

Anomie by Briana Moynahan

ANOMIE is a post-apocalyptic biopunk espionage thriller about Akaia 'Ears' Mako, a gifted private investigator who navigates the morally gray city of Cape Anomie. Drawn into the shadows of family secrets, betrayal, and experimental science, she must survive a world of genetically modified creatures, neon-lit conspiracies, and the manipulations of those closest to her to confront the moral cost of ambition and the secrets buried in her own bloodline.

Chapter 1

A late night breeze carrying a salty bite from the ocean surrounding Anomie danced between the sprawling architecture of the manmade island cooling the city from the midday heat into a comfortable warm embrace. Anomie had a way about reminding you that the ocean was always there waiting to drag you and everything it touches into its dark unknown - despite the sheer size of Anomie, no matter where you were on the island you could hear the roaring waves crashing against the beach.

It had been one of those days where I needed a long break and a cigarette. It had also been one of those days where I was greatly reconsidering living the professional detective life. The job I picked up was going cold and every lead I had led nowhere; it was not nearly as fun as playing detective was growing up - there used to be a lot less on the line.

With a cherry red cigarette glowing between my fingers, my apartment's fire escape became my getaway spot, I felt like I had a moment to myself finally. The crackle of the flame moving towards my lips on the inhale and then a moment of nothing, not even the sound of the waves broke the welcomed silence.

Deeply gathering a fresh breath the muscles in my legs struggle to push my body back upwards onto the landing without

slipping on the wet metal. A good smoke session never lasted long in Anomie before the city became drenched in rain once again, where storm systems moved in and out so quickly nothing had time to dry.

“I thought you were going to quit murdering your lungs for fun. You must be reading too many of those novellas again.” The sudden and unexpected voice from behind me made me jump and drop the barely lit cigarette butt through the grated floor. A welcoming and familiar face was proud at the success of frightening me while sneaking up the ladder.

“You cannot be scaring me on this ancient ass fire escape dude, you know that! Scared the shit out of me.” My voice came out cracked, annoyed and hoarse from the nicotine. “You better get up here already or else I’m going to push you and make it look like an accident.”

His short black shaggy hair was slightly wet and hanging in his face, shaking off droplets with every laugh that spilled out of him. Jonah Hallow, a city cryptid and midnight artist, stood nose to nose with me grinning hard like his life depended on it.

“Sketch, you caught me at a good time. This is the first moment I haven’t been ripping my hair out all week.” Sketch was a

nickname I had given to Jonah when he was first finding himself as a graffiti artist, at the time he was doing sketchy portraits of strangers in spraypaint, they were rough and choppy and looked like a doodle in a notebook. He was so proud of his early work that he kept the name to memorialize it, his real name felt unfitting to say now.

Sketch's proximity gave me goosebumps, his breath nearly hitting my ear and his hands brushed against mine. Reflex kicked in and I stepped back, turning away to let him pass by me; there was no way he could have missed my bright red face.

His smile was nonchalant anyways, unphased by the awkwardness I was radiating. "So what brings you out to the balcony tonight, my dear Ears?" Ears, a nickname I may have earned while eavesdropping, but I deeply despised the lack of cuteness it had.

"Other than having myself a little ciggie to kill my lungs and to clear my head? I would love to have this inside while pouring over my case but I don't want to get him," I gesture to the blue spikey ball of quills poking his tiny nose out at us, "sick, he does not need that nor do I need that right now." The porcupine

squeaked and shuffled away slowly, no longer interested in the excitement going on outside.

“Ah yes! Naald, the sweet and somewhat weird porcupine you call a friend! So sad, why don’t you make a human friend for once? There’s tens of thousands of people here to choose from!”

I snapped back, “I got you, what if I told you he’s more than just a friend, he’s family.” the words slipped out meaning to poke fun at myself. “Do you remember when I first got him? He wandered onto your family’s property and wouldn’t stop following me around and it got to a point where he always scared that one kid up the street when he got too close. He’s gotten better about it though.

