



ALVE

"A ripping, claustrophobic
thunderbolt of a novel."

—PIERCE BROWN,
author of *Red Rising*

SCOTT SIGLER

ALIVE

BOOK ONE OF THE GENERATIONS TRILOGY

SCOTT SIGLER



DEL REY
NEW YORK



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PART I

DARKNESS
AND LIGHT



ONE

A stabbing pain jolts me awake.

It hits quick but deep, a here-then-gone stinging where my neck meets my shoulder.

Did something bite me?

No...just a dream. A nightmare, maybe.

That's not how I should wake up on my birthday. I'm twelve. I can hardly believe it—I'm *twelve*. I'm not a little kid anymore. I should get to sleep in, I should get to sleep all day. There should be a cake, and my friends, and I shouldn't have to go to school.

School.

The thought of that place chases away my excitement. I'm so tired. Feels like I've never slept at all. If I missed my alarm, I'll be late for classes again. Mom will kill me. I don't want to go. At school, the tooth-girls and the circle-stars always make fun of me. And I shouldn't be teased on my birthday. I hate school, I hate them, I...

A tingling coolness on my neck, right where I felt that sting. Tickling, spreading...

...am I *bleeding*?

I open my eyes to darkness. *Total* darkness. I hear my own breathing, but nothing else. And...and I *can't move*. Curved bars, cool and rough, hold my wrists by my sides. I roll my hands, trying to slip free, but the bars are so tight they scrape against my skin.

"Mom?"

The word sounds too loud, almost a scream. Something is wrong. My voice sounds odd...kind of muffled.

Mom doesn't answer.

"Dad?"

Nothing.

I pull harder, but it's not only my wrists that can't move—something holds my ankles, and my hips are pinned so tight I can't even turn.

This isn't my bedroom. This isn't my house. My parents aren't here.

My chest seems to squeeze in, as if it is clamping down on my hammering heart. My body tingles, every ounce of me screaming *Get up! Getupgetupgetup!*

"Is anyone there?"

Nothing.

"Someone help me. This is..."

My breath catches.

I don't know my own name.

I thrash and pull, yank desperately at the unforgiving bars holding me down.

“Someone, *help me!*”

No one answers.

I scream so hard it tears at my throat. Someone *had* to hear that. Someone *has* to come get me, come help me.

I wait.

Still nothing.

I lift my head—my forehead clonks against something solid and unmoving. That's why my voice sounded funny: there is a board right in front of my face.

No, not a board...a *lid*.

Padding beneath me and at my sides.

I am in...

...oh no, oh no...

...am I in a *coffin*?

“Help! Somebody get me out of here!”

The pain that woke me plunges into my neck again, a sting so deep it locks me up, all tight-eyed and rigid and frozen.

I am trapped in the dark and something is biting me.

(If you run, your enemy will hunt you. Kill your enemy, and you are forever free.)

That thought seems familiar, a memory that stuck. Rage blossoms, gives me the focus to move despite my agony, gives me the strength to try harder. I pull and push, lift and twist. I focus all my strength on my right hand—*pull*, dammit—the skin of my wrist tears against the rough material, but I *have* to get out....

Pull, push, twist, yank, harder and harder until my coffin rattles.

I feel the bar crack. I can move my right hand more. Only a little, but *I can move it more*.

The sting slides deeper into my neck, and I cry out.

No one came before, no one will come now.

Will it hit a lung? Pierce my heart?

Will I die?

I jerk so hard the bones in my wrists grind against the bars holding them down. I hear another small crack, then another—my right hand flies free.

I slide my fingers up my body to my neck, blindly grab at the thing slicing into me. My hand locks down on wetness, slickness, a cold snake that moves and wiggles. It's trying to slither away, but I have it and I won't let go. I yank it to my mouth and bite down, taste something horrid, crush my teeth together so hard my jaw hurts. I thrash my head, I bite harder—something inside of it crunches.

It falls limp in my hand and mouth. I fling it aside, then spit, trying to get that vile taste off my tongue.

Right hand to left wrist. I grab the restraint. Its surface crumbles at my touch, powder falling away.

to reveal pitted hardness beneath. Right hand yanking, left fist lifting, the cracking sound comes quickly and my left hand is free.

