

CHAPTER ONE

Wake

"He is dead."

"Don't say that!"

"He looks dead."

"Stop it! He's not dead!"

"Glupaya devochka (Silly girl), I am meaning 'dead to world,' not dead dead."

Zeke hears the voices, but it's like they're speaking from another dimension, in slow motion, through a garden hose.

He extricates himself from the sucking black sediment of deepest sleep, relief dawning in his sluggish mind--relief to be emerging from the hellish nightmares that plagued every moment of his slumber. He struggles toward the light of consciousness above, then becomes aware of movement below.

Inky black tentacles swell from the void. One lashes out--*slap*, sting and burn. Another grabs his ankle and he's dragged back into the depths, ears ringing with a *whine, whir* and *squeak* like the sound of changing channels on an old-fashioned radio dial. He screams, soundless, swallowed by darkness.



Cheap booze. Abandoned buildings. Filthy blankets, flea bites and vomit. Playing guitar with strung out bands in shitty bars reeking of piss and sour beer. Sticking needles in his arms with shaking hands. Fever sweats and hunger. Ribs cracked by boots in a cold alley. Despair.



"Come on, lad. You need to wake up now. Rise and shine."

The dull impact of a slap on the cheek.

He's Zeke, he knows it, and he's asleep, somewhere--but he's also someone else, in another place and time.



A parking garage at night.

A couple stumbles in, leaning on each other, laughing. It's them. The man and woman from earlier nightmares. Nightmares of childhood torment and abuse.

Stepping out in front of them. "Remember me?"

The man grins. "Unbelievable," he slurs. "You miss me, ya little fuck?"

The woman laughs. "Bad Zeke! Bad!"

The man laughs with her. "Bad Zeke back for the belt?"

The woman guffaws, spittle flying. A pistol lifts to her face and fires. An explosion of brain and bone.

The man begs. He gets a hot bullet in the stomach and crumples, whimpering. A knife is drawn, and goes straight for the man's groin.



"Zeke! Wake up!"

Someone's yelling, shaking him. Someone he knows.

A dog barks.

"Milady, perhaps you could...?"



Crimson neon. Sickly green light. Washing blood from his hands in a mildewed sink. Splashing his face with rust-brown water. Scrawny arms, tracked with sores. A broken mirror. Bruised and sunken chest, tattooed and pale. Raggedly-shaved head and gaunt face. Teeth stained brown between cracked lips twisted in a fiendish grin. Eyes sunken in purple hollows, staring back at him.

Zeke's eyes.



The voices argue, vaguely familiar. A woman with a Russian accent, an Englishman, and a girl. But not just any girl--



Her name clicks into place in Zeke's mind at the same time his bald double in the mirror screams, *"Fi!!!"*

Whine, whir and squeak...



Splash!

Zeke sputters, water running from his face and hair. He blinks it from his eyes.

He has a hard time focusing, but makes out the form of a woman standing over him, her lithe body draped in a diaphanous gown of shimmering blue. A solid pendant of deep metallic red hangs at her neck, and a slim golden chaplet sits atop dark hair pulled back in a tight bun. Sensuous lips quirk up at one corner and keen eyes of burnished gold glint beneath sweeping eyebrows. She bounces a canteen in her hand.

"Like magic," she says in a velvety voice touched with sarcasm. Zeke's foggy brain is pierced by a vivid memory of wonder and trepidation.

Prathamaja Nandana. The First Daughter.

Next to her is a stocky, dour-looking woman with long, stiff, black hair, streaked gray. She wears an ankle length skirt, blouse and vest. Her overly endowed, peaked chest, propped by thick crossed arms, seems to point at him in accusation.

Mrs. Mirskaya, Fi's old babysitter and employer--who also happens to be Mokosh, the fabled Slavic deity of weather and protection.

Oh fuck. From one nightmare to another. But this one is real.

