Meat

It was freezing. The wind blowing off the river chewed right past my flimsy jacket, gnawing so deeply into my flesh that its bite seemed to scrape my bones. Police cruisers circled lazily above where I stood on the high riverbank, cordoning off the scene by air, and the pulsing glow of their ion engines swept over the gruesome display on the dock below, casting the strewn viscera and exposed bone in the kind of dancing shadows that almost made it look like she was, somehow, still alive. Midway through one cruiser's arc, one of its piercingly bright headlights pinned me right in the face. For a moment I had a vision of being a raw, bloodied haunch of meat impaled on a hook, swinging limply with nothing but the grinding of metal chain links to keep me company, gutted and skinned so that there was nothing to protect me from the cold. And then the sound of sirens faded in, followed by the snapping of a camera and the hum of officers muttering and what I was pretty sure was the sound of a rookie puking his brains out behind a bush at the sight of his first Blood Eagle victim. My own stomach turned when it hit me that the object of his disgust had been my reason for living—and now she was gone.

It was maybe two in the morning, so I and the rest of the New Amsterdam Police

Department had gotten dragged out of bed by the call that they'd found another one. Unlike the other incoming officers who were still trickling in, though, I just stood frozen at the top of the riverbank, unable to tear my eyes away from the scene below. Some officers were whispering behind me, and I didn't need to hear to guess at what was being said:

"Who's that weirdo just staring at the crime scene?"

"That's Detective Calvin Saturn, one of the lead investigators on the Blood Eagle case."

"What about the pile of mincemeat down there he's staring at?"

"Oh, that's his girlfriend."

I don't know how long I just waited there, hoping desperately that this had all been one fucked-up fever dream, before someone finally stopped by my side.

"Hey, Cal," he greeted me hesitantly. Even without seeing him, I recognized his voice immediately—Detective Brandon Sweeney, whom I've known since we were barely old enough to walk. We'd joined the NAPD together, clawed our way up the ranks together, and now we were the lead investigators on the Blood Eagle killings together. At the time, when we'd been assigned to work the department's most high-profile case as partners, we'd been ecstatic. But now—

"It's my fault she's dead, Bran," I said, my voice coming out as numb as I felt. "I killed her. Those fucking Blood Eagles." Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Bran's pity-drenched expression. Even to my own ears, I sounded despondent and pathetic, but I didn't care. "These last few weeks, I spent so much time obsessing over them that I forgot about her. The only times we talked, it was to argue about them. What the fuck was I thinking?"

"Good question," she said. "What were you thinking?"

"You know," Bran interjected awkwardly, "you could always—Marina, if she—I mean, I don't know if there's anything left, but if there is, they might be able to salvage something—"

I knew what he was trying to say. "Her ECHO," I finished blankly.

The ECHO was the closest thing you could get to a ghost, and its existence was all thanks to the sounder: a little circular microchip permanently fused under the left ear that dug its wires into the brain, like a hand filling out a puppet, essentially turning your body into a computer-operated machine. Memories, for example, were no longer left up to the notoriously

unreliable brain, but were instead saved to a sounder's sizable databanks in full HD. Sleep had once been a tiny bit of useful REM sleep and a whole lot of wasted time, but now, it was just a matter of shutting down and jumping right into REM whenever it was convenient. And there was no such thing as feeling hungry anymore. The physical discomfort of hunger had been one of the first 'irrelevant' sensations to be replaced by a purely computerized alert instead. In fact, the feeling of hunger had been obsolete for so long that people were writing shitty poetry about it already, in the same wildly out-of-touch way that bored rich people lament about the kind of poverty they've never known.

Shitty sounder-inspired poetry was a relatively new development, though. No one had cared enough to write poetry about sounders back when they'd just been about decreasing cortisol-induced impairment or regulating circadian rhythms. What really caught everyone's attention was the discovery that sounders, because they all but replaced the brain, had the unintended side effect of having everything that made up a person stored on them. As a result, when that person died, they left their ECHO—a replica of their consciousness stored in digital form—behind. By linking the deceased's sounder to your own with an ECHO uplink, you could interact with the dead as if they were still alive, even if no one else could see them but you. I'd heard that a linked ECHO was like a hallucination that could be turned on and off, but one that nitpicked everything you did just as much as the ECHO's source would've in life—if committing a travesty against the laws of nature wasn't enough, that was just another reason for me to never get an ECHO uplink anywhere near my own sounder.

