



## RAYAN PHILLIPS

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Rayan grew up jumping between the Welsh Valleys and the West Country, using books to make friends in the many schools he went to. Favourites from childhood include *The Spiderwick Chronicles* and *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, which have greatly influenced his love of the weird and fantastical. Coming out as transgender during his bachelors, he grew to love LGBT YA stories, but always wanted a sci-fi/fantasy edge to them. He worked at a stationery shop during his four years at university, which did nothing to help with his notebook addiction

### *About Children of Tomorrow*

THE CYCLE STARTS ANEW. THE CHILDREN OF TOMORROW RISE ONCE MORE.

Mitch's life is in shambles. Bullied for being transgender, misunderstood by his parents, and now he's seeing monsters. When he finally leaves the house after a life-changing accident, Mitch is harassed by a bully from school in a men's bathroom, and unleashes a blast of unknown power in self-defence.

Now Mitch is determined to learn how to fight. Approached by an organisation called *The Children of Tomorrow*, he must battle unknown creatures and keep the world in balance. But he's not doing it alone. He's got a few friends by his side ... and some enemies.

*rayanrhysphillips@gmail.com*  
*@rayanroar*

# CHILDREN OF TOMORROW

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## *Chapter One*

Let my parents' voices wash over me like a violent wave. It's hard not listening to them, especially when they're arguing about me. If Matthew was here they wouldn't say a word, but of course they left him behind. This is just between us three. A secret visit to the doctor that no one can know about.

I gaze out the car window, watching the heavy rain belt against the glass. I focus on a few droplets and watch them race. I want the third one to win, the one that's a little behind. I can see that the other two are slowing down, finding a harder, squigglier route down the glass, making it complicated. The third droplet makes a straight drop to the bottom. I love an underdog story.

'Mara's only sixteen ...' Mum says. Her voice is high, about to break. Tears will follow soon. 'She can't put herself through that and you know it, Rob.'

'I know,' Dad says. I don't know why they're arguing. They're both on the same side: against me. 'I know, I know. I don't want her to do it either.'

'I won't be able to, then,' I speak up, my arms crossed. I'm still staring out the window, the dull grey motorway showing me all of the British countryside's best sights, like a green mound, a sign for a McDonald's and a caravan. 'You have control over my life until I'm eighteen, so you can just say no.'

'We don't have control over you, Mara,' Mum says, leaning back in her seat to face me. 'We just want to do what's right for you.'

I want to argue back. She knows what *I* want, what *I* feel is best for me. Otherwise we wouldn't have made this trip. Part of me hoped that they could have been swayed to see it from my point of view. I'd arranged the talk with

the specialist. They were the ones that agreed to go along, see what it was all about. But now with all the talk of injections and hormones and operations swimming in their heads, along with all the shit I've had to put up with in school, I don't think they'll ever allow me to think about it again.

The glass of the window shakes as heavier droplets of rain hit against it, like they're desperate to get in. In the distance there's the distinct rattling of thunder, shaking up the sky. Dad's hands are white as he grips the steering wheel hard. There's no one else on the road right now, and I can see him getting more and more frustrated as he and Mum talk about me. He wants to get home quick.

I pull my hood over my short, curly hair, cut fresh last week. It's getting cold, and considering how old this car is, I'd be surprised if there weren't gaps in the doors letting in the storm. I can see the city down in the valley: its tall blocks of concrete that are ninety percent graffiti, its brightly painted houses that dance on the side of the hills.

My eye flickers, like something ran past really close to my face.

I look around the car. There's nothing, not even a fly that's escaped the rain. It must've been one of those things, a trick of the eye.

'... and I don't know how the school will feel about that ...' Mum whispers.

Something runs in the opposite direction. I'm sure of it. I'm sure there was something this time. Maybe it's a fox or rabbit, frantically trying to find shelter. It must be super close to the window, whatever it is, 'cause I feel like it's right in my face.

The car jerks slightly to the left.

'Dad!' I shout, my heartrate racing. 'What you do that for?'

'Wasn't me,' he mumbles, flexing his knuckles. 'Must've been this bloomin' wind.'

There's a flash of light. I jump. We all do.

'Oh dear,' Mum says. 'Here comes the lightning.'

But I'm sure the light came from just outside the window. Lightning couldn't have struck that close to us, could it? I'm sure we're safe, though. Saw a guy on TV prove that lightning won't hurt you if you're in a car.

I press my face against the glass, trying to get a good look of the outside world. I manage to see some things. The bleak black clouds that have wiped

away the spring afternoon, the plants on the side of the road being battered by the harsh wind, a looming shadow, creeping closer to the car ...

There's something out there.

Something bigger than I thought.

A deer? A horse?

No. It's the wrong shape. It's not galloping, it's ...

Scuttling.

Like a spider.

'Dad!' I yell.

'What? What's wrong?' he says, a little harsher than I would like. 'I'm driving the best I can in this weather.'

It's scuttling alongside us, keeping up with the car. It's right next to us, surely Mum and Dad can see it! It's hairy and it's fast and it's SO. HUGE.

But they're not reacting at all. They're just sitting there, still thinking on what happened earlier. How the doctor explained to them what 'transgender' means, and what choices I have to make me feel like myself, and how they know just what's right *for me*.

I sniff back tears. What is wrong with me?

I shake my head. I blink rapidly. Maybe I'm imagining things, but it's not going away. I consider bashing my head against the window, knocking some sense into me.

'I know you're going through a difficult time,' Mum says in response to my sniffing. 'Puberty was hard for me when I was a young girl ...'