Mrs. Mirskaya purses her lips, which causes the sparse hair on her upper lip to poke out like little whiskers, then clucks her tongue behind prominent front teeth and shakes her head. *"Lentyay,"* she says in Russian.

Zeke can barely hear her, and doesn't know the word means "bum," "slacker" or "lazybones." Given Mrs. Mirskaya's general attitude toward him, though, he could probably guess.

The women move off and an elderly gentleman leans in to unbuckle straps from Zeke's shoulders. Mutton chop sideburns, long braided ponytail, proud hooked nose and flinty gray eyes.

Fi's Uncle Edgar.

"Sorry to disturb you, lad," Edgar says with urgency. "We have a bit of a situation." But Edgar's voice is muffled and Zeke can't quite make out what he's saying. Edgar hauls him up from a flip-down seat against the wall. Once he's certain Zeke isn't going to fall down, he hurries away.

Zeke sways on his feet. "Wait," he utters. "Situation?" He's stiff, disoriented, his muscles sore to the bone, and his back hurts like hell. He's also shaking, feeling thin, weak, worn out. He pumps a finger in

his left ear, which is still bothering him due to the terrible cry of Tengu-Andrealphus, The Peafowl, from when they were attacked back at Peter's house. It doesn't help.

His nose registers the mingled smells of plastic and tin, fuel and disinfectant, but his groggy mind can't place them--then the floor bucks and shudders.

Zeke catches himself on the top of the seat, shakes his head to clear his thoughts. His hearing remains weak in his bad ear, but his good ear squeaks and pops. Sound rushes in--the drone of engines and howl of wind. A relentless vibration runs through his heels up his spine. And he remembers.

He's on a plane.

They'd left Peter's estate outside Toledo on a boat, made their way up the river, then across the western end of Lake Erie to Canada. Edgar presented official-looking papers at a dock near Windsor and made a call on the dock master's phone. A black van picked them up and drove them to a remote airfield where the plane was readied. A decommissioned Alenia C-27J Spartan troop transport Edgar told him he'd "bought for a song."

Of course Edgar owns a military cargo plane, Zeke's worn-out brain had mused. He is Sir Galahad. Sir Galahad should own whatever the hell he wants, right?

Too exhausted to ask questions, Zeke had gone to the hangar restroom to wash up and put on fresh clothes from his backpack. They'd placed Fi on a fold-down cot on the plane, unconscious, ghostly pale, breathing shallow and weak, perilously close to death. Then they were off on the long trans-Atlantic flight. Going to see Freyja, of all people. *The Freyja* of Norse legend, Edgar had assured him.

Unbelievable.

Well, MORE of the unbelievable.

Zeke had rarely left Fi's side during the flight, and Mrs. Mirskaya was always nearby. Peter flew most of the time, but Edgar took over once and Peter sat with Fi for a long while, holding her hand in silence.

Zeke couldn't sleep. He didn't want to. For worrying about Fi, but also because every time he dozed off the nightmares of childhood torment and drug-induced misery returned. And memories of murder. Someone else's memories.

He must have finally succumbed, though, because here he is, having one hell of a time waking up. But how could he have let it happen, with Fi in her condition?! She'd been bitten by Maskim Xul, and for all Zeke or anyone knew, she was dying! Aggravated, he shakes himself and slaps his cheeks.

"Hey sleepyhead."

Zeke jumps and whips around to see Fi standing behind him--*standing!*--clutching the taut webbing at the back of another seat to keep her balance in the turbulence. Her smile is weak and her dark-reddish hair a mess, but she's changed into clean sweatpants, tank top, light jacket and hiking shoes--and she's awake, and *alive*.

"Fi!" He grabs her and hugs her. "You didn't die!"

She grunts. "Nope." She hugs him back gingerly. "Careful though, little sore."

Zeke puts space between them but keeps hold of her arms. "Oh my God." He chokes back tears. "We didn't know if you were going to make it. You okay?"

