Flares

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Ch. 1

“Yeah kick that pussy’s ass, Mike! Fuckin’ little bitch!” Gabriel wondered, *Pussy? Bitch? Who are they talking about*? But the same time as Michael’s fist connected with his nose, he realized, *Oh, it’s me…*

With a crunch and a cry of pain he fell to the ground. Lying there with closed eyes, he felt Michael’s weight upon him. He opened an eye, and immediately had it pounded shut with a vicious strike. “You think this is what I want, HUH? But you just don’t fucking GET IT do you?!” The fists began to fall, again, and again, and again. Each blow drove Gabriel’s head into the ground, hammering him towards a merciful blackness that would fall on him like a soft blanket. *I guess it’s not going to be alright huh, Dad?*

About to black out, he was heaved back to reality by a fresh sensation of pain, making the beating pale in comparison. In Michael’s hand was a beautifully carved bone handle of a switchblade knife, its blade buried between Gabriel’s lowest pair of ribs. The shriek ripping from Gabriel’s throat silenced the jeering crowd. With a short, sharp, jerk Michael pulled the knife from his body, and bent to his ear, whispering. Gabriel was surprised to notice his cries were muted.

“That hurts huh? Don’t worry, you’re not gonna die, a cut like that won’t kill you. I’ll leave you here to think awhile, maybe you’ll come to your senses.” The boy felt the weight leave his chest and caught the fading words from Michael to his small band of spectators. “This is what happens when you cross me, but the rest of you remember, you won’t get a second chance. This one, he’s an exception.”

Michael walked away, his boots leaving a wake of bloody prints stemming from the pool which Gabriel now lay in. Gabriel’s breath came in ragged gasps, light fading from his eyes. Slipping out of the physical world, he felt the phantom kiss of the wind upon his cheek, and the sole drop of rain which fell upon his outstretched right hand.

Ch. 2

Gabriel’s eyes flickered, the world slowly creeping back into focus. He took a deep breath, and cried out in agony, the pain redoubling. Sliding a hand down his torso, he found dried blood beginning to crust upon his shirt. He pulled it up, probing the stab wound. He applied pressure, but it sent waves of pain screaming through his chest. With a herculean effort he tried to sit up, and felt blood spill between his fingers.

Grimacing, he laid his head back on the ground and drew breath through clenched teeth. His breathing began to slow, and the blackness once again weighed on his chest. Gabriel’s head lolled to one side. While slipping back into obscurity, a faint word echoed from the back of his mind.

*Hey.* He dismissed it, favoring the impending darkness. *Hey.* He heard the voice, insistent. He tried to push it away but like a fly it buzzed in his ear, impossible to ignore. *HEY. What do you think you’re doing? Are you going to LIE DOWN AND DIE? How about you GET UP and live. Live. LIVE.*

Live. That word, a burning brand in the front of his mind. Live. The blackness lifted. His primal instincts stubbornly refusing him the release of death. Staggering to his feet, he clapped a hand to his side, and straightened up, taking stock of his surroundings. It wasn’t much to look at.

A deserted street, in the middle of a city block as dead as the petrified trees lining the sidewalks. He stumbled down the road, glimpsing old signs on top of the boarded up windows of decrepit shops. The throbbing in his ribs increased, blood running in rivulets down his side. Panting, Gabriel allowed himself a single word.

“Fuck,” he rasped, continuing his unsteady gait. He tottered down the road, a sudden breeze blowing, rattling the branches of the dead trees, their clacking echoing in the empty autumn air. They seemed to mock Gabriel, laughing at his efforts. His breath increasingly labored with every step, Gabriel trained his eyes on the structure in front of him, its shadow cast at his feet by the setting sun. An old parking garage, four levels rising on decaying supports. *There,* instinct told him. He lengthened his strides, feeling the incline of the first ramp. Rounding the corner to the first level, he saw what he expected; the rusted ruins of cars stripped bare by looters, looking for salvageable material. The husks of the automobiles, once great, shining lords of the road, reduced to a shade of former glory evoked sadness in him. He climbed inside one of the wrecks, the reek of the mold-ridden back seat enveloping the cabin.

Tearing a strip from his ragged shirt sleeve he wadded it against his side in an effort to staunch the flow of blood. He looked out the glassless back window, watching the sun sink behind the skyscrapers of the block. The final rays of the sun lingered on a sign across the street. Rusted letters and faded paint rendered the sign nearly illegible, yet he was still able to make out the words before his eyelids dropped closed. They read,

WELCOME TO NEWPORT

Ch. 3

*Floating somewhere in the recesses of his mind, Gabriel was immersed in memories of bygone days. Lost in the dream, he found himself walking through his old house as a boy of no more than ten years old. “Mom! Dad!” he called, wondering where they were. “Here son!” His mother called from the living room, “Come join us!” He wandered into the room to see his mother sitting on her favorite chair working on the same novel she had been writing for the past 4 years. His big brother, a big kid for twelve, sat stock still beside his father. His father’s eyes were glued to the television screen, the opened, yet untouched, beer in his hand left to go flat and warm. “Son,” his father started, an unfamiliar emotion in his voice, “can you come here for a second?”*