'But I'm not a -' I say. I don't finish the sentence. Not because I can't say it, but because one of those spindly limbs crashes down on the car, crushing Dad's door, making him let go of the wheel, making us spin out of control.

I scream. Mum screams. Dad screams. I close my eyes.

The car collides with something metal and solid. I'm flung forward, caught by the seatbelt. I feel a sharp pain erupt from my ribs. Tears escape from my closed eyes, almost forcing me to open them, to witness what is happening.

I can't hear Mum. I can't hear Dad.

Then there's eyes, a whole bunch of them. White and glowing like orbs suspended in space. I realise I haven't opened *my* eyes, yet I'm seeing that thing's face like it's real and in front of me. I want to lash out, fight against it,

get it away from me. But I can't. I can't raise my arms and I can't open my eyes. I'm paralyzed with fear.

I feel something prickle my arm. Hairs like needles, scratching me, hurting me.

And then I feel dizzy. I feel something drift on to me, like I'm being covered in sugar. I want to throw up. I feel my stomach lurch and I retch, but nothing comes out. My hands drop to my sides. I feel the rain drip on to my face.

And then I see shadows dance in my vision. They tease me, they want me to catch them.

And then I hear sirens blaring in the distance. Their cry echoing round the valley.

And then I feel myself drift, like I'm sleeping, and not sleeping, stuck beside me, watching myself.

And then ...

And then ...

Darkness.

\*

*'Miss? Miss! Can you hear me?'*

My head hurts and I feel something sticky drip down over my eye. I try to open them both but only my left one can see things properly. The other one just sees dark, gloopy red.

'Can you say your name? Stick with me here. Can you say your name?'

'M ... Mitch ... ' I breathe.

'Can you repeat that? Can you speak louder?'

'Mara ... ' I say louder, my lungs feeling like they've been stabbed.

'Mara, stay with me. We are going to lift you into the ambulance and -'  
I can't remember what happens after that.

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I wake up in the hospital to broken ribs, a fractured wrist, a gash across my head, and the news that my parents are gone, killed instantly by a strange, freak accident.

They're amazed I survived.

I'm too hurt to cry. Tears trickle down my cheeks but moving, breathing, sobbing, yelling – all make my ribs feel like they are being pulled out, one by one.

I'm told that they think there was something wrong with the car, and combined with the rain and my dad's speed, that basically sealed our fate.

Their fate.

I'm still here.

I don't mention anything about the weird creature I saw. I'm not even sure that was real. My mind is frazzled, and every time I try to think back to the moment it's like I'm watching static, flickers of something trying to break through. When I fall asleep I see it in my dreams, and when I wake up I see shadows dance in my vision. They look like tadpoles, and tentacles, and thick, spidery legs. They're trying to get me, but I shake my head and they disappear. But I feel like something is always there, clouding my brain. I don't mention the dreams. They've heard me scream at night. They tell me it's normal to have trauma-related nightmares.

I also don't mention that I'm not Mara. Now's not the time to come out to all the doctors and nurses that are poking and prodding me, asking how I'm feeling when it's obvious that my life is falling apart around me. The use of my deadname loses its sting after a while, like a throbbing pain that you just get used to. Though, as I look through the cards people have sent me, I resist the urge to rip them up, both for writing the wrong name and for thinking that they can make me feel anything through a card.

All but one are from distant family, unable to help in any other way than a few words of condolence. The one that matters is the one that doesn't say 'condolences' or 'get well soon' or 'thinking of you', instead having an illustration of a superhero. Inside is a message: 'You are super. We are here for you, Mitch. From Dan, Nikki, and Skye xxx'.

I hug the card close to my chest whenever I have a private moment. The ink has smudged from where I've let tears drip on to it. I keep it under my pillow, worried that my brother will take a peep at it and notice that it's addressed to someone other than Mara.

I also don't want to suddenly spring a coming out on my brother, Matthew. At age twenty, and with no other family nearby to look after us, my brother is now my legal guardian. He has enough on his plate with social

workers and inheritance stuff to fret over to worry about his little sister actually being a boy called Mitch.

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There's a few days where I'm still in the hospital, and he comes to visit me and he cries, which he hasn't done in front of me since he was twelve. And that was over a lost football game.

'I must protect my little sister ...' He repeats to himself. My stomach lurches whenever he uses that word. 'I must keep you safe.'

Life seems to pause after that.

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Going home is bittersweet. Everything still being the same is equal parts comforting and depressing. A pile of shoes that need to be sorted out. A tower of official-looking letters from various intimidating sources (that's gonna continue to grow for some time), those breakfast bars that only Mum liked will have to be eaten soon, or just chucked away. Eventually.

I go to my room and shut it all away.

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My life is on repeat for the next four months. The same dull, depressing slog all day, every day.

The routine:

1. Wake up (usually at midday).
2. Take painkillers for my ribs (until the one-month mark, when I'm told to stop).
3. (Optional steps) Shower/put on fresh clothes, though only if I feel incredibly gross.
4. Read/watch/play a game until it turns dark.
5. Have food brought to me by Matthew once he's back from work (although when I say food, I mean microwave pasta that would make Mum cry).
6. Lie to him about leaving my room to eat lunch.

7. Message my friends and promise that I'll hang out this summer, but back out of any plans they make (also NEVER invite them round. I don't deserve them).
8. Try to sleep, if the nightmares permit it.

Amazing routine. Brilliant. Well done me.

My life can't get any worse, can it?