"I guess. I mean, I feel like shit, and I can barely stand up." She touches where bandaged fang-wounds are hidden beneath her sweatpants, on her bottom and the back of her thigh. She winces. "My ass hurts."

Someone brushes past, chortling. "She got bit on the butt."

Zeke and Fi cringe as Dimmi flashes a toothy grin. He's in human cloak, dark skinned and black-eyed, wearing khaki shirt and pants, and jungle boots, as he'd first appeared in the tunnels beneath Peter's house. He giggle-barks at his own joke.

“Idimmu Mulla!” From near the back of the plane, Pratha’s voice comes as a warning. Her golden eyes glare, though she smiles at the same time. It’s as if she wants him to screw up so she can rip his head off. Literally. Just like she did to the alligator-monster, Ao Guang.

Dimmi yips and hurries on his way, carrying a crate in his hands.

“That guy’s creepy,” says Fi.

“That’s Idimmu Mulla. They call him The Hyaena.”

“Dimmi, I know,” Fi responds. “I woke up a couple hours ago. Edgar and Mrs. Mirskaya filled me in on what happened after Max bit me.” She shivers at the thought.

“So you met Pratha and Baphomet, too.”

“Mmm. Yeah.” Fi gazes over Zeke’s shoulder, her expression a mixture of contemplation and fear. “The First Daughter, and The Goat.”

The plane is entirely open, cabin to tail, the interior nearly eleven feet wide and just over seven feet high. It’s mostly empty, with red canvas troop seats folded up against the walls. In the tail section, Edgar, Baphomet and Dimmi are hurrying to pack a truck that rests on a skid.

Like Dimmi, Baphomet is “cloaked,” as Edgar called it, taking on human form. Most likely to keep his horns from inhibiting his movement in the cramped quarters of the plane. He’s dressed the same as Dimmi, but is extremely light skinned, with short white hair and goatee--and pink eyes. Fi saw their Truefaces earlier, though, and she’s discovered that, if she squints and thinks about it, she can see his Trueface now too, like a superimposed image. The backward curving horns that rise above Baphomet’s caprine face nearly reach the ceiling, yet they’re ethereal, their sharp points somehow passing through the conduits and cabling as he efficiently, almost gracefully, goes about his work with slender hoofed fingers, crouching on back-bending legs with cloven feet. Dimmi works on the other side of the truck, and she can see his grotesque fuzzy face and big black eyes, high peaked ears and wide grinning mouth full of jagged pointed teeth. Fi shakes herself, blinks, and they’re in human form once again.

The truck is a military Mercedes G Wagon with dual rear axels, it’s roof support bars and canvas top stowed, the front windshield folded down and latched. Pratha lounges against the wall nearby, overseeing the loading of supplies--and ensuring that Baphomet and Dimmi stay on their best behavior.

“What’s going on?” Zeke asks Fi.

“Hell if I know,” Fi replies, exasperated. “They haven’t told me much, and they keep speaking in languages I don’t understand. But I think we’re supposed to be going to Norway.”

Zeke recalls what Edgar had told him of their destination, and the purpose of the trip. “To find Freyja.”

“Yeah. They call her The Mother of Cats and Dogs.”

“Really?”

“No, I made it up.” Fi’s condition has made her cranky, but not entirely subdued her sense of humor. “Yes, really.”

Her snarky reply catches Zeke off guard. He stares, taking in her sparkling green eyes, and it really hits him--she’s *alive*. And, disheveled as she is, right now she’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen.

He grins. Fi scowls, then it occurs to her too. A smile emerges, broadens to a grin of her own. They’re *both* alive.

Together, they laugh. Foolish, perhaps, absurd even. But they *need* it.

The shared relief subsides and Zeke wipes a tear from her cheek with his thumb. His hand stays on her face.

Fi notices that Zeke doesn’t look so good. Gaunt, pale, black circles under his eyes, taken by an occasional tremor.

“How about you?” she asks. “You okay? You don’t look well.”