“Naald has always been protective of you, I swear it’s like he communicates with you, which makes you not having friends even more concerning.” He knew I had friends and still teased me because I don’t see them nearly as much as he sees his - in my line of work, having trustworthy friends is worth a lot.

With Sketch leading the way through the window, I knew I was going to hear about the state of my apartment. With the way the kitchen was open to the living room, any mess that was out felt extra noticeable. Watching him carefully step over piles of

precariously stacked books and used dishes I prayed that he was avoiding my dead potted plants and wouldn't knock them over.

"You have got to let me clean this place for you, it's chaos!" A scornful look draws on his face as he glances around my apartment like a rat would just jump out and bite him, exactly the response I knew I'd get. There weren't many dirty dishes or garbage laying around, there were also case files and islands of reading material dotting the carpet like a map. A few vine plants and herbs hog the tops of the bookshelves, and the porcupine's crate near the windowsill in the living room was padded with towels and loose quills he made himself at home in.

Dictating the divide between living room and kitchen, the dining room table became the central hub for my investigations, rendering it useless for when I have guests over. Sketch took a seat on a barstool at the counter facing me as I put a kettle on for tea.

"Wanna play a game?" He asks, shaking his cigarette pack.

"First off, I'm so fine with you not touching my stuff. Do not clean it, secondly," I had paused for a moment as I got the mugs ready with cream, sugar and teabags and placed them on the counter while we waited. "I don't know what game you play with

a pack of cigarettes but I'm down to play a light game. Go easy on me though, it's my first time."

I could see a little red blush growing on his cheeks as he switched out the nicotine for playing cards. Sketch was swift with shuffling the deck, throwing out different tricks he picked up from his guys over the years. It looked like his hands were dancing, the cards forming shapes I didn't believe did anything helpful but they at least looked cool. With a flick of the wrist cards seemingly appeared from thin air and disappeared nearly as quick.

Between dealing the cards and making tea, there was a silence between us, not unwelcome however it felt out of place. I could read the room, Sketch was uncomfortable and looked like he had a lot on his mind as his hands fidgetted, I could tell he wanted to say something and it seemed important by the way he was mouthing something to himself. It took me a moment to realize he was in a dressier outfit than normal - his usual style being more street wear focused.

"Are you okay? You seem very uncomfortable with your choice in clothes," I did not get an answer. Instead, I was dealt a hand and we played while I wondered what was bothering him so much.

We played cards in silence for a bit longer, trying to get as close to twenty one as possible. The only memory I held of my parents was being shown how to play Vingt Et Un by my father before bed; that had to be when I was only a couple years old though and the details are now severely blurry.

Enough time went on sitting and playing in silence, that any conversation brought up was ignored, so finally I dropped my cards and smacked him in the head causing him to jump and nearly fall off his seat.

Apparently, he had missed quite a lot of the game with how zoned out he was, “Sugar? Yeah, give me some of that sweet sweet sugar in my tea. That’s what we are doing.”

I looked at him crazed and confused, I hadn’t even bothered asking if he wanted sugar, that’s exactly how he always takes it and half of a conversation already went by since I had gotten the mugs ready . I poured water in both of our mugs and handed it off to him, making sure he wasn’t gripping anything but the handle - it was hot after all.

“What are you working on lately? You seem to be in the middle of a big case right now.” He tried to redirect the attention away from himself and towards me yet again, whatever he had to

say is not something he is particularly excited for and puts our card game on pause for a moment while he gathers his pride and remaining thoughts.

“The standard. A very exciting case of a jealous divorcee checking in on her husband’s new accessory. It’s a whole messy thing but not very exciting in the long run, did you want to hear about it?” I could tell that he needs the distraction from whatever it is he has on his mind. Private detective work around Anomie had a lot of repetition, usually a woman looking to stop their husband's affair, or the occasional missing person, though those never seem to come up with anything; it was like they just walked into the ocean never to be seen again. Anomie’s news sources were showing cases left and right of missing people while The Council was staying silent on the topic and that is where I come in, to pick up the pieces that The Council is failing to help with.

