

Tab 1

All Us Coyotes

A Novel by Xylus Winters

Chapter 1

Rue holds the watch in their hand, counting the numbers with silent words. They hold a hand across my back, their palm firmly pressing into a vertebrae. There's a slight breeze coming over the steppe pushing air into our faces. Even still, the world is frozen in place. Not a sound flutters by. The ticking of the seconds hand picks up as my focus twists down the suction of my scope. A red fluorescent triangle twitching from the tiniest of movements.

"Circular breathing," Rue whispers, their hand still stead on my back and the watch still gently laid in their other palm. "Calm, calm."

I bring a hand off my rifle and stick one finger up, silencing Rue. No noise, only concentration. Rue nestles deeper into the rocks beside me, watching the horizon and then flicking their eyes back down to the watch. My eye traces the landscape of The Deseret, following the dirt and rocks as it rolls out beyond. I finally land back on the man—on horseback, rifle held at the ready and his horses stamping the ground and flicking at the reins and chomping at the bit.

"I see them," I signal, and Rue pushes down on my back to get a direction of my scope. They flick open the compass at their side and check the heading.

"He's in place," Rue confirms. "Right on time. What is he doing?"

I watch as Colter brings a pickaxe over his head and drives it down into a railroad spike.

"Removing the ties," I relay, feeling the calm disturb. My rifle sways more.

"Yep, on time," Rue leans back down into the rocky outcropping and brings the watch close to my ear. "Ready?"

I pull the bolt back, revealing a round with a distinctive yellow marking on the side. A small paint splotch, left there by some munitions expert. Explosive-tipped anti-material round, not enough to punch through a tank but it's enough for what we need. I swing the rifle around, finally finding my scope land on a large white object hurtling across the desert. A white train, painted with red and blue stripes down the side. The train lets out a light plume of black smoke from the engine and travels down the rails at a high speed.

The ticking fills my ears, the small metallic whirs of the machinery counting every second down. I pull back from the scope and check the rangefinder again. I dial in the scope a little and then pull back in. The dirt beneath my chest turns into clouds, the wind goes still, the ticking draws on. Each moment is longer, each tick takes longer to go by. The world goes silent altogether as I track the train with my scope, placing the reticle right on the wheel carriage. My scope is perfectly dialed for the distance and speed. I just need to take the shot.

My finger traces the edge of the trigger, feeling the sharp metal bite back. Softly I present more pressure, and more pressure, until the trigger suddenly gives way and bounces back. The rifle kicks back into my shoulder, pushing air from my lungs and shocking sound back into my ears. I remain focused through the scope. The bullet takes several seconds, then hits one of the train's metal wheels right above the track. A small explosion rocks the train, sending out a small shock-wave and pushing the train upward and off the track. A plume of sand and dust is kicked into the air on the other side of the train as the beast slows and carefully wobbles before each car begins to buckle into the other and the engine lays onto its side.

I pull away from the scope and notice I'm breathing heavy. Rue's face, obscured by the balaclava they always wear, smiles—a wrinkle in the fabric, but I've been around them for long enough that I know it when I see it. Rue flicks the watch back over their wrist and locks it in place. They then press a dial in, starting the count up. 2 hours.

I pull my gloves from my pockets and slide them over my hands. Rue gets up from their prone and picks up the rifle, folding the bipod and carrying it over to the horses. I follow, dragging my boots through the rubble and brush. Once at my horse I rest a hand gently on its neck and slip into my saddlebag, pulling out my binoculars.

I put them up to my eyes and look back down at the derailing. Colter is there with his rifle out and there are some people clawing their way out of the first car. I place the binoculars back in the saddlebag and pull myself up into the saddle. Rue behind me has finished putting the sniper away and mounts their steed.

“Lead the way!” they call, and I kick my horse into gear and keep tension on the reins, directing her downward. Poppy, my horse, is a hearty girl—a Grullo Nokota, a distinctive shade of black-and-grey-and-white mixed together. She's specific, and she likes to be told what to do. Tell her, and she'll do it. No two ways about it. Better think through that command twice before you give it. She'll jump off a cliff if you kick her around one. Keeps you on your toes.

Rue rides behind me and their horse utters its distinctive rebellion by snorting. She moves anyways, pulling the reins more than being directed by them. Arbor, a blue dun Mustang, stands just a hand or two shorter than Poppy. She got a leg full of flak from a shotgun early in life, but thankfully a vet was able to fix it up and now she only limps in a trot. To make up for it she learned quickly how to sprint into a gallop rather than gradually speeding up. Makes no difference to us.

