ABOVE BELOW

By

KATELYN ALANE CANEZ

A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors degree

With Honors in

Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

MAY 2015

Approved by:

[Signature]

Dr. Chris Cokinos
Department of Creative Writing
ABSTRACT

Alix should have died years ago, her body ravaged by cancer. At fifteen, she’s an anomaly among the Scavengers, who prowl the surface of war-ravaged Earth for scraps of the old world. When Above scientists capture Alix for medical testing, no one is sure that she will ever come back. A year later, she escapes, desperate to regain her old life - but friends have changed, loyalties have changed, and she has changed. Alix must find a way to blend old and new experiences together while outrunning the clutches of the scientists. No longer a child of Below, a fugitive of Above, she belongs to two worlds, both of which clamor to claim her as their own. A dystopian novel that asks what it means to grow up in a world full of flaws - this is Above Below.
Above Below

Chapter One: Home

Alix stumbled out into the snow, ice biting into her flesh, muddied and gray with grime from the urban center behind her. The slush mushed between her toes; the wind snatched at her long hair. The clinic had provided thin white dresses of some of the softest material Alix had ever felt in her life. But against the elements, the dress did nothing for her. Immediately she sprinted to the nearest streetcover, pried it open with her fingernails - breaking two in the process, sharp crunches against the hard plastic top - and dropped into the familiar darkness below.

It took a while to find her bearings – the clinic was constantly blinded with light that made her eyes burn to look at them. She crouched on the last rungs of the ladder, wary of letting her bare feet touch the mess of cold waste, but thought better of it. She was acting like this wasn’t all normal, acting spoiled. With a barely-repressed shudder, Alix climbed down from her perch, toes spread wide in the ooze to keep her balance. She padded along the sewer path, clenching her jaw to stop her gag reflex. The stench seemed worse than usual. Or perhaps, Alix mused, it might have been the fact that she had been living in a sterile zone for the last seven months.

A glow flickered against the far wall, and Alix carefully scurried across the corded steel cables to her home, arm over arm like she was taught. The aching in her biceps nearly made her fall into the muck below, the swirling greens and browns and blacks in eddies and lakes. The lack of activity, save for an hour of running a day and any physical tests, was taking its toll. She
wasn’t as strong as she used to be. Dropping to her hands and knees, she grimaced at the scratches on her hands from the rough pseudo-metal. They wouldn’t bleed, but they would sting for days. Her hands, once tough masses of callus, had been scrubbed and scrubbed until the flesh became loose and white, peeled off and discarded down the trash chute.

Alix made it to the suffocating warmth of her town. Any flammable items were being burned during the winter months, where even the cold permeated the ground, and the black smoke from burning plastic only made her cough. It seeped into her lungs like a heavy quilt and stays there, only making her cough more. Drawing up a hand to muffle her outbursts, Alix moved into the Center. A great bonfire crackled in the middle, people nearly setting themselves aflame as they tried to extinguish the gnawing ice in their bones. The outside ring to the fire curled in upon themselves, only their bright eyes visible beneath a huddle of rags, like the creature Alix had once seen in a book her friend had rescued and stored from last year’s bonfire season.

Madje’s shop was still open, broken windows glinting from the flames. It seemed a good place to start. Madje was a clothes dealer, and Alix was already drawing attention with her thin dress, not suited to the cold. She quickly dodged her way across the Center, sticking to the outside of the bonfire no matter how much she wanted to bask in its warmth. The door still opened with the same screech, and Alix choked back her automatic greeting to the owner. The bulk of the shop was taken up by Madje’s girth, almost upending her messily stacked heaps of repaired and obviously pre-worn clothing.
“Ay?” Madje croaked, swiveling around in an amazing feat of dexterity, “Ha’ ye come to
buy some clothes?” Madje was not the most beautiful of creatures but she was a friendly face.
Blind in one eye, with a film of milky yellow obscuring the pupil, her other eye was constantly
blinking in a morse-like fashion. The few teeth left in her lower jaw served to tear apart her
dinners in a rabid fashion, the moldering enamel sufficient enough. Her face was pockmarked
with radiation from the Surface clothes she handled. She suffered from burning sensations and
headaches; the kerchief covering her head hid three large lumps that were hot to the touch,
swellings that a younger Alix had touched with a detached concern. Madje, though one of the
staples of their community, would soon be gone like so many others, floating down the tunnels to
her resting place - another person would take inevitably over the business, someone not as fair.

Alix froze, knowing Madje was attempting to place her face. She had disappeared
months ago, and it wasn’t exactly odd to have people vanish and never come back. “Who are
ye?” Madje muttered to herself, “I knew ye once.” Alix had actually brought clothing back to
Madje’s from her scavenging runs many times in the past, but it appeared that Madje was not
currently in want for fabric at this time. Unfortunately, she knew it was probably from the
corpses that doubled in appearance during the bonfire season. People got cold; people got
hungry, especially away from the main thoroughfares.

“I’ve come to trade,” Alix said, attempting to keep the tremors of fear out of her voice,
“This dress for a set of clothes, plus boots.” It was a risky offer. The dress was all she owned in
this world right now, the thin cloth the only thing between her back and the elements.
Madje barked out a laugh, gap-toothed maw spitting saliva into the air. “What makes ye think that dress be worth ev’n a glove?”

Alix wordlessly held out a corner of her gown. The clotheswoman stroked the material with mangled claws, eye rolling in wonder at the soft touch. “Whereev’r did ye get this?”

“Trade,” Alix stated, “Set of clothes, plus boots.”

Madje continued to fondle the fabric with wide eyes, smudging the white with her dirty fingers. “Deal.” It was as if she was mesmerized by the quality of the dress. She probably hadn’t seen clothing like that since she had been corralled into Below, excluding the precious few items stolen from the surface.

“Good,” Alix said, stripping the dress off her body. What little warmth it provided was immediately lost, and she fought back shivers from the cool air rushing through the shattered windows of the shop. Her dirty feet twitched on the stone; she hoped no other person came to bother Madje at this particular moment.

The clotheswoman snatched up the precious item and set it carefully on the counter. “So, one shirt, one pants, socks, gloves, jacket, boots . . .” she recited. Clothes went flying everywhere in a mad dash. Madje pulled out stacked items and flung them like trash. It was obvious she was eager to examine the dress. “Here,” she called out, tossing a shirt to Alix, temporarily blinding her as it connected with her face. The fabric was faded rust, stitched over in many places. Alix held it up, staring dubiously at the small garment. Seven months ago, this top would be easy to put on – it would have been loose and large. But the nutrition given in the clinic, four meals a
day, made her body healthy. Where there was once corded muscle, now soft flesh clung to her bones in their absence. The cracked mirror on the wall flashed the girl’s image, and she grimaced at the sight. She looked like the naked girls in Old Tod’s magazine, full breasts on the page faded by the fondling of generations of men.

She struggled to get into the shirt, yanking it over her head. The rough stitching scraped red lines across her skin – burlap, Madje’s trademark. It was durable enough to last for more than a couple months. The tightness across her chest made it hard to breathe.

Madje kicked a pair of cargo pants at her, gray with blackened edges. Ironically enough, Alix had been the one to bring these pants to her. A fire on the surface had consumed the apartments housing the munitions factory workers. She stepped into the pants, stretching them over another her newly plumped hips and bottom, feeling the ashy char against her ankles. All of these new clothes were tight. Alix rolled up the pants twice over to prevent tripping. A pair of holey socks quickly followed, thick in some places and non-existent in others, while the gloves flew into the air for Alix to catch one-handed. Boots, cracked and dull leather with a slight loose sole, hit the dirt with a loud thump, sending up a cloud of dust. They were a perfect fit thankfully, for Alix knew what it felt like to have shoes too big or too small, but the shoelaces were shortened and threadbare, making them difficult to tie.

With a ‘hrrumph’, Madje grabbed a ragged sweatshirt with a broken zipper. “Sorry, ‘tis all that’s lef’,” she explained, stopping her flurry of activity to survey her client, “Quite lov’ly dear.” Her glazed eye and her good eye glanced over Alix. A flash of metal drew her attention. “What’s that?”
Alix’s eyes traveled down the length of her arm to her bio-monitor. It had been implanted only minutes after her abduction, and she hardly noticed it anymore. The screen, now cracked, gave constant information on her body and its levels, chiming when it received new data.

No one in Below ran around with hardware on their bodies unless they wanted to be shunned and banned. Those who did were the cyborgs, shunned at even her level, which came pretty low in the grand scheme of things. Therefore many of Below’s inhabitants made do with their physical defects, displaying them with a pseudo-pride that touted their “humanness”. She rubbed it without thinking, remembering how the supports pierced through her skin to the bone, how sore it had been, how she had tried to rip it off but to no avail. Shiny white scars, some still pink and purple, surrounded the metal piece, etched by her fingernails into the skin.

“Bracelet,” she stated, “Nicked it off a rich D-class.” She yanked the sleeve of her sweatshirt over her wrist before Madje could get a closer look.

“Don’t ‘spose ye would trade for it,” Madje murmured. Alix knew she would get a good price for a piece like this - if it wasn’t embedded in her very bones.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Alix said, before the woman could further analyze the machinery or even her appearance for that matter. The less people that knew she was alive down here, the better.

Without waiting for a reply, she backed out of the shop. Skirting around the edge of the bonfire, she wandered towards the train tracks. The transit train still worked at this hour, as dangerous as it was, but she needed to see Kade before she went anywhere else. Though a year
ago she would have frequented the slumhouses and crime rings without a second thought, now she only felt apprehension for the mess she was about to step into. She crossed the tracks, slipping between crumbling buildings.

The slums of the StationWay were as horrible as she remembered. The air reeked with the sharp smell of human waste, masking the musk of death only by degrees. As she passed an open shanty, a mother, missing her leg from the knee down, attempted to suckle her child on her withered breast. Its cry was weak, sounding more like a kitten than a human.

Farther down the street a family roasted a dog. Its shiny collar, no doubt the property of some Above Class, baked along with the meat over an open spit. A large man cursed at his band of scavengers-in-training, all orphans, spraying spittle over the children’s bowed heads. His flesh was purple with rage and he grabbed a small girl out of the crowd before him and began beating her with a melted strand of plastic. Neither the girl’s yelps nor her tears could not prevent welts as red as blood from swelling up from her body.

Here was home.

Alix clambered over a crumbling structure, once the area’s most popular gambling hall, to the Pleasure Quarters. Everything from drugs to the banned alcohol to sex was bartered, traded and sold here. Naked woman, skeletal bodies stretching, leaned out the windows to call out to purveyors below. A drunk man staggered out of an alleyway and fell into the muck at Alix’s feet. Chemical clouds and alcoholic fumes hung in the air, burning the nostrils and pervading every surface. A single match and the whole of this district would go up in a sea of flames.
Raunchy, crudely-drawn genitals decorated the concrete façade of the largest whorehouse in StationWay. Grunts and moans echoed from out the walls.

She waited for the man who paused in the doorway, thrusting out his paunchy chest in satisfaction as he drew up his pants. He had short, grizzled chest hair matted with grime, and had a slight limp in his right leg as he descended the few steps to the street. He obviously didn’t live here – he was a Whole. And yet he leered at her, licking meaty lips. He reached out to grab her arm, bony fingers threatening to mar her skin with bruises. “Hey whore,” he sneered, wrenching her arm, “Want to earn some bread?” The man looked her up and down, running his eyes over her body and his fingers over her soft flesh.

He stopped abruptly, glaring at her bio-monitor, which chirped in response to her increasing heartbeat. He threw Alix’s arm away like he had been holding feces. “Bleeding cyborgs,” he muttered, wiping his hand on his pants, “Disgusting tech junkie.” The man backed away, to wander further down the street into a bar. A tepid glance at her wrist – it had saved her, but she resented it – and she stepped over the threshold, hiding her arm underneath her jacket. She would have to find a better way to cover it, or better yet, remove the damned thing.

Alix was greeted inside by the stuffy and familiar odor of sex and sweat. The madam at the front desk dropped her thin stack of bills beneath the counter and swept the small mountain of pills she had been counting into a sack, safe from harm. “Kade still here?”Alix asked, aware of the appraising look the madam gave her.

“Who wants to know?”
“Collection for Rhino. Oxyhighs,” Alix lied, wracking her brain to remember the numerous dealers inhabiting Below. Though she detested the thought, Kade taking Oxyhighs again was believable; he possessed the white pupils of a chronic and recurring user even before she knew him. StationWay clamored, raved about the white-eyed, exotic whore whose mouth was like heaven.

The madam glared at Alix, uttering a devastating sentence: “Rhino is dead. For two months now. Killed by his successor. They had a parade around town with his head.”

Alix struggled to keep the shock from her face, automatically cranking out a response. “I’m his bastard. I intend to collect all his debts.”

The mistress froze for a moment before snickering. It soon turned into loud guffaws, the lady wiping tears from the edges of her eyes, leaving streaks of black makeup in their wake. “You’re much too pretty to belong to Rhino, Alix.”

Heat, followed by bitter cold, rushed through Alix’s body, leaving her fingers shaking in their wake. She clenched her hands closed to stop the panicked response. “Who are you?”

“You don’t remember me?” The mistress smiled, standing up and moving aside her shawl to allow a peek at the puckered triangle of flesh on her neck, a brand from her once-master.

