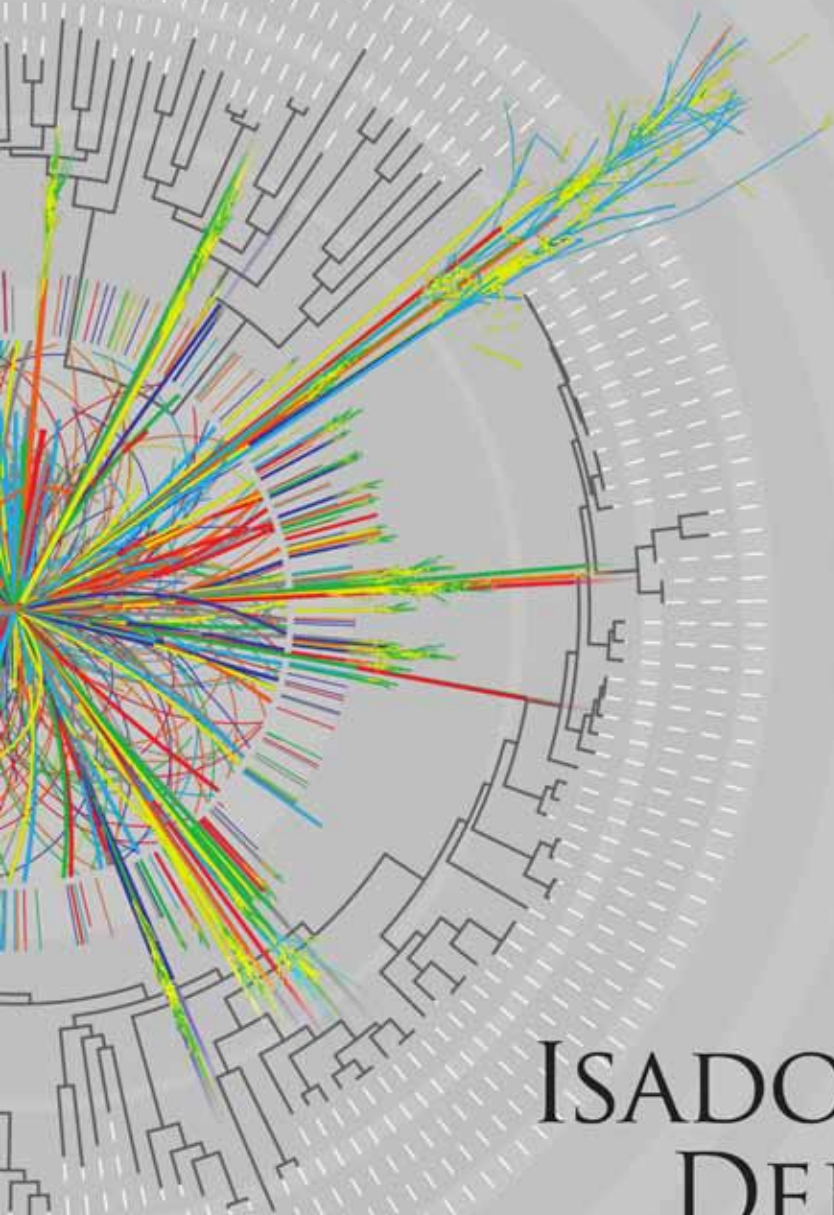


RIGHT OF CAPTURE



ISADORA
DEESE

Right of Capture by Isadora Deese

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SEQUENCE ONE





Part Roan_0001

THE fence was cold and damp and familiar. Roan curled her fingers around the chain link like it was her security blanket against the world. She was home. But she wasn't safe.

Just shy of fourteen, Roan Gorey knew enough about biosecurity measures to be an honorary microbe—the nasty kind that's kept behind airlocked doors. Two years locked up like a deadly contagion in a secret underground silo and a girl learns a thing or two about how to escape against all odds. Staying escaped is another matter. Each stab at freedom came with the harsh reality that she had nowhere to go. After all, Dimond—the billionaire with Batman delusions who built her cage—hadn't taken her by force. Her parents had sent her away.