Both hands grab the bar that curves across my waist. I attack it, *push-pull-push-pull-push-pull* making the whole coffin shake around me. The bar breaks.

Now for my feet.

The lid is so close to my face and chest that my hands can reach down only to my thighs. I'm wearing some kind of short skirt? I must reach farther, must keep trying. I have to get out, whatever it takes. I twist to my right hip, use the ankle restraints as resistance to wiggle my body lower, reach down with my left hand. My shoulder and face drag against the coffin's smooth lid, pulling at my cheek and nose and closed eye, but even then my fingers barely touch my knees.

I must pull harder, *harder*, I must keep fighting, *must* get out of the darkness. If I can't reach my feet, I will die here alone and screaming and—

—my fingertip brushes the rough bars pinning my ankles. So close, just a little farther. Contorted muscles and twisted bones vibrate with pain as I wedge in even tighter, but finally my left hand grips the bar. Grab and shake and yank, must get loose...

Crack, crack—both feet come free.

I slide up the coffin until I am again flat on my back. I press my palms against the lid.

I push: it doesn't budge. I'm not strong enough.

Think. THINK. You have to get out...

I need to use my arms and my legs, use *all* of me....

I twist and turn until I'm lying on my stomach. There isn't enough room to get all the way to my hands and knees, but I push down as hard as I can while I arch my back against the lid. Sweat drips into my eyes. Sweat and maybe blood. I press until my back screams...

...something in the lid snaps.

A sliver of blinding light hits the bed of my coffin, so bright it burns to look at it. I close my eyes and push even harder. I feel the lid lift, just a little, enough for me to slide my knees all the way beneath me.

(Attack, attack, when in doubt, always attack, never let your enemy recover.)

I take a breath, focus, and shove upward with everything I have left.

The shuddering complaint of something bending and tearing. At the end of the fight, the strong lid breaks like a brittle shell—I am *up* and *out* and *standing*...

...and *falling*.

I land hard, kicking up a thick cloud of something powdery. My heaving lungs suck it in. The floor spins and whirls beneath me, and there is light *everywhere*, so bright it stings even through clenched eyes.

Lying on my side, I blink, trying to see. I cough, trying to breathe. I wait for my eyes to adjust, hoping they do before whoever locked me in the coffin comes to put me back inside once again.

TWO

The light blinds me, makes my eyes water. Grainy dust on my tongue, coating my raw throat, so deep in my lungs it makes me cough again and again. The noise might bring the people who did this to me but I can't stop. I can't see, I'm too weak to move.

I am helpless.

The coughing fit eases. My body relaxes enough for me to sit up. I pull my knees to my chest, wrap my arms tight around my legs. I rub my wrists; the rough bars ripped my skin raw.

My coffin was warm. I broke it open, hatched from it, and now I'm in this cold room. I'm shivering. I'm out, yes, but alone, exhausted and terrified.

Where are my mom and dad? Why aren't they here? Where is *here*, anyway?

I smell things I don't fully recognize. Dry odors, stale scents. This place smells...dead.

The light still stings, but not as much. I can finally see a little.

Gray. The dust is gray. It blankets everything, hangs in the air, floating specks that spin with me on every breath.

My neck throbs where that thing bit me. I reach for the spot. A shirt. I'm wearing a shirt, and a tie. I slide my hand inside the collar, feel the wound...my fingers come away with a pasty mix of dust and blood.

I look at what I'm wearing: white button-down shirt, the short skirt—which is red and black plaid—black socks that end a bit below my knee, no shoes. My shirt feels tight. The sleeves end halfway between my elbow and wrist. The tie is red, embroidered with a yellow and black circle of tiny images. White thread in the middle of that circle spells a word: *MICTLAN*.

I have no idea what that means. And these clothes...are they mine?

My vision is blurry; I can't see anything but my coffin. Sitting on the dusty floor, I'm too low to look inside it. The lid split evenly down the middle, from top to bottom. The half closest to me slid neatly against the side. The far half sticks straight up. Maybe I broke that half, bent something so I can't move like it's supposed to.

Parts of the lid gleam under the lights—bloody finger streaks, I realize, from where I grabbed it, wiping away the thin layer of dust that clings to the surface.