“You know I *love* hearing about your work.” He gave an extended emphasis on the word love, his sarcasm seemed out of place for him being the one who asked to hear about it, however I chose to ignore it. “I kid, please, go on, I really do enjoy it.” Sketch leans forward elbows on the counter in his “listening mode”,

“An acquaintance of mine gave my business information to a woman who was distressed, her husband had been cheating on her for a while and she wanted to find out all of the little details on the affair discretely so she can eventually get back at him, I guess she already did the paperwork for the divorce but hadn’t handed them off to him yet because she wanted to make it a big deal, he apparently kept coming home smelling like quote ‘sweet velvety perfume’ unquote she didn’t recognize” I point at the sweatshirt on the counter, "she gave me his sweater to get an idea of the smell if I came across him, also mentioned his personality changes. I'd say it's a typical case for me, however while I was tracking him down he just vanished. I've never seen anything like it before. I would guess he just found somewhere warm to hunker down in - that's if you know what I mean." Sketch reaches over to grab the sweatshirt from the counter and smells it, his eyebrows shifted in a sense that made me wonder if he recognized the smell of it. He immediately puts the sweatshirt down and doesn't say anything else about the case, I wondered if I gave away too many details for him to ask further questions.

The longer Sketch was there, the tenser the room felt. “Are you off for the night?” I tried to divert the conversation to get him

to talk, “You’re dressed surprisingly well for someone who’s going to get paint all over your outfit.” His shirt was silk, dark brown and unbuttoned accessorized with a dress watch and scuffed loafers. Despite being well dressed there was the unmistakable cobalt and chrome paint under his fingernails from his last art piece he had completed with his graffiti crew.

He stood up and did a half assed twirl, showing off his outfit. “Nah, there’s some tension going on with the group right now, they seem pretty distant. If I’m being entirely honest, I was really nervous. I felt like this was something I needed to dress up for. I need to ask you a favor,” while his outfit was for confidence, anything but radiated from him as his hands kept fidgeting and he was stumbling over his words, “do you mind if we step back outside for another cigarette? I need one and it seems the rain has paused again.”

I grab our mugs and we make our way through the window once more. The heat from where I sat before was non-existent now, the cold of the fire escape chilled the bare skin of my legs just below my shorts.

“So, what do you have going on?” The sweet herbal taste of the tea warmed my stomach from the cold outside.

Stuttered whispers leaked from his lips, “Do you think it’s weird to want to see what’s beyond the ocean, the other side? What if everything is okay over there and it was just all made up as a lie?” A thought that was meant to be shared with a cigarette and those cigarette thoughts were some of my favorites. I knew this was not the question he truly wanted to ask but I was intrigued and bit the bait, “I think it’s pretty natural for humans to want to explore more and expand their territories. History has taught us that humans did everything in their grasps to expand as far out as possible. Science would classify us as an invasive species.”

“I don’t know if you’re getting what I’m saying. Like, so, yes The Council taught everyone that they were destroyed,” He says, “would you take the opportunity to though? To go and see if they’re telling the truth?”

The thought had crossed my mind once or twice, but I have seen the tragedies of what happens on a small island like ours and could not imagine grasping the size they would be before the war. The Council ensures that everyone understands that we could be worse off right now and yet we are granted the small life that we have left to enjoy the last few centuries of humanity; that

it is all we deserve as a species. My answer came with a paragraph background of opinions but I simply stated, “just to see what it’s like; leave no trace though. I have no reason to distrust The Council though, what would they even get out of lying? We have it great here, we have everything you could ever want right at our doorstep.”

“I just can’t stand looking at the ocean anymore, seeing the same faces and sharing the same streets with people I grew up around. We know these streets too well, Ears. At any moment you make the wrong move and you could be killed by someone because of an accident if they don’t understand. It’s contradictory,” The jump in the conversation was sudden and unexpected. His voice gets almost angry as he speaks, “The Council is contradictory. We have the technology to remove the territorial traits in animals and now they live in harmony. But The Council doesn’t want anyone to experiment on humans, they don’t want us to go to the mainland. You’d solve the only problem you have with the ‘forbidden’ technology.” Sketch aggressively finger quoted the air, feeling very passionate about his opinions, it was strange seeing him angry like this.