They were afraid of her.

Most people are, once they see the monsters she makes.

It was weird, being home. Mega understatement. Thoughts of home, her mom and dad, her life *before*—that's what gave focus to Roan's days and nights at the silo. But now that she was back, she didn't know how to feel. Or even if she *could* feel. Dear old Mom and Dad had the nerve to look relieved

when Dimond brought her back to their doorstep—like they hadn't signed the paperwork that disappeared her in the first place. Other troubled kids got sent to counseling, maybe juvie hall, but Roan's first stop was a high-tech dungeon in the basement of an old missile silo 3,000 miles away. Go figure.

Gripping that cold chain link fence gave her a strange sense of calm. Maybe she'd never feel normal without being fenced in. She took a long drag of the musty forest air into her lungs, and just for a moment she forgot how long she'd been away. The smell of muck and decay drew her in, and her thoughts instantly became more focused. The longed-for reunion with her parents had muddled things, and she couldn't afford to be on the fence today, even if that's the only place she felt comfortable.

It was late summer, back-to-school season. Cooler than usual, but the morning fog would likely burn off. She was grateful for her jacket. She might not have worn it if it had been warmer, and she'd need it if her escape plan worked. The jeans and white button down provided by her keeper would hardly keep out the cold of a New England night. Not knowing where she would sleep tonight gave her a thrill. Who was she kidding? *Being outside* was giving her a thrill. Cave dwelling was so last Ice Age.

This time of year used to make her think of beginnings, but beginnings and endings had taken on a whole new meaning for Roan. Her parents both worked at a university, so in her house the new year began not in January, but September.

New students for them. New teachers for her. Start of the countdown to Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas. Roan could sense the clock ticking down all right, but not to trick-or-treats and presents under the tree. *Something wicked this way comes*—or as it turned out—was already here, just below the surface.

She took one look around and summed up her options. Dimond was in the house sparring with parental units. Cross was in the backyard with eyes on her. Nuñez was hidden in the trees, ready to report. Nathan Hale, their nearest neighbor, may be home, or he may have decided to sit this one out. He'd be no help to her either way. The other two—Pirret and Wykowski—would be on the other side of the lot, blocking access to Swift River Road. She'd have to get past the meanest of them that way. But that's not what would get her caught.

Roan pressed her fingertips to her temple, scratching at the recent injection site. It was cruel to dangle a chance for escape like this and build the fail into her own biology, but that was Dimond all over.

What was he up to? Why a visit home now? She'd been allowed no contact with her parents since that horrible day two years ago when they'd sent her away, and now here she was, back home for hugs and kisses under the pretense that Dimond's people had finally determined that whatever had gone haywire with Roan's DNA wasn't catching. Today's visit was hyped as the first step toward her return.

Roan knew better. Dimond's people had confirmed she

wasn't contagious within the first few weeks of her stay at the silo. Why else would they have ditched those crazy hazmat suits? And as for returning home to stay, Roan knew that Dimond would never allow that. There had to be more to the timing of this visit, and it couldn't be good.

She glanced over her shoulder at Cross. He wasn't the usual guy assigned to her detail. The usual guy wasn't around anymore. Roan told herself not to think about that. Not now. Instead she replayed the awkward family reunion that had just taken place. She slowed it down, frame by frame, to try to take it all in, feeling as numb and dazed as that time she found herself in a muddy ditch after flying headlong over handlebars. She'd swerved her bike to miss a frog that day, but today there was no way to avoid inflicting pain. In fact, she felt pretty entitled to dish some out.

Cross and Dimond had flanked her on the walk from car to doorstep, making her feel like she was about to be presented to her parents for causing some neighborhood mischief. She'd been returned to the doorstep like that before, most frequently by their neighbors the Hales—usually for nothing more serious than rolling their house with t.p. or playing with fireworks in their backyard or taking their landscaper's John Deere mower for a joyride.