Why won't someone come and help me?

The thing that bit my neck...what if it's still alive? What if it's in the coffin, coiling, getting ready to slither out and attack me again? I don't want to look inside, but no one else is here and I need to know it's dead.

If I don't, it could hunt me.

I reach for the coffin's edge, use it to pull myself up. My legs don't want to work. They tremble and twitch as I rise and look inside.

White fabric, torn in many places, smeared with long streaks of wet red and a few light spots of powdery crimson. Loose padding shows beneath the rips.

A bloody, white pillow. Next to it, a limp, white snake.

No, not a snake: a *tube*.

A tube that ends in a long, glistening needle. Its white skin is torn where I bit it, showing some kind of black fibers beneath.

I watch the tube for a little while. It doesn't move. It's dead, because I killed it.

I pick up a piece of the bar that held my waist. The surface is deeply pitted, crumbly with the crimson powder...rust, maybe? Rust that ate away much of the metal, making the bar thin and brittle. Had it been solid, there is no way I could have broken free.

My eyes aren't stinging anymore. They've stopped watering. I can see the rest of the room.

There are eleven more coffins. Two parallel rows of six, lined up end to end. A wide aisle filled with a flat sea of untouched gray separates the rows. The thick dust coats the coffins, makes hard edges look like soft curves.

I was in the last one in the left-hand row. I can see it clearly now, see all the detail. It is decorated with intricate carvings: cartoonish people with big noses and huge, wild headdresses; squat pyramids with lots of steps; simple versions of the sun; big cats with exaggerated eyes and tooth-filled snarls.

This room is long and narrow, like it was made specifically to hold these coffins. It doesn't seem that bright in here now that my eyes have gotten used to it—the arched ceiling has only a few lights that work, barely enough to illuminate stone walls that are covered with gray-coated carvings.

At the far end of the room, I see an archway. In that archway...doors, maybe? They look heavy and solid, but I don't see any handles.

Something at the foot of my coffin catches my eye. A flat area, about the size of my hand, surrounded by dozens of small bumps, all of it hazed in puffy gray.

I reach out, trembling, and brush dust from one of the small shapes. It's a jewel: deep orange, glowing like frozen fire.

I wipe clear the flat area. It's engraved with seven letters and one period.

M. Savage

Is that my name?

I hear something. A small sound. Very quiet, very faint. It makes me think of being trapped in the dark, and then I realize why.

It's a girl's scream, coming from inside another coffin.

THREE

My wobbly legs still can't quite support me. I lean on the coffins to stay on my feet, stumble my way toward the scream.

Each step kicks up a small cloud of dust, as if I am the first person ever to set foot here.

The noisy coffin is halfway up the left-hand row. As I get closer, I can make out faint words coming from within.

"Help me! Mommy, get me out of here!"

I put my hand on the dust-caked lid. I feel tiny vibrations: the girl inside is struggling. I think that long, bloody needle jutting from the white tube.

With big swipes, I brush the dust from her coffin, accidentally creating a brief fog. The polished carvings gleam under the lights.

I rap my knuckles on the lid; her screaming stops.

"Calm down," I say. "I'll try and get you out."

There is a pause. Then she speaks, the coffin cutting the volume of her words but not the desperation they carry.

"Who are you?"

Who am I? No idea. Somehow, I don't think telling her *I'm Savage* is going to make her less afraid. I don't even have a first name, only an initial, but maybe that will work.

"My name is *Em*. What's yours?"

"I...I don't know."

A feeling of relief explodes inside of me, so intense I almost fall down again: *I'm not the only one*.

I have to get this girl out.

"Are there bars holding you down?"

"Something is," she says. "I don't know what, I can't see anything. I can't move. It's so dark here, please help me!"

"I told you to *stay calm*." My voice echoes off the stone walls, and I hear how harsh it sounds. She's afraid, she's trapped; yelling at her isn't going to help.

"It's okay," I say in a softer tone. "Listen, you have to break those bars."

"Break them?" Her voice cracks. "I tried, they're too thick!"

"Try harder. I broke mine."

Another pause. I listen to her grunting and struggling, then hear the raw terror carried on her words.

"I *can't* break them, I told you I'm not strong enough. Get me out, please *get me out!*"

I slap the lid, hard.

