When the world ends Five finds all manner of things from the wreckage. A smashed-in radio; a showerhead; a toy action figure with the face melted off. There comes a phase where he collects them religiously, tokens of a sacred world salvaged only in rusted car parts and charred copies of *Crime and Punishment* and cigarette lighters. It doesn’t last very long. An adolescence, perhaps. Eventually the load grows heavier than what its weight is worth. He leaves most of it behind in the ruins of a building that might once have housed a museum, or a mausoleum. It doesn’t matter, either
way. He’s onto something, combing through his calculations like a prophet sifting through dead entrails for divinity. He’ll return this rubble to the world, himself along with it. This is a more productive burden, if not any easier to carry; a grim-faced task he takes on with both hands. He tells it to Delores sometimes, like a promise, or a story.

Much later Allison will visit Vanya one pale afternoon and startle at the soft brush of their fingers as she accepts the cup of tea with both hands, open-palmed to receive. Not at the coldness of Vanya’s skin but the touch of it, for once not in bloodied pain or clumsy panic. Only incidental: a consequence of closeness. Tender was not a word they knew as children, too focused on all the minutiae of other things achievable by a body, the spin of knives and numbers. But still they were capable of it: hushed laughter past midnight and smuggled moments in a tent and all number of clapping games invented in boredom to occupy their hands. It makes sense. They were better at everything as children, after all, and this is no different.

But if she knew it once, then she still has it in her, now. Allison reaches out, lays her palm across Vanya’s.

“Thank you,” Allison says. It still hurts her throat to speak sometimes, though the wound was undone. Only an old phantom ache; just another memory. A reminder, perhaps. She doesn’t say anything else. Lately, she has begun to think that this is what it means, to be believed: leaving her own faith up in the air to be met halfway. The certainty of all the games they played when they were younger. Hand meets hand and strikes like a bell.

They sit there for a while, not in silence but in quiet. Breeze stirring through the open window.

“I’ve been working on a new song,” Vanya offers, eventually.

Allison breaks into a slow smile, childlike urge too strong to be contained. The body remembers joy. Among all other things.

“Please,” Allison says. “I would love to hear it.”

She holds the cooling cup in her hands, and listens.

“Where do you go when you’re not with me,” Klaus asks early on, and Ben finds that he doesn’t know. Resents that void for the longest time, being stuck on the wrong side of the static, dragged along as though by string, a drifting balloon tied to Klaus’ finger. Later he will find it’s not so bad as the alternative. At least this way, he can stay afloat. But it will take him a long time to accept this, and longer still to be grateful.
Being dead is not much different from being alive, in that his work goes mostly unnoticed and unrewarded. Ambitions of trying to lift a glass of water turn into trying to spill it, if just to feel the wetness on the skin, hear the resounding shatter. The glass remains unmoved; whole. In the end Klaus is the only witness of his failures, and to both Ben’s immense annoyance and relief he does not pretend to have not seen, making idle commentary, the occasional disparaging remark. It’s enough evidence of his efforts to keep Ben trying, for a little while, at least.

Klaus calls it a lost cause, but then again, Klaus gives up easier than most. It’s late one night when he finally says it, slumped in an alleyway behind a club pumping loud as a frenzied heart. “What do you want, Ben,” Klaus slurs, eyes fluttering closed, and Ben clenches his fists at his sides, a gesture he can no longer feel, only echo in muscle memory. Wouldn’t that be easy: a pinpoint answer that can be unravelled like a loose thread, setting him free. Instead he is knotted tight in the memories of his own making, of a life that refuses to let him go. What use is a ghost with nothing to want, no good reason to haunt. Only holding relentlessly onto itself, or to the next closest thing, perhaps: a brother.

Klaus is growing up, tall and hollow and frightfully thin, collarbones like fishhooks in his skin. Ben can’t see his own reflection in a mirror, has no frame of reference save for the height at which he can still look Klaus in the eyes. Maybe one day Ben will finally disappear, or maybe he, too, will only continue to grow; not like a living thing, but the rot that clings to it, monstrous as the body he left behind. The possibilities fill him with dread, or something worse: a bitter vindication. He isn’t sure which is which. For now he lingers by Klaus’ body long after he dwindles finally into a restless sleep, and waits to find out.