Her parents had been waiting for them of course, so they opened the door even before Roan's feet hit the *Welcome* mat. Her mom pulled her into such a hug that Roan almost forgave her. Almost. Her dad's arm wrapped around her mom's as if to shield the reunion from anyone who might

try to stop it. Like Cross.

Cross wore a preppy black sweater and khakis that were meant to distract from the military lean and mean underneath, but her father sized him up for what he was the second he saw him.

“You can leave your guard dog outside,” he’d ordered Dimond.

Dimond had the gall to look offended. Cross just stood there like a statue, a standard look on his face like he had a bad taste in his mouth.

“Mr. Cross is a registered nurse,” Dimond had replied. “As promised, medical personnel only today.”

“A registered thug, maybe,” countered her mom, still hugging Roan to within an inch of her life. “He stays outside.”

Her parents had pulled her inside like they were taking a hostage, unwilling to let even an inch of space separate them from her. *Don’t forget*, Roan reminded herself, trying not to melt into the embrace. *They signed those papers. They sent you away.* It was an awkward way to walk, as if they were one creature with six legs. Her dad’s broad shoulders couldn’t clear the pictures on the wall of the narrow hallway, and when he knocked loose her 3rd-grade school portrait, it was Dimond who caught it.

Dimond took a moment to examine the snapshot of her silly toothless grin before returning it to the wall. He punctuated the act with a compliment that couldn’t have

sounded more forced, “Cute.”

Once in the kitchen, Roan broke free of her parents and settled a comfortable distance away, behind the butcher block island. They looked hurt. Roan almost laughed in their faces. *Have your own parents banish you to a bunker where a bunch of strangers call you a pollutant behind your back, and then we can compare hurt feelings.*

“You’ve grown so much,” her mother had said, reaching a hand out to brush Roan’s bangs from her eyes. “They’ve stolen so much time.”

That’s when Roan realized why her mother seemed smaller. The last embrace between them had put Roan’s chin at her mother’s shoulder. The years had reversed the ratio.

“I can’t remember the last time I traveled so light,” Dimond interrupted the moment. No one paid him any attention, but he continued anyway, “I’m usually surrounded by people who wait on my every whim, so standing here in your home without so much as an offer of a glass of tap water is... refreshing.”

“Roan, honey,” her mom said in a tone she hadn’t used since Roan was three, “why don’t you go play outside for a while?”

Roan poured as much contempt as she could manage into her response. “Play outside?”

“We just need some time alone with *Dr.* Dimond, sweetie,” her dad said, and then he tried unsuccessfully to smile.

“There’s bound to be some language we’d rather you not hear.”

“That’s fucking rich,” Roan scoffed, and her dad looked like she’d just kicked him in the gut. She moved to the back door, but not because they asked her to. She needed some air or she was going to start screaming. “Try not to sign me over to any other goddamn psychopaths while I’m out here. Please, do me that favor.”

There were so many tears in her mother’s eyes, Roan didn’t know how she could see. She slammed the door behind her to let them know exactly how much she cared.

Once outside, she took a slide down the backyard play set they’d installed the last summer she’d been home, but she only did it to be ironic. On landing, she’d thrown a hand in the air to acknowledge Cross’s presence—less of a hello than a quick wave to say *I know you’re watching every move I make, dickweed*.

And now, the volume of the exchange in the kitchen was loud enough to reach her ears even at the fence. She could have pieced together the conversation if she wanted to, but what was the point? Everything Dimond would say to them would be a lie, and nothing her parents said back would change anything. They could never get back the last two years. The little girl they remembered was gone forever. They just didn’t know it yet.



SEQUENCE SIX

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ggggccacg
ggtggccccacc
catatgcaggaag
gctgacttt
gccccctcataggagagg
gggaggtggccaggcggcagg
caatccgcgcgccgggaca
ccccctgcaggaacttct
aaataaa



Part Walt_0010

WARMTH was not what Walt had expected to feel when he was shoved into Dimond's library, but in contrast to the steel tubes of the silo, even a snake's den would have felt less cold.