“Be quiet,” I say. “I’ll find a way to open it.”

Why can’t she get out like I did? Is she weaker than I am? Her fear is contagious, radiating from the coffin and coiling inside my chest. At first I was afraid I would die in the dark, but if this girl dies, I will be alone—somehow, that is even worse.

Not knowing what else to do, I push against the lid. Nothing happens. I slide my fingertips under what feels like the edge and I lift—gently at first, then with what little strength I have. Still nothing happens. I feel the long seam that runs down the middle, that separates the lid halves...too tight to get my fingers in there.

I look around the room. Across the aisle, I see something leaning against a coffin, a fuzzy gray shape maybe as long as my forearm and hand together. Five steps take me to it. I reach down, grab the shape, lift it and shake free the dust.

I hold a golden bar. Jewels of different colors and sizes dot its length. At the end is a C shape: the stubby prongs are silver, not gold. The bar is heavy and solid.

A weapon. I have a weapon.

Suddenly I am not quite as afraid.

I start to turn back to the girl’s coffin when something catches my eye...the lid of this one, it’s as dusty as the others, but it’s not sealed tight like hers. It’s slightly open, showing a thin line of deep shadow no wider than my pinkie.

I can’t look away.

My right hand holds the weapon. My left hand reaches out. I slide my fingers through the there-but-not-there dust, into that shadow, curl them under the lid-half closest to me. The polished wood feels cool against my skin. I grip tight and pull. It moves a tiny amount, then resists. I broke my lid apart when I did it opened; maybe if I can wedge the golden bar in that space, I can—

“Em, are you there?” The muffled voice comes from across the aisle, from the girl. Then, bordering on panic: “Did you leave me?”

I rush back to her coffin.

“Sorry, I’m here. I found something I can use. I’m going to try and break the lid and get you out. It will be loud. Hold on, okay?”

“Okay. Just please hurry.”

I lift the weapon over my head, then smash it against the lid. It makes a dull thud when it hits, indenting the dark material, making the whole lid vibrate off a hovering sheen of dust.

It feels good to hit something. Really good. I swing again, harder this time, feel my lip curl into a snarl as the metal strikes home. Again and again, each time harder than the last, smashing a carving of a big cat, crushing a stepped pyramid, chipping away the polished surface to reveal white wood beneath.

Finally, something breaks: the lid splits down the middle. The long halves slide to the coffin’s sides, revealing an older girl with long, thick, curly red hair spilled across her face. Her eyes squeeze shut against the light. Crimson bars pin her down. She’s wearing a white shirt that’s too small for her, an embroidered red tie, and a short plaid skirt.

She’s breathing fast. Her face is wrinkled up and her head is twitching a little, like she thinks someone is about to hit her but she can’t see the blow coming and can’t run away.

“Em? Is that you?”

I take her hand in mine. Her grip is weak, but her skin is warm and soft.

“It’s me,” I say. “It’s okay.”

“Thank you, Em, oh, *thank you*. Can you undo these bars?”

“I can. Stay very still.”

A couple of carefully aimed strikes from my weapon are all it takes to shatter the brittle old metal.

She lifts her hands to her chest, rubs at her wrists. The skin there is barely scuffed at all—did she even *try* to fight her way free?

“Hold on,” I say, “let me help you out of there.”

I set the weapon down.

I help her sit up, help her ease out of the coffin. It’s a challenge, because she’s so weak and I’m barely stronger than she is. She puts one foot down to stand, but her legs won’t support her—she falls into me, sending us both tumbling. We land in a dust-puffing heap, still holding each other.

We don’t move. We lie there for a moment, shivering, clinging together, coughing slightly. She holds me tight, so tight that I know we feel the same way: neither of us understands what’s happening, but we are not alone, and for that we are deeply grateful.

FOUR

The red-haired girl squints tightly, making the bridge of her nose wrinkle. So much hair, still draped over her face as if it can shield her from our strange reality. She's trying hard to make her watering eyes adjust. She trembles in my arms, terrified and confused.

"We're safe," I say, trying to comfort her. "We're alone here. Take it easy."

She nods, holds me tighter, but I feel her relax a little. Her hand seeks out mine. And we lock fingers.

