Any other morning, I’d dive into Durga’s observation bay without hesitation, but this is the day before my life begins. I hang back on the concrete meridian and raise the Tanto strapped to my wrist, jabbing the button that ignites the miniature LED beacon.

As the blue lights glow and a low tone rings out over the water, she rises. Durga’s head is the first thing to emerge from the waves, the brutal lines of her reptilian beak fading into the soft wrinkles that wreathe her huge, round eyes. She lets out a snort that blasts seawater from all three blowholes lined along the ridge of her skull.

The smell of salt, sea, and carrion washes over me, and I drink it in, letting the familiar aroma drain the nervousness from my body. Everything starts tomorrow, but I have nothing to fear with Durga by my side.

She raises one massive, clawed foreleg out of the water and slams it down, sending up a spray that plows over the meridian, leaving me drenched and sputtering and regretting hanging back on the barrier. Reckoners may be ruthless killing machines, but they’re downright cheeky when they know they can get away with it.

When I finish blinking away the brine, I swear I can see a twinkle in her eyes. I snap off the Tanto and pull my respirator up from around my neck, slipping the rubbery mouthpiece between my teeth as I fasten the straps behind my head. My mask comes next, slightly fogged from the warm August air.

Once I’m sure I’ll be able to breathe and see, I take a running leap off the meridian and dive headfirst into the water.

The ocean swallows me in a rush. The morning light dances through the waves, shrouding Durga’s bulk in glittering beams. With a few short strokes, I draw up to the tip of her beak and grab the edge of her keratin plating.

Durga blinks once, then lifts her head.

I crimp my fingers tighter as she raises me up out of the water. She’s horrendously gentle for a beast the size of a football field. Her eyes never leave me.

“Good old girl,” I murmur against her plating, then let go. The water engulfs me again, and I immediately lunge forward to grab the keratin covering her chest. I rap my knuckles against it twice. As long as I remind her where I am, Durga will be careful not to crush me.

I dive deeper, running my hands along the knobby, leathery skin between her plates. Most of the other trainers hate getting stuck with morning once-over duty, but it’s always been relaxing for me. Checking over Durga is like exploring an alien planet. As I glide along beneath her belly, I map out her ridges and crevices, the tectonics of muscles working beneath her skin, the subtle shifts of coloring that patch her hide. Her primary genes come from snapping turtles, giving her the wide, bulky body and spiny plated shell, but the length of her limbs and the muddled regions of red and green that swath her skin are reminders of the marine iguana DNA woven into her makeup.

She’s a big dumb turtle four times the weight of a blue whale, but there’s no denying the elegance of her construction.

I’m halfway down her left foreleg when it happens. Something pulses through the water, and it takes me a second to realize that Durga just shivered.

Reckoners don’t *shiver.*

Skrutskie, Emily. The Abyss Surrounds Us (pp. 2-3). Flux. Kindle Edition.

Skrutskie, Emily. The Abyss Surrounds Us (p. 2). Flux. Kindle Edition.