After a while, Ben reaches out, and settles a hand over Klaus’ brow, feverish in sleep. It’s useless to think that Klaus could feel it, like this, through the death and the dreams between them. He does it anyway.

In the immediate aftermath of their return they still stay in their house, each of them, as though uncertain of where else to go. Vanya has never found this place comforting until now, perhaps because she has brought it down in another time, ceilings to foundation, brick by brick. Fitting that this is what it takes, for her to rest easy in her room at night: the knowledge that these walls cannot hurt her anymore, and perhaps never could. Still, she refrains from sharing this thought with the others.

The others. Allison, who is relieved to have her here, she can tell. Five and Klaus accept her easily; Diego a little wary, as though she has surprised him in some way. Only Luther actively avoids her. Like he can hide, in these halls, in his body. They end up running into each other in their father’s study, a fact Vanya will later remember and find amusing. For now, she only stares at him from her spot behind the desk, in the high-backed chair their father once loved so dearly. She had been curious to see if the world looked any different from it. It doesn’t.

“Oh,” Luther says, blinking in the doorway, shoulders hunched in on himself. “Uh, sorry. I didn’t think anyone was going to be in here.”

Begging the obvious question of his own presence, then. But here in the room where their father kept
their lives running like spokes on a wheel, Vanya lets it go, along with the laundry list of all the
terrible things they’ve done to each other, cycling round and round. She feels no desire to keep it
spinning, but no need to shy away from the tracks it has made, either. It’s gotten them this far, after
all. Far enough.

Luther clears his throat.

“Vanya,” he says. His voice heavier now, with the usual weight he gives himself, as though life on
the moon has left him with the need to provide his own gravity. “I never had a chance to say. Or else
I never took it. But—for everything, you know, you must know...”

Between them lies two through six; years like pebbles scattered by the side of a road; an end of the
world. Still, two opposite ends of a flat line can meet, if time and space are turned on their heads, in a
twisted sort of circle. A power surpassing strength and speed, the usual limits of human nature:
forgiveness, or something close to it. Understanding, perhaps.

“Luther,” Vanya says. “What was it like on the moon?”

Luther startles, which is in itself a surprise every time, that a man so big can be felled like the rest of
them, as though he can possibly be unaware of his own breadth. Perhaps no one has asked him that
question before; never felt the need. Sure, she can deduce it for herself. Silent and solitary. Lonely,
she imagines, or doesn’t have to. But that is a state one can almost bear, so long as someone asks,
and makes all that waiting almost worth something. She knows this most of all.

“I’m not the best with words,” Luther says. Voice dry with humour, if a little stale, having gone
unused for a while. “And I was—angry, mostly, after finding out...” His words trail off, and he
shakes his head as though to clear it. “But these days when I think back, I find that—it was fine,
really. Of course I’m glad to be back, but you know—sometimes I even miss it.”

He says it like a secret, one that costs him something, exchanged in currency. The rueful dismissal of
whole years of his life, all that waste of time and feeling, a past recompensed by its present. Vanya
thinks she knows what he means. She doesn’t know what this costs her.

Under their feet there arises a clatter so tremendous they can feel its echo through the floor.
Something breaking; someone yelping high-pitched and horrified. The muted tones of Allison’s
voice, one Vanya recognizes in its familiar exasperation, reproachful and fond in equal measure.

“Uh,” Luther says. “I think that was Allison... making lunch?”

“And Klaus trying to help,” Vanya says wryly. She inclines her head at the room around them, the
locked glass cabinets and the neatly ordered desk and the paintings hung from the walls, belongings
of a man who does not live here anymore, and who has longer still to be gone. “We should get out of
here, don’t you think?”

Luther is looking at her like he wants to be careful; like it still possible for him. Maybe it is. Two
mornings ago in her room Vanya held a violin against her chin and raised its bow and not a single
string snapped. She stood there with the sunlight gleaming around her, notes she could just pluck out
of the air and taste. She didn’t. Not yet.