“My parents...” a harsh inhale and slow exhale allowed Sketch to find the strength in his voice, “- they left and I don’t know where or why or how long for, but they left. They’re just gone.”

“Did they leave a note?” I ask plainly.

“Oh right, yeah I forgot to mention that they left a note telling me exactly where they are and what they’re doing and that’s why I’m here grovelling to you.” I had struck a nerve with him, flinching. By mistake I had shifted into a work persona, detaching myself and starting from ground zero to make sure I got everything right, as if he were just another client.

“The staff of the house had informed me that there were late night visitors coming by. Always looking for my parents seeing where they were.” A deep whoosh of breath was released from Sketch’s lips, “I’ve always been worried about them, The Council has gotten so strict on their rulings and then also some of my boys were hearing rumours that The Council was involved in those missing people’s cases and they just won’t admit to it.”

I could see where this would make sense, The Council was very good at keeping a tight leash. Their Public Relations team worked overtime to spread their pro-eden and anti-mainland

propaganda throughout the city, and many high ranking gang leaders that challenged them suddenly went missing. However these newer missing people cases were all nobodys, they were the opposite of them and many of them didn't have enough enthusiasm for life to challenge their situations, so why The Council would go after them would be going against their support.

“So you think your parents are getting too big in their experiments?” An awkward laughter comes out of my mouth, “your family has worked side by side with The Council for years, jumping to their needs.”

Sketch gets loud for a second before lowering his voice, “People don't just come for visits late at night with guns because you're doing a good job. They don't sit and wait for them to come home watching you come and go because it's the neighborly thing to do. These were scary people, Ears. I couldn't imagine my family going against The Council, there's too much to lose.”

I questioned if he had gotten any other information from his staff, with only a mention of a locked office door and an empty pantry. Churning with ideas and strategies, my brain is a train on tracks knowing the station is just up ahead. I lean back and sooth myself softly stroking my porcupine quill necklace in thought. The

blue neon glow pulsed with my heart beat, making sure I always know who's waiting for me at home.

Recalling back to when we were young, Sketch's parents were fairly wealthy and had the means to take me in after my own parents disappeared. We spent a lot of time exploring the large mansion playing spies and hide and seek.

I guess you could say they expected the village to help, quite literally, and left us in the hands of the staff and citizens of Anomie. The staff of the house had taught us everything we grew up to use, art and science, psychology and observation. He was right though, his parents did not keep secrets. On the few occasions that Sketch's parents were home they gushed to us about their work.

Sketch stood next to me patiently waiting for me to think the details over. Finally, I say, "If the office is locked, could you find another way in?"

Shaking his head no, he says, "No dice, checked everywhere I could've thought a hidden key would be and nada. I couldn't even get ahold of his keychain long enough to try it on the door, but I did recognize the keys well enough to know there was not anything that would work. The windows on that side of

the house don't open either and are thick glass otherwise I would have tried to climb through them."

"Have you noticed a routine with his behavior while they were home? Something that might occur right before your pops enters his office?"

"The third day I noticed of his office being locked, I noticed that when he would come home from the lab, he'd make himself something to drink in the kitchen and then head upstairs," Sketch pauses for a second to take a drag of his cigarette, the warm glow illuminating his face, "then, he goes into the bathroom next to his office taking the drink *inside* with him. Then goes into his office."

I snort and choke on my spit as I laugh, "You're telling me that he takes his drink into the bathroom with him? Is he drinking it while peeing?" I giggle some more, "The endless cycle of water to pee."

I could see a grin sneak up through his concern, "Ha, yeah actually, that's funny though." He leans against the building, "There's a small table right outside the bathroom where he could set it, but he takes it in with him. I think it's incredibly gross, but I went and looked through the bathroom checking the drains and tanks, but came across nothing."

