesn’t care he’s almost done it in a helicopter; his body hurts all over — there’s no inch of his skin that wouldn’t be covered in bruises.

Jenna has a wide scratch across her cheekbone.

Josh is supposed to lay on his cot in his hospital ward at the moment, but disturbing thoughts about Tyler didn’t let him stay there. He kicks the backpack angrily, and Jenna moves it out of Josh’s reach.

“I shouldn’t have let him do that. But I couldn’t stop him, Josh.”

Josh jabs the backpack like a punching bag.

“Stop talking about Tyler as if he’s dead.”

Jenna bites her tongue.

“He didn’t recognize me,” Josh rubs his eyes, almost gouging them out. “He doesn’t remember me anymore, fuck it, Jen, he doesn’t.”

Jenna quickly wipes her face with her sleeve — it comes away damp.

“He was awake for like two seconds.”

“No, it wasn’t because of that,” Josh interrupts her. “He didn’t recognize me.”

Josh will never forget this look.

Tyler hasn’t died yet, but something inside of him has — Josh was all woozy during the flight, and Tyler was motionless, stripped out of his bloodied uniform while Jenna was pressing a cloth down to the gash in his temple. And he woke up just to blindside Josh with an oblivious glance before losing consciousness again.

The more Josh thinks about it the more painful it gets.

“Josh, we…” Jenna pats Josh’s shoulder. “We can make it through this. He’s strong, you’re strong, he’s going to get his memories back, just stop saying that he doesn’t remember you. We don’t know anything yet.”

“It’s still possible.”

“You can still handle it—”

“Handle? Are you fucking serious?” Josh throws her hand off his shoulder. “Do you want me to keep coping with it after breaking my life? No, our lives. I’d prefer to keep living like before, or — I’d better die on that godforsaken isle rather exist like this. You love him, it’s so fucking obvious, but so do I — but have you ever thought about me? Love is not a cure to everything, and I will never know the way Tyler will think about me when he’s awake — if they haven’t put him into a coma, you know? And what if they have? Am I supposed to bear this shit just because you and your incompetent colleagues turned him to a vegetable while battling for your selfish interests? Why do you think that calling me strong makes me stronger? I’m not strong, I will not leave him, just because I can’t, but it will always be your fault. I’m dealing with this shit since I was thirteen and my Contact happened, but I’d prefer to never get back to this, because the memory-erasing thing worked so fucking well!”
Josh’s brakes are broken; he’s speeding up, and Jenna is that deer he’s about to crash his car against.

“Your agents acted like a group of stupid alien hunters. I’m so fucking happy BUTCH has died in ruins. I hope something like that happens to VESSEL one day.”

He finishes his speech with a loud gasp. Jenna’s face doesn’t express anything.

“I know,” she just says. “I’m gonna stay by your side even if you’re gonna have to introduce yourself to Tyler again. Even if you’ll kill me for that.”

And then, they keep silent like offended kids.

And the doctors are fighting for Tyler’s life.

Josh prays for his abilities again and again. Such a massive Contact has happened, and if Tyler is about to get marked, his skin is gonna turn to the ink-adorned artwork.

***

“He’s awake.”

A semi-conscious Josh is curled on the floor, not having any desire to keep up the conversation with Jenna. The door next to Josh’s shoulder bangs against the wall.

“He’s awake,” the Doctor repeats. “You can visit him.”

Josh isn’t happy.

‘Awake’ doesn’t mean ‘he remembers me’.

Josh is shaking nervously as he enters Tyler’s hospital ward, and Jenna breathes into his neck, probably too afraid to meet Tyler right now. And Josh feels like he’s seeing him for the first time — Tyler’s powers have worked just right, and the wound in his temple doesn’t look like it might let his brain just fall out of it. He’s forced to lie on his stomach since his back and neck are covered with half-popped half-healed blisters, glistering as the lights touch them.

Tyler’s ankle is broken, hidden in a bracer with sticky patches.

And Tyler’s eyes are closed so the Doctor has probably lied to them —

“Where’s that freight train?”

Tyler’s voice is a light vibration.

Josh is flabbergasted.

“What? The freight train?”

“It knocked me over.”

“Oh. It was the ceiling. And it fell. On top of you.”

Tyler opens his eyes and shakes his head with a wince.
“Wow.”

The collars are still strangling their necks; Tyler touches it before turning to Josh again.

“I lost the ring you gave me.”