“You don’t remember me?” The mistress smiled, standing up and moving aside her shawl to allow a peek at the puckered triangle of flesh on her neck, a brand from her once-master.

“You don’t remember me?” The mistress smiled, standing up and moving aside her shawl to allow a peek at the puckered triangle of flesh on her neck, a brand from her once-master.

“You don’t remember me?” The mistress smiled, standing up and moving aside her shawl to allow a peek at the puckered triangle of flesh on her neck, a brand from her once-master.

“You don’t remember me?” The mistress smiled, standing up and moving aside her shawl to allow a peek at the puckered triangle of flesh on her neck, a brand from her once-master.

“Umma,” Alix murmured, recognition flashing bright - Umma, the small servant girl that took care of Kade, and now, to all appearances, the night mistress to the whole house. Escaping the clutches of a dealer who had kept her in a cage, forced to sing to appease the guests her master entertained, Umma had come here with nowhere else to go and a price on her head.
Apparently she had risen up the ranks - and was likely more powerful now than the man who had imprisoned her all those years ago.

“Alix,” Umma sighed, “Where have you been? We thought you were dead.”

“I did too.” A smile touched the edge of Alix’s mouth. “How is Kade?”

With that, a dark look passed across Umma’s eyes, and she sat back down, readjusting her skirts. “Not good,” she ground out, “He wasn’t the same after you left. You’ll see what I mean. Be careful. He’s up there somewhere.”

Hesitant, Alix nodded, scaling the smooth stairs, worn from years of traffic. At the top she glanced back at Umma, but she had already busied herself with a client trying to trade a piece of meat for the other kind upstairs. Business continued as usual, as it always had.
Chapter Two: Trap

The hallways were long, low Raylights turning the area dim and what some probably saw as a mysterious air of sensuality. Alix knew better - the partial darkness served only as a veil so that clients could not see the flaws in their purchases. Perhaps one of the women had lost many of her teeth, or was missing a limb. Perhaps one of the men was blinded or scarred from beatings. Whatever the case, this place worked as most of Below did, with the illusion that things were not as broken or destroyed as they appeared.

This floor was decorated with a ratty carpet, tread worn through in the middle. The edges depicted faded vines and roses, twisting into intricate patterns. Pictures still hung from the walls, pictures torn from old magazines of busty women, strong men, even a nubile young girl or two, yellowed behind plastic frames. A fake crystal chandelier, missing at least half its smoky glass strands, jangled to the footsteps of upstairs patrons.

Alix climbed another flight. Here the air was dank and musty. Breaks in the concrete allowed frigid air to crawl in like one of the poor creatures of the End. Once, in a shortcut, Alix had passed the End, listening to the howling screams of its inhabitants behind the brick walls. It had taken months for the nightmares to stop, their screams silenced with the veil of sleep, even curled securely into Kade’s chest. She remembered a semblance of safety there in his arms, knowing he would wake up and rub comforting circles into her back, calming her breathing. He was always there for her, or at least he seemed to be.

Her leather boots kicked a chunk of rubble - it sounded like a gunshot in the small, enclosed hallway. The doors in this hallway were weathered, far less opulent than their
counterparts downstairs, where the more popular courtesans could be accessed by their patrons with ease. Up here, where the building truly showcased its degradation - these places were reserved for the less fortunate to be called upon. Kade had once inhabited the lower rooms, but now he was up here. Something had gone wrong in her absence. She knocked on each door, the muffled bang resounding through the empty rooms. It seemed as though the entire floor was deserted, but Kade must have been somewhere in the vicinity.

Tentative, Alix stopped before the entrance to the last door, drawing her ratty jacket more firmly against her shoulders. She took a deep breath, letting the air fill her chest until it felt like it would burst. He had to be here. Her fingertips swung the door slightly ajar.

“Kade,” she whispered into the darkness, “You there?”

A metallic, sour scent clouded the air. In a crumbling corner, a lamp flickered, on its last reserves of Raylight. A creature crouched there, the available light emphasizing the sharp, bony contours of a bare shoulder. A head, covered in limp black hair, whipped around to stare at Alix with wide-eyed white pupils.

“Kade,” she breathed, recognizing the twitchy, erratic movements and blank stare, “It’s me, Alix?” Oxyhigh usage was a quick high, but dangerous. Increased levels of awareness and hormones made its users subject to whiplash emotions that could change on a hair trigger. Most of the stronger emotions - especially the emotions in Below - were not positive, and so many users lashed out in violence, grief or desire. The appeal to the drug was that it inwardly dulled the emotions of the user, expressing those feelings in an external manifestation. Chronic
addiction turned the user’s pupils a milky white. It didn’t inhibit eyesight, but it marked its victims as users for the rest of their usually short lives.

This wasn’t the first time that Kade had relapsed, even with her presence. Three years ago, back when they were both struggling, they had helped each other.

Kade tilted his head, half-in and half-out of a daze. “Alix? Alix is dead,” he groaned.

“No, I’m alive, if you can believe that,” Alix said, forcing a chuckle. If she could get him to laugh along with her, get him to focus on something humorous - it had worked twice before, getting him into a laughing fit so hard he was unable to stop until he lost his voice - she could defuse him lashing out ahead of time. Though judging by the mostly-used needle on the ground, skittering as Kade shifted his weight, he had just shot up, veins thrumming with the black, tar-like substance.

“Liar,” he growled, kicking the lamp into the wall where the light sputtered and sparked. Alix caught a glimpse of the concentrated rage contorting Kade’s face before the shadows swallowed it up. Adrenaline spiked through her whole body.

She broke into a sprint for the door, throwing her whole weight against it once she was on the other side. A loud bang made the aged wood reverberate beneath her back. Through the warped wood, she felt every impact of Kade’s kicking, punching and launching himself at the door in her spine. The wood splintered near the hinges.

Alix’s eyes flitted to the only window in the whole third story. Granules of glass pebbled the windowsill, a remnant of more prosperous times. Escape out the window meant a
long fall down - the ladders and pipes were too rusty to support her weight, and she did not have the strength anymore to hold herself up, fingers wedged into the cracks. The door across the hall, a crude snake etched into the wood, had a broken column next to it. If she could manage to push it over and trap him within, it would be an effective, but cruel, beginning to his detox.

Gritting her teeth, she dove towards the opposite door. Kade shot out of his room, finally free, colliding with the wall in his fervor. His skull cracked against the concrete, but he kept coming, muscles straining and face flushed and damp from exertion. Those blank white pupils skewered her into place like Above searchlights.

Her fingers scrabbling at the doorknob, Alix practically fell into the snake room. She jammed her knee into a half-mended desk, toppling to the floor. She could expect a bruise to begin blossoming on her bronzed skin, spreading like a rash of purples and greens, if Kade didn’t tear her apart first.

He couldn’t see well in the dark. He tripped over the same desk as she scooted into the corner, trying to slow her breathing. Propping himself up at an awkward angle, he squinted, trying to see better. Senses were heightened on Oxyhighs, but that didn’t mean he didn’t already have bad eyesight. Oxyhighs could really only enhance feelings and senses that were already strong, including physical strength. There were many whispers of ringed, drugged combatants pulling each other’s limbs and appendages off with nary a grimace - a profitable lifestyle for the winners and their masters.

She understood the pull for the drug.
It felt like you were truly alive, in sync with the ‘heartbeat’ of Below, the constant thrum of the sewage processing plant producing the weak electricity for the lights, the gush and belch of the furnaces and bonfires consuming fuel, the moans and groans and lives of inhabitants. You were amplified, you resonated, and yet, you felt no polar extremes. Everything was just fine, no matter how bad it seemed. You were stronger, faster - but the drug wasn’t perfect. Those who used were aware of the few second delay in processing, but refused to acknowledge a potential shortcoming in Oxyhighs.

This few second delay was what Alix was relying on to get the upper hand, this temporary disruption of time. She bolted for the door; Kade, startled, began to move. His ragged nails dug into her arms, scraping at the flesh to make purple bead along the scratches. Drawing her leg back, her heel connected with his nose, sending him backwards with a sharp crunch.

Alix slammed the door behind her, sending damp splinters into the air with the force of the blow. Her heavy rubber soles hit the shattered column, and whatever precarious balance kept the column upright came undone. With a shudder that made the floor shake, the concrete fell, blocking Kade from escape. A low howl emanated from the room, followed by an unsettling grinding sound behind the door. Hopefully the combination of concrete and wood would keep him at bay until he ran out of energy.

A trickle of sweat dripped down Alix’s neck and dribbled between her breasts. The adrenaline was wearing off and weariness threatened to overwhelm her. Why had she bothered to coming back to Below if this was what she was greeted by? An addict strung out and dangerous? A series of crumbling buildings and broken dreams? The filth of the human race compressed into
tunnels and caverns, never to see the actual light of day? To drop into a pile amongst the rubble on the floor, to slumber on the dust and forget, sounded tempting.

Instead she stumbled back to Kade’s room, realizing the outline of a bird that was carved into the door as she ran her fingers over the wood. She snorted - Kade was any animal but a bird. The Raylight in his room had miraculously gained back its function despite its cracked panels and exposed wires, and with a sigh, she entered through the threshold.
Chapter Three: Clearing

The first thing Alix stepped on in Kade’s den was a rusty syringe jabbed into Emilie’s grimy soft-plastic rabbit. Covered with synthetic fur that was once a bright, garish neon pink, its trip down the System had steadily turned the color to a grayish green, with an odor to match. Emilie, with the gap-toothed grin of a ten-year-old, had loved that thing with all her heart.

Bile shot to Alix’s throat and she swallowed the acid mixture to try and force the nausea down. Where was Emilie? The little girl had tagged around as Kade’s pseudo-sibling, running errands for him, a joyous smile always plastered to her face no matter what task she was assigned.

She gently lifted the once-treasured toy off the filth and plucked the needle from its furred tummy. One of the realistic eyes was broken, cybernetic endings visible, but it had always been that way. The surviving rose pupil flickered on and off. It hadn’t been charged in some time. Tenderly, Alix cradled the loved item in the crook of her elbow.

Her journey through the rest of Kade’s habitat didn’t take long. One corner was covered with stone, all stacked in order of size at least four feet high. A smile tugged at Alix’s lips. This was Emilie’s doing. She was a little organizationally precise. It was what kept her busy when Kade had business. In fact, she pictured Emilie, surrounded by rocks with her collections of findings. Alix peered over and indeed saw a small cubby-space hollowed out among the chunks of rubble. A couple of stray shiny items decorated the edges. Very carefully, Alix reached inside. Her fingernails caught on a rough chain. Retrieving the item, Alix saw the motherboard chip, frosted with blue plastic dangling from the end. The edges were rough, sharp enough to cut, but
one edge had been meticulously rounded smooth. The circuits glistened gold underneath the translucent plastic. Alix clipped the necklace on.

Something was definitely wrong. What had happened?

She would never leave her “jewels” behind. The girl had jangled as she moved - such was the volume of bracelets, rings and necklaces. Anything with a sparkle Emilie could make into jewelry. She crafted them during the days when Kade slept off his exhaustion, sometimes selling off her works to feed the two of them when business was slow.

Saddened, Alix turned away from Emilie’s corner. The rest of the area merited no other positive yet bittersweet discoveries. One corner contained a fetid, dented metal bucket whose contents caused Alix to gag at the stench. The south wall was tacked over with a tarp, torn and dirty. The slight Raylight from outside filtered in the boarded window and, lashing out a foot, the weak cover snapped under the force of her leg.

Near the flickering shattered lamp lay bloody needles. The steel flashed in the newly exposed Raylight. Disgusted, Alix swept them aside with her boot. The mostly empty syringe, the one Kade had been injecting at the time of her arrival, she crushed firmly beneath her heel. The oblong transparent pills - melted over a fire, they transformed into an oily black mass whose potency depended on the opaqueness of the liquid - Alix stuffed into her pants pocket. Was this the rest of his stash? How much did he pay for these? Was he accepting barters? Judging from Kade’s emaciated state, she guessed he had stopped eating in favor of the high. How many clients came in day and night to have Kade service them only for a pill?

Sighing, she picked up a heap that was probably Kade’s bedding, due to the fact that there was a large body-shaped dent in the fabrics, fetal position. Bedbugs crawled over her
hands, flat bodies searching for more blood. She shook them off with a sigh. Any sort of parasite, insect or otherwise, found a plethora of hosts in Below. They were the only ones who thrived rather than survived down here.

Downstairs, she tramped down the steps, trying to cover up the muffled thumps above her - Kade further exerting his energy. His thumps were matched by repetitive whacks on the second floor, two bodies creating a rhythm all their own.

Three blocks down from the House was a public well for washing, consisting of mostly recycled groundwater and hopefully not contaminated with sewage. Stained with urine, dirt and blood, she was bent on scrubbing the material until it was barely a heap of threads. No more white crust, no more gooey stains. The black market sounded tempting to visit right now, to barter away anything she had for Above soap, even from an E-class. The stuff down here, the “soap” from Below was like rubbing a rough brick on one’s skin. It didn’t lather and sometimes still had chunks of unboiled fat caked in. Occasionally it would be spiced with some Above plant, bartered by scavengers.