Walt had spent most of the day pretending to sleep, and the rest of it actually sleeping. Anything to avoid speaking to his father after the garbage origin story he'd coughed up over breakfast that morning. Walt was grateful to Judge for prepping him for the campaign of lies. His dad had stooped about as low as ever, accusing the Goreys of living a double life—professors and parents in one, and in the other, secret activists so radical they might as well have invited streamers and vaks into their home. Basic blame-the-victim tactic, and Walt knew why his dad was peddling it. If Walt bought into the idea that the Goreys were reckless extremists, his dad's mistakes might not have seemed so bad. Walt had spent too much time with the Goreys to believe it. The story worked in his dad's world where the Goreys were ruthless environmental zealots and Roan was less than human, but it didn't fit with the truth.

His father was called away to video conference into a meeting in D.C. As soon as he was out of the room, the

cruel couple from the basement showed up to deliver him upstairs. It was like he'd stepped out of a soup can into the inside of a sequoia. Bisected tree rings fluctuated from floor to wall, like lines of elevation on a map. A spiral staircase carved from a single piece of wood branched up to a second floor balcony. Glass cases held treasures in the walls as organically as pockets of sap might trap an insect.

A fire crackled at the far end of the library, sharing the wall with a bunch of talking heads. Only one was allowed a voice. The slick gray-haired anchor reported on a trade deal between Singapore, Indonesia, and Russia.

Dressed in lightweight thermals, Bradley Dimond sprinted on a treadmill that faced the wall, leaping up between strides to strike a punching bag. It took Walt only a few punches to realize Dimond timed his strikes for each time he heard the words *palm oil*. When the report was over, Dimond slid off the end of the treadmill and muted the anchorman. His heavy breathing mixed with the hissing heat from the fireplace.

Dimond ignored Walt's arrival, leaning casually against the treadmill to drain his water bottle. Walt remembered Judge secured to the steel bed in the cold cavern hundreds of feet below, and he was charging at Dimond before he even thought about it. Hodges tackled him. Jansen was about to tie his hands behind his back, but Dimond waved her off.

"We don't need to be so tough on him," Dimond said. "It was instinct to rush me. Football player, remember? He won't try that again. Will you, Walt?"

“No promises,” Walt replied, struggling against Hodges. Hodges pressed a knee into the small of his back, and Walt winced.

Dimond knelt down to Walt’s level and said, “You want to stay down there for our little chat? Or would you like to be able to stand on your own two feet and look me in the eye?”

Walt stopped struggling, and Hodges removed his knee. Walt made it to his feet in stages, stretching the pain from his body as he went. His arm had fallen out of its sling so he readjusted his elbow, grinding his teeth.

“Your dad says you’re a natural on the field,” Dimond said. “A born leader.”

“My dad says a lot of things.”

“You should be grateful to have a dad who thinks so highly of you,” Dimond continued.

“Are we going to compare dads now? I’m guessing yours made you feel inadequate.”

Dimond laughed at that, but he didn’t respond.

Walt’s eyes struggled for focus and fell on words carved above the fireplace: *Ferae naturae*. Dimond followed Walt’s gaze and asked, “You read Latin?”

Walt shook his head.

“Neither do I, except for a few phrases. *Ferae naturae* means simply, what is wild. Animals. Rivers. Oil.” Dimond paused, waiting for Walt to react. When he didn’t, Dimond played his part for him, “Wait—*oil* is *wild*? Says who?”

Walt shrugged, knowing that Dimond had an agenda and was going to tell him whether he cared to know or not.

“The United States legal system,” Dimond answered. “And for a businessman like me, that’s all that matters. There’s a fine line between what you can own in this country, and what you can’t. It all comes down to the legal definition of what it is you want to claim.”

