

# PART ONE

## MONSTER

'I am cast upon a horrible, desolate Island, void of all hope of Recovery.

But I am alive; and not drown'd as all my Ship's Company were.'

*Robinson Crusoe, Daniel Defoe*

When the world is burning, it's easy to forget about ice.

Easy for most people, that is. I knew nothing but freeze for over a year. I lived with the ice, on the ice, inside it – locked on the island as the rest of the world grew desperate with rage and disease. As the missiles fell and cities were blasted by a thousand-degree heat, I struggled to keep warm.

Frostbite and a chill so keen it cuts right through the heart: that's the price of survival.

Then what?

After everyone else was dead, I sat by a window for three days watching the glacier creak and break. When I took off my trousers, my skin flaked away and my legs itched. I scratched at the dead skin until I was pink and sore, then I got dressed again.

I thought about the scientists who had vanished into a crevasse twenty years earlier and were never found, how their little bodies would one day tumble out of the glacier's mouth like babies being born, frozen solid and perfectly preserved in their brightly coloured thermals.

People used to think that ice is white, but it isn't. There is all kinds of history inside it, waiting to be brought out.

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The beach tastes of skin and salt. Sand clogs my mouth and grinds against my teeth. When I move my hand I can feel the grains shifting beneath it.

Slowly, I lift my head. I sit up and cough. It starts in my throat, in the sand and spume still rattling in my oesophagus – then it expands, rising and billowing until I'm coughing from my stomach up, till my whole body is racked with it. I cough till I vomit on the sand, again, and again, and again, till all I can bring up is bile.

Wiping my mouth on my sleeve, I take several deep breaths. This is where the sea spat me out.

To the right, a broad belt of sand stretches for miles, into the mist and sea spray of the horizon. In front, following the line of the beach, a low cliff is dotted with trees and seagulls. The gulls nestle on ledges and wheel overhead, screeching. Every rock is covered, streaked white and grey. The noise is horrendous. After the deep quiet of Svalbard, it feels like an assault. I had forgotten how noisy life could be.

Beyond the diving gulls, where the cliff meets the pregnant grey sky, is a line of coarse bracken and heather. Like the trees, these plants look hardy and gnarled, gripping onto the rock face with old men's fingers.

My own hands are red and rough from weeks in the cold, the knuckles inflamed, the fingers sinewy and chapped. When I flex them, I can feel pockets of air clicking between the cartilage. My mother had pianist's fingers, elegant and slender, her nails shaped and painstakingly buffed. My hands are better.

I look to my left, where a cluster of rocks catches the sea

and whirls it around, so the waves come crashing back towards the beach. Which is how I ended up here, of all places.

I turn to the sea and there it is: the boat, my boat, beached and broken on the rocks a short way out, rocking with the swell. Or rather, what's left of the boat.

If I were a nautical person, I suppose I would say *she* instead of *it*. I might stand on the lonely shore and regret that I did not go down with her. But I'm not.

When I haul myself to my feet, the whole right side of my body smarts where the sea and rocks have battered me. I take another deep breath. I have not survived this long only to die on a shit-splattered beach in Scotland.

I wade back out into the undertow. It tugs at my feet, smaller now than the fierce grip of the storm, but still there – an echo.

I expect the boat to be nothing but timbers and a few sodden relics, but for the first time in weeks, lightness fills my lungs like bellows. The cabin is still intact.

I stuff what I can into my backpack and carry it aloft back to shore. I remember seeing a film as a child where a warrior fording a river had to carry his sword above his head to keep it dry, the weapon his most valued possession, raised high like a benediction. This is my benediction: a backpack full of clothes, food, a sleeping bag, two rolls of Elastoplast, a Swiss army knife, rope, a lighter. This is what will keep me alive.

I make four more trips out to the boat, bringing back whatever else I can salvage, reclaiming food then breaking off dry bits of wood. Back on the beach, I kindle a fire above the tideline. Forget mourning her passing – I burn her bones to keep me warm.

Once stripped of my dripping, salt-soaked clothes and changed into ones that are merely damp, I scour the beach for anything else that may have washed ashore. I gather carrier bags, two odd socks that I dry by the fire, a plastic bottle,

string. I lay out my collection in military rows in the sand, and the rows become a calendar, marking out the limits of my time. If I do not find anything else, I have only eight days left to survive.