I could sense that there was a lot of stress behind those eyes and a little bit of a feeling of failure in his voice.

“I’ve been freaking out and staying with a friend, it feels wrong to stay there for now, what if they were hunted by someone or The Council and they’re going to come for me next?” The anxiety reflects in his thinking, the panicking and paranoia taking hold for a moment. Flashes of blue danced across the wall as Naald picked up on Sketch’s racing heart. “I keep finding things where they shouldn’t be. The employees don’t stay in the house overnight anymore so I know it’s not them, they are scared too.”

He continues, “I love my parents, but as worried as I am about them, I want you to also find out what they’re working on, please. I know some think it’s a free for all in the new world and most things shouldn’t be questioned, but I would hate to think they crossed the line.”

I pat his foot as a consolation, knowing that it will take time for him to find peace and come to terms with whatever happens. I had hope that his parents were okay and that it was just another medical advancement for The Council.

“I’ll try my best to find out for you, but if it’s something you’re not going to like will you be okay with that?” Harmonizing

the cigarette cherries burning kept the silence from becoming deafening. He tosses the butt over the side and grips the railing of the ladder to descend, stopping at eye level to me. "You're good at what you do," His eyes sparkled with tears and spoke softly, "you listen even if it sounds crazy. I would rather hear the bad news from you than anyone else. You be safe. Get some sleep first."

My work was going to be cut out for me, I could not let Sketch down. The kitchen table became a new work space, pages of notes sprawled haphazardly replaced with blank pages as I collected my thoughts and information on paper and gathered supplies for the trek.

I started to yawn - once then twice more. Listening to Sketch was a brotherly annoyance, I knew he was right but I did not want to hear it from him: getting some sleep was a priority, I did not want to make dangerous mistakes by being tired. I drew the blinds and closed the curtains to crawl into bed, the glowing pulse of Naald's quills synced with his breathing and my heartbeat was a rhythmic night light, helping to drift me into sleep.

Chapter 2

One could hardly tell that the sun had risen the next morning as the dark storm clouds blanketed the sky over the island. The two story glass and concrete monolith that is the Hallow Estate loomed in that darkness over the yard with its brutalist concrete edges cut and diffused by the soft tropical landscaping and wooden accents using the ocean as a backdrop. The tasteful design of the property felt warm and inviting until you realize you've overstayed your welcome and suddenly the cliff behind the house felt a little too close for comfort.

Thankfully, there was a vantage point on a hill nearby allowing me to be posted above everything to observe the property. The binoculars were unexpectedly cold against the sensitive skin around my eye as I viewed the Hallow Estate bringing it into focus. There was something off almost immediately, Sketch had said that no one but staff was in the house at this time and that he was worried that something could happen; his instincts must have been right as there were black and red militants dotting the front yard. It raised the hairs on the back of my neck making me feel like a wild hog sensing danger as the guards were unlike the ones that the Hallow's employed, the black and red uniforms a stark contrast to the familiar white and

blue I grew up with yet they were nowhere to be found. Making sure the flash is off first, I snap a photo of the garden and its new inhabitants. The expectation of this being an easy in and out mission faltered and was wishful thinking on my part - no longer able to just walk in like I had originally planned.

The formation of the militants seemed amateurish and too unorganized for this to be a permanent station for them. While the binoculars were helpful from a distance, I needed to move to a closer location to overhear what the guards could be talking about, hoping one of them would spit out something useful.

Upon certainty that I was unseen, I hopped from place to place on the perimeter of the property darting between shrubbery to end up perched on the ledge of a nearby decorative fountain. The water bouncing the acoustics against the marble surfaces surrounding it caused any noise on the front lawn to be thrown behind the fountain; it was a trick I learned from one of the cleaning staff who loved to hear gossip from the landscapers on her breaks.