He shows his left hand to Josh, his fingers are burnt and bloodied, but he hasn’t lost any of them, at least. And he’s still aware of their awkward engagement. Josh takes a different look at the tattoos on Tyler’s chest, that one with triangles might form an hourglass, it’s running out of time*. And Blurry’s time has already ran out.

“Do you know what happened?” Josh changes the topic.

“Not really. But there was Merrick, our hate is endless, like, has something changed? He was hauling me with my head down,” Tyler tries to sit up; Josh gives him a shoulder to prop himself against. “They didn’t get my ankle in a cast. It’s gonna take two days. Maybe three. Have you seen all of my injuries?”

“I have,” Jenna says.

“They were terrible. They hurt.”

Josh is about to say that they’re strong, they’re gonna handle it, because this stereotypical shit is the only shit that comes to his mind. But the door opens again, and the same man comes in — Dr. Thomas, his nametag reads.

“You have a visitor,” he says.

Tyler’s glance is not as close as friendly.

“I don’t want to see anyone.”

“I know,” Dr. Thomas nods. “But Mr. Hoppus has just arrived.”

Jenna straightens up her back as she hears this name.

“Let him in.”

No one asks for their permission anymore.

There are important news to come.

Mr. Hoppus wears a white visitor’s coat and thick-rimmed glasses; he hugs Jenna tightly as soon as he walks in.

“Good job, Black.”

She nods silently, sitting down on a crooked chair and placing her hands on her lap.

“Now let’s talk about you,” Hoppus says firmly. “Let me introduce myself at first — I’m Mark Hoppus, the head of VESSEL, and I’m here to listen to all the curses you’ve been holding for so long. Also, I was the one who drove you to VESSEL spare location that day. Nice to meet you.”

His hand is hard and strong, but he doesn’t look like a person who enjoys snapping people’s necks. He mostly looks like a successful businessman getting ready for a colloquium. Tyler shakes his hand, too, leaving a small smear of a healing gel on Hoppus’s fingers.
“I got something for you.”

He pulls a flat key out of his pocket and presses it to Josh’s collar; Josh tenses up waiting for the electric discharge, but the only thing that happens is a low beeping. Then he feels his skin start to breathe as the collar is being unlocked and removed from his throat. Tyler ducks his head obediently while Hoppus works on his collar then giving both of them to Jenna.

“Keep this trophy.”

They have so many trophies already.

“Well, I think it’s pointless to apologize?” Hoppus says, looking at Tyler.

He raises his eyebrow.

“I think it’s pointless to ask you to leave?”

Hoppus chuckles.

“Yes.”

“Nevermind then.”

“Where did you get the card-key? Skipper said he only had one,” Josh says.

Skipper is such a blabbermouth. Hoppus gives him a devilish grin.

“I got it from Skipper, I swear, he doesn’t need it anymore.”

Jenna leans in along with the chair.

“What do you mean?”

“Tim Skipper,” Hoppus takes his iphone. “Died in an accident trying to escape from the headquarter,” he shows them a gallery on the screen. “Super secret files hidden from the police and so on.”

There’s a picture of a pale body with a hole from the bullet in his forehead, his fashion icon hairstyle is littered with chunks of his brain. Josh can only imagine how blown-up the back of his head would look like so he turns away from the screen when Hoppus pulls up another picture.

“BUTCH is ruined along with the reputations of the ones who survived,” he says. “It’s gonna take a lot of time to make VESSEL work again, but firstly — moral and material compensation. Technically, you’ve been working for us so you’re gonna get paid.”

Josh hasn’t even thought of his bank account.

And Tyler has a different question.

“And what about Blurry’s body?”

“He’s been dissected to atoms, thank God.”

Hoppus is about to cross himself.

“And our families?”
“Been evacuated by our agents when the spaceship caused a bustle. A shining sphere was visible above the forest, we spotted it near the towns where your parents live. We managed to get them out of the dangerous zone before they got in contact with the light. Let’s call it our witness protection program.”

Josh’s heart drops.

And Tyler thinks hard.

“I didn’t get marked,” he says. “Everyone on the isle was a Contactee, but I haven’t gotten any new marks, how is it possible?”

“There was also the dome,” Josh responds. “I think it blocked off the waves. They didn’t need to get so many Contactees at once.”

Tyler touches the burns on his shoulder, pink areas are way too visible.

“You’re recovering so quickly.”

“I’m lucky,” Tyler says.