Zeke breathes deeply to control the shaking. "I'm okay." Flashes of the terrible dreams stab through his mind, but he mentally swats them away. "Just cold, I think. Or maybe I'm getting a cold."

"Great, just what you need, right?"

Zeke grins. The plane bucks again, knocking them wobbly, and an odd voice rises.

Mrs. Mirskaya stands near the far wall, face and arms raised, mumbling ancient words.

Zeke clears his throat. "What's she doing?"

Edgar hustles to them carrying two parachute packs by the straps in one hand and Zeke's big blue backpack in the other. The splint on Edgar's arm is gone, the wrist Kleron broke in the tunnels now completely healed. "She's reinforcing the storm she's summoned," he says. There's a *snap* of lightning and *rumble* of thunder outside. The plane lurches. Fi and Zeke grab hold of each other and squeeze their handholds tighter.

"A storm?" Zeke says. "Is that a good idea?"

"It will hopefully aid in our escape," Edgar answers. He holds up the parachute packs. "Have you ever skydived, lad?"

"Uh, no?" Zeke says, looking at the chute packs as if they're severed heads of little green aliens.

"I thought not. Put this on then." Edgar hands the blue back to Zeke, who grunts and nearly drops it, because it still weighs a ton. Edgar tosses one chute pack on the floor and dons the other.

"What do you mean, *escape*?" Fi asks, her voice a little shaky.

"Escape from *what*?" Zeke adds, his voice a lot shaky.

"Fighter jets, trying to force us back toward their shores," Edgar answers, indignant. "And we're over international waters! They're acknowledging none of my clearance protocols--and my privileges are of the highest order, believe you me." He snugs the chute pack's straps in agitation. "Baphomet believes it's Kleron's doing."

A pall falls over Fi at the mention of Kleron. *Lucifer. The Bat.* Attacking the hospital with his minions, killing Billy, setting all those monsters on them at the house--including the buffalo-beast Mahisha and the screaming Tengu-Andrealphus peacock-thing. Tempting her in the tunnel hub chamber beneath Peter's house. Almost biting Edgar's face off, and ordering that horrible Maskim Xul to bite her.

And Max is a *spider*...

"Whose planes are they?" Zeke asks Edgar. "I didn't know Norway had an air force. I mean, did we make it to Norway?"

"No!" Edgar grumbles. "It's the R.A.F." Now he's really annoyed. "We're over *England!*" He turns in a huff, but Zeke grabs his sleeve.

"Wait," Zeke says. "How long was I asleep?"

"Just a few hours lad. It's still Tuesday morning. The sun's just come up. Fiona woke shortly after you nodded off. I'm sorry, but I hadn't the heart to wake you." He turns to Fi. "This young man has barely slept or eaten, or left your side, the entire flight. He needs rest, and food." He waves his hand in frustration. "Not this bother."

He marches to where Baphomet and Dimmi have finished strapping the load on the truck and are now covering it with a taut safety net. He pushes a large button in a panel on the wall and the aft ramp of the plane drops like the lower jaw of a very large fish, accompanied by the loud whine of servo motors and increased howl of the wind. The water-laden mist of blue-black storm clouds spirals away behind the plane. Flashes of lightning spark the sky pink and green. It's as if they're looking down the eye of a tornado.

"Oh..." Zeke says. "I'm not liking the look of this."

"Me neither," says Fi.

Zeke realizes something. "Where's Mol?"

Fi jerks her thumb toward the cockpit. "Up front, with Peter."

"Have you talked to him? Peter, I mean?"

Fi frowns. She knows she's going to have to speak to him at some point. He *is* her long-lost father, after all. She's just not looking forward to it. "Not yet."

Zeke runs his hands through his hair and groans as he watches Edgar fuss with the truck. "Edgar seems pretty worked up. Is he worried?" Because if Edgar's worried, Zeke figures, they *all* should be.

Fi's attention is drawn to something outside the oval window in the fuselage between them. "Well, there's something else you should see." She points.