Just as luck would have it, two guards walked right into the sweet spot. "The boss says we've got to wipe everything: the lab, the house, the staff. Said don't let anything that moves and

anything related to the case survive.” The first voice sounded more official, like a captain talking to their subordinate as the second voice sounded really young, “We’re almost done at least, no one left in the house. We have to finish this last sweep and then the whole thing goes up in flames. Too bad they built the place with concrete, it would be way more satisfying to see it collapse if it were made of wood.” Their voices drifted off as they walked away.

My head spun and I started quietly heaving at the thought of everyone I grew up around being dead and gone, my heart ached knowing I had to continue on and find out exactly what was going on to warrant this. I did not have to wait long before the militants started to move out and away from the house and I could make my way across the yard towards the back of the house’s back door, one that is connected to the kitchen for staff to come in and out of.

Hearing about the horrors of what those men did was nothing in comparison to what I saw in the kitchen. Deep red glistened against the walls and cabinets dripping rhythmically and pooling on the floor. The bodies of the people who used to make my baby bottles were laying lifeless on the floor and it made my

heart break even more. They were the ones who made sure that Sketch and I were fed. They prepared us all our favorite meals, our birthday cakes, and soup when we were sick; the memory tainted.

Stepping over the cooks and glancing into the pantry, it was as empty as Sketch had noted. I wanted to cover all of my bases so taking what else he had said into consideration, I checked the cabinet for Mr. Hallow's mug, dumped out the coffee bin, and checked the coffee pot, in case he was trying to hide it anywhere in there. As Sketch would say, no dice on finding the key in there.

I could not be certain that all of the guards were gone, though the house was as silent as christmas eve. My movements were slow and calculated through broken glass and remnants of the Hallow's personal effects.

A whispered "psst" shot out from a corner in the main entryway, behind a decorative wall divider. Ezekiel, one of the cleaners I grew to know well, was beckoning to me to join him.

"Little one! Akaia, please come here," He was frantic and had eyes that had seen horrors unknown. I put my finger to my lips to gesture for him to be quiet so we did not get found out.

"Ezekiel, you must know what is going on here, who are these people? What are they killing for?" I tried to comfort the

housekeeper with a pat on the back and a hug but the man did not want to be touched, he shrugged me off as tears ran down his face.

“Die koeël is deur die kerk. The damage has been done, I heard yelling and screaming coming from all over the house, I was just putting away my tools after cleaning the entry way. My wife, she answered the door,” He points across the room towards the familiar woman laying limp at the front door, “they questioned her at gunpoint, asking where Mr. and Mrs. Hallow were, but when she couldn’t answer...” His fingers poked my chest, gesturing as a gun shot. “By God, the lord is protecting us today, she is still alive she just needs medical attention. But they are still here close by and we must be quiet. I know what you are here for and you will not stop until you get your answers but please, be careful. If I survive through this, I must tell you something.”

“You never answered who they were, do you know? The guards.” Both of my hands were on his shoulders trying to keep his attention on me and on track.

The morning golden hour was peaking, drenching the violent scene in a yellowed moment of hope; contrasting the overall feeling of dread and sadness. Ezekiel looked back on his

wife with relief and sadness stating in malice, “They said their team was one that did work for The Council. The Hallows got into something messy and they cannot be forgiven.”

This was a sure sign that The Council did have their hands in the Hallows's affairs and the Hallows had done something they should not have. Sketch was unfortunately right and he would be pained to learn of the outcome.

The Council having its hands in something that the Hallows were working on confirmed that this was a project that was not allowable in their eyes. Observing the area for signs of more militants, I looked back to Ezekiel and demanded that he tell me how to get into Mr. Hallows office.

“I do not know! He changed the locks on the door, no one has been in there for weeks. I know the guards haven’t looked in there though, it wasn’t worth their time. I overheard them talking about coming back later to torch the place, they just wanted everyone inside to be dead so they don’t run or spill secrets or whatever they thought we were going to do, we’re paying for someone else's doing” Ezekiel glanced over at his wife again and started to let out a wail before I covered his mouth and dragged him under the stairs. My instincts were right, there were more

guards inside. Their footsteps loud and heavy, clicks as they reloaded and cocked their weapons rang through the hall as they raced downstairs to catch the noisemaker.