“Oh,” Luther agrees. “That sounds good. I’ll just...” He shuffles back out of the room.

Vanya takes another minute to herself. Then gets up to go. On her way out, she leaves the door of
her father’s study closed: exactly the way she has always found it.
For all their childhood competencies, neither Luther nor Diego ever reached their prime; only circled around it as though wildcats wary of their own potential. As though something always held them back. Their father, of course, was never able to find out exactly what it was. They probably couldn’t have said it themselves, either. Only that it was a height Luther never seemed able to reach, though he chased it all the way to the moon, while Diego curved like a knife thrown from his own hand, approaching the arc but no closer before returning back to his own downward momentum. Good and good enough.

Five observes this from the neutral distance of his own ranking, in the same kind of detached curiosity with which he once pored over Vanya’s book. The middle vantage point is always clearest, or so he likes to believe, and so he read the fates of his family as though characters in a storybook, happening far away in that once-upon-a-time fairytale land of the past. At the time he couldn’t help but wonder how he would have turned out: another deadbeat disappointment, failure passed through the family not by blood but in legacy. Well, he hadn’t yet. He marked chapter five as unfinished.

Now that he’s home Five can see it for himself. Still, less surprising than the fall of One and Two from grace is how they have decided to deal with it. Luther stringing it along all his life, acting like he didn’t know he was running out of rope. Diego embracing it early on so that he could then pretend it was on his own terms, cloaking failure in rebellion. What’s funny is that they’re both still soldiers, only Luther was fulfilling a false mission while Diego fashioned himself into a blade edged outward on the streets, both believing themselves a means to an end. These observations, Five keeps to himself, of course; he’s in the body of a thirteen-year-old, not as stupid as one.

“And what about you?” Delores says, painted eyes boring through him. Constant as always, though younger now than she’s ever been.

What about him, now that he’s completed his own trajectory, a circle returning to itself? Five’s no better than the rest of them, of course, except that he, at least, can see where he’s headed. No illusions, no pretense that his long-running life has ever been meant for anything other than this. As a child, of course, he thought otherwise, holding himself in the highest regard. As though someone outside of time, able to escape it. But he is not a child anymore. Neither are his brothers, though they would do well to remember that, sometimes.

When you can see both the dead and the living, reality becomes a sort of balancing act between the both of them. Not so crude as a tug-of-war or the flip of a coin; not heads, tails, either-or. More like the unwieldy goggles Klaus had to wear over his eyes as a child at his yearly medical checkups, the overlap of a lens. His father’s meticulous drawl: Which is clearer? The question following him all his life, driving him to its opposite answer, a vision muddied by lights and noise and ecstasy. As though through all of that beautiful blur he couldn’t still make out his second shadow, hovering over him like more of an omen than a guardian angel, a comparison Ben never warmed up to all the times he heard
it, the inconsolable grouch that he can be. Death does that to you, Klaus supposes; lets you hold a grudge like no other. Which is unfair, because Klaus is only ever halfway there.

Now that he’s sober Klaus looks out at a world he had to claw out of the wreckage of his own body to find, and wonders if it was worth the fight. Still the fear, seeping in like the cold from the crack under the door; it always finds a way in somehow, even after all this time. Though sometimes it’s not so bad, he has to admit. Forests of trees that stand superimposed over metropolitan cityscapes as though refusing to budge even in death. A couple of kids he sees skateboarding by a makeshift memorial at a telephone pole, laid with flowers and teddy bears and blown-out candles; they loop up and down and around in all sorts of gravity-defying tricks but never fall, not once. And a lazy sunny morning when Klaus, still half-asleep, says “Pass the syrup,” and Ben actually does. Staring at each other over the bottle sticking to both their fingers, eyes wide and round like they’ve been caught sneaking something sweet.

“What’s going on,” Diego says, slipping into the chair across from him, “you look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Chuckling at his own unfunny joke. Ben responds by tipping the saltshaker onto his plate. Terribly juvenile; gleeful like a child discovering his ability to both build and destroy castles in the sandbox. Of course, in a way, that’s exactly what he is. Klaus sighs like it’s all beneath him as Diego jerks back, cursing, and flips off in the direction he guesses Ben is sitting in. He comes close.