She had brought back plants a couple times, jumping over garden walls to collect petals from the sleeping Classes’ houses. The perfume on her fingertips reminded her of her first bathing.

It had been the first thing the Clinic had done, besides clamping the bio-feedback circle onto her arm and securing it. The metal tubes sunk into her wrist, through the bone, through the vein, to collect samples that could be collected via the attachment of specialized vials, flashing numbers and levels on its electronic face.
The strange white room, not large enough to walk across in five paces, had a strange lip, almost like she was standing in a large basin. A twisted Steel tube, polished to a sheen, protruded from the wall a foot or two above her head. Everything was so clean, and Alix felt vengeful, happy even, that she was smearing her sewer grime across the sparkling white. Dirty footprints created tracks across the marble, as did the violet droplets of her blood, roses blooming from her throbbing wrist and cheek where they had slapped her hard enough to make supernovas burst behind her eyelids. Everything in the space echoed. Then something mechanical squeaked behind the wall and it was wet.

Alix yowled in surprise, jumping back and almost slipping. With shaky arms, she propped herself up on the basin lip, not trusting her feet. The water was lukewarm and flowed clean from its spout on the tiled wall. It smelt like metal. Involuntarily, Alix relaxed under the flow. Her footprints and blood were swept away down a hole in the floor that she hadn’t noticed before. For the first time in her life, there wasn’t a layer of grime on her skin.

Hair plastered over her eyes, water tickling her flesh, Alix was having fun. This much water, and warmed water - made her feel okay. She felt okay.

The downpour from above finally quit, and Alix realized she was standing in a veritable lake up to her hips, the drain having closed a while before. A window to her left cracked open, the frigid air from the hallway wafting in, and someone’s hand extended through the gap to quickly drop a soft purple square into the water. It bobbed on the surface. Alix snatched it, more curious of the square than the hand. She wasn’t ready to be hit again. The opening in the wall clicked shut.
She sniffed the bar, finding the scent to be fragrant. Licking it, the taste was bitter on her tongue. It was soap, even though it smelt delicious. Running the bar along her arm, bubbles popped and left circles of suds, floating in clusters over the water.

Instead, back at the well, Alix picked up a slimy block twice the size of her hand. This was her soap. She dunked the tub into the well, bringing up dingy liquid. This was her water. She threw Kade’s clothes into the basin and started scrubbing, the soap burning in the open cuts on her hands from climbing the ropes to Below. Water splashed against her face from her furious washing.

Every day in the clinic, Alix dreamt of one of two things: the image of Kade standing silently, no expression on his face as she was dragged away, and the image of Kade struggling against his captors, seeking to free her. At this point, she wasn’t sure which was real, but the image of her lover, his eyes wild, haunted her. It made her want to care again.

That must have been why she was washing Kade’s disgusting clothing with scummy water and soap that didn’t smell much better than the clothes she was strangling with her restless hands and punishing fingers. When a thin layer of grease and dirt had successfully hidden Alix’s hands from view, she decided that she was done washing. It was probably cleaner than before. Dumping the washwater on the ground, she set the soap on the edge of the well for the next user. Twisting with all her might, loathing newfound weakness, Alix wrung the clothes until they didn’t drip anymore. She snapped them through the air, sending droplets flying.

A shiny, misshapen bolt lay exposed from the water, half sunk into the soil. Curious, Alix picked it up and pocketed it out of habit. This was exactly what she would bring back to Emilie after a period out scavenging. The look of glee on her face - even in regards to the simplest bit of
colored glass. Alix had to take care of Kade for Emilie now, wherever she was, dead or alive, even if she didn’t want to take the task upon herself.

Scenarios rushing through her mind, Alix made her way back. It was time to see if Kade had come down from his high yet. She didn’t want to think about what would happen if he hadn’t.
In retrospect, the concrete pillar wasn’t the best idea. It had shattered on impact, leaving chunks from the size of her leg to mere dust particles. She hefted a rock that could have easily been her head out of the way, ignoring how the loose powder irritated her hands further.

Halfway through, it became apparent that only half of the door could be cleared out by her power alone. The rest was too heavy to shove aside. Alix stared at the available doorspace, contemplating, before picking up a chunk of rebar from the ground and slamming it into the wood. A small burst of something like satisfaction flowed through her as splinters peppered the air. A vertical fracture in the wood, a couple inches way from the frame, became her next target. She wedged an end in the crack, pulling until her muscles strained with the tension. It came out cleanly, and she thought she saw the gleam of white pupils in the darkness, gone in the next instant.

“Kade,” she called out, readying herself with the bar, expecting a wayward arm to come smashing through the hole, trying to grab her. “Talk to me.”

A low groan, followed by the sick splat of vomit hitting the floor. This was a good sign. He would have lost the adrenaline and testosterone rush that made him so much stronger and angrier than normal. He’d be in the beginning of the sweats now, the varying temperatures turning his stomach inside out. Soon the nightmares would begin, waking and dreaming in those white eyes. As tempting as that sounded, leaving him to scream to the ghosts in the darkness, she wasn’t that sadistic.

“Back away from the door.” Alix warned, getting ready to swing at the gap again. Another wet hack made its way to Alix’s ears.
The wood cracked under the force of her blows, creating a hole large enough for Kade to crawl out of. She scraped the broken bits away with the end of the iron bar, finally letting the tool fall to the concrete with a clang, dull vibrations making its way up her arm. Her muscles shivered.

“I need you to crawl out. No sudden moves,” she stated, eyes fixed on the door. A few minutes passed before the sound of scraping from the inside of the room began. He was dragging his body along the floor, too weak to walk, and probably through his own mess at that. It took another few minutes before pale fingers peeked out into the hallway. The fingernails with ragged, caked with blood and dead skin. Had he been clawing at the walls in there? A finger leaned towards the left, broken by either his actions or someone else’s.

It would have been much faster to drag him out, but the last time she had gotten anywhere in his general vicinity after one of his relapses, he had struck her in the face, splitting her lip. The cut had been in the corner of her mouth, opening and reopening, a smaller mouth, with every bite or breath, taking weeks to close up.

Instead she watched, waited, as spidery fingers gave way to a hand and that hand to a skinny forearm and that forearm to a scarred bicep - a mark Alix didn’t remember seeing. The brutality of the old wound was held together by raised skin, dotted with stitch marks.

Kade stared up at her with dazed eyes, diluted blood dribbling down his chin as he forced his head through the door. He managed to wedge the breadth of his shoulders through the space before his eyes closed, his hand gone limp. The strain and lack of fluids triggered a shutdown of his system, having purged the blood partially.
Alix stepped closer to his immobile form, quiet save for the sputtering rise and fall of his back as he breathed. He was dead weight as she tugged him, digging her nails into his skin for a better grip. They cut crescents into his shoulders, red welling up beneath her fingers. How had she become this weak? The clinic had only authorized exercise occasionally, and anything she tried on her own had prompted restraints. Her muscles had atrophied; she was soft.

Kade’s skin was hot, burning, beneath her hands, a feverish warmth. His metabolism was in another upswing, processing through a drug that was not enough to sustain it. He would soon descend into chills again, and she yanked harder. She had to get him under a blanket to sweat this out. The raw edges of the hole drew ragged animal claws over Kade’s dingy body.

Her breath stopped as she dragged him out, into the light.

Kade’s right arm was gone.

The gray shirt had the damage from view, but the sleeve was strangely deflated, no flesh underneath to hold it up. She swallowed, averting her gaze to his other arm. The inside elbow of this sleeve had been torn clean open to expose the riddled flesh beneath. Every scar was an injection. Some were shiny with age, and some were pink and raw and new.

A wave of disgust made it easier for Alix to override her pity, pulling him free of the hole at last with renewed strength. The shirt barely covered his legs. There was blood between his thighs. Bruises marked his flesh, violent handprints rained upon his pale skin. He had not had good customers.

Kade was once one of the most requested lovers in StationWay. Now, missing his arm, addicted once more, he had fallen to the lowest ranks. Umma probably only let him stay here due to loyalty. She scooped him up, cradling him under the knees. He was so light, even for her
weakened muscles. He was so frail. His eyes, almond shaped, were bruised, sunken into his face. Pallid, yellowed skin rimmed his eyes and mouth. Skimming her fingers over his chest, Alix felt his ribs, like branches poking out, sharp and birdlike.

She deposited his limp form on his still damp bed, tempted to curl up next to him and intertwining their hands like old times, despite the stench and illness. Instead she crawled over to the window, resting her head against the frame. A fire escape trickled rust down in copper flakes to the alley below, where groups of people huddled for warmth. Alix closed her eyes, sighing. She remembered her first rain, already ten and one of the best scavengers in her pack. She had a nose for unearthing treasures and the guts to venture into some of the more unstable structures.

Back then, she was camped out in an empty warehouse, whose crumbling exterior had peaked her interest. Her pack was already full with plants, able to be eaten if stewed, and a couple pieces of metal that weren’t too badly damaged - a good haul. She got greedy. Everyone else had likely gone back, the green-brown of the sky darkening and foretelling of some great coming event. The ominous feeling was heavy in the air and the back of her throat, and yet she had pressed on, determined to find something better than plants to bring home.

Dry ashes powdered her legs as she inspected the area, listening to a far off rumble in the sky. Then the sky had burst into light and she had screamed, thinking she was dead. The light had been followed by a ground-trembling crack, the sky exploding into water. The rain burned where it touched, and Alix shielded her face with her hands, looking for a more enclosed space. There was limited roof in this building to begin with.

The droplets stung, leaving a ring of red with a deep green - almost black - center where they impacted. In blind panic she gashed her leg on an exposed pipe, gushing purple blood from
the wound. The pain of her leg and arms didn’t faze her - her back was already covered in long
gashes from beatings - but the tremendous noise and light were something she feared with a
deep, animal instinct. The sky was loud enough to send vibrations through the ground. Red
spikes of light reached like bloody fingertips towards the earth and left smouldering fires. She
crouched beneath a beam, barely safe from the storm, afraid the fingers of fire would set her
aflame or take her up into the sky.

Curling into a ball, she had waited out the storm, eyes brimming with tears, wincing every
time a new flash of light - bright, brighter than Raylights, so bright it left its imprint on the back
of her eyelids - and the angry yelling of clouds clamored for dominance. The concrete hissed,
puddling water eating small craters into the floor, and the smell of singe wafted through the air
from the sky and the ground. The few hardy plants were eaten through by the rain. Her burns and
leg throbbed in time with her heartbeat.

Later, when she had explored the area, when the sky had run out of fire and all was silent,
she had found little. A length of melted plastic cording and a doll’s head, hair brittle, were her
only prizes for surviving the storm. When she came back, she had been replaced by another
child, as she was thought to be dead. She thought she would be dead too.

A small coughing sound pulled her attention away from her memories and she jumped off
the sill, going back to Kade, who was knelt over a puddle of blood-streaked bile. She went to
pull his greasy hair away from his face as his form convulsed again, another stream spattering
onto the floor. Shivers wracked his body, teeth clacking noisily from inner cold. He fell back
onto the bed, completely exhausted once again. There would be a few more rounds of this before
he was lucid enough to consume anything.
Alix dumped a pile of mostly-okay clothing on his form, trying to get him warm. She mopped at the mess on the floor before checking his forehead, the water of cold sweat forming on his brow. The cold from outside was not helping his chills.

After an hour of observation and no visible change in his state, Alix reluctantly sighed and crawled in next to him. She hugged him to her chest, ignoring the damp stickiness of his skin. His hair fluttered against his throat, moved by shallow rapid breaths, eyebrows twisting as the nightmares began. A muted groan of pain escaped his mouth and his remaining arm moved to grasp at his phantom limb. Trying to subdue his struggling, though futile, Alix clutched Kade tighter, breathing deep and easy as if to influence his respiration.

He had done the same for her once.

Cocooned near her lover, amid the breathing and wheezing, crying and laughing, births and deaths among the thousands in StationWay, Alix fell asleep. She dreamed of blank nothingness except for touch - the cool metal on her wrist, the ticklish sensation of Kade’s hair against her chin, and the heartbeat of another living person.

Kade mumbled in his sleep, fingers scrabbling against the pebbled, poured floor in an attempt to grab some invisible object tangible only in his reality.

A crash echoed downstairs, followed by a shriek. A roach the size of a mouse scuttled across the hallway, dingy brown back gleaming. The ever-present motors of the sewers hummed a low throb, a white noise for its inhabitants.

At the crossroads, they slumbered on.
Chapter Five: Bargain

The morning was no different than the night in Below. The Raylights, many football fields across and consistently blowing fuses, were kept dim enough that the difference between light and dark could depend solely on the number of window’s in one’s room. The town bustled as usual, some awake and others asleep, some working at the sewer stations to ensure the continued flow of the machines, a flash in the Raylights above indicating shift changes.

In Above, in their carefully-constructed societies, safe from the radiation, lay the snoring Classes, whose sunrise would be portrayed on glass ceilings using the memories of past generations. No one dared to go outside the safe spaces to see if the Sun rose or not. Only officials stepped out into the wilds of the Surface, donning their thick hazard suits to test air and soil quality daily, hoping for a clean sample. The regular deluge of radioactive particles ensured that any such sample would be a long time in coming.

