

TERI TERRY

deception



ORCHARD

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*The stages of deception – shock, outrage, examination,
tolerance and acceptance – inevitably lead to veneration.*

*Deception can serve truth as well as truth can unseat
deception ... it's all a matter of perspective.*

Xander, *Multiverse Manifesto*

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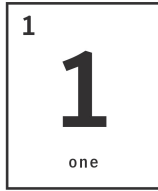
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SHOCK

Even an ending must have a beginning.

Xander, Multiverse Manifesto



SHAY

Please don't shoot me, please don't shoot me, please ...

My heart beats so slow I almost think fear has made it stop.

Instead, it is time that has stilled. What should be a rush of blood in my veins pauses, waits. A bird's cry seems to hang in the sky above me, the notes separating out and then joining back together. If I must measure the rest of my life in these small things, then they will go slow, as slow as possible, to extend my time on this earth.

Please don't shoot me, please don't shoot me ...

The soldier's horror and indecision batter against me – a kaleidoscope of sensations painted on waves of something like colour and sound that make up *him*, as he is now: his Vox, Dr 1 called it. And his fear is not just of the disease, but of *me*. But this wars inside him with what his eyes see before him: a girl, hands held forwards, on her knees in the dirt.

Yet who would blame him if he pulled the trigger?

Please don't shoot me, please ...

The temptation to attack his aura – to stop his hands and make him fall – almost overwhelms me. But if I did, what

would the point have been in leaving Kai and coming here? The authorities *must* listen to me. They have to know that survivors like me are carriers; that the epidemic started here, underground on this island. If I attack their guard, why would they listen to anything I might say?

Though maybe they already know. Maybe the RAF base on this Shetland island is part of the cover-up, and this is all for nothing.

Please ...

His hands tighten on his gun.

My head is swimming. I've stopped breathing; I can't bring myself to take a breath until I know what he will do.

His aura shifts; it deepens with resolve. He's made a decision.

Eyes still on me, one hand moves away from his gun as he reaches down for a radio.

I drop – almost collapse – to the ground, filling my lungs with air in a rush. I can hear the murmur of his voice but not the words.

Be brave, Shay. Be brave like Kai would have been if he were here.

Now that my heart is beating in normal time again it thumps too fast in my chest, and my breathing is shallow and quick. Exhausted from days of not sleeping much and then walking through the night, I lie down on the ground and look at the calm blue sky above me. My barriers are up in case Callie has noticed I'm missing, is searching for me, and that makes the world around me feel detached and distant.

I focus inside, instead: on slowing and deepening each breath. And despite my fear, exhaustion has my mind drifting in that weird place that comes just before sleep.

Does Kai know yet that I tricked him, that I've left?

Maybe he's still asleep.

I imagine his eyes closed, lashes dark on his cheek, breathing gentle, a half-smile of pleasant dreams on his lips.

And then my dream self is there, fingers in his hair, stroking his bare chest where his heart beats under his skin.

Click.

My hand stills. What was that?

Click. A harsh, jarring sort of sound, like metal on rock.

I'm confused, and then come back to here, now – to my body lying in the dirt.

It's footsteps. Someone is coming.

I push sleep away and sit up.

Walking towards me are two men and one woman, all in head-to-toe biohazard suits. Execution squad or welcome committee? They're remote, muffled by the barriers of their suits – their auras are still there, but half strangled.

The woman takes the lead.

'Good morning. I'm Dr Morgan. And you are?'

'Shay McAllister.'

'I understand you've told our sentry that you are a survivor of the Aberdeen flu. And that you are a carrier.'

'Yes. That's right.'

'How do you know you are a carrier?'

'Everywhere I've gone the epidemic has followed. I didn't know; I realised after. I could show you on a map where I've been and tell you when, and then you'd see.'

She listens, nods; what I can see of her face behind the transparent front plate of the helmet of her suit is guarded and giving nothing away, but it is there, in her aura. They knew – or, at least, suspected – as much.

'Why did you come to Shetland?'

'To trace the cause of the epidemic. It wasn't from Aberdeen

at all; it came from here. Underground.'

They exchange glances. A ripple of alarm passed through them when I said *underground*, but I can't read why.

'You'd better come with us,' she says. She hesitates, then holds out a hand.

I take hers in mine, scramble to my feet. The suit is cold, metallic; the form of her hand vague underneath its glove. Any warmth her hand may have doesn't penetrate.

'We haven't enough suits to cover the base, so we need you to put one on before we go in. All right?'

I notice then that one of them is carrying a suit over his shoulder. He passes it to me.

'I've guessed the size about right, I think,' she says, and shows me how to step into it. When it closes over my head I have to fight to not struggle, to not push it away. It snaps shut and seals. She explains the controls, and how to breathe inside it. The filtered air tastes dull and removed from the island.

We walk down the hill. I feel clumsy, like the earth under my feet is too distant to walk on with any certainty.

As if I'm separate from it, and will never be part of it again.