*“Sure, Dad.” he answered. Sitting by his father opposite his brother, he watched what was unfolding on the television. On screen is the National News, the news lady looking uncharacteristically perturbed. She is covering what seems to be the weather, which is odd considering the weather is never a top story. He listens, but quickly loses interest as she starts talking about something that has to do with the decaying ozone layer. They talked about environmental protection a lot in school, and school was boring. His big brother dared to ask, “Dad?”*

*“Quiet! This is important.” The boys look at the screen once more, the anchor’s words beginning to sink in. “As we speak, solar flares of unprecedented proportions are nearly upon us. With the weakening of the ozone layer, the flares will come closer to the earth’s surface than they ever have before. The full extent of damage is unknown. However, scientists speculate that there may be interferences with the Earth’s power grid…”*

*She stared, fixated, past the camera, past the teleprompter, and out what must have been a window of the news studio. A great red light began to fill not only the TV screen, but the very room in which Gabriel now began to feel a terrible heat. “Don’t worry, everything will be alright.” The words floated to Gabriel on his father’s voice.*

*“D-Dad?” he said, his voice hitching. But the house and his family were gone. Gabriel stood in the middle of a flat mesa, the night sky lit up by a raging inferno which swallowed the stars. He cried out in fear, hands flying to his face, trying to shield his eyes from the blinding light. And then, the whole world went dark.*

Ch. 4

CLANG!

Gabriel’s eyes snapped open. He shot upright, the pain in his side forgotten. Adrenaline coursed through his veins. His ears were pinned back, alert, and he craned his neck, looking in all directions. Opening the groaning door, he stepped out and in short, tentative strides melted into the shadows cast by the columns.

He controlled his erratic breathing. Pushed fear aside. He crept around the other side of the pillar, warily extending a hand into the pale moonlight to grasp a cement chunk fallen from the level above. He focused on where he had heard the original noise. A rusted out red wreck, by a collapsed piece of ceiling, partially hidden by darkness.

With a soundless grunt, he heaved the concrete at the wreck, its strike causing a mournful peal. The boy was rewarded with the sound of boots pounding pavement, and caught a glimpse of a lithe figure darting through obscurity. He padded forward, thin soled shoes muting his steps. Listening, the sound of shallow, rapid breath filled his ears. He dug in behind another wreck, closing in. Like a shade he moved, ready for what came next.

He halted behind a column and steeled himself. His hand slid round the corner of the pillar – and was met by another hand. He whirled in the opposite direction, expecting the other to do the same, and found only empty air. Then the same boots which had pounded the pavement now pounded the middle of his back, launching him forwards, headfirst. He tucked and rolled, turning to face his attacker. Only there was no one there.

Suddenly a shift in the shadows, and he felt a ripple of air go through his hair, ducking under a flying piece of cement. The boots beat their tattoo once more, and without waiting for their attack he squared his shoulders and drove forward like a blitzing linebacker. He caught his adversary around the hips in a perfect tackle, ramming the surprisingly light body into the ground. He jumped to his feet trying to stomp the attacker, but their boot found its mark between his legs first.

He doubled over in pain while his foe scrabbled to their feet and tackled *him* to the ground. Feeling the weight of a body sit astride him once again, a desperate fire filled Gabriel, and with a barbaric yawp he threw his adversary off. They rolled on the ground, out of the shadows and into the moonlight, each trying to gain the upper hand. Gabriel then trapped the other’s legs underneath his and climbed on top, eyes red with rage. He cocked his fist and looked down at the face he was about to mangle.

In the pale moonlight the face of a girl with brilliant green eyes framed by light brown tresses stared back at him. He froze, astonishment paralyzing him. But the shock of his discovery was soon replaced with the agony of his side as he felt fresh blood trickle down his waist. An inhuman cry of pain was loosed from his jaws, and he fainted dead away.

Ch. 5

The haze of the morning sun danced in Gabriel’s eyes. He raised his right arm to block the light, but it stopped with a sudden jerk, accompanied by the rattle of chains. Turning away from the sun he noticed his hand zip tied to a length of chain wrapped around an exposed piece of rebar jutting from the pillar he sat against.

“Hey, sleeping beauty,” a soft voice said from behind him, “like your new bracelet?” Gabriel stretched his neck back in search of his calm voiced captor. He glimpsed flowing brown locks disappearing behind his column, and saw the face they were attached to emerge moments later. A high forehead perched above an aquiline face, the curves of her jaw accentuating thin, soft lips. Eyes following the incline of a small, sharp nose, Gabriel found himself once again met by her brilliant green eyes, behind which danced mischief and curiosity, but also wariness and a promise of swift retribution if provoked. She held his steel grey gaze, and like two wary wild animals they scrutinized each other. Without breaking eye contact, Gabriel answered, “Jewelry never suited me.”