Merrick and some of the agents haven’t been covered with the dome, and this might bring serious troubles; but the aliens have already let them know this game is over so maybe they can not consider all those people Contactees. Maybe, they don’t even need Tyler as an indicator anymore, he’s an expired gleamer.

Hoppus gets a call and leaves without excusing himself.

And Tyler adds —

“I have no idea what happened to me.”

***

Tyler doesn’t remember a lot of things — his mobile laboratory or when he sold that travel trailer he loved so much. He remembers how he met Josh, because he got marked that day — he remembers all of his marks. But no proper facts mentioned, and Josh doesn’t push him when Tyler tells him so; Tyler is recovering bit by bit, and maybe his memory would be the last thing to get repaired. Tyler’s broken ankle heals within three days, his left shin is still a little swollen, but the bone isn’t fractured anymore; his temple looks better than ever — it’s creepy, the way his skin sews itself, and the scab begins to flake off his bare back.

“It’s unbelievable,” Dr. Thomas wonders. “Best case in my career.”

Josh wants to punch him for these words. Tyler is not anyone’s case.

Wounds turn to grazes, and grazes don’t look that bad when they’re finally allowed to leave the hospital, as secret as VESSEL and BUTCH labs. They meet Jesse in the waiting room, he doesn’t look like the living dead anymore.

“Thanks for your blood, pal,” Jesse says with a wide smile.

B is tottering along with him, its chest is bandaged with a thick layer of duct tape and a cracked display shows a ‘thanks’.
“I’m glad it helped.”

Josh is tired of being polite to everyone.

They’re used to taking so many flights within past few months, and that’s when Josh discovers that their families have spent a week in the bunker underneath the town — it belongs to VESSEL, but there was a global hunt. And saving them was Josh’s last wish. If the aliens wouldn’t have protected the isle with the dome, there would be too many Contactees, and they would’ve gotten killed by somebody afterwards.

Duns and Josephs are back in their houses by the time Josh and Tyler get discharged from hospital — they arrange a family dinner, with all of their family members as special guests.

They’re in Josh’s car; Josh has never been happier to grip at the steering wheel again.

“I’m nervous,” Tyler says.

Josh doesn’t wear his ring anymore, keeping it in the box and waiting for better times to come. They all meet in Josh’s parents’ house celebrating their little nothing — all of them have survived, and Chris shakes Tyler’s hand and hugs him and calls him son.

“I’m so proud of you,” he says.

Josh’s father says the same.

Neither of them mentions bullying their sons for not being like the others, for Josh’s repressed memories surfacing or for Tyler’s eccentric way to express himself. They just don’t talk about it, and everything is so bittersweet Josh excuses himself and leaves, standing in the backyard where all of it started in the first place.

“They’ve signed the papers,” Tyler says.

Of course, Tyler wouldn’t stay with them without Josh.

“They’re not allowed to bring it up, can you believe?”

Josh leans on the railings, looking up at the sky.

“Do you think the aliens have signed the papers as well?”

Tyler smiles crookedly.

“Who knows.”

They listen to the trees rustling and to the chirr of cicadas mixed with the laughing and voices coming from the living room. They’re alive, they’re under the government’s protection from now on, and their bank accounts can let them buy new houses and start a new life if they want.

VESSEL is making amends as hard as it can.

When they enter the house again, there’s a small I WANT TO BELIEVE party as stereotypical as it seems — there’s the poster, and Josh’s parents hold it along with his siblings. They smile, finally taking Josh’s quirks right.

“We shouldn’t have done that,” his mother says.
He knows it’s about therapy and stuff.

It’s not a secret anymore.

His father has way too many grey hairs.

Josh doesn’t want to say something about ‘we all make mistakes’ because his mental health is not a toy to get thrown away. He’s upset. He’s upset when Tyler gets asked for joining his own family; Tyler wordlessly hugs Maddy, shaking his head then shrugging.

It’s weird.

It’s weird, and Kelly hands them their *family portrait* — it’s a surreal picture of them covered with stars, with their *zodiac signs*. Josh’s features are sprinkled with cosmic dust, and Tyler’s marks gleam golden.

“I made it for you,” Kelly beams, her smile is confined between the wrinkles in the corners of her mouth. Kelly has changed her usual country-style by cutting her hair; her hairdo now looks almost like Laura Dun’s one. Josh thinks that his and Tyler’s mothers have a chance to befriend each other and maybe even share a cup of coffee afterwards.