Getting a sounder implanted was mandatory, the included antiviral software giving it the same importance as vaccines of the past. But it was thanks to ECHOes that, unlike vaccines, no

one really hated having a sounder. Sure, everyone was aware (at least, to some extent) that an ECHO was exactly what it said on the tin: just an echo of someone's former self, nothing more. But in practice, that didn't really matter. As revolting as it was, everyone could get on board with having a piece of a dead loved one that tricked you into thinking they were still alive.

Almost everyone, that was, except for the Blood Eagles—who always destroyed their victims' sounders for that reason—and except for me. The Blood Eagles might be a crazed murder cult but at least we could agree on one thing: humans were made of meat, not metal. Treating an ECHO like it was still every bit the human it copied? That was more bullshit than you'd get straight from a bull's ass. There was no way I'd trash Marina's memory so quickly by giving a chunk of metal the same reverence that I'd given her.

But that didn't even matter—I was close enough to see the clot of hair and blood that had once been the left side of her head, where the remains of her sounder were ground into the mangled flesh, the silicone dust glinting and sparkling whenever one of the hovering police cruisers swept over her with their lights. There was nothing on which to build even the most fragile of false hopes: nothing was left of that piece of shit microchip that could've pretended to be the woman I loved.

"And good riddance, too," she said.

"Even if there were anything left of her sounder," I responded icily to Bran's misguided attempt at comfort, "you know full well I'd never use the fucking thing." He definitely should've known, considering he was fully aware that the only thing stopping me from gouging out and crushing my own sounder was the fact that it would kill me. Over all the years we'd known each other, I'd been more than clear about that.

"Sorry," Bran apologized immediately, not even slightly taken aback by my pointed response. At least he knew me well enough to have seen it coming. "Thought I might as well bring it up. You know. Just in case." I had to bite my lip to keep from retaliating with something even harsher.

"Cal," she chided, "he's just trying to help."

It wasn't fair of me to get angry at him for that. I took a deep breath, letting the grimy city air slither down my throat and into my lungs. "Thanks," I finally muttered.

"No problem," he said, much to my relief. "Anyway, I checked when I got here and it looks like they've already pretty much finished processing the scene. It's... the same as all the other Blood Eagle victims, except they can't find her heart. But they're already searching the river, so not a lot that we can do for now." I understood what he wasn't saying: ribs severed from spine and wrenched open, lungs pulled out and splayed to her sides like some grotesque impression of wings. Just like the others, killed using the same ancient Viking execution method known as the 'blood eagle'—hence the name.

Except for the missing heart thing. That was new.

"I'm gonna wrap up here," he continued, "then head back home for a bit before I clock in at the station. If you want, you can just head home now. But I swear that if we find anything, you'll be the absolute first to hear about it."

I knew what he was doing, but I also knew I wouldn't be able to fight him on it. "Fine," I conceded reluctantly. "I'm starving anyway. I'll see you at the station in a couple hours, then."

"Yeah," he responded, his brow furrowing slightly. There was a peculiar note in his voice, as if he'd found something unusual with what I'd said, but I ignored it. I was too hungry to care.

* * *

Only when I was stumbling into our—my dark apartment did I realize that I was more tired than I'd thought. By the time I'd closed the stainless steel door behind me, I was swaying unsteadily on my feet with every step, and even with the wall's help, I could only barely keep myself upright.

I'd read something a while ago that said if you were sleep-deprived enough, it was neurologically the same as being drunk, which was why sounders had some automatic subroutine (for the "user's best interests") that blocked the effects of being tired. Their ability to suppress those effects was limited, though, since sounders made jumping in and out of REM so easy that there was never really a need to combat severe sleep deprivation. The sole way to override your sounder was to stay awake for maybe four or five days straight, and only then would you reach the point of exhaustion where you could feel your diaphragm dragging and grating its way through flesh and tendon and guts with every breath, the friction burning your stomach like paint stripper, eating away at the skin to expose something red and raw below.

I passed out on the couch of my own accord—in the sense that I hadn't used my sounder, not in the sense that I'd done it intentionally. It was three in the morning when I sat down, but when I checked my watch again, it was closer to six. I blearily did the math in my head. That was still a good three hours before I'd need to actually go in to work, thankfully. Well, even if I hadn't meant to fall asleep, at least I still had more than enough time to eat.

As I lay on the couch trying to muster the energy to get up, there was a cheery *ding* from my pocket. I would've thought that it might be Bran if I didn't recognize the sound immediately, and a half-hearted glance at the screen confirmed my initial thought. *BLOOD SUGAR LEVELS LOW. TIME TO EAT!* the alert read. I sighed in annoyance, the air whistling out through my gritted teeth. I didn't need the message, sent from my sounder to my phone, to tell me what I already knew.

I got up and went to make something to eat.