A corner of her mouth twitched upwards, “Oh, come on, it’s so hard to come by these days! Besides, rusty iron links are a good look for you. The brown goes with the color of the dried blood all over your face. The guy who did that couldn’t have done a better job working you over if you’d asked him to. But then again, you were asking for it in some way or another, weren’t you?”

She pulled over a hunk of metal that might have once been a hub cap and sat as comfortably as it would allow, cocking her head quizzically. “It’s not every day you get to see someone thrashed like that. I was scouring through the upstairs of one of the shops when I heard the ruckus you were kicking up in the street. Your yellin’, “How could you do that?” and his hollerin’ “I did what I had to do!” Yep quite the shouting match you guys kicked up, ‘course that changed from shouting to fighting almost as fast as it went from winning to losing for you now didn’t it?”

She studied the pair of grey eyes which gave nothing away. Searched the lined, weathered face of a boy who could have been around her own age of eighteen, and examined a grim mouth set in a firm line which seemed to be holding back not only the pain from his stab wound, but a greater pain resulting from wounds no amount of bandages could cover.

“It’s a long story.” Gabriel said, aware of how pathetic the answer was. He shifted to try and get comfortable and received a twinge in his side, cracking the freshly formed scab. He sucked in his breath and arched his back against the post, face a rictus of pain.

“Hurts, huh?” The girl said, her chin now resting on her hands. “Tell you what buddy boy, let me in on why your face looks like it was hit with a sack of bricks and I’ll think about helping you out with that extra hole in your body. Shit, in a world like this you can use all the friends you can get, and it looks like you’re fresh out of friends.”

“Well it’s not like you can make it any worse. And if you do, maybe I’ll get lucky and die on the spot.” The girl giggled stretched out her long legs, plonking her big, loud boots up on a chunk of cement near her hubcap, and got comfortable.

“Ah shit, here goes…”

Ch. 6

After the first flare hit Earth, the sky burned for what seemed like an eternity. The heat was unbearable, like a living thing it crawled inside every one of your pores, smothering you from the outside in. Dad rushed the family out of the house as soon as all the lights went out. We grabbed what little we could and packed Mom, my older brother, and me into the car. Ours was the only car on the block which started. The damn thing was so old and it had so few electrical parts that when all the power got knocked out she ran as if nothing happened.

We stayed on the move, watching the world burn from our rear view mirrors. From town to town, city to city, we kept running. At first my brother and I didn’t know what we were running from, we just followed Mom and Dad, trusting in them. But we found out for ourselves soon enough. As we lost the power grid, the world sunk lower, dragging everyone down with it. People stopped being people, and became…*Feral.* No power, no government, no structure, no laws.

Right from when it happened, Dad made us a promise. *“Don’t worry, its gonna be alright.”* He would say it constantly, his mantra. At first, I thought it was meant for us to hear, to keep us going, to make us want to wake up once more and see the world cast in this bleak light. Maybe it started out that way, but weeks blended into months, months into years, and those six words became the only things keeping my father out of the abyss into which Mom had already fallen.

And then, one day, he was gone. Floating away as easily as a dead leaf on a light breeze, he simply ceased to exist. I realized then, whatever had remained of the world before died with my parents, and my brother and I could either die with them in the old one, or live in the new one. So we got low. We got dirty. We survived. But surviving isn’t exactly living is it?

We found others like us, desperate and alone. We two led them, our own little gang, surviving off others. Stealing. Looting. Killing when we needed to.

And sometimes when we didn’t need to.

It’s a scary thing realizing you like having someone else’s blood on your hands, and even scarier when you coat them with more before the old blood has a chance to dry.

Then it all changed. We were combing through some stores, and when we threw open the doors to the stock room of a grocery store, we found a Father and his two small children huddled around a meagre camp site. He didn’t get up, he didn’t fight. He sat there, staring at us with hollow eyes, my Father’s eyes, eyes which spoke from their sunken sockets, ‘What would you have me do?’

One of his children, a little girl, buried her face in her father’s grimy jacket and began to bawl with an intensity only toddlers possess. He tried to shush, her, to calm her down. *“Don’t worry, it’s gonna be alright,”* he said to her.

Time slowed to a crawl at the utterance of those words. I looked over at my brother, his face ashen as their weight hit us. Here was a Father, promising his children the impossible, even when he himself knew perfectly well it wouldn’t be alright. And I understood. I understood why he said it, I understood why my father had said it for so many long years.

Hope. The one thing that had separated us from the feral reality which had consumed the world. Was it hope for love? Peace? No. Just hope for something better than we know now.

But something different was in my brother’s eyes. Hatred, fear, and all-consuming rage blazed. Hatred for empty promises, fear of what happened when the promise failed, and rage at being abandoned as a babe in the wilderness.

These things twisted my brother’s face into a mask of cold fury, and he started advancing on the Father, malice guiding his intentions. He pulled out his knife, its blade glinting in the sun as it unfolded from the smooth, bone handled grip.