I look at our clasped hands: our skin is not the same. Hers is pale, a pinkish tan. Mine is much darker; mine is brown.

Our hands are about the same size. That strikes me as strange—she looks older than I do, almost old enough to leave school. Girls that age are usually so much taller.

School...these clothes, did we wear things like this in school? I can't remember. I have a vague image of a few girls looking beautiful and perfect while I looked ugly and stupid, even though we all wore the exact same thing.

Her short plaid skirt shows almost all of her legs. They are long and shapely, not knobby-kneed twigs like mine. Maybe someday I will have legs like hers. The sleeves of her white shirt end just past her elbows. At her chest, the top two buttons are missing, showing the curve of her breasts. She's probably embarrassed by that. I'm embarrassed for her; it makes me uncomfortable.

We lie there, unmoving, dust motes swirling in the air.

Her hair is so long. I reach to my own head, feel that my hair is tied back in a heavy braid. I pull around and look at it—it's black and thick. The braid hangs down to my waist. It feels so silky, like it was recently brushed.

Someone put me in a coffin and fixed my hair? A shiver slides across my skin.

Maybe it's okay. Maybe Mom brushed it. Or Dad. But if it was them, did they do that right before they sealed me in and left me to die?

The red-haired girl finally opens her eyes a little, blinking slits that show me their color: a deep green.

She blinks away tears. She sniffs, wipes at her nose.

"You saved me," she says. "You set me free. Thank you, Em."

She sits up. She brushes her thick hair behind her left ear, then her right. When she does, I see something on her forehead.

A black circle, as wide as the distance between her eyes, made of a material that clearly isn't hair and yet is also a *part* of her at the same time. The dark color stands in stark contrast against her white

pink skin. The outside of the circle is smooth. The inside is kind of jagged, with stubby points sticking inward. Eight of them, evenly spaced apart. Stubby points...kind of like...

Like *teeth*.

She's a tooth-girl.

I feel a surge of emotion. Tooth-girls...they made fun of me in school...didn't they? I can't remember my school. And I can't remember why the tooth-girls ridiculed me, only how their words and glares and jokes made me feel: small, unimportant, worthless.

I *hate* her.

No...I don't even know this girl. At least I don't think I do. We're in this together. I will not hate her because of some decoration on her skin.

Wait—do *I* have one?

My free hand flies to my forehead. I feel something embedded there. A circle, like hers, but smooth both inside and out. There are no stubby points, no *teeth*.

Our fingers remain locked. Her skin is warm, the only warm thing in this cold room.

"I'm afraid," she says. "What is this place?"

"I don't know."

My fingertips lightly trace the shape that marks my skin.

She sees me doing that, reaches to her forehead. Her eyes widen with discovery.

"I have one, too," she says. "Yours is a plain circle, but mine feels different on the inside. Bumps or something...what are they?"

Teeth, I want to say, *because you're a tooth-girl*.

But I don't say that. I like her, and she seems to like me. I don't want her to know that phrase in case it makes her remember something and not like me anymore.

"They look like stubby bits," I say.

She waits for me to keep going, but I don't know any other way to describe what I see.

She thinks for a moment. She shrugs. "We both have symbols. I don't know what they mean."

"Neither do I."

She looks around the room, taking it all in.

"This isn't the birthday I was hoping for," she says.

"It's your birthday, too?"

She looks at me, doubtful, like I'm playing some kind of trick on her.

"Yes," she says. "I'm twelve."

She's the one who is playing tricks. My instincts were right: the tooth-girl, whatever that is, already making fun of me. I lean away from her.

"I'm not dumb, you know," I say.

She blinks, confused. "I...of course you're not. I didn't say you were." She blushes and looks away like she knows she said something wrong but doesn't know what that something was.

"Em, I would never be rude to my elders like that."

Elders? What is she talking about?

"You're not twelve," I say. I point at her legs, her breasts. "Look at you. You think I'd be so stupid"

that I'd believe you're the same age as me?"

Her expression of embarrassed confusion changes to one of total disbelief. She holds out her arms, looks at them, then down at herself.

"I don't understand," she says.

She pulls at the bottom of her shirt, but the material doesn't stretch. Her belly—flat, pale—exposed. This, too, makes me uncomfortable.