“Is that why you brought me here?” Walt asked. “To give me a lesson on property rights?”

“No, Walt,” said Dimond. “I brought you here to help you understand that your *definitions* are confused. You still define Roan as the little girl who grew up next to you.”

“What do you say she is?”

Dimond pointed to the words above the fireplace and repeated, “*Ferae naturae.*”



Part Judge_0005

THE spider worked directly above him, spinning its web between two steel support beams. Judge watched the spider's progress with a detached interest while he worked out his own survival plan.

Over the last two years whenever the snarky engineers he only knew as Raj and Bob needed to upgrade the jetkill, Judge fought through the sedation to focus on what they said while they worked. *If Judge ever takes a dip in the ocean, it won't be the ocean for long*, Raj said once. Bob joked back, *The boss would have to sign him up for swimming lessons first*. They'd shared a laugh over that, because what could be funnier than the idea of *a scary freak like Judge showing up at the local YMCA for Guppy class, Level One?*

Thanks to Bob and Raj, Judge knew that even though the jetkill was built to be water resistant, saltwater would corrode electrical components in the mechanical shutter. Saltwater wasn't just found in the ocean. Sweat and tears would do. Judge couldn't work up a sweat tied to that table, so all he needed to do was cry.

He'd never cried before, at least not that he could remember. If anything, growing up in the *pre* taught you

how to internalize your emotions. He figured that crying, like everything else, would start as long as the right switch was flipped. He concentrated on his physical discomfort, but the drugs in his system took off too much of the edge for that to be effective. He thought about the people in his life. It was a short list. The engineers and techs—Bob, Raj, Felix. Even the ones that treated him like a human were afraid of him, but that fact didn't produce any tears. His parents. Judge barely remembered them. Nothing there. Roan. Just anger. Angry tears would work, but none came.

Judge had never expected Dimond to go this far. He knew they weren't friends. He knew Dimond was using him, same as Roan, but while she was kept locked away in the Duomo, Judge was given free rein—within the confines of the silo, anyway. Now *he* was imprisoned, while the spaghetti monster ran around topside, no doubt clueless about what to do. He'd made the mistake of thinking that Dimond treated him differently out of respect. It had just been a ploy to make Judge feel safe. He'd walked right into this, eye wide open.

There it was. He tapped into the regret and betrayal like a well, and the tears gathered in the corner of his good eye. He tilted his head as much as the brace allowed, and after a few moments, the tears breached the bridge of his nose and began to flood the jetkill.

The IV kept him fully hydrated. As long as he was able to tear up, he'd keep at it until the jetkill cracked. Chaos was his only weapon against them. The restraints were a bigger

problem. A few carefully placed vaks would free him from the table, but if he damaged the jetkill enough to override the controls, he'd no longer have the precision to avoid slicing himself in half. The only regular visitors he got were the techs who checked his vitals and changed out his fluids. If none of them had grown a conscience enough to loosen a strap yet, why would they ever?

A hangerbot zipped overhead, and its wake broke an anchor of the spider web. A single silky strand dangled and reminded him of a loose *not* in the *pre*. He saw his way out.

Through the night Judge worked on flooding the jetkill, studying the structure of the web overhead until he could see it even with his eye closed. Having no measure of time, Judge figured that morning had finally come when he heard the platform elevator bringing someone down to his level. Bright red Converse hightops and slack army green cargo pants announced who it was before Judge recognized his voice.

"I hate to see you like this, Judge," Felix said, his voice cracking as he hopped down from the platform, careful not to spill his morning coffee. "I really do."

"Then let me go."

"I wish I could."

"What's stopping you?"

"First off, I think you'd probably delete us all," Felix said. "Who could blame you, after what we've done to you? But I don't think you'd stop there."

“All those months of training, and I never knew you had such a low opinion of me.”

Felix set his mug down on the steel table. He checked Judge’s pulse, inspected the needle in his forearm, and chatted like they were old friends catching up over coffee.