Alix snuggled closer into her warm embrace with Kade. She was an anomaly. Most Scavengers didn’t live to be her age without developing symptoms of radiation poisoning, since they went on the Surface to collect without precious hazard suits. If one could afford it, cancerous tumors could be removed by laser techs up the tracks near Platform B, in a room where white bowls stood mounted into the walls and decaying benches surrounded the door.

Most couldn’t afford the treatment. Children as young as six, people Alix had known, died, with their rabbit-thin bones poking out from their lumpy flesh, growths eating away at their bodies. Alix had never been to the laser techs, had never felt the growth of a hard tumor underneath her own skin or the fatigue of just waking up.
Her eyes shot open as her bio-monitor beeped. She had smashed the electronic faceplate, hoping it would shut down, stop reading her heart rate and temperature and ‘rad’ levels, let her ignore the metal in her arm without doing more damage to her own body. Even now, in the waking hours, she was aware of its presence and its ugly scars, slipping her sleeve over her wrist. She yawned, showing her eyeteeth as her jaw dropped.

Barring the smell, this used to be how she woke up with Kade. Their nude bodies would be intertwined, a tan leg slung over a pale hip, her fingers splayed over the furred line on his skinny stomach, her breath skimming over his collarbone as she drew in air with the attitude of the half-asleep. The sticky crystallization of salt over their skins would prompt quick baths, sometimes heated and often cleaner than well water.

It wasn’t - couldn’t - be this way anymore.

Alix removed Kade’s arm from around her torso, reluctantly leaving the warm wrappings. A layer of frost glistened on the outer edge of the blankets, stiffened by cold. She would need a better jacket if she was to travel anywhere outside StationWay. Here, the heat was mostly enclosed, but farther up and down the tunnels, great gaping holes let in the temperature, and sometimes weather, from the Surface.

Her stomach grumbled. She got hungrier a lot faster because of the clinic, gorging herself on breads and actual vegetables and grains and meats - she might’ve gone back just for the food alone. It was unlikely there was any food like that, let alone anything edible, in this room. She had to go out to the market, and though she didn’t relish the thought of encouraging someone else’s addiction, the pills were her only barter.
She tromped over to the syringes again at this thought, grinding them into sparkling dust, just so there would be no physical temptation. The needles themselves she gathered in her palm and held out to the light, taking in the bent and resharpened tips. The ends were darkened and coated in a light, creeping dusting of rust. If Kade didn’t manage to recover, it might not be the withdrawal symptoms that killed him this time. The needles were poured down a deep crack in the concrete, glinting dimly and far away from anyone’s reach.

The handful of Oxyhighs in her pants pocket felt heavy. It would be easy to shoot up, forget the things that had been done to her, forget this wretched place - her fingers twitched towards the drug, interrupted by another impromptu belly rumble. They would be good in the market, she had to remind herself, the oily black in Kade’s half-used syringe last night had been a deep, thick color, a decent batch. He probably had to do many services to get Oxys this good.

The south wall’s tarp was a little worse for wear, but she tore it down anyways, snapping the couple of threads connecting it to the nails in the wall and fashioning it into a sling. There was a pile of clothes in the corner that could be salvageable, especially the thick wool coat on top. They would have to be washed - she wanted to get out of here as soon as Kade was conscious and mobile. The bio-monitor made her unease grow, and she wrapped it in cloth, thickly wadding the metal to look like a cast. It wouldn’t be long until the clinic tried to get her and any valuable data she collected on her escape back.

Alix loaded up her bag with fabrics before kneeling next to Kade, wiping back mussed hair from his closed eyelids. No matter what he had done, no matter how he looked, he still retained some of his old qualities - the gentle furrow of his brow, the slackness of his bottom lip. Hopefully he wouldn’t wake up for a few hours yet, but she upended a waste bucket for him to
use once he did. Flies were suddenly out of a home as their contents sloshed out the window to
the angry shouting of the unfortunate man who happened to be passing underneath at that exact
moment.

Padding downstairs, Alix nodded at Umma’s replacement, a dark-skinned women whose
hair curled close to her skull. The House didn’t get much activity in the ‘light’ hours, when a
majority of the workers were at their jobs. It was only when the shift changed, sewage facilities
exchanging one group for another, that the men, in all their stinking glory from hours with feces
and trash, were released. Many liked to get a good fuck in before bedtime, and Alix had often
been booted out of Kade’s room, eyes still hazy from lovemaking, because a customer was at the
door. For now though, the whole House was in a lull, waiting for the next wave of patrons.

On the street outside, the paths were mostly clear, the opposite of the crowded rooms of
the courtesans. She started off down towards the market, pregnant sling bouncing against her hip
with every other step. One could buy plants from the Surface for stews next to the vendor
hawking stolen Class jewelry, the metal still tinged red and brown with blood that had been spilt
over a cheap necklace. Fried rats sat next to good-luck charms, clothing in one stall and nude
pictures in the stall one over. Most everything was second-hand or from the Surface - anything
new and clean came from Above and the Classes. This was a place to find whatever you could
ever need, all with a price in mind.

The bonfire from last night smoldered in the middle of the market, undeterring shoppers
and merchants from buying and selling wares. Across the circle was Madje’s shop, closed for
now but open later in the night when people were more desperate for clothing. Alix skirted the
crowds, wandering up to a seller of fried meat - or so it said on the board - so crisp that every
hunk looked the same, even divided into boxes. The reused oil wafted through the air, prompting Alix’s stomach to produce loud gurgle.

“Welcome,” the vendor grinned, showing more than a few gaps in his smile, “What would you like? If you’re not sure, you’re welcome to try one, pretty thing.” His pupils skimmed over Alix’s form; her skin crawled. She had been getting looks the whole walk here, and this examination didn’t escape her attention either, but she had picked this vendor for a reason. Hopefully her choice paid off. She plucked a large nugget from one of the boxes, popping it into her mouth without acknowledging him. It was a grainy sort of protein taste, with a crunch between the teeth that Alix relished.

“Roach,” she prompted, getting another smile from the vendor.

“That’s right! Just yank off the antenna and the legs, fry them up good and they become delicious treats.” Alix let the flavor roll over her tongue again - roaches were definitely better fried than raw. She shrugged, smirking at the idea of the Above clinicians who shrieked like they were being murdered when a cockroach crawled out of her pocket. They would probably vomit if they saw her eating them now.

She stared straight into the white pupils of the man. “How many for one of these?” she bargained, pulling a slick clear pill from her pocket. “I only have a couple, so I want my money’s worth.” The man stared, transfixed by the drug, but recovered quickly, backtracking.

“Oxyhighs, huh? What makes you think that’s a good batch?” he retorted, crossing his arms, failing to hide the shivers in his fingers.

“Black as shadow,” she swore, watching the phrase change his expression. “See how translucent this is?” She held it up to the Raylights, turning it this way and that.
“I can do four roaches and a crow,” he sputtered as she slipped the pill back into her pocket. She had worked as a hawker before - Alix knew how to draw in an audience and buy product. Her stomach rumbled again.

“You can do better than that,” Alix replied, “Six roaches, two rats and a crow.” She took out the pill again and rolled it in her palm, “Black as shadow.”

The seller wet his lips, tongue flickering out to moisten the chapped skin. “For two Oxys.” He swept at the back of his neck, wiping away sudden sweat.

“I can’t do that,” Alix reprimanded mournfully, putting the pill away again. “I have two kids to feed. You understand, of course.” His eyes flashed, wanting the drug, needing the rush, needing the high. She had barely moved two paces away from the stall before he was calling her back, mopping at his neck again.

“Six, one and one, final offer,” he gulped.

Alix gave him a predatory smile, all teeth. “Six, two and two; we’ve got a deal,” she repeated, changing the amount so quickly he didn’t notice, agitated as he appeared.

“Six, two and two,” he nodded, hands shaking as he packed away her order. The exchange was made without a fuss, a bag of food, enough for two days if rationed carefully, for toxic sludge compressed into pill form. He cradled it like a gift, packing away his wares in his haste to inject. In the flurry of moment, Alix nicked two more roaches and ate them as she walked away, trying to settle her stomach.

From stall to stall she scuttled, trading another Oxyhigh for a pound of greens and two more for a solid metal pot that was blackened but usable, plus two bowls with duly chipped
edges. She could make a soup for herself and Kade for the next few days. Alix almost skipped
along the market - she hadn’t lost her touch for bartering, one thing she could trust.

Urgent demanding up ahead made her stop, cautious. That voice had shouted at her to
get back inside, to eat her food, to hold still for the doctors god fucking damn you. Alix ducked
behind a notice board plastered with swatches of dingy paper. Two figures up ahead, much taller
and bigger than any of the Market crowds argued with an older man, holding up a paper.
Bundled in layers of clothing, trying to hide their health and cleanliness, only the two’s eyes
shone from slits in their masks, an unnatural brown that caught the light wrong.

They were wearing contacts. They were from Above. Recons. She crouched lower to the
ground, a restless whimper building up in her chest.

Their real eyes were grey, a silver that skittered if one looked close enough. The doctors
who had leaned into her face, pulling up her watering eyelids, the needle coming in and out of
focus as it continued its descent, they had the silver skitter eyes. So did the guards. Microscopic
metal machines, glimmering nanobytes that kept Above citizens healthy and young - living three
times the lifespan of the oldest surviving inhabitant in Below, if you believed the rumors. The
engineering perfection made them stick out like a sore thumb in a world populated with misfits -
the weathered, the tired, the sick, the partial, the young whose eyes carried knowledge of
suffering long past their biological years.

However, her health made her an easy target to point out as well. She hadn't bothered to
hide it, given her limited clothing and time.

A chill ran down her spine. They had pushed the older man to the ground, moving to the
stall where Alix had bought her greens. The owner would willingly give them information about
her visit to avoid suspicion himself - even she was surprised that he had waved her over from the previous stall, regular black pupils staring her and the Oxyhigh she held in her fingers down.

She thought the city would be enough to hide her, hide her from the scalpels and needles and lasers and the sound of the screaming in her own head the screaming it just wouldn't stop -

Alix had to get out of here. She really had gone soft. Eyes were always watching in Below, whether through its people or the few cameras mounted on the ceiling. The only place where no eyes watched was outside on the Surface, amongst the buildings of ghosts, hollow, gasping structures, in the flat ashy plains, moaning their emptiness, in the few patches of nature that were overrun with quickly evolving animals - the place with no water, no water, no water, throat crying from thirst, the place where the sky rent and exploded in fury.

People were never safe, even from themselves.

She found a shirt that didn't smell too rank and draped it over her head, covering her body with the thick woolen coat that immediately made her sweat. She had to get back to Kade, get him standing, get him clothed, get him safe.

Alix stood on the threshold to the House, lost in her thoughts all the way there. She was still sweating beneath the jacket, arms carrying her purchases as she mounted the steps, hurrying back to Kade's room. The madame didn't stop her, snoring in little wheezes, head dipped to her impressive chest.

"Kade," Alix whispered, closing his door behind her. She was met with a fresh pail of excrement clanging onto the wall, missing her by a whole foot. Bewildered, she turned to stare at the dripping slime before Kade, fearful eyes in pinpricks, swiped out with his arm. A starburst of pain across her cheekbone, the skin slashed under his long nails.
"Who the fuck are you?" Kade shrieked, "Get out of my fucking room!" He tried to lash at her again, hand forming a claw. Alix slammed the metal pot into his wrist. "You bitch! You son of a bitch!" he howled, curling his hand into his chest.

"That's no way to greet your Alix," she singsonged, throwing the heavy coat over his head, not impressed by his display. She untied the bag from her hip as she watched him flounder around, trying to remove the obstruction from his vision without using his hand. "If you're done being an idiot, I have food." The fried roaches were a little worse for wear from their scuffle, insides pooling out past the crispy shell. She set two on a nearby cinderblock, going back downstairs with the rest of her food to fill up the pot with well water. Boiled enough, it would be a passable base for soup, once combined with some of the meat and greens.

Alix couldn’t help herself from chomping on a twisted root from the pile of greens once she dumped them in the pot. She separated out the thick fibers with her teeth, molars grinding the plant into a pulpy mess. The two roaches were gone from the cinderblock, a few crumbs and the stain of oil the only remains. Kade crept around the peripherals of her vision as she busied her hands, a constant hunched figure, cradling his bad shoulder, freed from the coat. His eyes weren't visible from underneath the tangled weave of his hair. He was still wary of her, as he should be.

Alix set the pot on the sparking lamp in the corner, hoping its panels were still hot enough to cook. Kade sat sullenly on a large piece of rubble, picking at a scab on his knee. He was likely still hungry, but it was a miracle that he was keeping down food so early in the withdrawals. It wasn't worth it to expect this much from him yet.
"Soup's on," she muttered, a phrase that Kade had yelled out in delight once or twice at the sight of a large, decadent meal, paid for by a rich customer who enjoyed seeing the skinny boy stuff himself silly.

Kade emitted a wet hack from his seat, glancing between her face and the pot full of food. "I will throw you out that window if you even try it," she threatened, rubbing at her eyes. The pot didn't even look hot yet - it might take a while.

Alix got up, heading straight for Kade. He tensed, shoulders drawing up to his ears.