Kelly keeps grinning.

They thank her in unison.

But they aren’t renewed enough to neglect the weight of their old life.

**Epilogue**

It’s just one of those average days when Tyler’s showering takes much more time than necessary. Josh can still hear the water running, rills smashing the sink, but he can’t hear *Tyler*.

Josh isn’t worried, no.

Tyler doesn’t come out.

Still *not shaken*, Josh knocks at the door; he gets nothing.

“Tyler?”

The water keeps abusing the sink.

Tyler never locks the door anymore. That’s the rule since that one time he fainted there; Josh had to break into the bathroom back then, and now these emotions return. Josh doesn’t think twice before throwing the door open, he sees red; red in front of his eyes, shapeless drops on the floor and on the sink. Tyler doesn’t even try to clean all the red color, staining his face and neck, staining *everything* there.

Josh wants to scream and weep and shake Tyler, but his hysteria won’t help.

“Cool guys don’t wipe the blood?” he asks instead.

Tyler’s nose is an open wound.
“I tried to… remember.”

Josh’s heart cries loudly.

The nosebleed is a snare Tyler gets into each time his mind drifts back to those events, to the fight with aliens.

“Tyler —”

“Sorry.”

Tyler is sitting in the corner, head rested on the side of the washer. If the washer was turned on, Tyler’s brain would’ve turned to a bunch of mashed potatoes. Josh crawls to sit beside him, to pick a bloodied towel off the floor. Tyler turns away but doesn’t ask Josh to leave.

“I saw a white room,” Tyler sniffles. “But I don’t even remember that I shouldn’t remember that.”

The sight of blood on Tyler’s nose, on his lips and teeth is disgusting. He holds his palm underneath his chin, red slime fills it up like a cup.

“These flashbacks just keep coming, and I can’t stop them,” Tyler exhales wetly. “It hurts me.”

Tyler’s head injury is not the only thing that could cause this. There was a huge splash of energy, and Tyler was inside of its epicenter.

And it hurts Josh, too.

“Breathe with me, Ty.”

Tyler’s grey t-shirt has turned to black as the blood has soaked through the fabric; he grips at the hem, his fists leave bloody prints on his joggers.

“You’re thinking too much.”

“Because it hurts so much.”

Tyler folds the towel to find clean areas on it, pressing it to his nose. Tyler’s blood is contagious; it gets onto Josh’s skin. It makes him want to scratch the holes in his body to get rid of it.

Tyler is a poison. Josh is a remedy.

“I want to help.”

Tyler pinches his nostrils.

“You’re helpin’.”

“Don’t throw your head back.”

White spots on the towel aren’t pristine anymore as it covers Tyler’s mouth and his nose. The tiles keep drinking Tyler’s blood.

“I’m tired,” Tyler mutters. “All the things I’ve ever l-learned, I learned from pain,” he presses himself to Josh; it’s a repetitive part. “I’m sick of it.”

There’s still too much blood, but Tyler is oddly calm, he’s fully conscious though his speech is
“We’re gonna be okay.”

Tyler shakes his head.

“Let’s drive away?” he rasps out. “Please? Let’s take your car, and… This apartment is suffocating me, don’t you see?”

“I see.”

Josh’s voice is too loud against the void.

Tyler’s words swim past his ears. Josh has always wanted to travel, to see the cities and maybe countries, and the air there is smothering him, too. Though it’s Tyler who’s choking on his own thoughts now, his brain is broken beyond repair. Tyler is pale, with bruises under his eyes and with the blood caked underneath his nose; a large red stain on the towel is an evidence.

“We n-need to change something.”

“We’ll change everything.”

Josh is always up to build a tower of promises.

There’s a feverish gleaming in Tyler’s eyes, a short wave of golden shining flashes through his tattoos. Tyler smiles timidly, lazy trails of blood keep coming out of his nostrils.

Josh has an idea.

***

They’re delaying the wedding. Again. But instead, they take all the money they have saved and earned; they take their cards and sell Josh’s car, buying a minivan with the place in the back.

“I need some time,” that’s how Josh explains his suddenly needed vacation to his boss.

Tyler says the same.

They just need to unwind after living in the town that holds so many dark mysteries.

“I miss my trailer since you told me I had it,” Tyler utters, lugging their bags into the backseat. “I don’t remember much of it, but I’m sure it was a safe place.”

Car keys jingle in Josh’s palm.

“We’ll find a new safe place.”

Jenna asks them to call her every day.