"Do you remember," she began, her elbows propped onto the counter as her fingers toyed with the leaves of a synthetic potted plant, "when we went to the Botanical Gardens last year?"

"Yes." I stifled a groan, because I was out of milk. It wasn't real milk, but it was sure better than eating cereal dry.

"You loved it there. You said you'd found the most human thing about this city, that you'd tear down New Amsterdam itself to keep it... but that was before you got the Blood Eagle case. Before their thoughts became your own. Before you loved them more than me."

There was a tablet sitting on the kitchen island, right next to where I was currently scarfing down a bowl of dry cereal that crumbled like ash in my mouth. I picked it up and tapped it, blinking to adjust my vision as the screen burst into life, the bright light harsh against the early-morning haze drifting in through the windows. Even before it turned on, I knew exactly what I was going to see—the uncreatively-titled "Manifesto," delivered weeks ago to the station when an old-school flash drive had somehow been unobtrusively slipped into my mail.

I hadn't reported it because I hadn't felt the need to. My goal was to catch a murder cult for their murders, not their ideology. And it wasn't like there was anything wrong inside the

Blood Eagles' manifesto itself: it just explained that they targeted those people who had misused their sounders, because then they had stepped too far into becoming less than human.

In some weird, twisted way, it even made sense. After all, how human is someone who deadens all their nerve endings to never feel physical pain? How much respect could you possibly be giving your dearly departed by treating their ECHOes, which the Manifesto rightly described as "gross mockeries of the human soul," as being equal to them? And how much of a person is a person who can't feel hunger at all? Maybe I wouldn't have phrased it in those exact murderous cult-ish words, but whenever I thought about it, I still couldn't help but agree with what they were saying.

I thought about it a lot.

"I know." She was perched on the other side of the island, balancing on the faux-wood stool where she sat. "This was the last place you saw me. And that's what we fought about.

Remember?"

"Yes."

She hummed lightly under her breath. "I told you I was leaving. You let me go."

I'd finished the cereal, but it'd been like eating chalk. I slid off my stool and dumped the bowl in the sink, then began scouring the kitchen for what I'd need to fry up some bacon. It barely took five minutes before I was tossing a loaded plate back down on the island. Even if it wasn't really bacon, it tasted close enough—but not today. Today, the artificial fat congealed like wet sawdust on my tongue and the synthetic meat went down with all the ease of crushed glass.

Something had changed. I knew exactly what it was.

"You said you wanted a taste of something human," she said. "For once in my damn life'—those were your exact words—'because I'm so fucking sick of this city.' You said that the Blood Eagles understood. That they knew what it meant to be a thing of flesh and blood."

"Yes."

"But I saw then how little this thing of flesh and blood meant to you." She sounded sad.

And something in my heart broke.

"No," I snarled, my head snapping up to meet her eyes. She looked surprised at my outburst. "That's not true. That was never true. I wanted something human, and I was a fucking idiot and forgot—that something was you. It was always you."

She tilted her head, her dull green irises boring into mine. "I broke your heart," she noted.

"It doesn't matter." The truth was, I barely remembered the Gardens. I had a vague recollection of some mildly interesting plants, maybe, but those were just plants. When I'd said that I'd found the most human thing about this city, of course I hadn't meant the fucking *plants*.

Somehow, she seemed to know what was in my head, because something like relief had crept its way onto her features.

"Marina," I said, "if you give me your heart, I won't need mine."

BRR-ING. The sharp noise sliced abruptly through the empty apartment, startling the only person there to hear it. It took me a moment before I recognized my ringtone and reacted accordingly. "Bran?" I guessed, after a brief scramble to dig my phone out of my pocket.

"Get over here," Bran rushed out, clearly too excited to bother with niceties. "The leader of the Blood Eagles, he messed up, they're bringing him in now—Cal, we got him."

Dr. Donner Onslow: the man who had, however indirectly, killed twelve people. One look at him was enough to tell. According to Bran, a night shift drone had realized that all the Blood Eagle victims had seen psychologists from the same practice—excluding Onslow himself, who was, suspiciously, the only one with untouched patients. Problem was, that evidence was circumstantial at best. Onslow seemed to know that, because he held a disarmingly pleasant expression when I entered the interrogation room that was more irritating than anything. He was the textbook criminal mastermind, secure in the comfort of his own ego, and that pissed me off.

"Gentlemen," he started, as soon as I'd taken a seat in front of him, only a flimsy aluminum table separating us, "may I ask what this is about?"