*‘NO!*’ I shouted, snapping out of my trance. But I was too late.

The Father had a red grin across his throat stretching from ear to ear, and the cold steel of the knife seemed to glimmer with joy as blood ran down its length. The children cried even louder, my brother hardly sparing them a look.

It was then that I knew. This new world, it was perverse. Twisted. Like a sick, suffering animal needing to be put down.

I made up my mind then and there. As I sent my fist crashing into his chin, I knew that my brother, Michael, had to die.

Ch. 7

Silence hung between them. The sun had again sunk low in the sky. The girl’s face was impassive, and she chewed her lip indecisively. The boy knew she was weighing his words against her gut feelings, he could almost see scales see-sawing behind her eyes.

She got up off of the hubcap, strode over to him, and cut the makeshift zip tie handcuffs with what may have been the last box cutter on the face of the earth. The chains rattled as they clattered to the pavement. Gabriel stood slowly, joints creaking, and was surprised to notice the girl’s eyes were almost level with his as he straightened to his six foot height. “Well, thanks for-”

“Don’t thank me yet.” She said abruptly, her face unreadable. “You tell a good story, but if there’s one thing I’ve learned in this world it’s that stories like yours don’t have a happy ending. I don’t know if I’m willing to follow you around just to end up with a knife stuck in me.”

“Whoa whoa whoa, hey, I never wanted your help,” Gabriel said, raising his hands defensively, “This is my problem not yours.”

“Spare me the macho bullshit.” She rapped, her arms folded across her chest. “You tried to take your brother on last time and look what happened. In case you’ve forgotten, Mom isn’t exactly gonna swoop in and give the two of you time outs. He’ll kill you, plain and simple. This isn’t a matter of whether you want my help or not. You need it tough guy.”

They stood no more than half a foot apart, mouths set in firm lines. Gabriel thought to himself, *Can I really handle more of someone else’s blood on my hands?*

“You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into, this isn’t your fight…” he tried to caution her, but he already knew the outcome.

“I know full well what I’m getting myself into.” She replied tersely, hands now on her hips. “A gang like yours has hide out, a home base. Food. Water. Shelter. Weapons. We take out your brother and the rest of them scatter like dust in the wind, the loot ours for the taking. Keep your noble pursuit of justice to yourself O knight of the wasteland, I’m in this for the long haul. So whadd’ya say, partner?”

She stuck out her hand, and he grabbed it, pumping it up and down once. “Well that’s settled then!” She said happily. “Alright you lackey, lazy, layabout! First things first, let’s take care of that stab wound.” She grabbed her battered back pack sitting on the other side of the column the boy had been chained to, and rummaging through it, she produced a needle, a spool of thread, and a jet lighter.

“I suppose it’s a bad time to say I hate needles…” Gabriel said resignedly.

“Don’t worry!” she quipped cheerfully, “I’ve had lots of practice.” She rolled up her jacket sleeves and showed him a network of scars crisscrossing her forearms, as proud as a girl scout who had earned her sewing badge. “Come on now, off with the shirt.” her voice taking on a matter-of-fact tone.

Gabriel shed his shabby overcoat like a snakeskin, peeling off the grimy sweater and undershirt he had on underneath, exposing the angry red wound.

The girl gave a low whistle of appreciation while heating the end of the needle. “Handy with a knife your brother is,” she said, “he get to carve the turkey at Christmas?”

“I hope your stitches aren’t as shitty as your jokes.” Gabriel said, deadpan. “By the way, I don’t believe we’ve been properly introduced,” he said, “I’m Gabriel. Gabe if you want, I’ve been called much worse anyways.”

“Well how very nice to meet you, Gabriel,” she responded, having finished heating the needle’s now red hot tip. “My mother named me Lilith, but its Lily to you.”

“So Lilith,” Gabriel began, “are you going to get start-OWWWWWWWW FUCK!”

“Oops…” she said dryly, “I missed…” It was going to be a long night.

Ch. 8

The next morning’s sun found the two of them coming down the ramp of the garage well rested, if a little sore on Gabriel’s part.

“So where do you want to start looking?” Gabriel asked Lily, his mind sharp from a long night’s slumber.

“I figure the site of your ass kicking is as good a place as any to start,” said Lily, shading her eyes, “Maybe your loving brother left something behind.” They turned the corner, and were now walking down the street with the petrified trees and boarded up shops.

“There.” said Gabriel, pointing at a dark red stain on the pavement. They fanned out on opposite sides of the street, not entirely sure what to be looking for, but looking nonetheless. Gabriel waited for something to catch his eye. “Come on dammit.” he cursed under his breath. He circled back to the stain, *his* stain, on the median line of the road, and sat on his haunches studying the splotches. Faint boot prints leading away became the something he was looking for.

“Hey Lily! I found some…” His voice trailed off.

