In the days where the earth was newly broken and the living still remembered the sleepers walking the world, a water buffalo found a tiger in a coffin.

It was in the days where the sleepers' land purged itself of all it could not bear, coughing out into the periphery seeds and parts by the thousands—and also those sleepers that were unsuitable or broken or merely in excess. The tiger was one of these last, though who knew what kind?

Now, tigers are the natural enemy of the buffalo, and this buffalo belonged to a large herd—rain had fallen in abundance upon the parched earth, and the herd was full of eager young ones, barely aware enough to realise all the dangers the world now held. So the buffalo was ready to kill the tiger, or to push the coffin back into the dome, into the sleepers' land. But as the tiger unfolded his body and stalked, all grace and elegance, from the broken coffin, the buffalo saw, for a bare, suspended moment, a shadow of what the world had been before its breaking—green grass and clear water, and the memory of sleepers that were as gods.

And, so, in spite of her misgivings, the buffalo took the tiger back to her herd.

How Kim Trang got to the pool:

After the sun goes down, the girls huddle together in the remnants of a house by the sea—every screen, every scrap of metal since long scavenged to keep their own bodies going—and tell each other stories. Of animals, and plants, and of the world before and after the Catastrophe. Thuy is outrageously good at this. Her sight allows her to read the other girls' microscopic cues from heartbeat to temperature of skin, and adapt her tales of spirits and ghosts for maximum effects. Ngoc He stutters, barely hiding the tremors in her hands—nerve-wires that broke down and that she hasn't yet scavenged replacements for—but she has the largest range of tales of any of them. Ai Hong speaks almost absent-mindedly, playing with those few crab-bots that aren't frightened by so much light and noise—they skitter away when she puts down her hand, and draw back again when she frowns in thought, trying to recall a particular plot point.

Mei usually sits, listless and silent; but this time, she gets up and leaves the house as Ngoc He finishes the tale of the mechanic and the durian fruit. Kim Trang gets up and follows her.

She finds her in the courtyard, watching Vy finish the dismantling of her hibernation

berth. She leans against the wall, breathing slowly, evenly.

Vy nods to Kim Trang as she comes out—she's busy figuring out how to pull out the last few chips and cables, scavenging everything she can so the girls can keep going for a while longer, absorbing and integrating the remnants of sleepers' technology to repair themselves. A few crab-bots crawl over the power source, trying to fix it in spite of all the evidence, but most have given up, and are simply dragging pieces of metal back to their burrows—they were meant to keep things running, to repair the dome, but they were cut loose after the Catastrophe and are now like the girls, taking everything they can for themselves. Vy isn't talking to Mei, but then Vy was the one who didn't want Kim Trang to bring Mei home, to let the tiger loose among them.

"Give me a hand afterwards, will you?" Vy asks.

Kim Trang nods. Her lineage is that of a repair construct. Her distant ancestor who survived the Catastrophe isn't here anymore, but she and generations of her descendants have left Kim Trang routines—knowledge at the organic and electronic level, so thoroughly ingrained it might as well be reflexes by now.

Mei straightens up when Kim Trang arrives, gives her a tight and forced smile.

"You should be inside," Kim Trang says.

Mei shakes her head. "I'd just be an imposition."

"You could tell stories," Kim Trang says. "Of the world before. Of—"

"Of how we broke it past repair?" Mei's voice is curt.

"You weren't the only ones," Kim Trang says. The girls' ancestors might have been constructs, acting under duress, having free will only insofar as it didn't contradict the sleepers' orders—but does that really make them blameless?

"I'm the villain in all your stories," Mei says. She shakes her head.

The tiger. The walking time bomb for Kim Trang's kind. No wonder Vy wants her gone, and Kim Trang should follow Vy's advice, tell Mei to leave. "It's the way we learnt the world."

"The world." Mei's gaze looks past her, at the dark shape of the dome that dwarfs them both. The air smells, faintly, of brine, of spilled oil. "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

"Many things weren't. Are you angry they left you behind?"

Mei shrugs. "It was broken, wasn't it?"

"The berth?" Kim Trang nods. "Beyond repair. Or at least, not with the tech we have. I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Mei shrugs. Her eyes haven't left the dome. "It's not like I could go back." She rubs her fingers against her arms, as if drawing the contours of scars, or wire traceries—what would they feel like, those fingers on Kim Trang's skin? "We thought the earth would be green when we woke up again. Cleansed." She doesn't say from what, or who bears responsibility for it.