Bran stood behind me, slouched against the wall with his arms crossed. He said nothing, presumably letting me take the lead, and I thanked him silently in my head before responding. "Rem Hopkins," I began, getting right into it. "Christie Creek. Tallow Price."

He raised an eyebrow, almost amused. "I'm afraid I'm not following."

"Packard Lector. Mads Schwartz. Eve Rousseau."

I could see in his eyes the exact moment when he realized what I was doing, because that was when they lit up with delight. "I see," he interjected, "aren't those the names of that horrific cult's victims? What were they called, the Red Eagles or something?"

"What a class act," she said. "Red Eagles.' Har-de-har." Har-de-fucking-har, indeed.

It seemed that Bran had caught on, because now he jumped in. "Tam Ester." He picked up from where I'd left off, moving around the table to stand behind Onslow, just outside enough of the doctor's peripheral to be uncomfortable. "Alferd Long. Dolores Hyde."

"You know, I heard that their goal is to punish those who misuse sounders. Personally, I can't fault them. Do you know how many of my patients have had their lives, their humanity, ruined? Like ECHOes—they've completely destroyed the healthy grieving process! Personally, I consider them to be gross mockeries of the human soul."

Wait. "Gross mockeries of the human soul?"

I could feel him scanning my expression very closely, trying to find any sign of a reaction. I didn't want to give him one, but I also hadn't expected him to be that explicit and outright quote his Manifesto—except no one knew he'd done that but me, and I couldn't call him out without drawing suspicion to myself for not having handed it over earlier. And it wasn't like it was a common enough phrase that I could brush it off as coincidence.

Fuck. How the hell could he have known that I'd read it closely enough to remember that line? He didn't know anything about me—but then, he'd sent me the Manifesto. And it didn't look like he'd tried again and sent it to anyone else, meaning he hadn't wanted the police as a whole to see it, just me. So that begged the obvious question—why me? What had he seen in me, and what was he planning to do about it?

When I stumbled, it wasn't obvious. Just an extra breath when I shouldn't have needed one. But it was enough, because when I did, his polite smile widened just a little bit more.

Even so, I didn't stop. "Mel Typee. Wendy Goya. Sawney Hart." That made twelve.

"But of course I can't condone their terrible actions, and I should hope that I wasn't brought here to be accused of something so absurd. If you check with my assistant, I'm sure he could tell you exactly where I was when these poor people were so brutally murdered."

And I was sure that he would. But we knew full well that the Blood Eagles weren't just one man, so Onslow wasn't going to get off that easy. I opened my mouth to tell him that, except—

"Marina Madchen," Bran finished. I froze.

Onslow's expression shifted to one of real surprise.

"Who?" he asked, genuine confusion in his voice as he finally turned to look at Bran.

Bran scoffed. He moved over to the table's end and suddenly slammed both palms down onto its metallic surface, the rattling of its uneven legs ringing out in the small room. "You had twelve other chances to pull that, so don't even try. And especially not with her. Come on—you think you're saving humanity, getting your followers to kill people who've become *your* definition of," and his voice dripped with sarcasm here, "'less than human.' You might've somehow convinced them you were right, but with her? With her, there's no question of how disgusting you are. You killed an innocent woman, mutilated her body, and even took her heart like some creepy fucking psycho, just because she's the girlfriend of one of the detectives investigating you. What kind of savior does that, huh?"

Onslow was thinking. The gears turning in his head were visible to any observer, and so it was equally as obvious when they all clicked into place.

"Ah," he said. He turned back to look at me. I couldn't drag my eyes away from his, because now I could see that this wasn't some last-ditch, blustery attempt to regain control of the situation. Somehow, he knew more about me than I ever would've guessed. And now he really had figured it all out.

"You see, Detectives," he explained, addressing us both by name but making it clear through his unwavering gaze that his words were only meant for me, "suppose I were one of your Blood Eagles. In that case, I might tell you that our chosen method of execution, the blood eagle, has historical connotations that show how we view our targets as the enemy, an inhuman invading force that needs to be stopped through whatever means necessary. In theory, that is."

"How is this even relevant?" Bran scoffed. He went completely ignored.

"In the meantime, removal of the heart," Onslow continued, "is also a very loaded act, but one that is not in line with our hypothetical motivations. Taking the heart is a personal, not political, act, but my alleged cult following only acts out of political motivation. Hence why, were I to be the cult leader you seem to believe, I would tell you that your last victim was clearly not murdered by us. Moving away from the theoretical, as a show of good faith, I'll even share some of my thoughts informed by my expertise as a psychologist."

Onslow paused before continuing. Narrowed his eyes meaningfully. My lungs stopped dead in my chest, because he *knew*.