"Strip," she commanded, motioning at his oversized and overworn shirt. He looked taken aback for a few seconds, then closed his eyes and opened his legs, exposing scabbed-over teeth marks and yellow bruises in a thick weave against his skin. He told Alix once that he never looked any of his customers in the eye - if they took him from behind, all the better. It was just how he coped, and looking her in the eyes as he touched her, felt her, made love to her, was all the more special.

She swallowed, trying to keep her throat from clamping. The area behind her eyes felt hot and irritated. She knelt down, wincing as he accepted the hands on his bony knees. Her thumb smeared the bubble of blood from his nervous picking. She gently closed his legs, standing back up.

Kade blinked up at her in surprise, brows drawn together in confusion. Had he expected her to exact payment in exchange for him eating?

"No. We're going downstairs to the baths. You need a good scrub," she smiled, trying to put him at ease. She turned to unwrap a sliver of Above soap she had stolen from a vendor as he argued with someone else. The fresh, flowery scent of the piece pierced the air, perfume
covering the smells of boiling food, human waste and unwashed flesh. Even she smelled, Alix noted, and she scraped along the sliver with a fingernail, curling a piece of soap off. She put it between her breasts, hoping the scent would stay, at least for a little while. When she turned back around, Kade had just begun to dip his fingers into the pot, only to recede with a hiss. She laughed, a clamorous sound that made Kade clutch his bad arm again in a reflexive motion, protecting it from further damage. It would seem that the light was heating their meal just fine.
Chapter Six: Cleanse

Getting Kade into the bath was an endeavor. He was all flailing limbs and no strength as she dunked his head under the cold and somewhat slimy water, screeching with the cold as he attempted to escape the freezing sluice. “Calm down, it’ll warm up,” she joked, yanking on one end of his shirt, though it was so threadbare that she pulled it apart with just a tug.

Kade, shivering, cursed at her.

“Who’s gonna be the prettiest boy in StationWay again,” she teased, dumping a bowl full of water onto his scalp. The water turned black, streaming in rivulets that cut trails through his layer of grime. His skin was gritty to the touch, especially in the creases of his body like the back of his neck, where pebbles of skin and salt rolled against her searching hands. Alix found this somewhat fascinating. His body was grey and red, turning a light shade of ash even when she scrubbed enough to make him twist away from her brush.

Her Kade kept impeccable care of his body, skin glistening with the use of creams. He was beautiful, ethereal even, draped in colored silks and ribbons. The customers ate up the way he appeared, even as they left blurry grey handprints over his porcelain skin. In return, Kade ate up the attention lavished on him for his looks, accentuating his eyes with kohl, his thin lips with berry juice from Above gardens. He was a vain creature, her Kade, vain and knowing.

His lank hair, matted with grease, was torn in places, ripped and splintered ends of varying length decorating his head, as though someone might have, and probably did, take a fistful of his hair and wrenched.

Her Kade had always had long hair, to his delicate collarbones, a display of femininity that made Alix jealous. He seemed effortless in his beauty, ebony strands always tickling Alix’s
face with the spice of cinnamon and rose as he rocked up into her, her own hair a spread of blonde on his pillow.

Now his head was covered in a ratty layer of dead strands. Alix lathered her hands, coating her palms with a white film of soap, thankful that her cuts had scabbed in the night. She plunged her fingers into his hair, damp and chilled from water. Horrified, she felt his entire scalp shift, and she pulled away, only for clumps of hair to rest between her digits. She shook her hands in the water, cleaning them. Suppressing a shudder, Alix continued to pull away skeins of hair, until she worried that he was bald underneath.

It was a relief to find a stubbly new growth of hair hidden beneath the dead locks, a product that felt like the bristles of the scrub brush.

Kade shivered as she ran the sliver of soap over his torso. His concave chest belched out individual ribs, the bars of a cage, skin tight and waxen over the bones. His nipples were red from abuse, and she trailed the soap over his neck, tendons flexing under the pressure.

She paused at the stump of his arm.

It had been severed cleanly, through sinew and bone and muscle, a perfectly parallel cut whose end was covered in a thick layer of tough skin. Mismatched points, much like the scar pattern on the other arm, decorated the outer edge. Someone had tried to reattach it?

“Stop poking me,” Kade snapped, baring his teeth. Alix settled for washing his back, methodical, skirting around the edges of slices and cuts, mounting the jut of his shoulderblades with the brush. She asked Kade if he wanted to wash the rest of himself, as he hid his limp genitals in the curve of his palm, away from her view.
"I'm not incompetent," he sneered, "I'm not completely fucking useless just yet." He grabbed the soap, an angry red flush creeping up his now-clean neck, splashing water outside the tub to soak her shoes. Alix let him, idly combing through her hair, ripping through the knots. She passed Kade the brush when he gestured for it, waiting for him to scrub his feet until she stood up. He copied her movement, rivulets streaming down his body.

The soup had to be more than ready to eat.

Back upstairs, Alix took back her wet jacket - they had not thought to bring a change of clothes for Kade - and hung it, pointing the naked man in the direction of garments. He could find something suitable. She tipped a bowl into the pot, rim grating against the side, ladling a portion of the meal for Kade and herself. The rest could be saved for later.

Kade crouched down where she had set his bowl, newly clothed in a tank top and ripped sweats. His fingers shook as they went to grab the edge - a new symptom, though not unheard of. Physical stress on the body produced erratic muscle spasms that could last anywhere from minutes to years. It looked like live wires flowed through his hands, and he clenched them, trying to stop the movement, white pupils staring at the bowl, beyond the bowl, just a pure circle of moon.

Alix lapped at her own soup, which had ended up with a veritable lake of fat on the top, floating in a greasy pool of trapped bubbles. A chunk of meat, now uncrisped by boiling, occasionally bobbed up to the surface and disappeared like some mythical sea creature, parting the green bits of leaves and stems. The bowl was slippery, slick from some of the broth having slopped over the rim, and she struggled not to drop it all over the floor, fingers skidding on the ceramic.
Kade was making progress. He had finally got ahold of his own bowl and stuck his lips right in without thinking, scalding temperature causing him to let a mouthful dribble onto the concrete. Tears in the corner of his eyes, he continued to suck down the broth without stopping, as if trying to prove something. He coughed, setting the bowl down to chew at a wad of meat in his cheek.

“What’s that thing on your wrist?” he rasped, swallowing and rubbing his tongue along his top teeth, muscle no doubt singed.

Alix glanced at her wrist. She unwrapped it to bathe Kade, and now the thick metal shackle gleamed under the Raylights, cracked screen flickering incomprehensible numbers and figures. The bio-monitor never really itched until someone mentioned it, a phantom urge to scratch, pry the tubes out of her veins and bones, removing the deep ache. She traced the bored, shiny grooves in her skin from her own fingernails.

“Bracelet,” she intoned, going for another sip.

Kade glanced doubtfully at the band. Though the screen was broken, the metal still looked new, the few attachments clean, despite grime and water. Only cyborgs would wear tech like that - resistant to everything, including fire. As a test he threw some of the grit from the floor onto her wrist - and into her bowl. She frowned at him. “Really?”

The dust slid off the metal without friction. Kade backed up, leaving his empty bowl and darting to the bed, where he surrounded himself in fabrics, only his eyes gleaming dull white in her direction. Cyborgs weren’t whole. They weren’t human. They were remnants of extermination procedures by Above, their soldiers equipped with the latest in deadly technology. To wear tech, to even sell tech now, was to associate oneself with the enemy. If you lost a limb,
you lost that limb forever, and made do without it, to keep from being shunted into the background of society.

Alix slurped at the rim of her bowl, straining out some broth between her teeth, unfazed. She didn’t have too much of a choice in the bio-monitor decision - or the abduction either. She glanced at Kade’s eyes, which slowly blinked back at her. He had changed. Perhaps she had too, because it was hard to recognize any of her old love for him. She had always imagined coming back, being greeted with tender kisses and whispers of adoration, into the arms of her lover. Her fingers picked up a pebble and threw it. This was far from the idealized dream.

Kade was the last thing she saw before being taken, his hollowed eyes drawing her towards him even as hands dragged her away.

She had struggled like a wild thing, biting and kicking and scratching, driving soil and waste into the faces of the people pinning her shoulders back. A knock to the head had flashed red before her eyes, then a wavering but fast-enclosing circle of black. In that last second of tunnel vision, Kade’s face - stoic and eyes averted. He refused to look at her, not trying to fight the men that surrounded him with superheated daggers and tasers. He had given up, whether at that moment or long before.

Alix felt betrayed, confused, turning the scene over and over again in her mind until she didn’t know what was real and what she might have imagined. Nonetheless, Kade could not be trusted, not even in his weakened state, not even as she waved him over after ladling another serving.

A scratching at the door gave her pause.
Umma peeked her head in. “Mind if I join you for breakfast?” she asked. When Alix nodded her assent, she entered the room, causing both inhabitants’ breath to stop. The ends of her black hair was matted with blood; long stripes of welts crisscrossed her elegant brown neck, her dress torn down the back.

“Bleeding sores,” Alix cursed, hurrying over to the woman’s side. The lashes were puffy and inflamed, layers and layers of them, one on top of the other, dribbling blood and clear ooze. Umma winced as she sat down, taking the bowl that Kade offered her.

“You look better,” she commented, sipping at the soup, “I’m glad that you have someone else to look after you now.”

“I don’t need looking after,” Kade grumbled, stroking the frayed ends of her sleeve. It was his favorite color, a deep, royal purple.

“What happened?” Alix asked, “Do you want me to get one of the girls?” Maybe another courtesan would know how to patch this up, know how to stop potential infection and minimize scarring. The skin was flayed beyond what her rudimentary medical skills could handle, the deeper cuts congealing into black slits. Though Umma had been whipped before, as a child, later in life she had covered the scarring with a massive tattoo of a tree, one she had seen on the pages of a book. Now the picture hung in bloody strips, only a few leaves remaining near the tops of her shoulders. Even with proper healing, the tattoo would never look the same.

Alix dabbed at the edges of the cuts with a piece torn from Umma’s dress. This was how normal people bled, this red color, much brighter than the violet, almost purple, blood that ran through Alix’s veins. She always figured it had something to do with why she was taken, why there was a piece of tech embedded in her arm, why she went through blood draw sessions for
two hours, why they had invaded her body and were planning to invade her mind, drilling holes through the front of her skull. Alix shivered, remembering the cold metal of the operating table.

The clinic was climate-controlled, as were the rest of Above structures. Weather was portrayed on the ceilings of the dome according to what was happening on the Surface, just without the changes. The metal, whether in the form of a needle or a chair, was then a stark contrast to the usual balmy temperatures.

It was always warm, enough to make her face bead with sweat but not drip. Alix could wheel in circles in the garden, arms outstretched and looking up, seeing blue instead of green-brown. The white fluffy spots were clouds, so her guards said, though clouds didn’t look anything like those safe, pure skids across the glass - they were turbulent, roiling, like the images of the sea Alix watched during blood draws. This prospect of water, water without end, still sounded dubious. Nothing existed on the Surface but the gutted and collapsing corpses of buildings. “Umma?” she asked again.

“I’ll live,” Umma replied, “I always do.” She sipped again from the bowl, making small talk with Kade. It must have been a while since they caught up. “Does it hurt still?” she asked, gesturing at his stump. He tensed and then relaxed, noting that Alix was still busy with her task.

“It burns sometimes, like it’s still there,” he admitted, “It feels like the lasers again.”

“Still,” Umma agreed, a sigh in her throat.

“I reach out to flex my fingers sometimes,” he chuckled, demonstrating with his hand, “It’s such a fucking disappointment to not be able to do that.”

“If Emilie was around, maybe you could have,” Umma reprimanded, finishing up her soup. Kade twitched, clearly tender about the subject.
“Alix,” Umma interrupted, “If you scrub anymore at my back, I will not have any back left to heal.” Alix flushed, caught listening in.

“What happened to Emilie?” she blurted out, fingering the chain of the necklace around her throat. If the little girl wasn’t dead, then it could potentially be worse.

Kade shifted, defensive. “None of your business.”

“None of my business. None of my bleeding, fucking business to know what happened to Emilie!” Alix hissed, “It’s not like I took care of her when you had clients, when you were ill, not like I treasured her just as much as you did!”

“Then why did you leave?” Umma asked, quiet but curious.

“It wasn’t of my own accord,” Alix murmured, head dropping into her hands. Of course she felt guilty, having left Emilie, left everyone she knew, thinking she had abandoned them. People got up and disappeared, moving on to new places or new lives. It wasn’t uncommon. But she had never been that person; she was loyal to a fault, even when she knew she shouldn’t be.

“Alix,” Umma replied, laying a hand on her leg, “Emilie is alive and well, if that’s what you were worrying about.” It was like all the tension left the room. Alix could have cried, big salt tears dripping down her cheeks, stinging the scrape from Kade’s nails. Then Umma frowned. “But you might not be for long, if the bastards that hit me come back. They were looking for you, Alix. Kade too.”

“Why? When?” Alix whispered. The hair on her arms buzzed in response to the coming answer. It was not going to be something she liked, and apprehension clotted her throat.

“A few hours ago. A few people at the Market mentioned you,” Umma clucked her tongue. “There’s no protecting your neighbors anymore; they’ll sell you out for a song.”
“I have to go,” Alix panicked, wrapping her hands around her hips, pressing into the scars there. “I have to leave.”