My belly is cold.

I look down at my blood-speckled shirt and realize, for the first time, that it's too small for me. The bottom of it leaves my stomach open to the cold air. My sleeves end halfway up my forearms. Now I wonder it feels freezing in here: I'm half-naked.

I touch my belly, suddenly self-conscious. This seems...*wrong*, like showing bare skin is a bad thing.

The shirt is too tight against my breasts.

Or...are my breasts too big for my shirt? I feel them. They weren't this size before...were they? Now they weren't. I'm sure of it. I can't remember anything, but I know my body has changed.

The red-haired girl stares at me intensely. I realize I'm touching myself right in front of her. I look away, put my hands in my lap.

She feels her own chest—her eyes widen with surprise. "What happened? They weren't like this before."

I shake my head. "Same with me."

"So, you say you're twelve," she says. "You look nineteen, maybe twenty. You look like a grown woman."

"So do you."

She nods slightly. She looks off, glancing at nothing in particular. Her lips twitch, like she's saying half-words that I can't hear.

"It doesn't make sense," she says finally. "We need more information. Until then, we have to believe what our eyes show us."

She again cups her breasts. She isn't ashamed at all; she's measuring, thinking.

The corners of her mouth curve up in a small grin.

"I can't recall what I asked for, but I'm pretty sure I wasn't expecting *these* as a present," she says. "Maybe it's a good birthday after all. I mean, other than being locked up in the dark."

Her fascination and delight with her body's unexpected change hasn't completely taken the fear out of her eyes. She reaches up, touches one of the carvings on her coffin lid. A jaguar, I think it is, one eye smashed and splintered from where I hit it.

"Some of these images seem familiar," she says. "I can't place them, but...well, they're familiar."

"My coffin has them, too."

The red-haired girl wrinkles her nose, shakes her head. "*Coffins* are for dead people. We're clearly not dead."

She stares at my forehead. Her eyes narrow—she's trying to work something out—then she looks away. Does she remember what my circle means? If so, she doesn't share.

She points to the jewel-encrusted rod lying on the ground beside me.

“I think I know what that is,” she says.

I pick it up and wipe dust off the metal. I move it closer to her so she can see it better. “Maybe you used a weapon like this before?”

For the first time, the red-haired girl smiles wide. It lights up her whole face. She looks *amazing*. Her eyes gleam with delight. I’m not sure it’s possible for a person to be more beautiful than she right now.

“It’s not a weapon,” she says. “I think it’s a *tool*.”

A tool? That never crossed my mind.

She starts to nod, like she’s sure she’s right, then stops. Her smile fades. She’s not sure. She isn’t sure about anything.

“Em...do you know my name?”

“No. Let’s find out what it is.”

I stand, take her hand and help her up.

She seemed so tall at first, but I’m only a tiny bit shorter than she is.

I lead her to the foot of her coffin. Just like with mine, there is a flat area surrounded by dust-covered jewels. I brush it clean. Blue jewels frame the engraved letters *T. Spingate*.

“That’s you,” I say. “I think. Your name is Spingate. Does that make you remember anything?”

She frowns. Her lower lip quivers. Her eyes water, and this time it’s not from the light. Her eyelashes are long and dark. I suddenly have a desperate urge to find a mirror. Do I have green eyes like hers?

Spingate shakes her head. “I can’t remember anything. I remember my mom...sort of. But I can’t remember her face.”

As soon as she says that, I realize I have no idea what my parents actually look like. Mom and Dad are blank spaces. I know the concept of my parents, I know they loved me and I loved them, but their faces, their names...nothing.

Spingate sniffs, wipes away tears. She nods slowly, as if accepting things for what they are. She studies our surroundings, taking in the walls, the ceiling, the door-arch.

“Em, do you know what’s outside this room?”

“No idea.”

She looks at the coffin across the aisle, where I found the weapon.

“That lid isn’t shut all the way. Was that one yours?”

I point to my right, to the last coffin in our row. I see my path of footsteps through the dust.

“I was in that one,” I say.

Spingate stares down the aisle for a few moments. Her mouth moves a little again. When she does that, it’s like she doesn’t even know I’m there.

She looks me up and down.

“How did you get all bloody?”

Other than smears of dust, her shirt is clean and white.