"I believe that you are looking for someone who would've known he had done something wrong, and so tried to use his knowledge of the Blood Eagles to cover it up. Someone who knew the victim very, very personally." Onslow's voice was hypnotic. I could barely breathe, much less think about getting a word in edgewise. "Someone who hates sounders and ECHOes and how they reduce a whole human being into a trinket. Someone who wanted more than just a keychain to remember her by." The fluorescent strips lighting the room were too bright. Were digging into me like hooks in my flesh. And Onslow was the butcher letting me hang. "Someone who loved her enough that, even though he murdered her, still wanted her heart."

Bran laughed. Loud and harsh. Like metal grinding on metal. "You can't be serious," he addressed Onslow incredulously. "What kind of a strategy even is that, getting brought in as a murder suspect then accusing your interrogator of murder..." He trailed off into an uncertain silence, because he'd just turned around for confirmation from me, and I wasn't laughing.

"Cal?" he probed, suddenly much less confident. His voice had about as much effect on me as a snowball on an avalanche. It didn't even register.

"You're wrong," I retorted, staring down Onslow. I needed to make sure. Needed him to understand. "I didn't murder her. It was an accident. We were fighting again, and she—I didn't realize I'd pushed her that hard. Not until she went down. Do you know how impossible of a fall that was, for the corner of the table to hit at that exact angle at that exact spot, and with enough force to crack her sounder? It was an accident. I loved—love her. I never could have murdered her."

I couldn't tell anything from Onslow's face. It'd been so smug before, but now it was just empty. That was the last thing I wanted. I needed him to understand.

I didn't murder her.

"Cal, what the fuck?" I heard Bran's stunned voice from off to the side. It was so faint that I barely heard him. "Shut up, what are you even saying—"

"I love her," I insisted, desperation beginning to creep into my voice when I saw that Onslow's expression still hadn't changed. "I wanted—I want to be with her forever."

"Cal, shut *up*—"

"She was the best thing that ever happened to me. She was the most human thing I ever found. Do you know how hard it is to find anything human in this city? Of course you do, you wrote about it. You should understand."

"Cal."

"I needed her. I still need her. It was an accident, I swear. And her heart, I just—I didn't think about it, it just happened, it was the only way for us to be together—"

"Cal!" I realized with a start that Bran had been all but shouting my name. I wrenched my eyes away from Onslow to face Bran instead, just as the full magnitude of the fact that he'd heard everything hit me like a sucker punch to the gut. He looked like he felt the same way.

"Cal," he repeated, a little more quietly now that he had my attention. Unconsciously, I held my breath. I didn't know what he would say. I didn't even know what I wanted him to say. "What did you do with her heart?"

"What?" I blinked, taken aback by the question.

"What did you do with her heart, you sick fuck?" he repeated, his own disgust and horror finally bleeding through into his words. "You hypocrite. You're always going on about how sounders make us less human—but fuck, how could anyone get less human than you?"

I sat frozen. "Bran..." I trailed off, scrambling wildly for something, anything to say.

"Shut the fuck up," he snapped. "Jesus fucking Christ, Cal—you're supposed to report it as an accident, not rip open her fucking ribcage and leave her body on a pier, then make excuses and ignore that you did it like a complete fucking coward! Fucking hell."

I was swaying, dangling from a hook. Trapped under these crushing lights. Their electrical whine pressing down on my skull. It was too late. He would never understand.

I was faintly aware of the door to the interrogation room being thrown open—the occupants of the observation room, I noted absentmindedly, must've called in the cavalry to come get me—and officers swarmed in. Shouting. Bristling with weapons. At some point, I'd stood up, but it didn't help. A sense of claustrophobia was threatening to overwhelm me, and even though the room's temperature hadn't changed, I felt very, very cold.

"You're still human to me," she offered, but it was too late. Nobody outside of my own head would ever understand.

Suddenly and without warning, something pulled sharply at my arm. I looked down to see Onslow staring intently up at me, his fingers wrapped around my elbow. The incoming officers were closing in, but just before one of them got close enough to grab me, Onslow tugged me down until my head was level enough with his own that he could whisper something into my ear.

It took me a moment to sift his words out from the noise all around us. But when I did, I nearly collapsed into the arms of the officers that seized me and dragged me away from Onslow. Relief poured through me, spreading from where Onslow's hand had grasped my elbow, burning through my veins and heating up my frozen flesh, because *he understood*.

As they hauled me off, I didn't resist. I couldn't. Not when the only thing I could hear, the only thing that I could think of, were Onslow's last words to me ringing in my ears:

"You loved her so much that you ate her. What could be more human than that?"