“You do,” Umma agreed, “They threatened to burn down the House. I have to protect my daughters and sons.” She threw a pointed glare at Kade. “Except for you, Kade. You need to leave with her. Take her to Emilie.”

Kade opened his mouth to protest before Umma cut him off. “I mean it. You owe her that much. You owe me that much. Don’t drag us down with you again.”

Kade settled for spitting out a mouthful of greens onto his growing pile on the concrete, where they lay unhindered like victims of a plague, limp and decimated.

“I want to live,” Umma pleaded. “I want you to live. For the both of us, leave, or I’ll let them take you.”

“I’m going,” Alix stated, “If you want to follow, I won’t stop you Kade.”

“Come with me first,” Umma interrupted, trying to get up without stretching her back. Alix grabbed an elbow to help her. “You need money first.” She dug into the pouch on her hip, one that jangled. She pulled out a handful of motherboards and ancient gold coins. “Take these,” she pressed them into Alix’s hand, “Take care of him.”

“I’ll try,” she replied, astonished at the wealth in her hands.

“Kade,” Umma turned, dwarfed by his stature as he too stood up, “Thank you. For all those years ago. For taking in a little girl who had no life left to live. For accepting her, when all the others refused.” She kissed his cheek, leaving a circle of red. Her eyes were wet. “I loved you for it. I still love you for it. So thank you.”

For once in his life, Kade was silent of his own accord, giving Umma a nod.
Chapter Seven: Runner

The cars of the train might once have gleamed, slick silver sheets plating the skeleton, lights bright and flashing to scroll words past on a black honeycombed screen. They would have glided along the ribbon-thin tracks, smooth and unhindered, noiseless, breathing steam and air as they passed by the busy stations and corridors. The people on its insides would have been clean, respectable, sitting across from each other in seats that were soft enough to fall asleep in for the comfortable ride.

The subway now rattled down the rusty tracks like a centipede, segments clacking against one another, the couplings eaten away by time and misuse. If one wanted to switch cars during the journey, they would have to jump between the free space where there had once been a rubber seal connecting the sections in a blind leap and hope that the train didn’t turn. Black splatter adorned the open doors where the air screamed past in an archival reference to those who had miscalculated or to those who had their luck turned against them.

Graffiti and gang signs now decorated the cars, covered the advertisements that showcased the latest technology for an underground civilization. A sign portraying a happy family playing in the surf had crumbled, the baby’s face, hidden in the crook of its mother’s shoulder, was nothing but a messy exposure of rat-eaten wires overlaid with chalky paint.

Sparks cascaded off the tracks, a wave of fire, as the subway careened towards its next destination, carrying the same load of characters - the sewage worker whose rank smell was buried somewhere underneath the layers of grime on his face, the working woman who had saved up enough money to finally visit her parents in their crumbling shack, the few ragged orphans who scuttled along the train’s cars like it was second nature. Most of the seats, leaking
foam like guts, would be empty. The train only ran because it was automatic, an archaic system who would run and keep running beyond many lifetimes, the whine of the wheels a constant background noise.

Alix kept her ears perked up for the pitchy noise as she hid behind the entrance to a bar. Though the platform, crammed with sleeping bodies grateful for a piece of flat ground to lay their bones upon, was in plain sight, the two Above Recons were still browsing about in the market, getting ever closer to the area. It would not bode well to be seen, though she had wrapped herself in scraps of clothing as camouflage. She would not stand out against the population of Stationway, similarly bundled for warmth against the cold. She chanced a peek over at Kade, who glared back beneath a makeshift wrap of cloth, insulating his bare head.

“When’s the damn train?” he asked, lips snarling beneath apathetic eyes. He refused to cover his face, vain as he was, though his nose and cheeks bloomed pale pink. He tucked his fingers between his thin thighs as though he had enough heat for the slight appendages.

Alix didn’t answer, instead hefting the knapsack over her shoulder. The howling screech of untreaded wheels on the tracks was far in the distance yet, echoing down the tunnel that connected the thoroughfare of Stationway to a neighboring sector. She had only jumped the train twice, and both times she had only dared to ride it as far as the dark mouth of the tunnel, which gaped open despite structural damage to the stones. She was afraid of what was in the next town, never having the courage to go to the other communities, despite her avid prowling on the Surface. Crawling about in hollowed-out caverns made her skin itch, and even now she yearned for the discolored skies of the Surface.
Bits of plaster began to shake loose from the bar’s cracked walls, adding to the snowfall on the ground. Kicking bits of concrete to skitter along until they hit the tracks with hollow clangs, Alix and Kade waited for the rush of incoming stale air, freezing but damp against their bodies. Jumping the train was dangerous, but the slowing of the cars as it reached the platform would provide them with ample opportunities for access. The machine screamed as it came closer. It stopped at the platform, where people were forced to weave like dancers, mincing their movements with light steps between the groups of sleepers. They did not stir.

Only a few moments later, the automatic doors whooshed shut, closing behind the few individuals who had entered. The subway cars started up again with a deep groan, pushing its heavy body along the tracks, always moving.

The engine of the train passed, its solar panels crackling with electricity. They would have to jump on at the very end of the cars. Alix looked over worriedly at Kade. His missing limb would cause him difficulty in vaulting onto the thin edge. He knew this fact, and renewed his venomous glower at her stare.

Every muscle in Alix’s body tensed. It was coming.

She darted out from her space in the shadows of the bar, wisps of breath curling out of her mouth. Feet blurring, she ran parallel to the track, close enough to touch the grimy frame. The knapsack thumped against her hip. A quick glance behind her, though she did not do so, would have revealed Kade’s awkward jogging in her wake. His white-pupiled eyes grew wider with alarm as the distance between them increased.
It was difficult to draw breath down here, the thick, stagnant air cloaking one’s lungs. Kade struggled to gulp down panicked inhaled breaths, his chest rattling with each mouthful. His heart stuttered, rabbit-quick. His legs burned with each stretch; his phantom limb cramped and itched.

He coughed and red coated his teeth, a sharp tang on his otherwise dry tongue. He pressed onwards - refusing to be left behind.

A blast of steam caught Alix right in the face, heat hissing against her pores. Crying out, she fell back, eyes stinging, temporarily blinded. Angry scorch marks decorated her right cheek where the cloth mask had slipped, exposing tender flesh.

Blinking furiously, she cleared her vision in time to realize - somehow, through some kind of miraculous event - that the last car was passing her with Kade clinging onto the rusted railing. He glanced down with an incredulous look, eyebrows rising. “C’mon ya Reject, can’t even ride a train?” he taunted, “Absolutely useless, ain’t ya?”

Sneering her derision, the girl made a sprinting leap towards the railing, launching herself at his face. “What was that, junkie?” she breathed. Her feet clung to the bumper of the train, boots scrabbling for purchase.

Alix managed to pull herself up, no thanks to Kade. He fingered the stump of his arm as she thrust open the door, which despite its age, opened silently. She let him go first into the car and stepped over the threshold herself, feeling a shiver work its way out of her bones.

The train was not much warmer than the air outside. A fallen floor panel, revealing the rushing ground beneath, spat sparks onto the already blackened surrounding grid. A single strap of ragged leather hung destitute from the metal bar traversing the length of the car, the rest of its brethren harvested like grapes from their roost. The entire car had been cleared of any seats, the
few peoples already having jumped the train on an earlier route sitting on the ground, huddled
together in bunches. Their knuckles, sore and red, clutched onto their jackets, pulling the fabric
in ever closer as if they could integrate their outerwear into their bodies.

Mist swirled out of Alix’s mouth as she exhaled, plopping down against the wall. Kade’s
spidery movements eventually placed him next to her form, leaning against the wall, spine
poking out to connect with the metal. He shifted, trying to find comfort.

Now that they weren’t running for the train, Alix relaxed, shoulders slumping. She
blearily looked around at the rest of the passengers on the car, unwrapping her head to better feel
out her burn. It stung and throbbed when she put her fingers to it.

“What?” Kade asked.

“Yeah, like a plastic whipping,” she replied, biting her lip as she felt for blisters. It had
been a long time since she had been whipped, knowing better to stay out looking for treasures
than to return with nothing, even if it meant risking her life. Once she had stayed in Above for
close to a week, a week spent chewing on plants that burned her gums and defending herself
from the many mutant beasts that roamed the plains. Better to have been out in the acid rains and
the ruins of a world long gone than hungry and beaten below.

“Don’t think I ever had one a those,” he murmured, not remembering the raised scars on
her back, the way he had traced the lines and kissed the uneven surfaces. A grim inward smile
filled Alix’s chest, tight and breathless. She had to stop thinking about Kade - or at least the
Kade she had known.

To distract herself, she started to reexamine the riders. Though most were hopelessly
bundled into balls, there were a few that stood out - the tall man at the head of the car, his
mangled fingers twitching, the young teen with frightened, dark eyes, the group of angular bodies crowding near the open floor panel and chuckling every time sparks managed to flicker out into the car, and two girls, both well-dressed and sporting elaborate facial tattoos, tribal print roiling around their sharp eyes. When one of them laughed, her teeth sparkled in the light, diamond-white inlays embedded in her eyeteeth.

Alix couldn’t bring her eyes away from them, transfixed by the shine. Kade, his magpie eyes honing in on the brightness, did the same, tongue licking along his chapped lips. Once upon a time he had been similarly adorned, not with teeth jewelry but ear piercings, bright against his black hair. They lent him a sense of affluence; added to his slanted eyes and lean form, his accessories made him a commodity not only for his services but for his simple presence. He emitted high-class status, which lead many to believe that they were paying for what they deserved out of life.

He had sold his jewelry, piece by piece, gem by gem, for the Oxyhighs he so craved.

“Got ‘em done on Plat Five,” the girl threw out, noticing their stares, “Payment for my last run, yeah? They’re gorg. Interested sweethearts? The guy sharpens ‘em too for free if ya want ‘em.” Alix ran her tongue over her own teeth, free of ornamentation. Kade did the same. Neither were into body mods, as they were expensive and recognizable. And as parts of the lower classes, in one of the worst slums of Below, they weren’t worth a stomach that crawled up against one’s backbone, pressing itself flat against the spine like it could disappear.

“Wazza matter? Cat got your tongue?” her partner added, flicking her own bifurcated tongue in their direction. Kade visibly recoiled, stood up and made his way to the end of the car, furthest away from the two girls.
“Aw, looks like ya boyfriend dun like us,” the first girl commented, watching Kade’s retreating back stiffen at her words, “Pity, that.”

Alix caught up to Kade. “What’s up?” she whispered, “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of some flashy freaks.”

He had enough fight left in him to sneer at her remark. “That one chick, the snake-tongue one? She’s a runner for Midos. Bet her pal is too.”

Midos was the second strongest drug lord in Below. But now that Rhino was gone, it was likely that he was the first. Additionally, though Rhino had been known for his tough-skinned approach to business and his penchant for pretty jewels, Midos was known for his cruelty and his sickening desire for very, very young girls. He picked them up from the women who owed him money and used them until they were unfit for work at even the lowest of the slums. A Midos girl had everything she wanted, with a price, and carried his seal - a gold line melted into the flesh of their cheeks, marring them forever.

And those two were Runners, and pretty high-ranking ones at that. If they caught the barest sniff of the motherboards bound around Alix’s thigh, they were as good as ratmeat.

She glanced back, wary.

The girl grinned, her teeth stones glittering under the flash of Raylights outside the window. The entrance to the tunnel threw them all into darkness, the wink of her gems the last thing they saw before they were swallowed by darkness.
Chapter Eight: Ride

It was like the cave.

That hole in the ground that she had fallen into while scavenging, a gaping maw in the earth filled with vines of wire and the drip of poisoned water. Alix had twisted her ankle, the sharp crack of strained tendons against bone and an unexpected pain that brought her to her knees - sliding on those knees down a rubble scree that ended in a drop too high to escape. She had listened to the trickle of water further back in the cave, to the skitterings of the little things whose racket increased as the muddied light from the Surface faded into night. The pitch blackness of the cave made it impossible to climb out, despite the packed earth walls riddled with the impressions of her fingers, the crumbling dirt in the creases of her palms. Multiple pairs of legs ran over her thighs, her scalp, her ankle bound in a ragged and moth-eaten sleeve, no matter how many times she smacked them away.

Alix had nightmares about the cave for months, of being buried under the earth too deep for anyone to hear her screams, of being smothered by the darkness that she had never experienced before.

In the clinic there were underlights in each of the hallways, in each of the rooms; out the window, the screens projected what the doctors called stars, oohing and ahhing over the latest conceived constellations of bright pinpoints. Raylights flickered constantly over StationWay, only dimmed in emergencies; even the Surface’s clouds filtered a muddy half-light through their thick undulations.
Alix went to grab for Kade’s arm, not realizing it wasn’t there anymore. Instead in her panic, her fingernails swiped towards the emaciated ladder of his ribcage, clothes the only barrier preventing gouges in his flesh. He still felt the pressure, the sting of rough friction.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Kade hissed, grabbing her wrist which trembled in his bony grasp. “Don’t tell me you’re afraid of the dark.”