“There was a tube in my coffin,” I say. “It stabbed me with a needle. That’s what woke me up.”

Her expression darkens. Maybe she realizes that if I hadn’t broken out of my coffin, she would still

be in hers.

“But how did you get out? There’s no one else here.”

I shrug. “I got myself out.”

She gives me a strange look, as if the concept is unthinkable.

Spingate’s hands reach to her shoulders, rub slowly up and down like she’s hugging herself against the chill. She walks across the aisle, wobbling a bit but standing on her own, then kneels at the foot of the coffin with the slightly open lid. She brushes off the nameplate.

“It says *B. Brewer*. The stones are purple. Maybe we can use the tool to open it and see if someone is inside?”

We’ve been sitting here talking, and I never thought that there might be others trapped like Spingate was, like I was. All these coffins...maybe one of them holds a person who knows what this place is and how we got here.

I walk across the aisle and jam the heavy bar’s forked end into the small crack, the lid closest to me under the bar, the forked end under the lid farthest away. I push down.

The lid doesn’t budge.

I rise to my toes, put all my weight on the bar.

“Em, I can help with—”

“*I’ve got it*,” I say, my effort turning the words into grunts. I hear a slow creaking coming from the lid. I rise up a little more, then push down as hard as I can, all at once—there is a loud *bang* from the coffin as something gives way.

The lid halves suddenly tilt up, hum as they slide to the sides. Sheets of gray spill off their smooth carved surfaces.

We look inside: a wave of fear pushes my body a step backward.

Spingate reacts differently—instead of stepping away, she leans forward.

“Maybe you were right,” she says. “If that’s *B. Brewer*, I guess in his case it really is a coffin.”

FIVE

Brewer is a dead little boy.

A thin line of dust runs up his tiny, shriveled body, dust that fell through the crack between the lid

The coffin is the same size as mine and Spingate's, but it looks huge surrounding such a small corpse. The skin of his face is dried so tightly to his skull that it's cracked in some places, showing the bone beneath. His eyes are empty sockets. His lips have shrunken back, showing two rows of discolored teeth; it looks like he's smiling.

I feel sick to my stomach.

Brewer is wearing a white shirt and an embroidered red tie. Black pants and a black belt instead of a plaid skirt. Even if he wasn't all dried up, the outfit would have been too big for his little body. Pitte's crimson-spotted bars hold down his hips, ankles and wrists, even though his feet and hands are hidden inside his pants and sleeves.

Spingate points to his tiny forehead, to a symbol—just as black as ours—embedded in his dried skin. It is a circle with one line down the middle and one running from side to side.

“A cross,” she says.

“Or a *T*.”

She shrugs. “Maybe a plus sign?”

“Maybe.”

A tooth-girl, a circle-girl, a cross-boy...and we have no idea what any of it means.

I'm staring at a corpse. That could have been me. These are coffins after all, so why is he dead while I am alive? Looking at him makes me cold in a different way than the temperature and my scant excuse for clothing.

I'd be so much warmer with pants. Did he get to wear pants because he's a boy? If so, that's not fair.

Spingate slowly extends a finger toward Brewer. She pokes his cheek. Dried flesh crumbles and falls away. It's awful, but it doesn't seem to bother Spingate at all.

She grabs the sleeve of his shirt, starts to tug.

My hand locks on her forearm.

“Stop that,” I say. “What are you doing?”

“Making a bandage.”

“For what?”

She points to my wrists. “You're still bleeding.”

I look at them and see she's right. The bars rubbed my skin raw. Small spots of red well up from a dozen tiny tears. ~~Dust packs the wounds, making the blood more sludge than liquid, but it's still~~ slowly oozing out.

"I'm fine," I say. "We shouldn't disturb the dead."

Spingate huffs. "The dead don't care."

She tears two long strips from his shirt, jerking his tiny body in the process. A thick, dry piece of his face falls away, exposing the cheekbone below.

Spingate wraps the strips around my wrists and ties them off.

"That's better," she says. "Should we open the other coffins?"

Nine remain closed. Spingate and I wasted time sitting with each other. We wasted more staring at Brewer.

"Yes," I say. "And quickly."

She holds out her hand toward my weapon. "Can I try?"