Zeke squints through the window. It's all just dark rushing clouds. "What?"

"Part of the reason Edgar's upset, I think. They showed up a while ago. Been communicating with Peter and Pratha using some kind of sign language."

"What? Who? I don't see anything--" The mist rips aside and Zeke jumps back. "Holy fuck!"

Fi nods. "That's what *I* thought."

Flying alongside the plane is what looks like a large man with a white bird's head, wings and tail. There's a rectangular box tied to his back with a huge sword strapped alongside. On top of the box rides a skinny old man, his stringy white beard flapping in the wind and snug knit cap held to his head with a strip of cloth knotted beneath his chin. His clothing, some kind of robe, is similarly lashed to his body to keep it from blowing away. The old man waves, grinning like mad, but loses his balance in his excitement and grabs hold with both hands.

"Who is *that*?!" Zeke asks.

"More Firstborn. They did tell me that. But these are supposed to be on our side. Edgar called the bird-guy Fintán mac Bóchra. Seemed genuinely excited to see him. The little guy on top, not so much."

"Why?"

"That's Myrddin Wylt. Edgar's *grandfather*."

Zeke recalls what Edgar told them about his lineage. His father had been Sir Launcelot du Lac, and regardless of what the fables say, Launcelot's real father was... "*Merlin*. No way."

The mist thickens, obscuring the view. When it clears briefly, the figures are gone.

From back by the truck, Edgar whistles toward the front of the plane, startling Fi and Zeke.

They hear a familiar bark and turn to see the open cockpit door. Molossus, Fi's uncle's dog, pokes his big sandy head around from where he's perched in the co-pilot's seat. He *ruffs* happily, jumps down and comes running up to them.

Zeke greets him with a scratch behind the ears. Mol grunts in reply. His bandages are gone and there's little sign of his battles with the terrible wampyr and werewolves or his run-in with the locust swarm on another world. Instead, he's wearing some sort of makeshift harness of nylon straps and safety belts.

Zeke tugs on the harness. "What's this?"

Fi shakes her head. "No idea. Like I said, they haven't told me much. Mostly 'Be still, Fi.' 'You've been through so much, Fiona.' 'You're lucky to be alive, Fi.' 'You should be resting, dear.'" Mol barks and presses his head against her leg. "Ow!" she exclaims, and shoves him. He barks again, wagging his whole body.

Zeke smiles, "I'm not the only one who's glad you're okay."

"I guess." She looks at Mol. "Until two days ago I was convinced he couldn't care less about me." She rubs his head. "All this time, I was wrong." Mol barks louder and licks her hand.

"Molossus!" Edgar shouts. "If you please!"

Mol trots to the back of the plane and hops into the front seat of the truck. Edgar clips Mol's harness to straps anchored to hooks on the truck floor.

Zeke mutters, "What the...?"

Edgar strides up to them. "Not to worry. He can bite through the straps if the raft doesn't deploy."

Zeke and Fi both open their mouths to ask Edgar what the hell he's talking about, but alarms buzz and red lights spin furiously along the ceiling.

Peter's voice roars through the fuselage. "*INCOMING!*"

"For Heaven's sake!" cries Edgar. He shoves Zeke down into the seat, causing Zeke to let go of the blue backpack, which he still hasn't put on, because it's really heavy.

"I have Fiona!" shouts Mrs. Mirskaya. She smashes Fi against the wall with her body, gripping handholds to either side, trapping Fi's face between mountainous boobs.



In the cockpit, the missile approach warning system is burping and blinking on the pilot's console. Peter whips off his headset and swiftly flips the switches necessary to jettison the tip tanks--oblong storage containers for extra fuel on long flights that are attached to the end of each wing.



Back inside the fuselage, there's a loud *pop* and *clunk* as the tanks break free. Not a comforting sound.

Edgar finishes buckling Zeke in, then flips down the seat next to him and sits. With the parachute pack on his back, the best he can do is hang onto the safety belts to secure himself.