“Did you know that when you were a baby,” Felix began, “we had to move our entire research operations whenever you *sneezed*.”

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“I don’t think you’d destroy the world on purpose, Judge. But by accident, yeah. Maybe.”

“How often did I sneeze?”

Felix shined a pen light in his good eye, and instead of answering Judge’s question, asked him, “What’s it feel like? To have a hole so deep inside you, it could swallow up the world?”

“Hungry,” Judge said. “And thirsty. Can I have a sip of your coffee?”

“Not a good idea,” he said. “Could stunt your growth.”

“My sister dunked me in the deep end of another dimension for a dozen years,” Judge reminded him. “I think I can handle some caffeine.”

Felix would have to release Judge from the table to let him try his coffee, and Judge knew he wouldn’t. He just wanted to give him a chance to do the right thing. He wasn’t sure why.

“I can’t” was all Felix said.

There wouldn’t be any more small talk. Fine by Judge. Felix rounded the table to check the jetkill, just as it finally gave off a spark. “Have you been *crying*?”

“I’d stand back, if I were you,” Judge replied.

The shutter slipped open, no bigger than a pinhole camera, but it was more than Judge needed to target the web. Felix pulled the remote from his shirt pocket with the speed of a gunslinger. He shut the jetkill down, but not before Judge made a half dozen vaks overhead.

Felix’s hand shook as he kept the remote pointed at Judge.

“What happened—how did you—what did you do?” Felix sputtered.

“Head’s up” was all Judge said.

A strand of vak spider web wafted down. Its anchors had given way, and the ultra-thin vak with its shimmering ribbon of light fell like a deadly band of aurora borealis.

“You know what happens next,” Judge said, trying to remain calm. “I die.”

Felix made a funny sort of whimpering sound, and then he leapt into action. He stuck the remote between his teeth so that his hands were free to loosen the straps on the table. He said something that sounded like *you’re crazy*, but the remote in his mouth made it hard to tell. Judge slipped clear, just as one end of the linear vak sliced through the metal like butter. The spider clinging to the other end of

the strand landed gracefully on the lip of Felix's mug, then shot a few centimeters more of silk to release the vak web and crawled away.

Felix spat out the remote and lunged for the wisp of web left behind, catching it by fingertips. He lifted the vak web from its descent through the floor, slicing the table in half again. It swayed dangerously close to him, and he twisted his body away from it, holding it at arm's length like a poisonous snake. He looked pleadingly at Judge.

"Are you crazy? This wouldn't have just killed *you!*" he cried. "You could have destroyed the whole planet."

"Then congratulations, Felix Kwan," Judge said. "You just saved the world."

"So what am I supposed to do now?"

"My advice?" Judge said, sweeping Felix's coffee mug off the mangled metal bed and taking a long sip. "Try not to sneeze."

Judge yanked the needles and tubing from his body, scooped up Felix's remote, and headed for the elevator. He knew the way out from here.

About the Author



MARIANN MURRAY

A native of Kentucky, **Isadora Deese** is a freelance writer and lab admin at MIT. A graduate of Indiana University and Boston University Master's Playwriting Program, her writing explores the evolving connections between technology, art, and nature that are shaping our near future.

Isadora helped coordinate some of the first iGEM (International Genetically Engineered Machine) competitions at MIT, and co-wrote *Adventures in Synthetic Biology* with Drew Endy and the Synthetic Biology Working Group, illustrated by Chuck Wadey. In 2005 *Adventures in Synthetic Biology* was

the first comic to be on the cover of *Nature*, and continues to be translated, most recently into Norwegian.

Isadora was hired in 2012 to write five short films on the history of biosafety and the future of synthetic biology for the National Science Foundation. She is currently on the Board of the BioBuilder Educational Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to providing STEM curriculum and materials to middle schools, high schools, and community colleges.

She is married to writer and historian Richard Samuel Deese. They live in the Boston area with their three sons and two cats.

Right of Capture marks a return to writing novels and is the first in a series of five.



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