She was gone. The street was empty save for Gabriel himself. Panicked thoughts raced through his mind. *Was she Lost? Hurt? Alone?* And a more ominous thought, *did Michael find her?* “LILY!” He called out, uneasy. Silence. The dead air seemed to smother his call as soon as it left his mouth.

CRACK

A noise like a gunshot sounded from a hardware shop across the street from Gabriel. He sprinted towards it, dreading what he might find inside. Seeing the boarded up front door, he cut into the alleyway beside the store, and clambered through the fire door which swung loosely on rusted hinges. Inside, he saw shelves stripped of most anything usable as a weapon save for a long handled screwdriver. He grabbed it and whirled through the store, *Lily where are you?*

Seeing a flight of stairs leading to the apartment above the store, he bounded up them, only to have his foot go right through the first rotted step, its CRACK identical to the noise he heard earlier. Pulling his foot from the hole, he called out softly “*LILY!”*

Still no answer. He went up the stairs gingerly, the boards groaning mournfully. Screwdriver raised, he went to the room with a half open door and shouldered it open, bursting into the room with a violent cry. But he saw nothing, save for a sheet less bed, a moth eaten lamp sitting on a dilapidated bedside table, and an open window through which the afternoon sun streamed.

“Think you could shut up for one second and help me out of here?” said an exasperated voice. Startled, he looked down and saw Lily thigh deep in the floorboards, her big boot having gone right between the joists. The sight of Lily having to squat like a Cossack dancer with one leg dangling into the room below like a terrible light fixture sent the boy into gales of laughter, the stitches in his side stretching with every breath.

“Oh *ha ha* asshole,” Lily snapped. His eyes still watering, Gabriel grabbed her under the arms, and pulled her up and out like a cork from a wine bottle.

“Well, if you’re done messing around up here I found some tracks outside.” Gabriel said, dusting off her pants. He felt her legs shaking. When she didn’t answer immediately, he looked up and saw her chewing on her lip again. “Hey, everything ok?” he said, concern creasing his brow.

“Hmm..? Oh! Yeah everything’s fine don’t worry!” said Lily, whose face was as pale as the light which entered through the now-closed window. Gabriel stood, and blocked the light.

“Lily, are you sure this is what you want? You don’t need to do this, honestly, you’ve got nothing to gain by helping me.” said Gabriel, his eyes locking with hers.

“I’ve never been more sure, Gabe.” she replied, and grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket and kissed him full on the mouth. Gabriel, who had never kissed a girl even before the Flares, was hit by an amalgamation of feelings so foreign to him that he was absolutely lost in bliss. Lily’s soft, full lips pressed against his caused the back of his throat to dry up like a desert well, and he was dimly aware of a more primal feeling coming from the depths of his abdomen. He took hold of the back of her head, wanting, knowing, *feeling* that this was right. This was the way the world should be.

Perhaps things would have been different if Gabriel had known anything about girls. Perhaps he wouldn’t have been so lost in what he would later call love. Perhaps he would have been wise to the fact that love is a devious thing. Perhaps, if Gabe had known all these things, he would have noticed the window slide closed. Seen the shadow cast by the figure that watched the couple from the windowsill. Heard the audible *click* of a blade snapping back into a beautifully carved bone handle. And maybe, just maybe, caught the furtive moves Lily used to fold a hastily scrawled note into her back pocket. A note, which if Gabriel had read, would send him running from the room as fast as his legs could carry him.

Ch. 9

The sun had dipped low in the sky, its fading orange glow filling the small room with ambient light. It illuminated the bed, casting light on two figures whose bodies were so intertwined it was difficult to tell where one ended and another began. Gabriel stared at the ceiling with a stupid gap-toothed grin on his face.

Lily was nestled in the crook of his arm, her left leg thrown over his lower extremities, her left arm wrapped around his midsection, and her head lay softly upon his breast, the frenzied beating of his still excited heart unable to rouse her from slumber. Gabe played with her hair, wanting to preserve every second this moment gave him. *It feels like I’m dreaming,* he thought to himself, lost in the imaginings of Lily and himself in a different time, place, and world altogether. *Yes, this is a dream,* his inner monologue continued, *a dream you can’t spend the rest of your life in. If you want to dream it again, you know what you have to do.* *So get up.*

Gabriel untangled himself gently so as to not wake Lily, and stepped naked into the moonlight now shining through the room’s sole window. He looked out at the remnant of the once great city, the monolithic buildings stretching as far as their skeletons of steel would allow, their height alone seeming to promise hope for a better tomorrow, for in order for humanity to tower so high, it must once have been equally as low.

Pulling on his clothes, he let his eyes wander over Lily’s sleeping form. The embodiment of tranquility, she was now his. His happiness. His desire. To Gabriel, she was one of the few things left worth fighting for. She was his Love. Stepping through the door’s threshold, he stole one last glance at her, drinking in every curve and edge of her prone body, and without knowing why, the word *Shakespeare* was on his lips. He scrawled a message on the wall in front of the bed with the stub of a pencil found in the bedside table, letting her know he stepped out to get a lay of the land and instructing her to stay put, he would be back in a few hours.

