

Brilliant Blaze

Tyler is ten years old, her feet buried in the gold-flecked sand of Coronado Central Beach. Sunset is a torch between the distant islands, turning them opaque, pollen-yellow. She can barely make out her mom, an arms-up silhouette bobbing past the break, her laughter a shifting, shapeless sound on the downwind.

Tyler is uneasy. She thinks about what her mom said, moments ago, before striding into the water.

“It’s all gonna go someday.” A warning in her voice, but hope, too. Like she’s talking about the sun, knowing night’s coming, and so is the dawn. “When it does, you swear you won’t be scared. Promise?”

Tyler squints up at her mom, whose eyes were narrowed against the last brilliant blaze of sunset, a hand up to deflect the light. “Okay.” Tyler doesn’t know what her mom’s talking about, just that it’s getting cold and the marine layer is pawing at the horizon like an impatient animal. “Promise.”

“That’s my brave girl.” Tyler’s mom touches her forehead. “One more dip?”

Tyler doesn’t get why her mom seems to be asking permission, but she nods anyway, and watches her walk back into the surf. She vanishes beneath the waves and they close, a paper-thin veil of gold leaf, over her head. She doesn’t come up for so long that Tyler, skittish, follows her. Before long the break knocks her down and her lungs fill with salt.

Hands beneath her arms and the vault of butter-yellow sky overhead: her mom laughs as Tyler splutters. “Too brave, sometimes.” She carries Tyler back up to the safety of sand, though it shifts dangerously beneath her feet. “Come on. It’s getting late.”

The end of the world came so steadily, Tyler couldn't help but be reminded of that saying about frogs being boiled alive. How did it go? She snaps her lighter and holds the little flame to the end of a cigarette.

She releases smoke through her nose. It's cold up on the bridge, and since the barges and rigs stopped moving the bay has begun to stink. Sea brine tangles with mold, the taste of stagnancy, still pools and poison. Tyler eyes the city skyline; she's from north county but her mom's favorite place was Coronado.

"Kitchy, touristy, just the right amount of tacky and true." She'd take them every weekend. They'd visit the same shops and beaches each time, pretending to be tourists. "So easy to blend in when no one belongs, anyway."

Tyler stands on the bridge, trying not to remember. She's unnerved by the silence here, though it's been weeks since a car roared down the lane or a ferry whispered over the water.

"What are you thinking about so deeply?" Ryan makes his way to her side and unfolds a cigarette from his pack, lighting it off the end of hers. "Shipment's not due for another two hours. You can wait inside."

Tyler taps ash on the rail and eyes a plume of smoke, rising from the Star of India. "You know that saying about frogs in boiling water?"

"Come on, it's getting cold."

She casts her cigarette butt off the bridge and follows him. A ramshackle fort has been built against the lane divider. It's plywood and stripped cars, mostly, with some insulation and slipshod tubing to run feeble electricity. *Seaciety* is spray-painted above the door.

When the virus accelerated, factions started forming across the world. At the time they were little more than Facebook groups, ranging from concerned neighborhoods to political radicals to conspiracy theorists and doomsday-preppers.

In the end it didn't matter who was banding together or why; names and titles fell off the face of the planet when populations plummeted, when the power died and the Internet went cold. All that mattered in the end was how to live after you survived.

Ryan pushes open the squeaky plywood door and steps onto a platform. When Tyler's next to him he gives a wire line a sharp tug, and their platform rises quickly. The fort is balanced between two streetlights, its core a radio tower built by one of the cleverer members of Seacociety. At the top is a precarious communication cabin.

"You think it's legit?" Tyler eyes the sea through gaps in the plywood tower as the lift ascends. "The vaccine?"

Ryan shrugs. Like her he's a native. They went to the same community college and might have had a class or two together before the world fell apart. He's older than her, and lost both his parents and all four grandparents in the first sweep of the virus. He'd been working in the airport and was a carrier before he knew it. He once told Tyler he was sure he'd passed it on to hundreds, maybe thousands of people, before he realized.

When she reminded him it wasn't his fault he'd said, "Yeah," with a bitter smile. "Hard to feel innocent when I'm alive and they're not."

Innocent. It made sense that the carriers, who for some reason could spread the virus without being harmed by it, felt guilty just by existing. Now they were needed. Seacociety's mission was to amass supplies to protect the vulnerable, and in the year and eight months since the virus first spread, they'd saved thousands of lives.