Peter flips more switches, deploying the plane's attack countermeasures, then jams the throttle forward and leans on the yoke.



Zeke's heart hops to his throat and his testicles feel like they're crawling up into his kidneys as the plane accelerates and dives.

Fi says, "Mmf!"

The plane banks into a sharp turn.

Fi says, "Brmfp!"

Smothered by Mrs. Mirskaya's bulk, Fi can hardly breathe, and she can't see a thing, but Zeke's eyes, wide in terror, catch sight of Baphomet and Dimmi clutching the sides of the truck to keep from flying out the back of the plane. Pratha, on the other hand, holds onto nothing. Her lips move in a silent chant as she somehow remains upright regardless of the plane's pitch and roll.

Behind them, streamers of light and smoke whirl away through the clouds, trailing from the flares and chaff that Peter has released in hopes of confusing the guidance systems of the approaching missiles. The flares flash bright as fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Still diving, the plane banks the other way, pressing Zeke hard against the back of the seat. Fi voices another muffled complaint, while Mol barks like a puppy, tongue flapping, tail wagging, as if he's on Mr. Toad's wild ride and enjoying the hell out of it.

The plane suddenly slams sideways and quakes, the concussion of a near miss louder than thunder. There's another explosion on the opposite side, then two more from above.

The fuselage quivers and groans, but the alarms cease blaring and the overhead lights stop flashing. The countermeasures worked. The drone of the engines drops in pitch as the plane levels out.

"The bloody gall!" Edgar drops the safety belts and thrusts to his feet.

Zeke never would have thought the incessant noise of the engines and wind could stand in for silence, but now it does. He remembers to breathe and liberates himself from the safety harness. Mrs. Mirskaya releases Fi, whose eyes look far too big for her head.

Free of Mrs. Mirskaya's protective mass, Fi says, "Unguhhh! Fuck!"

“Fiona!” Mrs. Mirskaya scolds, looking her over. “You are all right?”

Fi glares at her. “Are you *kidding*?!”

“You are all right,” Mrs. Mirskaya replies, satisfied.

Edgar retrieves Zeke’s backpack, which has wedged itself between the skid and the front tire of the truck. “Put this on now, lad.” Zeke fumbles the straps over his shoulders, too dazed to question. While Edgar tightens them for him, Zeke glances out the window, fully expecting to see the plane on fire and trailing black smoke. And it is.

The end of the wing is aflame where a broken fuel line from the tip tank has ignited.

“The plane’s on fire! The plane’s on fire!” he cries.

Peter comes striding from the cockpit. “It’s alright,” he says. “We’re not staying.” He twists a finger in the air and shouts in his big Peter voice, “Time to go!” He snatches Fi up in his arms and proceeds to the starboard hatch near the base of the ramp. Mrs. Mirskaya follows, protesting in fervent Russian.

On either side of the truck, Baphomet and Dimmi retrieve pneumatic ratchet wrenches attached to the walls by coiled tubing. They look to Edgar, who nods in confirmation. They remove the heavy-duty bolts that secure the truck’s skid to the floor. Mol hangs his head over the door to watch.

Edgar reaches into a storage panel on the wall, takes out his scabbard, sword sheathed, and belts it to his waist.

It occurs to Zeke that Edgar is the only one wearing a parachute. “Umm... shouldn’t--“

Peter tugs the hatch open, which multiplies the roar in the plane.

Fi gets a blast of cold wind in the face and an eyeful of yawning storm. “Ohh! Peter?!”

Mrs. Mirskaya shouts in English now. “Papa! She is not well!”

Peter peers down through the clouds. “She’ll be fine.”

“What?!” Fi demands. “I’ll be fine *what*?!”

Edgar holds a hand up and whistles sharply. Baphomet and Dimmi train their eyes on him. So does Mol, who barks his readiness.

Mrs. Mirskaya shakes a finger at Peter. “You do not throw sick person from airplane!”