He turned then, and walked out the room and down the steps, fingering the lighter and box cutter he had taken from her pack in his pocket in case things turned ugly. He walked out the fire door of the hardware store, intent on following the trail he had discovered earlier, the full moon providing more than enough light to track effectively. Kneeling by the stain on the road he studied the tracks, which led around the far corner. Hitching his pants up, he set off following the tracks, keeping to the shadows. *Where are you big brother?* Gabriel thought, eyes trained on the trail.

Each print was now fainter than the last, and as he rounded the street corner they stopped suggestively in front of a sewer grate. *Always liked a little hide and seek, didn’t you Mikey?* Lifting the grate, Gabriel stared into the black depths, and climbed down the ladder hanging from the lip of the manhole. The sewer was a solid wall of blackness extending in all directions. Gabriel stood in a circle of pale moonlight and looked up, wondering if he would live to see another moon like this one. He took a breath, and started walking, going on nothing more than a gut feeling. He followed the twists and turns of the sewer, flicking the lighter on whenever he came to a junction, mentally marking every change in direction. *Left, right, left, left, right* and so went the count. Further and further into the bowels of the sewer he went, losing track of time in the darkness. He had almost lost track of his path when he was met by a sheer drop. Dismayed, he did not know what to do, unable to go any further without losing his way entirely. Just as he was about to turn back, a harsh, barking cough rang through the area. Gabriel froze, seeing two faint lights appearing from the direction he had come. Two faint lights which grew brighter by the second. Two lights heading straight for him. Out of options, he scurried back to the edge of the drop, and hung from his fingertips, hoping they would walk right past him in the darkness. A gruff voice reverberated all around him, “…why we gotta fuckin’ go out and patrol all goddamn night, there’s nobody left in this shithole city,”

“Look man, you wanna bitch about it, go talk to Mike, see how that goes for your sorry ass,” said an equally gruff voice, “you seen what he did to his own *brother* when he pissed him off that time, what do you think he’ll do to you if he hears you running your mouth off while we’re supposed to be doing night patrol?”

The orange glow of the flames drew nearer. Gabriel had pulled himself up enough to see over the lip of the drop, and was now staring at the heels of two pairs of big, thick boots Lily would have loved.

*Lily*.

“Oh come on man, you know as well as I do the suns gonna be up in another 20 minutes, and this will be the *third* goddamn time I’m short on sleep, never mind getting any kind of breakfast.”

Gabriel’s stomach did a flip flop. He had totally forgotten her. She was alone. Vulnerable. He needed to get back. Now.

“Oh for Christ’s sake will you quit your whining? We’re all tired, we’re all hungry, and guess what? Nobody gives a single shit how much worse off you are than the rest of us. So shut the hell up and get MOVING!” The one guard shoved the other in the back. “Come on, one more corner and we’re back home.” The two of them made a final right, their lights disappearing behind the corner.

Gabriel pulled himself up, shoulders shrieking with the effort. He jumped to his feet and took off like a shot, following his mental map. While making his way through the tunnels, he saw thin rays of sunlight begin to snake through the gaps between grates at the top of the sewer. Every gruesome fate imaginable befell Lily in Gabriel’s mind while he ran through the maze. He reached the ladder in no time, springing up the rungs. He clambered out of the man hole and didn’t bother to replace the cover, heading straight for the hardware store.

He yanked open the fire door and flew up the steps, going too fast for them to snap. He grabbed the handle of the bedroom door and almost burst it from its hinges.

The room was empty.

Gabriel felt as if the floor fell from underneath him. He strode quickly to the bed, looking for any sign of struggle, and found nothing. There was no reply to the note he had written on the wall. Her pack and clothes nowhere to be found. She had vanished easily as a wisp of smoke.

He sat on the bed, stunned. He couldn’t fathom why she had gone. He needed her. He *loved* her.

“GABE!” A voice called. Her voice. He crossed the room to the window and opened it, sticking his head out and searching the street.

“Gabe! Over here!” She called again, clearer this time. He saw her standing in front of the store and waved to her out the window of the shop, smiling. Relieved, he closed the window and headed down the stairs. He pushed open the fire door expecting her to meet him there. He walked out with open arms, and received an embrace.

It wasn’t Lily.

“Hello, little brother.” said Michael.

Ch. 10

Blackness. That was all Gabriel knew. The hood over his head shut out the world. He had given up trying to struggle against the restraints holding him to the chair in which he now sat, awaiting whatever fate Michael had planned. He heard the bang a metal door open and close not too far from where he sat, its flat report hanging in the still air.

Footsteps approached. His shoulders tensed involuntarily as the scrape of another chair sounded in front of him. The hood was whipped off his head, and he was blinded by the afternoon sun streaming directly into his eyes from the open sewer grate directly above.

“What was that Elvis quote Mom always used to say?” said a low voice. “‘The truth is like the sun, you can shut it out for a time but it ain’t going away.’ Well the suns shinin’ bright right now, so I guess that means the truth is out too huh?”