There was nothing in the vicinity that I could use as a distraction, the natural instinct of fight or flight was kicking in and I needed to get out of there before we were caught. "I can't just leave her by herself bleeding out any more, she needs me. I need to be with her and our baby..." His eyes connected with mine, "*Agter die kap van die byl kom.* I am honored to have helped raise you, you're a wonderful child. Go into the darkness and find the truth." Before I could make a snap decision and prevent him from leaving, Ezekiel runs out to be with his wife. I did not get to see what became of Ezekiel, however the popping of skin as bullets rained upon him and the evil, monstrous laughter was something that will ring in my ears for eternity. The guards had been standing right outside of view from me, but they would have had a perfect view of Ezekiel.

Urges to sob at my caretaker's violent passing were muffled by my own hand covering my mouth. Being unarmed meant if I was found I would suffer the same fate. There was now a new meaning behind my mission, if the people I cared about

were being harmed by the people I cared about, we had a bigger issue. There was an unborn baby that was murdered today, something that most citizens of Anomie would find a problem with. Whoever was behind this needed to be taken down.

The Council militants only stopped shooting when they emptied their clips and all the ammo they had on them, they found pleasure in the excessiveness of their psychopath behavior. They debated amongst themselves on whether or not they should look around for more stragglers. If anything were real in the spiritual realm god must have been on my side; they decided that the trek to get more ammunition was not worth the one or two people that they could have found. A single tear ran down my face before I wiped it off and took my chance to head up to the office.

The second floor was just as rummaged and ransacked as the first. I took a deep breath and continued with my mission, being cautious and moving slowly in case there was still a stray guard. All of the carefully curated rooms were now torn apart and decorated with splatters of deep red and broken furniture. I recognized a room I had gotten to know well over the years, my childhood ripped apart and memories unrecognizable. I could see

at the end of the hall, Sketch's room mirrored the damage to mine, the guards were searching for something of interest in both of them or simply just finding joy in being destructive.

I find the bathroom that Sketch was talking about, noticing the hallway table next to it, the drawers tossed over the edge of the balcony. The bathroom was the only part of the house that was left untouched, an obelisk of normalcy out of place in the rubble. While I trusted and believed that Sketch had checked everywhere, I wanted to see with my own eyes if there was something he may have missed. I cracked the vents and drains open, tried to shift every tile to see if there was one loose, and checked the toilet tank including under the lid. He was right, seemingly it was not here.

The gleam of a thin white thread caught the corner of my eye, it was no thicker than a piece of paper. One could mistake it for plumbing tape, however as I got closer I could see the silky sheen of a thin ribbon coming out from the shower head. I slowly unscrewed the fixture with my hand below to cup anything that fell.

“Gotcha!” I exclaim.

There was nothing in my hand.

“*Fuck.*” There had to be something I was missing, that the correlation of the keylock and Mr. Hallow bringing his coffee into the bathroom did not click for me. I searched everything a second time high and low until I finally noticed the coffee ring *etched* into a shelf on the wall shared by the office.

Peeping my head out of the door and into the hallway, I made sure the coast was clear before moving on. I could see out of the hallway window at the river of guards moving away from the house and back into the city.

I had to run downstairs to find the exact mug that Mr. Hallow used and hoped that the guards hadn’t smashed it. I was less careful about moving slowly now that the guards were gone and I darted down the stairs and into the kitchen once again.

Having briefly checked the mugs before for a physical and typical key, I did not pay much attention to which mug was which. They all were fairly similar, sporting the same squarish shape and were white. I knew that the one I was looking for would be slightly different to make it easy for Mr. Hallow to grab each and every time.

If the guards had been looking for the key to the office, there is no way that they would understand the concept of an

RFID tag embedded into a coffee mug. When the cabinets did not show any signs of any of the mugs being what I needed I had to look elsewhere, I checked the floor and sink, turning over the cooks to make sure that their bodies weren't covering it. The sink was empty and the floor was only covered in damaged plates. The mug was found in the dishwasher nearby, so the mission could continue. The bottom rim of the mug had a silver lining, different from the rest that sported the typical raw ceramic. Seemingly Mr Hallow did not share mugs and only used the one, something I remember from my childhood. I quickly race back upstairs to the bathroom with my new discovery and place the mug on the etched space on the shelf. I could hear the pins of the lock from the other room satisfyingly click into place as the door unlocks.