“Hopeless,” Five comments as an aside, to himself perhaps, or to someone else. He’s sitting at the other end of the table, newspaper in hand, nursing a mug of coffee and—Klaus squints—something truly abominable on his plate.

“Are those marshmallows?” Klaus says. Beside him, Ben lets out a snort.

Five pins him with a stare. “What about it?”

Amazing. The jokes write themselves. Except at that moment Vanya comes in, dressed like she’s on her way out, and draws to a stop. “Peanut butter and marshmallows,” she says.

Diego stares. “Is that a code for something?”

Five lifts his coffee mug in her direction, chin raised loftily in the air. “A true connoisseur of taste.”

Vanya bites her lip, like maybe she’s hiding a laugh. “I used to leave you those, you know. After you disappeared. I would make them just the way you liked it and put them outside your bedroom door, every night. Can you believe that? I really thought it meant something.”

“Of course it did,” Five says, taking a bite and chewing noisily. Diego makes gagging noises because he’s twelve, but truth be told, Klaus’ curiosity at the taste is getting the better of him. Ben shoots him a judgmental look, like he somehow knows, which is both impossible and incredibly unfair.

When Five looks back up, he pauses. Vanya is still poised in the doorway, the strangest expression upon her face. “It did?” she repeats, voice low.

Five blinks. “Well, in practical and temporal terms, of course not. But to you? It must have, didn’t it?”

Vanya is still staring at him, as though he is speaking a dead language. It seems the kind of thing he would do, Klaus muses.

“Vanya,” Five says with a heavy sigh, a great, insufferably sophisticated air. “Believe me. I know a little about the stories we invent to keep us company.”
Then he looks back down at his plate to find it empty, right as Klaus takes a big, gooey bite.

In the ensuing commotion the only casualties are Klaus’ tastebuds, two plates, a cup, and one of Diego’s throwing knives, for which Klaus supposes they are lucky. *Which is clearer?* The answer feels earned, after so long of looking in the other direction: this and only this, though the dreams still tug at him at night, life in the trenches and death in the crypts. He can now tell the difference. That means something. It must.

Family is where you are loved. Allison knows this; she saw it in the movies. Family isn’t where brothers die and disappear into thin air and drug themselves into a stranger, but this isn’t her real one, anyway, so she gives it up. It gets easier the longer she’s been gone, as though leaving behind some ill-imagined characters of the past, murky and muddled in the shadows of her memory. Meanwhile, the world of the present is ever expanding, lights and cameras and opportunities thick in the air like spring, and all she has to do is open her mouth and let them in.

She makes a new family. But something’s wrong, a sickness she inherited beyond her blood; a yawning hole in the heart of her, ever hungry for more. The baby cries and her husband gets a faraway look in his eyes and by now Allison has too much to lose. No longer a child, or a teen running away from a funhouse of mirrors impersonating a home. Normal people stand by their mistakes and fix them. Except Allison’s better than normal; she was a superhero, once. She can stop the mistakes before they even happen. The familiar adoration returning to her husband’s eyes, mirrored on the faces of her fans lining up by the red carpet to catch a glimpse, proof that she does more than exist but is made multiple in every photograph and video and screen in the world.

Her power frames her desires as hearsay, like they already exist fully-formed in the world; like they aren’t even hers. This way, she doesn’t have to do something so shameful as beg, or even command. Just raise a false question that is only ever echoed as true. For this, Allison is grateful. This must be the world, she decides. All familiarity and fondness; everywhere she looks reflecting herself back at her, forgiving in all its faces.

Diego wields himself like a weapon; this much has never changed. But now that the threat is over he finds himself unsure of where to aim. These nights he roams the hallways of the house more than he does the streets, pacing past closed doors in a restlessness he can’t shake. Then, of course, one of them opens.

“Shit,” Diego hisses, jerking back. “What the hell are you doing awake?”