Gabriel’s eyes had adjusted to the harsh light, and now saw his brother, Michael. Barely twenty years old, he looked like a man ten long, unkind, years older. Michael, who murdered a father and nearly killed his own brother, was leaning over the back of the chair opposite Gabriel, the semi-darkness in the sewer alcove giving his eyes a dark, sunken look. He was stooped, as though a crushing weight had been placed on his shoulders, eyes riveted to a spot on the floor directly in front of Gabriel.

“The hell are you talking about, Mike?” said Gabriel, eyes still smarting from the light.

“I’m talking about you and me, baby brother. You, me, and the truth about this big shitty world that landed right in our laps. The truth that you just don’t wanna see.” Mike sat down in the chair and rested his elbows on his knees, his eyes still on the floor.

 “Gabe. I… I am so sorry for what I did to you.” Two tears rolled down the bridge of Michael’s nose, catching the light of the sun and sparkling brilliantly as they fell to the floor.

“Its just, I…I was so *angry.*” Michael continued, scarcely able to control his voice. Gabriel sat stone still and silent, his brother’s words striking him like the tide crashing upon rocks.

“I heard him say them, *those words*. But it wasn’t that man who said them it, it was *Dad*. Dad promising everything would be ok. Dad *lying* to us. Lying to those little kids. He couldn’t do what he had to do, can’t you see that? He *COULDN’T.*” His voice rose to a frenzied tone, bouncing off the walls of the sewer alcove

“I CAN. ME. I’M THE ONE WHO KEPT US ALIVE GABE.” He jumped out of the chair, gesticulating wildly, spittle flying from his lips.

“EVER SINCE YOU WERE TOO YOUNG TO DO ANYTHING BESIDES SHIT YOURSELF I’VE BEEN LOOKING OUT FOR YOU. AND WHEN THE WORLD WENT TO SHIT WHO GOT YOU THROUGH IT HUH? WHO GOT YOU TO STOP SHAKING DAD’S BODY, TELLING HIM TO WAKE UP? WHO WAS IT GABE, HUH?!”

Michael grabbed Gabe by the front of his jacket glowering at him with the same steel grey eyes, and said in a deceptively calm voice, “It was me. Mikey. Your big bro. The only family you’ve got left in the world.”

He let go of his jacket, and slumped back down into his chair, deflated. “Gabe, you just don’t understand man. This world, its…its nothing like the old one. I thought you did, I thought I *made* you understand that after Dad died, everything him and Mom taught us died with him. All that ‘respect your neighbor’ golden rule shit doesn’t fly anymore man. That world is *dead.* And the one we’re in now, it’ll chew you up and spit you out, then stomp on you a few times just for fun, watching you twitch and squirm like a bug on a pin until…” Michael trailed off, a faraway look in his eyes.

Abruptly Michael rose, and produced his beautiful bone handled knife. Gabriel swallowed past the dry lump in his throat, and when Michael walked behind him he closed his eyes in resignation. He heard a ‘snick’ and his restraints fell away.

Gabriel stood slowly and turned to face his brother, whose distant gaze focused on everything and nothing. “There’s nothing left, little brother. Nothing worth fighting for. Except family.”

Michael put his knife away, and held out his hand. Gabriel stared at it for an eternity, wanting to grab it, hold on, and never let go. He wanted to be with his big brother again, he wanted to be with his family.

But he didn’t take it. Because Gabriel knew. He knew there *was* something left to fight for. Something worth dying for if it came to that. *Lily.*

“You’re wrong.” Those two syllables hung in the air, permeating the peace which had settled over the room. Michael’s eyes snapped wide open, then narrowed to slits, hard grey chips of flint boring into Gabriel.

“What?” he said in a clipped tone.

“I said you’re wrong, Mike.” said Gabriel, “About there being nothing left to fight for. You’ve never been more wrong in your life.” Gabriel stared back at his brother, not challenging him, yet not afraid either. He spoke with the detached ease of someone discussing their grocery list, “Love, Mike. Hope. The things that make us human, the things that make us better than your big shitty world. The things that you’ve forgotten existed.”

The two brothers stood rooted in stone, the air between them blazing with tension waiting to erupt. Then a smile crept onto Michael’s face, which split into an open mouthed grin from which poured hysterical, uncontrollable laughter. Gabriel shifted on his feet, uneasy as he watched his brother doubled over in wracking gasps for air. When Michael regained his breath, he looked at Gabriel with tears still in his eyes and queried in a contemptuous tone, “Love, you say? Love is worth fighting for? And what do you know of love little brother?” Gabriel’s face hardened, his hands balled up into fists.

“Enough to know that it’s truer than any of the bullshit you just spun me,” said Gabriel hotly. Michael smiled even wider as he saw how much he was getting to his little brother.