"It's not so bad," Kim Trang says. It's all they've known, really—save for phantom lineage memories, a nagging sense that things ought to be freer, larger, less dangerous—the silent killer, the thoughtless expectations that get girls killed, out there, if they don't shut them out.

"No," Mei says. She shakes her head. "Why did you save me, Kim Trang?"

Kim Trang has thought of that, at night. She remembers finding the berth in the still waters of the pool by the dome, Vy strenuously arguing that anything from the sleepers was poisoned gifts and that they should leave it there to break down. Kim Trang, too curious for her own good, reaching out, touching the glass—her lineage gift stretching, the berth switching to maintenance mode, letting her see the still, waxy face of an unknown woman, eyes wide in a perfect oval of a face—not like Kim Trang's own face, scarred from a fall into rocky water, from encounters with fractured tech, to crumbling ledges and acid earth that ate at their skin, the hundred ways that the world tries to kill them for the mere act of living and being free—a face that's beyond scavenging, beyond survival. "Why not?" Kim Trang asks, trying so very hard to keep it casual.

She leans against the wall, close enough to Mei that she can feel the heat of Mei's body—the feel and smell of her, a sharp taste in her throat—a memory, not hers, but a lineage one, of rooms with walls so white they hurt the eyes, of hands brushing alcohol against wounds.

Mei looks at her, cocking her head in a particular way; and Kim Trang can't tell what she's being measured against. "Whims? I shouldn't think any of you had them."

"We're not animals," Kim Trang says, more harshly than she meant.

Mei looks horrified. "Of course not. I didn't mean—just that you couldn't afford them. I'm sorry, Kim Trang—"

"No, it's all right," Kim Trang says. Heavy with something she cannot name, she reaches out to run a hand against Mei's cheek, feeling the contour of soft, warm skin so unlike hers. A shiver wracks her body from head to toe, all the lineage memories rising and blurring together as if the world was suddenly washed in rain.

Mei tenses. She's going to pull away—what a foolish, foolish idea: Vy was right, it was a bad plan from the start—but she doesn't. She leans in, gently taking Kim Trang's hand, and sets it on her lips. Taking it into her mouth, her tongue wanders around Kim Trang's flesh, sending pinpricks of desire down Kim Trang's spine. The girls design their own descendants and no longer need sex to reproduce, but some pleasure reflexes still remain the same across generations. Kim Trang withdraws her finger, slowly, while drawing Mei's lips to her own, drinking all of her in.

Such a bad, bad idea.

"Big'sis?" Vy's voice. Of course.

Kim Trang breaks away, watching Mei smile at her, tentatively, and with the tightness of someone who's not sure if things will still be there tomorrow. "I'm sorry," she says. "But I have to go. Later?"

Mei relaxes a fraction. "Wouldn't dream of missing it." She pulls away from the wall, and goes back towards the house. Kim Trang should go back to the berth, help Vy out—but she has time. She can watch until Mei is gone, completely swallowed by the darkness.

Kim Trang walks, slowly, to Vy, feeling the heaviness in her subside, her breathing slows down until her lungs no longer burn. The berth is now little more than scrap metal, a tantalising mess of opened-up compartments with torn cables and broken parts. Kim Trang runs a hand, slowly, on the control panel. It warms up to her touch, trying to cycle itself back into maintenance mode. "That's what failed. The regulator in the control panel. The crabs can't repair that. If the dome hadn't ejected her, she would have died inside."

She thought Vy was going to say something harsh, something about things being for the best if that had happened, but her sister's dark eyes are wide open, with the same lack of expression as Mei's when she was watching Vy dismantle her berth.

"Did you hear everything?" Kim Trang asks.

"I'm not a spy," Vy says, affronted. "But I have eyes. And you do, too, except you weren't using them to pay attention."

"I don't understand."

"The crab-bots," Vy says, curtly. "When you two—kissed—they gathered around her in a circle. Like a court. She's waking up."

"She—" Kim Trang flushes, embarrassed though she doesn't know why. "She means no harm." Mei is a sleeper—clusters of implants and gen-mods, the algorithms that used to enforce compliance to the sleepers' will—algorithms that generations of the girls' lineages haven't been able to breed out, the same algorithms that bend the crab-bots to her will. Centuries of enforced obedience in their blood, and should Mei decide to give orders...