I pull out my sleeping bag and am asleep before the sun has set.

By the time I wake, the fire has died and the remains of the boat have been claimed by the sea. I eat some of the more perishable food, pack my backpack and lace up my boots. As I climb the shallow cliff, the gulls shriek and divebomb, but I ignore them.

I reach the top and start to walk.

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I walk because somewhere there must be food and water. I walk to seek out shelter. I choose a destination because otherwise the possibility of *anywhere* is too big.

My parents lived around forty miles from Scotland. The Scottish mainland is roughly three hundred miles long. I do not know where I have washed up, but if I manage an average of ten miles a day, I should be home inside a month.

Of course it will take me much longer than that. I will get lost. As much as possible, I will avoid towns and cities. I will avoid their bombed and broken buildings, and their Sickness-ridden bodies lurking like a virus already in the bloodstream.

I will leave the roads, clogged with the cars of all those who tried to flee from explosions or infestations, those who had not already been claimed by the War or the Sickness that rose out of it, those who tried to reach the so-called Safe Centres before they shut their gates. Who knows how many shells are lying unexploded on the tarmac? Who knows what kinds of explosives or gases or diseases they might contain?

I will stick to fields and moorland and heaths. Nature always was a more predictable place – though even then there will be obstacles to overcome. There will be places to stop and search for food, and the unavoidable ritual of living. Survival is time-consuming.

Still it sits somewhere at the base of my belly, this drive to return. I am like a homing pigeon, pulled back to the place it was fed and watered and kept safe from prowling foxes, even though its keeper is no longer there to care for it. I suppose it is a pilgrimage of sorts. A sacrifice meted out in aches and

blisters – an absolution. I need to see for myself that my parents are gone.

I dream about it sometimes. Not home itself, but the journey, the perpetual striving. In my dreams, I climb the hill behind my parents' house, or I drag my feet along the lane that leads to their village, but I always wake just before I arrive. There is always further to go.

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My father called me Monster. It was supposed to be ironic, I think – an affectionate joke.

As I got older, my mother tried to change it, but by then the name had solidified around me. It was a shame, she said, for such a pretty child to have an ugly name.

My mother often lamented that I didn't fit my cherub cheeks and curls. Her name was Beatrice and she wore it like an elegant fur coat. As for me, I grew into my name and out of my curls. I think it takes a monster to survive when nobody else can.



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I sit on a crumbling rock at the edge of a copse, where the air still smells of sea.

The fields here are wide and flat, and there is a feeling of height. The ground seems to go only as far as the nearest wall, and then into a cold sky beyond. I watch bright clouds scud across the horizon until it feels as though the whole world is moving.

For a moment, I can almost believe there was no War, no Sickness, no inevitable Last Fall. Then my eye lingers on the tangle of weeds growing over the bottom of the five-bar gate, part of the faint air of neglect that has settled over everything, human control succumbing to plant-life as the War forced people into towns and the Sickness swept through what remained of the villages.

A blister as big as a five pence coin has bubbled up on my right heel. I pop it between my nails and a clear liquid leaks across my thumb. I sit with cold air stinging the raw skin, until I'm numb from sitting. Then I stick a plaster on my heel and put my boot back on.

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When I was five, I started to squirrel things under my bed in my mother's old shoe boxes. Little things, the flotsam and jetsam of daily life: spare plugs, old phones, the toaster that was supposed to be thrown out. I sat straining my eyes by the desk lamp, fiddling and tinkering until they worked again, or until I could piece the parts together into something new. I fell in love with the honesty of objects, how they thrived or failed based on their own mechanical truth. On rainy days, I would lay out all the pieces on my bedroom floor just to gaze at them. I knew their ridges and grooves intimately.

My screws and wires were my company. In the playground, I fought the girls who whispered behind my back and cold-shouldered the boys who prodded me in the side and sometimes claimed to want to be my friend. When Callum Jenkins slouched over one lunchtime to tell me I was 'cool for a girl', I bit his arm until I tasted blood.

As a teenager I became volatile and fierce, snapping at neighbours who asked about my favourite subjects, turning a sullen eye on critical aunts and uncles. I swore loudly at the gaggle of cousins who came to visit. My mother bought me a book: *How to Start Conversations and Make Friends*. I told her to fuck off.

By the time I was sixteen, I had taught myself how to be Monster.