Fi squeaks, “Throw?!”

Edgar holds up two fingers, signaling Baphomet to release a small guide chute from the back of the truck’s skid. It flies out the back of the plane, pops open and twists on it’s cord in the tailwind. Mol barks and wiggles with excitement.

“I’m not throwing anybody,” says Peter. “You ready?”

Fi shakes her head. “NO!”

Edgar drops one finger and Baphomet loses the larger extraction chute. It snaps out over the ramp and opens behind the plane with a *whump*!

Fi tries reasoning with Peter. “Um, it might be the first time ever, but I think I agree with Mrs. Mirskaya.”

Mrs. Mirskaya props her hands on her hips. “You see, Papa?! Listen to Mokosh!” She turns to Pratha, who has moved closer to the hatch. “You tell him, *sestrenka*!”

Pratha shrugs. “He’s older than I am.” Mrs. Mirskaya glares.

Edgar makes a fist. Dimmi pulls a lever to release the latches that are all that hold the skid in place.

Skid, truck, Mol and all are jerked out with frightening speed. Mol’s thrilled yapping fades as the cargo disappears in the mist.

Edgar places his hand over his heart. “God be with you, old boy.” He nods to Dimmi and Baphomet, who jog down the ramp and jump.

Peter turns to face Mrs. Mirskaya. “She’ll be fine.” He holds Fi out as if in presentation. His voice rises and pride glints in his eyes. “This is *Fiona Meghan Patterson*!”

Fi says, "Yeah but--"

"Finale Omega Paterna! The final and last of The Father!"

Mrs. Mirskaya stamps her foot. "Papa!"

"She is *Firstborn!*"

Fi says, "I--WAAAhaaaaah...!!!" Peter has spun, cradling her tight to his chest, and stepped out the hatch. Fi's cry dopplers to nothing as they plummet away.

Mrs. Mirskaya says some very bad words in Russian while Pratha leans out the door to watch Peter and Fi's descent.

Mrs. Mirskaya yells, "Out of my way, sister!" and launches herself after them.

Zeke is speechless as Edgar drags him to the hatch. "We've no tandem rig," Edgar explains, "nor parachute large enough to accommodate two persons, should we care to rig one." He straightens Zeke's backpack, clasps the waist belt and pulls it tight. "Pratha's plan is the safest." He places a pair of goggles on Zeke's head. "Most likely."

Zeke finds his voice, which is much higher than he'd like it to be. "Most likely?" He looks wide-eyed at Pratha, who winks, and he breaks into a cold sweat. His voice goes even higher. "What plan?"

"It's a very sturdy pack," Edgar says in reply, giving the shoulder straps one last check. "The finest craftsmanship." He snaps the goggles down over Zeke's eyes and gives his shoulders a squeeze. "Chin up, cheerio, and all that." He steps to the hatch and crosses himself.

"Wait!" Zeke pleads.

But Edgar is gone.

Zeke finds himself clinging to the sides of the hatch, watching in terror as Edgar falls through the clouds, dropping fast--much faster than it looks on TV and in the movies--like he's being sucked away by some powerful invisible force. Which he is. It's called gravity.

Zeke's stomach flops, his scalp tightens and vision swims. He squeezes his eyes shut to clamp down the vertigo, but the alarms go off again, screeching, buzzing and flashing.

Strong slim hands take him by the shoulders and spin him around. Pratha puts a hand to his cheek. "Relax," she purrs.

Zeke gulps.

Then her mouth is against his, her tongue slithering between his teeth, coiling around his tongue like a snake on a rat and flicking the roof of his mouth. Searing heat of involuntary passion ignites Zeke's lips, spreads downward to melt his icy gut, inflame his loins and curl his toes.

She pulls away, leaving him barely able to stand. The alarms continue to blare as she places an elegant hand upon his chest, gazes over his shoulder to the dark sky beyond, and gives him a good hard shove.