“Oh, we’ll see exactly how true it is bud, don’t you worry,” he said, a dark glint in his eyes, “Bring her out!” From the same door Michael had entered, two gang members now came, holding a limp form between their arms.

*Lily.*

Her head lolled to one side, a trail of blood oozing from her scalp. Her mouth hung open, and she drew faint breaths through swollen lips. Her boots dragged along the floor behind her. The gang members set her down at the edge of the rectangle of light the skylight created.

Gabriel wanted to rush over to her, to cradle her head in his arms, to be the first face she saw when she woke up. But one look from the guards discouraged any such action.

“It hurts, doesn’t it?” said Michael, “To see someone you care about in pain? Trust me Gabe, how you feel is nothing compared to how I feel right now.”

Gabe rounded on his brother, ready to launch himself headlong at him, knife and guards be damned. He looked his brother square in the eyes, his face a mask of cold fury. “I’m going to fucking kill you, Mike. For what you did to her.”

“For what I did to her?” Mike scoffed, “What about what she was going to do to you? I saved your ass Gabe that’s what I did. Just like I always do.”

“ENOUGH WITH YOUR BULLSHIT!” Shouted Gabriel, hurling himself towards his brother, fists cocked. One second he was hell bent on smashing his brother’s skull in, and the next he was lying face down on the ground with one of the gang member’s knees in the middle of his back, pinning him. Mike hadn’t moved an inch.

“Look Gabe I can understand why you’re mad, shit I’d have tried to kill me too. But it’s like I said, you just don’t get this world baby brother. You don’t know how nasty it can be. But you’re about to find out.” He walked over to Lily’s limp form and began slapping her face yelling, “WAKE UP, BITCH!” He pulled her to her feet and sat her down in Gabriel’s old chair, her eyes barely open, tears running down dirt stained cheeks.

“Mike, please, she’s done nothing wrong, let’s be reasona-”

“Oh done nothing wrong has she?” Mike cut in, “You hear that girly? My kind hearted brother here thinks you’re quite the girl-scout. Why don’t you go ahead and tell him how wrong he really is? Tell him about how you lead him on, tell him about how you were going to hand him over to me, about how you’re only in this for you. What was it you said to me? That you could have him following you around like a lovesick puppy, and all you wanted in return was as much food and water as you could carry? Well go on, TELL HIM.”

Lily looked at Gabriel, the brilliance in her green eyes now faded and hidden behind purpled swollen lids. She began to speak, “The…note…Gabr-”

“DON’T YOU EVER SAY HIS NAME AGAIN!” Michael roared at her, bunching a fist in her hair and yanking her head back, producing a weak cry.

“MIKE!” Gabriel cried, “Mike, please, she was going to say something!”

Mike looked at Gabriel with fire in his eyes. “You’re damn right she was gonna say something. More lies and bullshit.” He released the bunch of hair in his fist, and Lily’s head flopped forwards.

Gabriel felt as though time had taken a leave of absence from this corner of the universe. He looked at Lily’s broken figure, unsure of what he saw. She had the appearance of the girl he had loved, and maybe even still loved, but also saw a creature which had pulled out his beating heart and stomped on it, giving as much thought to it as the crushing of an insect.

Michael came over to his brother, squatting close to him. “This has got to end, Gabe. You gotta finish it. Make her hurt as bad as you hurt now. Do it, little brother. Do it, and come back to your family.” He held out his open hand.

In it was his knife.

Gabriel took it and stood up, watching the way the light played off the gleaming blade. He looked at Lily, semi-conscious in the chair. He began to walk, knife held loosely in his hand, standing in front of her after a few strides. He tilted up her head, looking at her ruined face. She was totally unconscious now. *Good,* thought Gabriel, *She’ll feel no pain.* He brought the edge of the knife against her neck, whispering, “Don’t worry, it’s gonna be alright.” Whether he said it to himself or to Lily, he did not know.

Tears welled in his eyes, and his hands began to tremble. He gripped the knife tightly, its blade thirstily awaiting the swipe. He loosed an anguished cry, and…

A cylinder dropped through the open grate overhead, bouncing twice before promptly exploding with a blinding flash of light. The door burst open, and three men in black body armor entered the room, quickly dropping Michael’s gang members. Michael shouted at Gabriel, telling him to, “LEAVE HER! GET OUT OF HERE!” before he was clubbed in the face with the butt of a gun. Gabriel, still blinded by the light, was on his knees, hands over his eyes. One more man emerged from the doorway. He was wearing a slim fitting charcoal suit, freshly pressed and laundered, with black shoes shined to iridescence.

He walked past the three men, right up to Gabriel, who was still half blind from the blast, and spoke to him with a voice that dripped contempt, derision, and of all things, *money,* “Thanks for finding my daughter,” he drawled. The man then struck him on the temple quick as a snake, and Gabriel crumpled to the floor, his vision fading. He was vaguely aware of the man touching Lily’s face, and calling her, “Sweetheart”. He reached out towards her, struggling to get up. A thick soled boot crashed into the side of his face, and he knew no more.