"Her kind never does mean harm," Vy says. She shakes her head. "They didn't set out to break the world. Or to deny us our freedom. Until things don't go their way." She reaches out, squeezes Kim Trang's hand between hers. "I'm not doing this out of spite. I know what you want."

Does she—when Kim Trang herself doesn't know what she wants? "I know what you want."

"It hasn't changed," Vy says. She picks up a scrap of metal, from the wreck of the berth, crushes it between her fingers—slowly starts absorbing it into her skin, growing a bulge that will be digested next time she needs repairs. "I'm sorry, but—"

But things are what they are. But tigers don't abandon their stripes, or their fangs, just out of charity. "I know," Kim Trang says, but she can't find an answer that would satisfy her and Vy.

The tiger didn't ask where it had woken up, or when, or where the sleepers' land had gone, or why he seemed to be the only one of his kind in the midst of animals that should not have survived the breaking of the world. He sat, listless, until one day the buffalo took him to the periphery again, showing him the boundary with the sleepers' land: the smooth surface of the dome resting in a sea sparkling with the rainbow colours of spilled oil. There was no door, no way to enter, and not even windows to guess at what might be happening within.

She expected him to scream, or to weep, or simply to rise and stalk near the walls of the dome with the same deadly elegance as when he'd risen from his coffin. Instead he remained silent, though there was a gleam in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

"We can look for a way in," the buffalo said, finally, because the silence made her uncomfortable. "Perhaps there'll be someone you knew—"

The tiger spoke, then, in a voice rough with disuse. "How do I know they're not all dead inside?"

The buffalo had no answer, but she felt as though her heart was being squeezed into bloody shreds.

After the kiss:

Kim Trang rises in the morning, and finds Mei gone.

For a slow, suspended moment, she thinks something has gone wrong, but all the girls still sleep on their mats: Thuy hugging the machine she's building (an augment based on crab-bot biology, that will help her dive longer into polluted waters); Ngoc He tossing and turning; Vy perfectly still (her lineage was gen-modded from plants, and she draws oxygen into her body through her skin and eyes rather than through lungs).

Kim Trang finds Mei outside, by the wreck of her berth, watching the rising sun. Part of Kim Trang's lineage remembers a bright, blue sky and stars scattered across the night, but for all of her life the sky has been grey and overcast, the heavy clouds promising a storm that never comes. Mei's hands rest, loosely, on the control panel—lights flash, fleetingly, before sinking back into quiescence.

Mei bends, kissing Kim Trang—a brief taste, a wounding sharpness on the tip of her tongue, her hips digging into Kim Trang's—and then she pulls away, though Kim Trang can still feel the weight of her presence. "It's beautiful, isn't it? I had forgotten what it was like."

Kim Trang doesn't see beauty—merely the same thing she sees every day—but Mei's enthusiasm is infectious. "It is," she says.

"Three hundred years of missed sunrises." Mei sighs. She says, finally, "It was beautiful, too, the world before. In a different way." She crouches at the foot of her berth; and Kim Trang crouches with her, no longer seeing the shadow of the dome. Around them is nothing but muddy earth, with the sharp, familiar tang of metal and oil. Mei's outstretched hands wrap around Kim Trang's callused ones, a touch that Kim Trang aches to take to her chest, to her hips. "Slender spires of metal going all the way into the sky, and gleaming as the sun struck them. And a flow of vehicles and people in the streets, all colours and sounds, a roar that would never fall silent, not even while night came."

As she speaks, Kim Trang feels it, rising in her blood—memories of the lineage, distant sounds and images, a sense of a world opening up around her that could give her anything and everything, leaving her breathless and flushed. "It's gone," she says, more abruptly than she means. And in such a place, she would be a servant, a menial.

"Yes," Mei said. "And perhaps it's just as well. We weren't always kind to your

ancestors, among all our other sins." She pauses. Kim Trang runs her hands over Mei's face again. She bends closer, but Mei pulls away before the kiss. "I used to design buildings. Making sure everything was in perfect harmony in rooms and walls. There's not much I can bring you."

You can command the bots, Kim Trang wants to say, and then thinks of how Vy and the others would view this ability—not as a useful skill, but merely a prelude to their own enslavement. "You'll learn."