In response she burrowed closer into his lanky form, trying to comfort herself with the rapid stutter of his heartbeat, the wheezing expansions of his lungs, a stomach that gurgled in displeasure. Kade tightened his grip, hearing the frantic muffled beep of her biomonitor in response to her elevated blood pressure. If they were heard any passengers of the car, especially the two Runners for Midos, they were in deep shit. He fought back against the crawling of his skin, skin that had touched too many other skins in a rough slide of pleasure or pain, and put his hand over the pulse on the side of her neck. It made for some awkward positioning, but she calmed immediately with the old trick that he remembered from their past together.

Kade almost heaved a sigh of relief when the monitor slowed and then stopped its noise.

It was still dark in the car apart from flashes of sparks in the open floor panel, sharp flares that illuminated outlines of passengers - an extended foot, a curled-up body, the hunched profile of a face with a hawk nose. From what he could see, neither of the Runners had moved from their places on the other side of the train car, one with her feet propped up diagonally towards a window, the other leaning against a pole coated with the grime of thousands of fingerprints.

This was for the best - that neither of the Runners got wind of the motherboards on Alix’s thigh or the pills in her pocket. His fingers itched towards the oblong shapes, clear and pure. His last few customers were merciless, pulling him apart from the inside-out, slicing his skin with
their knives and blades to see him bleed, face pressed into the floor and rutted into like a dog - but at least what he was paid was enough to get him a good stash. They were his pills, they belonged to him, he had worked through the pain for the pleasure of a good high, and yet here they were, in the pocket of the girl who had betrayed him, her soft, new pockets of flesh cushioning the sharp contours of his bones.

His stump felt like there were bugs beneath the skin, roiling where it kissed into the curve of her shoulder.

With a half-hearted flash, Raylight began to pour into the car once more as they left the tunnels to a new section of Below. Here, the buildings were spaced farther apart, crumbling edifices of brick and concrete, where a little boy exited one of the hovels to gape at the speeding subway cars. There were actual streets here, tramped dirt lanes with trenches down either side that lead to the main sewer line. What people did here for work was a mystery, as there were neither sewer control systems or openings to the Surface, as far as Kade could see through the broken and cracked plastic windows.

Alix managed to extricate herself from Kade’s side after the second fleeting brush with light, frowning as she realized what she had done, touching the side of her neck his hand had pressed into, the long fingers and wide palm a comfort on her thrumming veins. She was both surprised with herself and Kade. He still remembered those long nights and days in bed with her, listening to the panic lace through her voice as she recounted her tales on the Surface. He was always fascinated by those stories, knowing that he would likely never see the place where shriveled plants grew from the crevices and fissures in buildings long abandoned, where occasionally pillars of smooth gray stone decorated a set of stairs that lead to nothing or
factories, rubber belts torn to shreds, that housed hundreds of copies of the same item in great piles, toppling their brethren at the slightest breath of air.

She rubbed the side of her neck until it was red and hot.

“How much farther down the line do we have to go?” Alix whispered to Kade, flinching as the two Runners cackled at some joke in their corner.

“Two more maybe?” Kade replied, trying to casually wipe his hand on his rough pants, “That’s what she told me at least. I think.”

Alix fidgeted, braiding a piece of her hair. “Why did Emilie leave?” She felt Kade stiffen next to her, muscles gone tense, preparing himself for a fight. “I just wanna know.”

“It wasn’t safe for her anymore.”

A dry laugh. “Kade, nowhere is safe in Below.”

“She got into a lot of trouble when you left,” Kade replied. Quiet from Alix. “Felt like she had to support me I guess. Wasn’t making as much money. Got really sick. This.” He gestured at the empty space where his arm would have been.

“What did Emilie do?” Alix asked. Emilie seemed like a safer topic than whatever happened to Kade’s arm.

“She just got into a lot of trouble. Fell in with the wrong people. Tried to make a name for herself,” he scoffed. “She was barely eleven. What was she gonna do? Be like you?”

Alix glanced downwards at her hands, riddled with pocks and scars. These were working hands, hands that were attached to a body that lucked out. She wasn’t some success story - the Scavenger that went out hunting with a chipped machete strapped to her back and a bag that always came back bursting with prizes. She got lucky. She took some stupid risks and somehow
managed to wiggle her way out of those situations. Even multiple expeditions into an Above
city, chased by guards and Recons and enforcers always ended up with her escape and minimal
damage. She wasn’t a person to emulate. She shrugged in response, not sure what else to say
with that comment.

“Emilie tried to be one of them,” Kade nodded, craning his neck towards the Runners.
“Thought one of the bigs would pick her up. That didn’t fucking happen.”

“So you sent her away,” Alix stated.

“I guess,” Kade murmured, leaving it at that.

Questions threatened to burn their way out of Alix’s throat, but she shoved them back
down at the look on Kade’s face. Eyebrows clenched, mouth pursed; he was daring her to say
something, anything that he could lash out to. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. Instead she
chose to stay quiet, studying the curve to her calf, clenching the muscle that should have bulged
inside her pant leg but instead twitched like some dead thing.

The sole of her shoe was threatening to flap off, and she picked at the rubber, pulling off
a small chunk or two which then found themselves thrown through the hole in the floor. A very
clearly-outlined footprint marred the ground between her legs, stickiness matted down with dirt
and dust, evidence of another person long departed from the train.

The next tunnel came with a whoosh, and Alix shut her eyes, clenching her palms. It was
just like sleeping. The only darkness was the back of her eyelids, and even then, she tracked
streaks of yellow and purple and blue across the expanse. The air was mustier in the tunnels, a
heavy pall of damp earth and decomposing organics filtering over her bare face. She nuzzled
further into the cloth wrapping around her jaw, shielding her skin from the sudden onslaught of
humidity. Alix breathed in the familiar must of sweat and skin. If she pretended hard enough, she could be in a bed somewhere, tangled in sheets that were too threadbare to keep out the cold; she would wake up in the morning with feet like blocks, massaging them with hands warmed by the clench of her thighs, pulling color back into the appendages with every stroke. Toes curled inside her boots, pressing lukewarm toes to the bottoms. It would be too easy to nod off here, the rhythmic clack of train cars on the tracks lulling her to sleep.

She was too used to complacency, hours spent doing nothing in the clinic, rounding the walls of her room counterclockwise until the doctors snapped at her to stop exerting precious energy. At least listening to the AudioSys, listening to stories and books pumped through a set of speakers in the wall, kept her occupied for a majority of the time, lost in tales of knights and princesses, a civilization of talking animals, a woman and man reunited after strife and war to their significant other’s arms. Alix used to dream of Kade like that. Now, even if there wasn’t animosity between the two, it would be an uneven embrace, one stiff limb curled around a plump form, flesh squishing with the clutch.

Despite putting a gap between their bodies, Alix felt Kade lean up against her anyways, the paltry heat of his side calming the escalation of the monitor, which was white noise to her at this point. Perhaps he had heard the warning tones beneath the messy swaddling of her wrist, the screech of elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol, the pounding of her heart. Even if she tried, she couldn’t stop her body from reacting, relaxing, in his presence.

“First stop,” Kade muttered as the cars ground to a temporary halt, automatic doors opening onto a dimly-lit platform, probably leading to the town they had just passed. No one left their carriage, though the tall man near the doors stumbled in place as if to exit. Kade squinted as
two or three stragglers wandered around the platform, a single body striding past the man still deciding whether or not to disembark. “And another Runner,” he snarled, derision coating his tone, observing the new passenger, whose compact body was covered in a ratty trenchcoat, ends flapping with knotted threads. A glimmering snake of metal studded the outside of one ear, the other ear missing a large chunk.

“Another?” Alix echoed. “Same crew?” She turned her head towards their corner, still not opening her eyes, a blind swivel.

“Not sure. Not about to go ask,” Kade responded, choking on a cough. “They’d better not come over here though.”

“What are you gonna do? Cough on them?” Alix prodded.

“Cough all fucking over them,” he agreed. The new Runner was pushing the tall girl with the eyeteeth decorations around in what seemed like a playful manner, but could have easily been an intimidation tactic. Hopefully they were from the same crew, friendly. If a fight started in this car, it was unlikely that they would be able to evade the mess.

The doors closed, a squeak as they sealed.

“You think Emilie will be happy to see me?” Alix murmured, picturing the little girl in her mind - wispy, frizzy braids that clung tight to her scalp, the dusky brown of her eyelids fluttering in sleep, her warm, chocolate eyes.

Kade snorted. “Gonna be honest with you. Absolutely not.” Surprised, Alix’s eyes popped open despite the lack of light, staring towards Kade’s white pupils, one of the only colors she could make out in the dark. “You basically emulated her mother. Left without a word and without her.”
“I didn’t leave because I wanted to,” Alix snapped, “You were there, you’d think you’d remember. Or maybe your memory went to shit with all the Oxys that fried your brain. What’d you do? Start using again? Start slumming again with your -”

Kade clamped a hand over her mouth, nails digging into her cheeks. “Shut the fuck up,” he growled, “They’re listening.” A spark illuminating the carriage confirmed, indeed, that the Runners’ faces were all turned towards their spot. Their footsteps echoed on the thin metal flooring as they came to crouch around the two.

“Looking for a fix?” the new Runner asked, chin squared, eyes hidden beneath a pair of reflective lenses. “I’m selling.”

“It’s cool, I’m good,” Kade said through gritted teeth, Adam’s apple bobbing as he attempted to smother Alix’s wrist with his own on the chance of the monitor making noise again.

“You look like you need one,” the one with teeth mods leered, with a shark-toothed grin, “How long has it been pretty boy? Too long?”

“White pupils don’t lie,” the one with glasses mocked, holding out a pill between their two fingers, “Black as shadow.”

“I’m set,” Kade grunted, trying not to shudder as the girl with the split tongue licked her lips. “You guys work for Midos?”

“Yeah, what’s it to you, junkie?” the Runner asked, shoving the pill back into their pocket. The sneer accompanying the statement was less effective with the lack of front teeth.

“In the market. Looking to sell,” Kade replied, settling back into his old way of bantering, trying to ignore Alix’s sharp pinches to his side that told him to stop, just fucking stop talking. “Also looking for a friend of mine.”
“You’d have to talk to the boss about that one,” the lensed Runner said, “But I admire a junkie on his way up. I’m the same.” Removing their glasses, kohl-outlined, white-pupiled eyes stared at Kade. “A friend you said?”

“Little girl. About twelve. Went to Midos a while back, looking for a job,” Kade intoned, “Told her mama I’d get her back home, or at least tell her how she is.” Alix tensed at this new information. Emilie had gone to Midos. Emilie had gone to Midos. Why the hell had she gone to Midos? Had Kade sent her to Midos? Was there a gold filament bisecting her cheekbone now? It was best not to react at the moment. Kade had more practice with dealers and “authority figures” in Below than she ever would. In fact, he slept with a few of them, practiced hands and tongue able to bringing the most powerful people to their knees. It was an useful, effective skill.

“Midos’ type,” one of the girls muttered.

“She went to him for work. A Runner’s work,” Kade said. “Nothing else.”

“Sometimes you go to Midos and you don’t get what you want,” the split-tongued one replied, rubbing at her cheek. “Funny how that works out.”

The train left the tunnel, finding another pocket of civilization. Light trickled through the windows, through the fringed edges of Alix’s eyes. Was this their stop? She uncurled herself from Kade’s side, warily watching the three Runners that surrounded them.

“This is Midos’ territory,” the white-pupiled Runner said, sliding back on their glasses. “Follow me if you want to meet the boss.”

The carriage screeched as it slowed on the tracks.
Chapter Nine: Midos

How they had ended up in the lair of the current biggest drug lord in Below was nothing short of crazy. Alix shifted in place again, feeling like a beggar waiting for an audience with the king, lazing about on his throne.

The inside of this place was lavish, carpeted in thick rugs and draped in colorful fabrics, hardly mended. They were either acquired new or in very good condition. Alix saw Kade out of the corner of her eye, craning his neck to gape at all the fancy trimmings, and sighed. He was still distracted by overt displays of wealth, where the rich person didn’t have to hide their finery for fear of attack. Though he could sniff out profitable customers better than a hunting dog, he had always been drawn to the ones with the best presentation, even if he was tipped off by the madam of the house that another patron was the better choice. Kade might easily disappear in here and never come back out.

The Runners had led them through a series of hallways that felt more like catacombs, including one stretch where girlish giggles and curious small eyes watched from behind doorways, but apart from that brush with life, the complex echoed with emptiness. No one seemed to be around, the open rooms cluttered up the ceilings with items, but no people. With the lack of security around here, it only seemed like a matter of time before Midos was taken out, a new head in the spot his had been.

The cushion under her rear was embroidered with tiny dancing people, various substances offered while they waited. They were alone here too, though there were voices in the next room that could be heard from the gap in the door where the wood didn’t quite reach the floor. Alix shifted again, letting the rice resettle to reshape itself to her body. Kade seemed right
at home here, leaned back against a silk tapestry, rubbing the back of his neck over the fabric again and again to recall the warm slide of the material over his body in better times.

The Runner with the glasses, a person who was addressed by the various child servants in different states of undress as Romulin, sat beside Kade, sipping at a strong plum-colored jar of hooch, painting their lips a deep red. Apparently Romulin possessed some heft around here, having dismissed the two other girls in the first room, to the pointy-teethed one’s dismay. Where they were now was uncertain - maybe somewhere in rest of the building they hadn’t yet explored, maybe back out in Below to collect debts or sell. Either way, they were two less people to deal with, should the potential arrive for conflict.