That strikes me as funny. She wasn't strong enough to get out of her own coffin, but she thinks she's strong enough to break one open from the outside?

I hand her the jeweled rod.

Spingate takes it, and when she does, that soul-melting smile peeks out again. She's excited, moving quickly, her fear suddenly forgotten.

She moves to the next coffin and brushes dust off the nameplate. The jewels sparkle bright yellow.

"*K. O'Malley*," she says.

Spingate's fingers trace the yellow jewels. She puts a fingertip on one and pushes: it slides inward until it clicks. When she pulls her finger away, the jewel stays depressed. She pushes it again and it clicks again, then returns to its original height. She moves to the next one, pinches it between finger and thumb and twists: the jewel rotates in place.

Somewhere inside the coffin, we hear a series of small whirs and clinks.

Spingate doesn't know what she's doing, but she's trying things—pressing, then listening, turning, then listening some more. Her lips move a little, making no sound. She points at the jewels, her finger bouncing in the air—she's counting.

She lifts the weapon, touches a pattern of jewels on its shaft, then presses a similar pattern on the jewels surrounding the name *K. O'Malley*. A hidden panel on the side of the coffin slides up fast, revealing the negative space of two small circles.

Spingate laughs, delighted at her success. She stands, then slides the rod's prongs into the circles—they fit perfectly. I hear a click. She lifts the end of the rod.

A deep *thrum* comes from inside the coffin. The lid halves shudder. Dust powders down from the top as they slide neatly to the sides.

Inside, lying motionless, eyes closed, is...a boy. A sleeping boy, dressed like Brewer but as big as we are. Bigger, even—his shoulders press against the coffin's white fabric, the toes of his black socked feet touch the end. He has thick, brown hair. His skin is darker than Spingate's, but not as dark as mine.

He is beautiful.

The symbol on his forehead is a circle, like mine, but the right half is solid black. His clean white

shirt is far too small for his smooth chest. Some of the buttons are missing. There is no dust on him, none at all. No blood, either. The bars holding his waist, wrists and ankles seem far too tight.

I stare at him. I can't help it. I feel strange. My insides shiver.

"He's breathing," Spingate says, her words a hushed breath.

I need this boy to wake up...I need him to see me.

"Give me the weapon—I mean the *tool*. I'll break his bars."

"Just a moment," she says. "We might not have to break anything."

The tool is still firmly locked in the coffin's side, sticking up at an angle. She looks at it, then at O'Malley, then at the tool again. She presses a pair of jewels on the handle: nothing happens. She thinks, presses a different pair, then the bars across O'Malley's wrists, ankles and waist split in the middle and snap down, vanishing inside the coffin's padded lining.

Other than the gentle rise and fall of his chest, he doesn't move. I feel a rush of panic that Spingate will wake him—I need to be the one who does it.

"Go open the other coffins," I tell her.

She looks at me. She seems confused. She looks at O'Malley again.

"Spingate, hurry up about it," I say. "We don't know how much time we have."

She sighs. She likes looking at him, too, and it's hard for her to look away. She does, though. She pulls the tool free and walks to the next coffin.

I stare down at O'Malley. His hair looks so soft. His mouth is slightly open, his full lips moving with each breath. When Spingate smiled for the first time, I thought she was the most beautiful thing that could ever be.

I was wrong.

I hear Spingate brush dust away from a metal plate.

"This one is...oh, I'm not sure," she says. "I think it's...Air-ah-mov-sky?"

Something about that grabs my attention.

"What are the last few letters?"

"It ends with an S, a K and a Y," she says.

My breath catches, because I *remember* something. A name. A name of a...oh, what is it, it's right there, tickling my thoughts...of a *musician*. Yes! A musician, with a name that ended in an S, a K and a Y.

Tchaikovsky.

"It's not *sky*," I say. "It's *skee*."

I go back to staring at O'Malley.

"Aramovskee," Spingate says. "Can I open it?"

Why does she keep asking for my permission?

"Sure, go ahead."

I hear her working at something. I reach out a finger, gently touch O'Malley's ribs. He's warm. The contact sends a prickling sensation across my skin. I don't feel cold anymore.

He doesn't respond.

What should I do? What if he doesn't wake up at all?

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