Mei's hands tighten into fists. "Not as well as you do, and not as fast. I wasn't born into this world."

"We can wait."

"Can you? You have no space for dead weight."

Feeling useless. Kim Trang knows how that goes. Even if there weren't a hundred stories about sleepers waking up too early, she would know in her bones. "You could—"

"Design something here?" Mei shakes her head. "Vy would never let me do it. Besides—" She makes a short, stabbing gesture. "I'm not sure I know better than her, when it comes to design."

"She'll come around."

"Will she?" Mei's gaze is shrewd.

"You're—" Kim Trang takes a deep, shaking breath. "Vy thinks you're not one of us."

"Mm." Mei's hands rest at her side, quietly, looking at Kim Trang with an odd expression on her face. Before Kim Trang can protest that she doesn't think that way—not even sure if that would be a lie—Mei says: "She's right."

"No," Kim Trang says. "You—"

"I'm a danger to you all," Mei says. "The tiger in the story. The predator that undoes you in the end. I'm thankful you saved my life, Kim Trang, but it's best if I left."

She—she. No. Kim Trang can't hear anything save the roar of blood in her ears, a hundred different lineage calls, wondering how to fix a broken situation, finding no way out. "You can't leave. You'll just die out there."

"Credit me with a little resourcefulness." Mei makes a short, stabbing gesture—the

crab-bots gather from the berth above them, watchful and still—awaiting orders. "The entire world remembers. I'm—" Her face twists in a terrible expression that wraps around Kim Trang's chest like a metal fist. ”I'm not like you girls."

"That doesn't mean you have to leave!"

Mei rises. It would have been worse, in many ways, if the crab-bots had followed, but she's let go of her hold on them, and they're inert again, crawling over the wreck of the berth looking for anything they can use. "It does. It's what I am. Too many implants, too many gen-mods—to take them out of me would kill me." Her expression softens for a bare moment. She lays a hand on Kim Trang's shoulder, with nothing of desire or lust in it. "Don't feel bad. It's the way the world has to be, and I'm by no means blameless. Atonement, perhaps, for what I did to you and your ancestors."

Kim Trang scrambles to her feet, struggling to find words. She can't leave. She—Vy has to be wrong, of course she can stay with them, she's not a danger—again and again in circles in her mind. "Mei! Please—" She does the only thing she can think of. She grabs Mei by the shoulder as she's walking away, turns Mei towards her with all the strength she uses to wrench cables out of sockets and chips out of their compartments.

"Don't touch me!"

It's like being electrocuted—a jolt of current that seizes all of Kim Trang's limbs, sends her to the ground, spasming, struggling to breathe—arms and legs refusing to obey, her entire being screaming with one voice. She has to stop; she has to be still; she has to bow down. Every single lineage-memory breaks around her until the only one that remains is old, as vivid as yesterday: her faraway ancestor bowing to a sleeper after repairing their vehicle, and the rush of pleasure that seizes her, stilling her where she stands.

No. No.

The world is broken, centuries have passed, and her ancestor is long dead.

Slowly, agonisingly slowly, she pulls herself to her feet—and it can't have been that long after all, because Mei is still standing, watching her with horror in her eyes. Her mouth opens, closes—words come, dragged out of her. "I didn't mean to—Kim Trang—I—"

And then she's gone, running away from the debris-strewn courtyard. Follow. Kim Trang has to follow her, or she'll lose her forever. She—she can barely stand, and the thought of catching up to Mei—the thought of her fingers resting on Mei's warm skin—makes her stomach heave.

Days passed, and the tiger ate again. He regained strength and plumpness, though he could not find a place among the buffalo's sisters and daughters. They spoke too fast, of concerns and concepts he wasn't familiar with, and they refused to let the tiger touch the machines they were fixing. In the evening, he sat with the buffalo, speaking, not of the world before the breaking, but of small, inconsequential things; making small talk and jokes until the buffalo's heart grew light again—until she forgot that she'd ever feared him.

He grew fat and sleek, and with his mind running around in circles, found no use for himself in a world that had moved on. So instead, he remembered the past, and the days when the ancestors of the buffalo had moved to do his bidding—the power that was still within him, as inseparably as his heart and liver, that had once made them kneel before him—and as he remembered, that power slowly woke up, unfolding within him as the tiger had once unfolded himself out of his coffin.