Klaus blinks at him, slow and deliberate. “You mean, how am I supposed to *sleep*, when you’re out here prowling like a tiger about to pounce on us in our beds?”
“Shut up and go back to sleep.” Diego turns on his heel, heads down the other way. When he laps back, though, he is unsurprised to find that Klaus has done nothing of the sort, only sunk down to sit cross-legged on the floor, back against his closed bedroom door.

“What are you doing?” Diego glares down at him.

Klaus raises his palms as though in surrender. “Watching you, of course. What are you doing?”

“Why are you watching me?”

Klaus arches an eyebrow, eyes widening. “Why, for the entertainment, of course. It’s not everyday I get to watch someone self-immolate.”

Diego’s hand goes to the knife at his hip.

“Oh, shush,” Klaus says.

Diego stares, disbelieving.

“Oh. Diego hesitates. Lifts his hand from the holster.

“Ben says thanks for not stabbing me,” Klaus says, looking bored. “Most generous of you.”

Normally Diego’d follow it up with something cutting. The groundwork’s all there. In this hour, though, he finds himself distracted by a chill on the back of his neck, creeping unease.

“Hey, big boy,” Klaus says, a note of alarm in his voice. “You good?”

“Ben’s the only one there, right?” Diego says, the rush of his words betraying his urgency.

Klaus stares at him for a long time, long enough for Diego’s skin to itch. Then—“Don’t worry, it’s just us here. Hey, is three still a crowd when one of them’s dead? Ow, why’d you hit me.”

Diego stares not at Klaus but somewhere beside him, the empty patch of air where a person might be, or a ghost. This hallway, this house, the world could be full of them, and Diego’d never know. Only keep passing them by like a shadow out of the corner of his eye; nothing there when he turns around to look.

“Hey,” Klaus says; might have been saying for a while now. “Yoo-hoo. You’re not high, are you? Doesn’t suit your style.”

Diego looks at him, surrounded by all the ghosts of their own making, and thinks maybe there’s a different reason Klaus couldn’t sleep. Maybe Diego’s only an excuse. Maybe everyone is just that: a distraction from all the worse things. Diego considers it, then sits down on the floor across from Klaus, back against the wall.

“How does it work, anyway,” Diego asks, for the first time he can remember, or maybe not: a flash of déjà vu he didn’t know he still had in him, a vision of himself pestering Klaus by the foot of his bed: Do they speak to you? Can you hear them? You could help them, you know, avenge their murders or whatever, if you could actually do anything, if you actually gave a shit. Klaus tugging his covers tighter over his head, already beginning to shut all of them out, all of it, everything. They couldn’t have been more than twelve or thirteen, the cruelest age, back when Diego was less concerned with pinpoint accuracy and more with collateral damage, everything that whole year
sharp-edged and savage, wanting to draw blood. Proof of purpose.

Klaus sighs. “It doesn’t.” Voice thick with condescension, like they’ve had this conversation before; like he could have it in his sleep. He waves his arms in the air as though to illustrate his point. “Shit just happens, and I’m stuck right in the middle of it.”

Diego raises an eyebrow. “I saw what you did at the concert hall. Didn’t look like shit just happening to me.” A pause. “Looked like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

Klaus smiles in that unsettling way of his, teeth bared. “That was all Benny, not me. He’s charming when he’s unleashed, isn’t he? The real star of the show.”

“Uh-huh. What about when he saved my life?”

“Can’t take the credit for that one, either.” Klaus shrugs. “He came right through me like a door. Didn’t even ask permission!”

“So he could do it again?” Diego settles back against the wall, knees up before him. “Right now? Or does it only work when the world’s ending? Maybe I should threaten your life a little. Kick in the adrenaline.”

“Oh, you’re terrifying.” Klaus yawns. “He’s our brother, you know. Not a circus trick.”

Diego snorts. “Hate to break it to you, but all of us are sideshow freaks.”

“That explains the costume, then.”

The knife embeds itself in the door an inch above Klaus’ shoulder. Diego regrets it immediately when Klaus pries it out of the wood and starts playing with it in his fingers. The sight of Klaus with a knife makes him antsy. Like blood’s gonna start flying or whatever.