But in Mexico a faster-working vaccine had recently hit the black market, and Seacety needed it, no matter how dangerous it was to procure. Pirates and bandits hid in the coves and along old highways, waiting to attack and plunder. From what Tyler gathered, these anarchist groups were only interested in the booming, desperate economy of the apocalypse. They didn't care about the cost of their prosperity.

So tonight, at sunset, a Mexican speedboat would deliver a chest of this new vaccine in exchange for safe passage through the waterways. Tyler wasn't sure how Seacety planned to enforce the security, and she didn't care. What mattered was getting the vaccine to their largest warehouse, the old Coronado Hotel. It's castle-like main spire had been burned to a crater during one of the first panic waves, but much of the grand place remained untouched. Seacety's vulnerable ranks were protected there 24-7, kids and old people who'd managed to evade the virus so far. Tyler and Ryan, Seacety's fastest runners, only had to wait for the delivery.

"You're sweating."

Tyler sobers at Ryan's voice. "I'm fine."

He shrugs, and strikes up a conversation with Alis, the trade-off dispatcher for the mission.

Tyler feels unsteady at the top of the tower, where cracked Plexiglass windows are wedged between sheets of plywood and plaster in haphazard shapes. The warped material gives an eerie vantage of the land and adjacent sea; Tyler can see waves of dead city, stretching over the hills toward the east. Once the lights there had glittered, spangled and endless as a desert sky; now they lay desolate as a graveyard.

Worse was the sea, stained brown, white froth cast against the coastline. Like so many of the seaside cities San Diego had been struck hard by battle, plague, famine, and siege; only in the last eight months had a semblance of quiet fallen over it.

Tyler knows it's because the dead at last outnumber the living, that the war has become invisible. Humans against virus, contagion, starvation; a thousand enemies and a diminishing will to face them.

Tonight will change that. Tyler touches a fingertip to a spiderweb crack in the Plexiglass. *Tonight's the start of something new.* She can't even remember peace or normalcy; her life is composited only from this last year and a half, a blur of gunfire, smoke plumes, HazMat suits and crumbling skyscrapers, mountains of abandoned cars, body barges burning in the shadow of five-star hotels.

But, no, wait; there *is* something else—a glimmer of something forgotten, almost unfamiliar, from before. Sunlight, shimmering between islands; sand between Tyler's toes. Her mother's laugh on a breeze and the tide, clear as glass, rushing up to wipe Coronado beach clean.

Tyler blinks. Beyond her fingertip a dot of motion comes into focus. "What time are we expecting the delivery?"

"Not for more than an hour." Ryan's voice betrays the slightest barb of panic. He comes to Tyler's side. "That's them."

Tyler stiffens. The tiny speedboat leaves a white lace of wake; not far behind is a pursuing vessel, bigger, and gaining fast. "Drop the lift."

"We can't," says Alis, pinning Tyler with a look of admonishment. "They can't board at speed. They have to be stopped."

"If we don't drop it, they're going to be killed," says Tyler, grabbing a Kevlar vest from a safe beneath the dispatch board. "Do it."

"The cables are too thin, they'll snap—"

"Do it," Ryan agrees. He pulls on his own vest. "And call max backup."

Tyler looks sharply to Ryan.

He says nothing, just bends over the safe and withdraws a rifle.

“Runners don’t do guns,” Tyler says, but Ryan puts a rifle in her hand. “Ryan—”

“Come on.” He’s already stepping back onto the lift. “Just carry it. You don’t have to use it.”

Tyler hesitates, then follows. The platform hisses down, fast and unbalanced enough she has to crouch to keep her footing. She glares at Ryan.

He doesn’t notice. “Your mom’s there, right? At the hotel.”

Tyler says nothing. She slings the rifle over her back. The clamorous *shling!* of the boat lift deploying startles them both. “Alis dropped the cables.”

“Let’s hope they hold.” Ryan sounds wary.

They hit the bridge as gunfire rings out. Tyler freezes. Ryan is already out the door. *Too brave, sometimes.* Tyler flinches, shaking that old voice, that forbidden memory, from her head.

A concussive *crash* follows the gunfire—the boat made it up. Tyler forces herself out of the fort, staggering back at the sight of the lift. One of the thick cables has snapped, dumping the speedboat directly onto the bridge. Bullets ping off the barricade from below.

“Take it,” shouts one of the deliverers. He’s clutching his thigh, blood pulsing in angry bursts between his fingers. “They know about the hotel, they’ll make it before you—”

“They’re infected,” says a woman as she steps off the shattered hull of the speedboat. She carries a First Aid kit to her compatriot. “Carriers, not vaccinated. They infect sanctuaries so they can loot them. If you want to protect your faction, you should go. We’ll be fine.”