The motherboards chafed against her thigh.

“So if this is Kade,” Romulin swallowed, running their tongue over their lips, gesturing towards Kade - who had told Romulin his name, being distracted by the decor - with the jar, “Who are you?” Alix shrank back, willing her breathing to resume.

“Alexandra,” she lied, fingers twitching against her pant leg, “Kade’s friend.”

Romulin smirked. “I doubt that. You two look like you go way back. So tell me Alexandra, what’s Kade like in bed?”

Alix sputtered, spared only by Romulin’s laughing. “I’m just fucking with you.”

“Midos says come in,” a girl, no more than seven announced, interrupting their so-called conversation, tugging at the base of her shirt to better hide her legs.

“That’s us,” Romulin said, swinging their legs off the bench they were sitting on. They followed the girl towards the room whose splintered doorway was shrouded in gauzy, gaudy fabrics. Shrugging, Kade side-eyed Alix before following.
Apparently the room they had been in before was only an antechamber, large as it seemed. This new area was three times the size, filled with ornamentation from the Surface. In one corner leaned a plastic flamingo, side slightly melted black; along the walkway, varied sculptured heads looked into nothingness, fixing the guests with an inhuman stare. Some plastic figurine, coated in char and ash with only the striped red and white socks and red shoes showing, sat upon a twisted bench. A near-pristine chandelier hung from the ceiling above the central platform, wax caking in drips on the empty metal candle holders. Alix could only imagine the labor and time it had taken to get these large items down here - Scavengers could only take what they could carry on their backs. It must have been a massive, expensive undertaking to amass all these “treasures”.

Squeals of delight emanated from a mountainous pile of stuffed animals, bright and cuddly synthetic furs hiding tangles of arms and legs engaged in playfighting. There had to be at least fifteen different girls in the mix. Every so often one of them would spring out, bare feet pattering, protected by heavy layers of carpets from the concrete of the room, before diving back in. Everyone’s eyes drifted over to this scene of joy - captured by it. Even the burly man at the head of the room, underlit by brand-new Raylight panels, straight from Above, gazed upon them with a certain fond benevolence.

Here, on a throne that was more of a well-loved armchair than anything else, sat Midos. He was different than Alix had expected - only having heard rumors about the man, having the fortunate to never run into him or his gang up until now. He was a large man, beard scrubby, streaked salt-and-pepper, and cropped close to his chin in an attempt to mask his receding chin. His biceps curled around the girlchild in his lap, keeping her secure, fingers tickling her bare
midriff. A scarf draped around his neck, looped in an intricate knot that his square hands couldn’t achieve without help. True to his name, Midos was covered in gold jewelry, the myriad of chains coating his neck digging into thick flesh. His entire visage looked sleepy, relaxed, save for the bright flicker of his eyes as they took in his guests.

“Who’s this, Romulin?” Midos rasped, exposing his gold teeth to the air, his wide mouth stretching halfway across his face. “More sewer rats that you take under your wing?” He propped his face on his hand, rings imprinting their insignias and facets into his skin, glancing at Kade first, then Alix. “What use do I have for more rats that are gonna drown?”

Romulin shrugged. “Said they were looking for someone. One of the girls?” The girl in Midos’ lap froze at these words, taking up her braid and worrying the ends of it between her teeth. The brand on her face was still fresh, red and blistered flesh surrounding the thin line of gold. She snuck glances at Kade and Alix, perhaps wondering if they had come for her by some fraction of a chance.

“One of my girls?” Midos replied, frowning.

“No, no,” Romulin backtracked, putting their hands up in a placating gesture, “A girl who came to be a Runner. A little too old by now to be one of your girls.” A weary, disappointed look passed over the face of the girl in Midos’ lap, and she shrank back into his grip.

“Name?” Midos grunted. Romulin looked to Kade for help.

“Emilie. Almost twelve by now. Short. Shorn hair. Gap in her teeth?”

Midos mulled over the details in his head.

“Finicky? Excitable? Likes jewelry?” Kade added, desperation growing. If Emilie wasn’t here, where else could she have gone? Or worse, had she been here and disappeared like so many
other girls in Midos’ sphere of influence, washed down the System in a quick-moving slurry of cash and desire? Alix shoved her hands in her jacket pockets, scrunching the fabric between her fingers. That couldn't be the case. Emilie was a smart child. She couldn't have - wouldn't have - fallen prey to Midos.

"Ask Vandra," Midos said after another tense moment, "She's the one who keeps track of the new Runners. That ain't my job."

"Do we have your permission to see her?" Romulin asked, to which Midos smiled, flashing his teeth once more as his hand swept in a grand motion.

"You have my permission,” he repeated, “Now go bother someone else with your problems and leave me be.” Midos returned to tickling the girl in his lap, who shrieked in false protest at his actions. Romulin nodded, already turning on their heel without a second glance, expecting Alix and Kade to follow. Obedient, they followed like baby birds after their mother.

Only once the door was shut again, the trio of Runners - one bald and coughing - waiting to be seen next ignored, down a few hallways that all looked the same from the outside, did Romulin turn around. “Lucky break, guys,” they breathed, shutting the door close to the heels of Kade’s feet, “She’s not one of his.”

“Oh well, thank the sun for that,” Alix retorted, “Now we definitely know where she is.”

Romulin cocked their head at Alix, removing their sunglasses to stare at her with increasing intensity. “Better lost than another line in his harem,” they murmured, “I’ve seen too many girls gone through here; their faces are a blur now. Suddenly they’re his ‘golden girls’, his ‘darlings’ and the next, you’ll never see that particular one again. So yes, indeed, let’s thank the sun that your friend has the potential to be free somewhere out there.”
Alix looked down at the floor, swallowing hard. She didn’t want to be here - here in this place that was like the Scavenger headquarters, following the orders and whims of a man who seemingly controlled life or death, here in this empty building filled with nothing but souvenirs of times long since past. The scars from previous plastic whippings burned in that moment, a reminder of hard lessons from hard teachers.

Her first strike was after failing to bring anything home that night, her dirty knuckles dusted with ash from sifting through piles she would later learn to identify as leftover pockets from previous Scavengers - devoid of treasures but still intact enough to hold the possibility of reward. She wasn’t allowed food that night either, nursing her stinging welts and her shrunken stomach whenever each flared up. It had been a miserable night, curled apart from the others, wanting their warmth, their comfort, but not their touch on her aching back.

She was not a fast learner.

Alix’s stubbornness had cost her more than once, but she wore whatever new cuts she gained with a false pride, showing off her experience, her survival on both the Surface and in Below, to other Scavengers, swapping stories of daring expeditions and miraculous finds. Even running into a Scavenger on the Surface, provided they knew the rules, was a welcome relief to the endless stretching plains as a friendly face in the midst of the wilderness, as added security when the things in the dark started howling.

“We need to see Vandra,” Kade demanded, not noticing how Romulin’s eyes became hard and flinty, slipping their sunglasses back on to stare at them with an impassive face.

“And I need to see some gratitude,” they smiled, “I just stuck my neck out for you. Pay up junkie. You owe me now.”
“We don’t have much,” Alix interjected, “I have a few Oxyhighs, but -”

“I don’t buy from anyone but the source,” Romulin sneered, lip curling back, “I don’t know where you got that shit, or who made it, or if the batch has been compromised. I ain’t taking that risk. Try again.” Alix removed her hand from her pocket, letting the pills she had gripped trickle back down through her fingertips. She couldn’t give them a motherboard - it would be dangerous to display that sort of wealth here, as they hadn’t even gotten the chance to break down their currency into less overt and ridiculous means before being edged out of Stationway by the two Recons. She glanced over at Kade for help, a pleading expression on her face. Maybe he was hoarding away something?

“My girlfriend found this a while back. We were saving it for when it was needed,” Kade said, pulling out a single gold coin. “Is this enough?” Romulin stared at the offering, contemplating. It was real gold; Alix has bitten into the end of one of the disks, feeling the metal give beneath her teeth to leave a mark, testing it. It would be worth something here, where the coin could be melted down and reshaped for something Midos would want. Alix almost applauded at Kade’s ingenuity.

Romulin took the coin, sweeping it up with their hand in an instant and squirreling it away in their coat. “It’s acceptable,” they admitted, “I’ll take you to Vandra - she’s in charge of all the Runners, keeping track of where they are and what they bring back and forth really.” With a flick of the tattered tails of their trenchcoat, Romulin bade them to follow yet again.

Thankfully this time they left the confusing building, stepping across the street to the blocks of apartments where the Runners lived. Compared to Midos’ palace, this place was full of sound - the snoring of multiple people, yelling voices, a soft song from upstairs, muffled thumps
and thuds, the screech of a kettle whistling, muted chatter - packed to the brim with living, loud bodies. They climbed multiple flights of stairs to the top floor, which pressed into the earth above like a molar waiting to erupt outwards.

“Van?” Romulin knocked, their fist banging a hollow sound on the metal door, “Here?”

“Hold on,” a muffled voice said before the door opened.

Leaning against the frame, not amused, was a girl about Kade’s age. Her white-pupiled eyes roved over the two newcomers; her hands made to pull her messy blue hair back into an updo, combing at the roots where the darkness bled through. “To what do I owe this visit?” she said in a clear and fluttering soprano. Her mouth twisted its thin lips in concentration as she took a circle of stretched-out elastic from her robe pocket.

“I was just about to go to bed,” Vandra groused, finally getting enough of her hair back to put it up and away from her face. “I haven’t slept in a couple days.”

“Shouldn’t take long,” Romulin assured, “These two are looking for an Emilie?”

Vandra’s face dropped. A great pounding downstairs gave her pause. “Rom, tell those kids on the second floor to stop locking each other out or I will lock them out. You two, come in.” She stood aside to let them pass, staring expectantly at Romulin.

“Yeah, yeah, got it, thanks,” they replied, a tentative question stuck in their throat, “I’ll stop by tomorrow?” Vandra nodded, a quick jerk of the head, before closing the door on their face. She turned to find Kade and Alix standing in place, waiting.

Vandra gave them a tired smile. “Ya’ll are going to want to sit down.”

“If she’s dead just tell us,” Alix blurted, feeling her throat constrict.
“No, no, not dead, just sick,” Vandra replied, eyebrows raised, surprised, “Did you expect her to be dead?”

“We assumed the worst,” Kade explained, “We’ve heard things about Midos.”

Vandra fluffed her ponytail, wrapping it around to become a bun. “Everyone hears things about Midos. It’s near impossible not to. But he doesn’t touch my Runners.” She smirked. “I’m the one in charge here.”

Kade and Alix sat down in separate chairs at Vandra’s bidding.

“Like I said before, I haven’t had much in the way of sleep, so this story’ll be quick and dirty,” she stated, “Emilie came to me to be a Runner. She wasn’t good at it. She was good at repairing jewelry that was recovered from the Surface. That became her job. She was paid well and treated fairly enough, though I’m sure she was bullied by the others for her position. But then she got sick. It started as a cough and then got worse. I got her to leave, to see some doctors farther down the tracks. It’s been a few months. I haven’t heard from her since.”

“How bad was she?” Alix asked, imagining the coughing that would wrack the young girl’s form, her delicate ribcage curled in on itself, lungs spasming.

“It would’ve gotten worse if I didn’t get her to go see someone,” Vandra reflected, “Though she was determined to keep working. She really enjoyed putting back links on a chain; she could do it for hours, just concentrating. I’ve never seen anything like it.” She paused. “But she didn’t collect all of her pay before she left.” Bare feet slapping the floor, she trotted over to one of the walls, composed of dusky red bricks, crumbling into piles of fine powder on the floor. Reaching up, her hand removed a stone and rummaged around inside. “Come here.”
A vial of sweet crystals was pressed into Alix’s palm as she neared, the plastic cooled from its hidden storage space. “Take this,” Vandra murmured, replacing the chipped brick, “This is the last of her pay.” Alix fought the urge to shake a few of the precious grains onto her tongue, to dip a wetted finger into the tube and remove it covered with pure white sprinkles. How long had it been since the bowl of sugar was placed in front of her tea, the kindly doctor with the oval-shaped silver eyes and the scent of bread scooping a half-spoonful into her morning tea, cutting the bitterness of herbs and liquid vitamins, stirring until the sweetness had dissolved beneath the clanging metal spoon, around and around in the reinforced ceramic? The backs of her molars ached for a taste; she turned the vial in her hand, watching the grains shift and tumble into small hills and valleys.

“Promise you’ll give it to her?” Vandra asked, white pupils ringed by green staring into Alix’s face, switching to look upwards at Kade as he approached the pair. Alix nodded. “Good. Because if you don’t, if you’re lying, my Runners will find nose you out in a heartbeat.” Her eyes narrowed. “And that’s my promise. You can find her one station down, though you’re welcome to stay and rest for a bit. I’m certainly going to.”

Alix shuddered, thinking about the next tunnel. But now that Vandra mentioned it, her limbs did feel really heavy; her head fuzzy. She slunk over to the most cushioned chair and passed out before she could tilt her head back.