“You know,” Klaus says thoughtfully, looking down at the turn of the knife in his hands, “somebody once told me, a long time ago, that if you can’t sleep, it means you’re awake in someone else’s dream. My money’s on Luther. He’s probably got all of us running like hamsters in wheels in his subconscious, the inconsiderate bastard.”

Diego’s back aches, against the wall. He closes his eyes. There’s nobody left to dream about him. “Who told you that dumb shit? Ben?”

“No,” Klaus says, and doesn’t elaborate. Diego’s already forgotten the question, anyway. He’s swimming in an old memory; days at the academy, a new life that still gleamed with promise. “Get up,” Eudora says, face glowing with satisfaction after knocking him down, spread-eagled on his back against the training mats. Leant over him with her hand held out like an offering. “Get up, come on.” His father watching in impatience as his brother gets the better of him, each and every time. “Get up, Diego.” His mother by his bedside, opening the curtains to let in the light of a new day. Get up. Every fight bringing him down tight-knuckled and bleeding in the streets, the distant sound of sirens tuned to the frequency of his sluggish pulse. Get up. Come on, Diego. Get up.

He doesn’t. Their reach is beyond him, now. What a regret. What a relief.

“He’ll never ask,” he thinks he hears Klaus say, not unkindly, to Ben maybe, or to someone else. “But by all means, it’s sweet of you to stick around.” And that’s the last Diego hears before he slips under, and he sleeps, and he doesn’t wake up again until Luther trips over his body in the morning and screams bloody murder.
Up on the moon the world always looked small and smooth as a marble. He felt no sadness or longing but a curious relief: that to be apart from it was the best thing he could have done for it. This way, he could keep watch; keep control. Even reach out and take it into his hands.

Now, too, he looks upon his sister as though from a great distance. One and seven were always the furthest apart. How much of that is his fault and how much is his father’s, he feels no need to disentangle. Either way this is the only thing left to be done. He feels a great certainty that has not returned to him since the days before brothers vanished into thin air and time on the moon meant nothing at all and a father’s legacy was a lie.

“I’m sorry,” Luther says into Vanya’s hair, and starts to squeeze.

One blustery day the seven of them go out. Really, it’s Klaus’ objective; the others tag along more by accident than arrangement. Ben is a given. Five was curious why Klaus was researching military gravesites in the library; Diego overheard. Allison and Luther they bumped into on their way out. And Vanya, lingering in the corner of the room, whom Klaus asked to join them.

It’s a dull, overcast afternoon, though spots of light leak occasionally through the clouds. They’ve brought their umbrellas, just in case. Klaus drops his to the grass. Stands before the memorial for a long time, just staring at the granite.

Ben says nothing. Glances back at the others. For some reason they have kept their distance, perhaps out of respect, or the unspoken realization there is something far beyond their knowledge happening here; that they are out of their depth. Allison is saying something to Vanya, voice hushed; Luther and Diego look uncomfortable with their idleness. Five is watching, a sheen of interest in his eyes. All seven of them in one place is still rare, even these days. But not impossible. On occasion, it feels right.

Beside him, Klaus closes his eyes.

A few feet away, Vanya sucks in a sharp breath.

“Ben?” she whispers.

Klaus’ skin is lit an unearthly blue. Ben feels it like a shift in the ground, in the air, as though a crack in the ice. Wind runs through his hair, and he remembers it like the climb of trees in the backyard on the rare occasion he could be alone, the crane of his neck out the rolled-down car window to watch the world blur past, the freedom of a summer afternoon that felt like it would never end. The pat of a mother’s hand on his head. The race against his siblings to be the fastest, strongest, smartest, and
what was all that running for, anyway, when they were only children, when they’ve ended up in the same place after all, when they’ve had so much time to get here, with the breeze on their upturned faces at last—

Klaus doesn’t move. But for a flicker of a moment they can see a figure standing there, hands laid overtop Klaus’ own, their foreheads pressed together. Echoes of long-lost laughter. He did it, Ben thinks, dizzy with triumph, he actually fucking did it, and he lets out a whoop, startlingly loud in the quiet field; did they hear it? Did they hear him?

“Can he see me, too?” Ben demands.