One day, he looked at the buffalo's daughters—at their flat, blunt teeth, at their horns that could never be used as weapons, at their meagre meals of grass—and saw that he was more than them. "I can help you," he said. They looked at him, incurious; and as the eldest turned away to look at her workbench, something stretched and broke in the tiger's mind.

"Stop," the tiger said, fiercely. "Listen to me."

And the sisters and daughters of the buffalo, caught in the fist of his power, froze where they stood. The tiger watched all of them, as still as statues and awaiting further orders. He meant no harm, he told himself. He wanted to help them; to share the knowledge he bore from the sleepers' land; the secrets of machines and chips in his blood—and did it matter if they didn't want to listen to him? It was just that they didn't realise everything he could teach them, the wealth of knowledge that he'd hoarded within his mind and that could be theirs so smoothly, so easily—the knowledge they desperately needed to survive.

He meant no harm, but the truth about tigers is this: They always end up thinking of themselves as kings and queens, no matter how changed the world might be.

At the pool, where Mei was first found:

At the bottom of the incline, by the water's edge, Mei is skipping torn bits of metal in the pool, her arm a blur. With each movement she makes, more and more crab-bots bubble up from under the dark, greasy surface of the water, a spreading dark mass that seems to echo Mei's gestures, some slow secret dance that pours out of Mei like liquid gold.

Kim Trang takes a deep breath, and starts the descent. Her first footsteps bring down a shower of rocks: Mei looks up and sees her and keeps on watching her as she descends. When Kim Trang gets near her, she turns, frowning, her face going tight with effort. The crab-bots vanish, sinking again into the depths of the pool.

She's waking up, Vy said, but she was wrong. Mei is awake now. Kim Trang's hands shake—lineage again, howling at her to bend the knee, to obey as her distant ancestor once did.

But the world was broken and taken apart and utterly changed.

"Kim Trang," Mei says. "You see—" but Kim Trang doesn't leave her time.

"You're a coward," she says.

Mei's face tightens, and Kim Trang finally understands that what she thought of as Mei's expressionless face is merely despair, spread so widely that it distorts everything.

"A coward," Kim Trang says, again. "You'd rather run away than try to fix a problem."

"I'm a danger to you."

"So is my knife," Kim Trang says, levelly. "So are the bots."

"The bots won't make you bend the knee."

"They can kill me in other ways. They can go rogue or malicious."

"You don't understand," Mei says. "Even if I don't mean it, even if I don't have any delusions of grandeur or any intention to use my powers, they're still here. In my blood. It's who I am."

"It's who you once chose to be," Kim Trang says. "In a world since long dead. Do you want to continue being that person? The one who entered the berth secure in the knowledge the world would be a paradise?"

"I—you saw it!" Mei raises her hands, and the crab-bots rise again from the depths of the pool, ring after ring of speckled darkness. The world remembers. "All I have to do is lose my calm, and it'll happen again. How can you—"

Kim Trang thinks of being thrown to the ground, thinks of pain running through her limbs, of getting up and running after Mei. "I've been hurt before. The girls have been hurt before. Of course it will happen again. You'll do the only thing you can do:

apologise, make it better, and do your best so that it never happens again. We all stumble."

"Not that way," Mei says, darkly, but she watches Kim Trang with that peculiar hunger in their eyes. "You say it like forgiveness is easy to earn."

Kim Trang shakes her head. She walks closer—no nausea this time, nothing to stop her but the memory of pain—and runs a hand on Mei's skin. Part of her braces herself for another jolt, but there's nothing. "It's not. It never is. And atonement isn't, either. Do you think it's going to be easy to remember every day that you shouldn't be giving orders?" Every morning, Mei will wake up and know the price of impatience or anger; she'll see the crab-bots and try not to command them—see the girls and not think of the constructs of the past—like being able to breathe and deliberately holding it, forever and ever. Mei's entire body is taut, like a wire about to snap. "No. But it's never going to work, Kim Trang. You've heard the stories. You know how they end."

"I know," Kim Trang said. "But they don't have to all go the same way."

Mei's face is a study in agony. "Kim Trang—"

Kim Trang comes closer and wraps her hands around Mei's—warmth and smoothness, and the face she remembers, the woman trapped in a berth that she fell half in love with at first sight, the sleeper who should be their ancestral, implacable enemy. "Tell me a story," she whispers. "A different one."