Heading into the hall and finding the door unlocked I could see that this office room is as curated as the rest of the house. The floor was a lightly stained hard wood covered with an ornate wool rug being held down by leather armchairs and a strong and bold office desk. Opposite from the doorway was a rolling bulletin board, the other side sported a whiteboard filled with notes and formulas to something I did not understand the context of. Hung

against the papered walls was expensive artwork that was gifted from various citizens.

Waist high bookshelves lined the remaining walls with various tools displayed on top. I had almost read through all of them before I moved out, inspiring me to collect materials of my own. Adorned with various stacks of paper, the desk was almost unusable, however its centerpiece struck an interest. Sketch's parents were not usually this disorganized, I could tell that most of these papers were communications between other labs and sharing information and the data requested.

Sitting on top of a stack of these letters was an envelope, its color resembling the bloodshed below. The desk chair proved to be uncomfortable, its seat molded to another resident like hostile architecture keeping me from staying long. The envelope looked like it was already opened, the edges crinkled slightly and torn around the clasp. I tried to be gentle when unclipping the latch and releasing the contents from its paper prison but still ended up tearing the envelope a little. Photos, letters, and documents were inside. Many of the photos were candid of Sketch and I as children, his parents in the lab, and various photos of organs of unknown origins. I could not risk losing this evidence

so I started snapping photos of each one, I placed them to the side and moved on to reading some of the documents.

The first was a cease and desist letter on formal letterhead from the Council, stating that the scientists lab will be cut off from funding if they do not halt the research and operations that they are conducting. The second letterhead's logo was glaringly familiar, with flashbacks of gunshots and blood splatter. I recognized the logo as the same on the militants' uniforms outside. It seemed that The Council had a dedicated team for this raid monitoring the Hallows comings and goings, the photos included were just some of them over the years.

The rest of the documents were not as important in the moment, only containing passwords and itemized lists. Deciding there was nothing left to find in the room, I made sure to snap a picture of the whiteboard, turning it over to the back as well. A card dangling in the corner of the board caught my eye; it was small like a business card, fitting in the palm of my hand. I pluck it off, slicing my finger in the process. The edge of the card is razor thin and sharp, made of a thin metal unlike aluminum and anodized a deep red like the folder.

Sentiment was a growing feeling the more I came to terms with our childhood home burning to the ground in a few hours, with concrete bones as a grave marker of everything we knew and loved. There was no way to stop it. I left the office, no longer worried about raising suspicion, but I did not leave; I turned the opposite way from the stairs and I stood in the room that I had all my favorite moments in. It had not changed a day, the walls covered in posters, raw art, and objects that would qualify for accessories to a Sketch action figure; all mirroring different qualities of Sketch. He left a backpack, so I used it to hold his sketchbooks and some art supplies.

There's a photo of us pinched into his mirror, him trying to wet willy me, and disgust showing in my entire body as I try to get as far away from him while standing in place; a moment frozen in time, with locked-in happiness. I shove it in the bag as well as some of his clothes, stuffing in as much as possible.

We were going to miss this place so as a final goodbye, I captured a moment of raw happiness, frozen in time in his memory and in photographs with no indication anything bad was about to happen; blissful ignorance in film form.

I did not want to stick around and find out what happens when they light the place up, so I escaped into the backyard, feet slapping the damp ground flattening the soft grass. Pushing through the bushes with branches that grasped my hair and shirt sleeves with resistance on letting go; floral ghosts trying to pull me back to their grave. I look behind me, and see two masses of brown and black fur entering the courtyard. Cackles thundered and echoed throughout the property. There was no time to waste, the hyenas they had with them would pick up my scent faster than a dog.