Klaus grits his teeth. “If I concentrate hard enough—I think—yes—”

Ben clears his throat. “Hello,” he says, grinning ear to ear. “If you’re there. It’s nice to meet you at last. I’m Klaus’ brother. Did you know, Klaus wet his bed until he was at least nine—”

Klaus swipes with his fist, catches Ben in the jaw. Ben barely feels the hit, but what a difference that sliver of impact means. He laughs so hard he doubles over his knees, wheezing like he can’t get enough of that precious air. Ghosts can’t breathe, but tell that to Ben, who can taste the beginnings of the storm.

“Damn,” he can hear Diego say with a low whistle. “That’s your catch? Not bad, Four.”

“So that’s where it took him,” Five says thoughtfully.

Luther’s squinting. “Uh, when did this happen, again?”

The cemetery crackles with blue. Lightning and thunder. Over their heads, it starts to rain, and Ben tilts back his head, catches the drops in his mouth.

When they’re thirteen Five leaves and doesn’t return. Vanya holds out hope; she leaves sandwiches by the foot of his door as though luring home a runaway cat; she makes up stories. Surely Five has been kidnapped by a gang of bounty hunters or assassins or else some nefarious counterintelligence agency. Surely he has stumbled into a human trafficking ring or a terrorist conspiracy or else some similarly supervillainous scheme. She dreams up elaborate plots that end with Five strapped to some scientist’s surgical bed or strung upside-down from his ankles in an interrogation room, the pivotal moment for a certain group of heroes to come swooping in and save him, or even just one. But she knows better than to bring this up to the others. Time drags on, as it does, their brother forgotten as though nothing more than a gap between numbers, the skip of a record, and Vanya learns that none of them are heroes, herself least of all.

So when Five does drop quite literally back into their lives, she concedes the point. Of course the sandwiches had nothing to do with it, or the stories. Of course he would save himself.

Five says things about the end of the world, about a mission, stakes higher than they’ve ever been. But of course; he’s never outgrown the fantasy they were molded into following, during their childhood. Even looking at him Vanya feels a deep discomfort, this reminder that they were once
that young, cheeks smooth and eyes clear and enough bravado to fill up all the empty corners of a room. Believe me, Five insists, up until he doesn’t anymore; casts her aside like another faulty, broken instrument. Vanya was right not to. After all, she once believed other things, too.

In all their lives Allison has never thought of Vanya as beautiful. Sweet, sure, if a tendency towards sullenness. Timid and sympathetic. Clever and quiet. Beauty was always somewhere else: a distant dream, a careful angle in the mirror, the starlets on the glossy pages of the magazines in echo of their mother’s perfect face, red lips and silky hair and eyelashes engineered to curl. It wasn’t until Allison stared down at her newborn daughter’s wrinkled, wailing face that she understood for the first time the true weight of that word. And though Allison would still pose for the pictures and dress for the red carpets, she knew she would never measure up to it, and quite possibly never had.

It’s only now that she finds it once more, in the least likely of places. Her sister on the stage, tearing her song from the violin, hair a halo radiating white. The rafters crumble; the ceilings sag. The concert hall trembles as though on the verge of breaking apart. Allison stands in the centre aisle and watches.

Vanya’s beautiful. Mesmerizing, even. Allison can’t take her eyes off her. Thinks: this is who Vanya could have been. And then, cleanly, corrects herself: this is who Vanya has always been. It’s only now that they can see it. Belief is not the same as truth, even if it comes from Allison’s mouth. Especially then.

Elsewhere their brothers are converging on some futile plan, but that is so very far away from them right now, far from this moment, in which Allison meets Vanya’s eyes, and smiles. Sister. I see.

Plaster rains from the rooftop. The air screeches like a train racing on its rails, gathering friction. The world is about to end. Vanya looks at Allison, and smiles back.

Which is when their brothers burst inelegantly back into the scene, simple-hearted and stupid. Vanya flings them into the air like a cast of dice. The strains of her song taste like an electric burn, searing hot from the inside out, pain and grief woven into a melody that springs tears to Allison’s eyes.

Vanya, Allison would say, if she could. How beautiful you are, and how much this has cost us.