Ryan grips Tyler’s arm. “Can you drive?” He has a narrow black kit in one hand. Enough medicine to save every life at the hotel.

Tyler forces herself toward a tarp beside the fort. She yanks it back, revealing hers and Ryan's sleek black bikes. They grab helmets and leap on. As she turns her bike around Tyler spots the attacking boat in the shadow of the bridge, but its wake is already fading.

They're headed straight for the hotel.

Go. She's never ridden so fast in her life. Wind bites at her exposed neck, her hands. Time seems to drag as her bike speeds, its tinny wail proclaiming every mile she leaves recklessly in her exhaust. There's a reason Tyler's posted here. She knows the streets of Coronado better than anyone in Seacielty.

She knows them by Italian food on the water, as the ferries pass; sunsets on the little dock, waiting for the city lights; a stretch of grass by the fountain, eating ice cream and listening to her mother laugh.

It's all gonna go, one day.

Tyler hates the memory. She never relives it. She can't. *Swear you won't be scared.*

Because how had her mother known? What could she have done? The day the virus hit US soil, her mother had clucked her tongue. "And so it begins."

Tyler forces her bike faster, chest tightening as the bitter wind takes away her breath. She can see the red-tiled rooftop of the hotel in the distance. Once-manicured neighborhoods fall away, broken windows, shuttered doors, smoking cars, scorched fences.

Promise?

Tyler hasn't talked to her mom once since reading her name on the hotel registry. Was she a carrier? Was she not vaccinated?

After the virus killed ten thousand in the city, her mother left a note and a syringe on the kitchen counter. *There's only so much we can do*, the note had said. *Take it*. Tyler hadn't seen her since.

The beach comes into view. The islands. The sunset: a streak of hammered gold arching heavenward. A boat tears onto the wet sand as they arrive, skipping a shallow dune and landing in an explosion of dust. Dark-clad figures leap forth, bolting for the hotel.

Tyler whips her bike to a neck-breaking halt and tears off her helmet. "Take the medicine. Give me the box."

Ryan balks. "Your mom—"

"We don't have time."

Ryan's expression is stricken, but this time he obeys and offers Tyler the empty box. They're side by side on their bikes. When Tyler takes it, Ryan doesn't let go.

He holds her eyes. "Run, Tyler."

Tyler nods, but she won't run. *There's only so much we can do*.

Ryan speeds away. For a split second, she lets herself remember that day: the note, the syringe, the ghost of her mother in the kitchen. *Take it*. Tyler feels the pinch of the syringe, the hissing burn of something foreign in her blood. She's not a carrier. She never was. *Innocent*.

Tyler kicks her bike into gear and rips up onto the sidewalk. In her periphery she sees the attacking crew slow. She knows they're shouting, but can't hear what. She bends close to the bike, clutches the box in clear sight, and speeds down the pavement.

The wheels kick up sand when she hits the beach. The bike pitches sideways and pins her, both of them impotent. Tyler, panicking, manages to wrest free. By the time she's standing, there's gunfire, loose and frenetic, over the beach. She runs.

A bullet catches her in the side of the neck and she goes down against the velvet sand. Pain burns through her and she gasps, clutching her throat as someone yanks the box free. The shouting intensifies. They are blurs overhead, arms-up silhouettes against a butter-yellow sky. One points a gun in Tyler's face, but he doesn't fire. Mercy? Or frugality?

Tyler listens to them leave, their voices fading as they run toward the hotel. Tyler prays Ryan gets there first. That security holds. That everyone inside survives.

In her memory Tyler looks at the note on the counter, and thinks of her mother. She picks up the syringe and tests it the way she's seen doctors do on TV; a thin arc of liquid glitters from the tip. She puts it in her arm, hisses at the pinch, and depresses the plunger.

In most of her memories her mother is shadowy and vague; where does she work? What does she do? Why does she disappear for days, weeks at a time? Every weekend they go to Coronado and watch the ferries and the city lights. They sit on Central Beach and watch the sun go down, knowing it will come up again tomorrow. This is the mother she remembers.

Tyler rolls onto her side. The surf here is clear, or maybe she's too tired to see that it's not. It touches her fingertips and washes away her blood. The islands are pollen-yellow, the ocean gold leaf; *too brave, sometimes*.

Tyler hears her mother laugh, the sound shapeless, shifting. The sunset is a brilliant blaze; Tyler can see it even though her eyes are closed. The world has ended, but she hopes, somehow, some way, that tomorrow it will begin again.

Don't be scared, she thinks.

Promise?