It doesn’t take much of a preparation, just a mattress and a bunch of pillows to construct a makeshift bed, just a ‘Mom we’re going to travel’ and ‘no, we aren’t breaking up’. Tyler doesn’t explain to the Josephs what they’re doing. He has only somehow made friends with Maddy; Kelly and the others can’t crack his shell.
Steering wheel is like a wheel of Fortune.

“Ready?” Josh asks.

Tyler grins.

“Ready.”

Josh starts the engine, this minivan is their first family car; there are hundreds of roads waiting for them, hundreds of motels and adventures. The wind hits through an open window, and they’re driving nowhere.

Or, they’re driving *somewhere*.

***

*Gram* jumps into their journey on their way to Oklahoma, during the stop at a gas station. Tyler is the first who spots the hustle — a bunch of guys are trying to shove a firecracker into a stray dog’s mouth.

“What the fuck?” Josh yells; the dog whines, its jaws are still trapped in the guy’s hand.

They jeer, tossing the lighter with the fire flickering.

“Problems, buddy?”

Josh is grateful he had spent his time training at VESSEL; it definitely helps him win a short fight and defend a poor animal — the dog nuzzles his blackeye ten minutes later while Tyler drives. Getting a little beaten was an accident since Josh was outnumbered; Josh laughs as a golden retriever sneezes at his face, then licking his cheeks and shaking his head.

“He wants to go with us.”

The dog barks cheerfully.

“Gram,” Tyler says, speeding up. “Grammy.”

They give him a name of a music award, because Tyler has refused to call him *Meeko*.

“Okay, Gram,” Josh sighs. “You’re our new best friend now.”

Gram doesn’t respond, chewing on the leftover of Josh’s burger.

They make their abstract way, they eat junk food in the roadside hash houses, they spend the nights in dog-friendly motels. They see a fancy side of the world, full of lights — ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds call for them along with long walks and midnight conversations.

In Houston, Tyler goes to a Tattoo Removal Clinic to get rid of one of his chest-tattoos and causes a major power outage. He stays marked.

And, there are even more roads, and three of them against the world — three of them plus Jenna on the screen of Tyler’s phone. They stop the van to talk to her as their daily routine, the signal is weak; Josh doesn’t see much of the background, but he can still recognize dim flashes and a music pounding.
“Where are you?”

“At the club,” Jenna shrugs with an innocent smile. “One of Mark’s friends throws a Birthday party.”

Tyler raises his eyebrows when Jenna clues him into the situation; there’s another detail Josh notices.

“Your hair. It’s pink.”

The music gets louder; Jenna tilts her head forward, faded-pink strands almost touch the screen.

“It’s pink,” she confirms.

Tyler chuckles.

“Blue, now pink. It suits you.”

Josh ruffles his hair — he doesn’t dye it anymore, his natural color is back. He really wants to chant about Jenna’s new style, but that’s when Gram jumps onto his lap, drooling all over Tyler’s phone.

“Say hi to Grammy,” Tyler pats Gram’s head. “He adopted us.”

Jenna throws her thumbs up.

And Josh can’t believe it’s his new life.

Two hours later, they’re driving past the woods, thick pine trees cover up the secrets of this place; Tyler stares at it wordlessly, and Josh stops the van to let him think. They climb into the backseat; the stars are gleaming, but Tyler’s marks remain plain black. And Josh likes it, Gram licks them, and Tyler pats his head. Tyler doesn’t tell him if his memories have gotten back, he smiles and says —

“It’s like a honeymoon trip, but better.”

“Yeah,” Josh agrees. “Much better.”

And Josh is so stupidly unmindful, mentally repeating to himself that everything is okay just for now.

And it’s okay.

They don’t look at the sky anymore, but it doesn’t matter — the sky looks down at them.

Chapter End Notes

* hourglass tattoo
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this is not a story about the losers trying to save the world; this is a story about the losers who are scared shitless.
this is it. they deserved the ending like this, i think. it's been 2 years of me working on
this series, and it's all over now. i still have some things to say, but i'd prefer them to stay in my head. i wrote an epilogue last february, before a puppy Jim appeared; i somehow predicted his breed but i didn’t want to change Gram’s name bc i created him soon after they won Grammy.

thanks to everyone who’s been sticking around, special thanks to PantaloonWarrior and searein--

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moodboard

art by searein

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somebody asked me to make a list of tyler's marks/tattoos so here it is

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