Time is running out, but with her throat cut out Allison feels an immense relief: that she is made ordinary at last. No longer a voice but a body, free to actualize her wants for herself. Everything reduced to the simplicity of instinct, the direct line between need and action, no words to get caught up in between. Her sister is falling. She reaches out and catches her.
By this time Five should have no use for reverence. Should barely remember it, even, beyond the white-hot pulse of his purpose. But now that the latter is gone, he finds himself strangely bereft. Back when he looked at history through the scope of a rifle he felt a hollow satisfaction in every fired bullet: that he was making his mark on the world, and that this way he could still be a part of it. Now he kicks a pebble at a couple of pigeons to shoo them away from him on the street. They remain unperturbed, heads bobbing, pecking expectantly at the ground.

“Our fans,” Klaus comments.

Earlier Diego had requested Klaus’ help; something about speaking to a murder victim. Surprising that he had asked for it; surprising that Klaus had accepted; surprising that Five, sitting—not skulking, no matter what Klaus says—with his martini in hand at the back of the room, had said he would be coming along, too. Well, why not? The world had been saved, and it wasn’t Five’s first martini of the morning, and there certainly wasn’t anything better to do. Now, though, he’s reevaluating his choices. They’ve been standing on this street corner for twenty minutes, waiting for Diego to get back to them from some task he hadn’t clarified; Five doesn’t particularly care for the details. He’s used to stakeouts, or else waiting for things that might never arrive, but no longer does he have all the time in the world.

It’s a cold morning. Five scratches under his the collar of his coat—retrieved from the back of his childhood closet, dusty and moth-eaten, one he notices with some satisfaction his thirteen-year-old body is beginning to outgrow. He was forced into it when he made to leave this morning without one and Diego snagged him by the back of his shirt and said are you crazy, it’s the middle of winter, and Five refrained from reacting like a hissing housecat, though just barely. He’s survived forty-five years past the apocalypse; he can endure the indignity of being coddled like a child. He put on the coat. If Delores were here, she’d have something to say about it, to be sure; something about tolerating old comforts, or even worse, succumbing to them, or something else similarly pithy and wise—

“Shit, I’m hungry,” Klaus announces. “Anyone feel like hot dogs?”

Five stares at him. It’s just the two of them there. Unless—

“Well, that’s too bad for you, then, isn’t it,” Klaus says cheerfully, like he isn’t talking to Five at all, and then he turns on his heel and saunters away. Five watches after him. It’s just him, now. Well, him and the pigeons.

In the distance, a horn honks. The slow shuffle of cars through traffic. Lights changing colour amid the foggy midmorning gloom. Five’s walked this street before, he’s sure of it; only it wasn’t a street at the time, but the aftermath of one. Here was where he once dug out a dusty pair of boots from the remains of the department store across the street; here was where he trawled through blocks of asphalt ripped up from the ground like ribbons to find a cracked motorcycle helmet, a broken watch, fourteen different photo IDs, a curved piece of neon tubing he can now piece to the O of the OPEN sign in the window of the 24-hour convenience store across the street, a ring. Here was where he slept under the skeleton of a bus shelter and dreamed himself free of hunger. Here is where Klaus is now returning from around the corner, looking very pleased with himself, holding a hot dog in either hand.

“You’re welcome,” Klaus says, and shoves one at him.

Five stares down at it. At his feet, the pigeons perk to attention.

“You got me a hot dog,” Five says, a tad unnecessarily.
Klaus eyes him like he’s lost his head. “Why, what else would you have been expecting?”

Whatever Five would say is forgotten at the return of Diego, ludicrous in broad daylight in his leather getup, glowering like he’s witnessed something unpleasant, all as usual. He nods at the hot dog in Five’s hands. “Did you get me one?”

“No,” Klaus says.

Diego stares at him, incredulous. “What the fuck?”

Five wonders if Ben is laughing. Ketchup and mustard are dripping onto his sleeve. He gives in to it, the wonder: that such mundane excess can still matter. Hot dog carts and streetlights. All the brick and mortar that will outlive them all. He takes as clean of a bite he can manage, and at his feet, the pigeons flutter their wings, rise into the air.

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