Poppy leads me through the rocks herself, my reins only correcting her back into the general direction. She makes quick work of the hillside and soon we are back running through the sandy sagebrush flats, heading toward the now-smoking train on its side. From a distance I can barely make out the full extent of the damage, but as we get closer I can start to understand it. Most of the cars are still upright, if not off kilter a little. The first two cars were completely buckled at the joints and came apart, laying on their side. Colter aims at the patrons who managed to make it out of the train and have lined them

all up against the cars, rifles toward them. I come to a stop and pull my own assault rifle from my saddle, holding it at the ready and looking over those who Colter has lined up. Colter holds his rifle at the ready, aiming it at each of them, yelling demands for them to empty their pockets.

The patrons are rich—there's no two ways about that. No flowery language to help make that aspect land easier. I'm not afraid of that fact, I love it. I'm fueled by it. Watching these scum pilfer through their trousers and pull out dimes and lights and rings and wallets makes me feel a great sense of glee.

"Anything good so far?" I ask, Colter nods. Colter is a hoary man with a mane to his head and a spot of blue eyes to accentuate it. He has a large beehive tattoo on his large arms—a bodybuilder in a previous life. They made useful now.

"Nothing concrete," he tells, his voice a twist of a east-Texas accent; part of it the result of Bells Palsy. "But we do have lead."

"A lead?"

Colter walks up to Poppy and lays a calming hand on her neck. He nods.

"Buster over there talkin' about a house," Colter's eyes meet mine and I feel a prick of cold hit the back of my head. Blue pearls set against his oily blond hair, slicked back behind his ears. A cigarette is perched in the valley of his left ear and his breath stinks of gum rot.

"What about a house?"

"East of here, that-a-ways," Colter gestures off to the west where the mountains climb high and their white frosted peaks scrape against the ceiling of the world. My heart lurches in my chest as I look at them. Still the tallest mountains I've ever seen. "Says there's a 'treasure' within."

I lean over the horn of my saddle and eye the fleeced patrons. A house, deep in the Utah Wasteland. Questions race in my head and memories flood back, but I try my best to put them aside. My heart burns with rage again. "What said it?"

Colter walks off, picks out the first in the line, and hauls him over to me. He's dressed in a pair of black slacks and a white dress shirt tucked into it neatly. He has on brown loafers and over his eyes are a pair of large metal-frame glasses with brown-tinted lenses, but just barely.

"Tell her what you told me," Colter speaks into the man's ear, and he starts coughing up sentences.

"There's a house southwest of here, near the Arches. The house is guarded but it... it has a treasure inside," he says, his voice gravely—as if he just woke up. I watch him intently,

my brow furrowed. Rue gets off their horse behind me and begins zip-tying the patron's hands and tossing them to the side.

The Informant looks at me again and his eyes lock onto my throat. My heart stops a beat as he looks at me, his eyes suddenly going wide—not a noticeable wide, undoubtedly a wide that Colter and Rue would pick up on. We who have seen it notice it. I raise my chin to him and reach for my sidearm.

“Yes, there is a treasure there indeed,” the Informant continues, his words twisting like a snake and his eyes locking into mine and dilating further. “A treasure you will want to see.”

I feel a constricting over my throat. I pull my sidearm free and level on his head in one quick action, pulling the trigger and sending a spray of blood out of the back of his skull. Colter yipes and whistles and hollers, letting the man's body fall limp onto the sand below. Poppy whinnies and jumps but settles herself down. I slide my pistol back into its holster. Gunpowder whiffs fill my nostrils.

“Is it a good lead or what?!” Colter comes back to my side excitedly. I shake my head.

“It's a good lead,” I tell him. He cheers and picks his rifle back up from the ground.

“Alright!” he cheers. “Riches and glory, riches and glory!”

He pats my horse and walks off toward Rue, ready to tell the news. He looks back at me and points, “That's my girl!”

I don't offer a smile or a nod. I switch my attention back to our looted captives. My chest beats hard. My throat still feels the tension. In my pocket I pull out a pen and a paper pad, flipping it open and scrawling on one of the pages. Simple things, thoughts and feelings that can be surmised quickly. I flip the notebook closed and stuff them back in my pocket, turning me head to the East.

I look back at the mountains and witness their prominence. Ice flows down where rivers will soon run, their tops capped in ice which cuts off perfectly just a half-quarter of the way down—a strange sight for mid-July, but a new reality. Despite being from this land, the deserted Utah Wasteland, I'd not spent a lot of time up near the Wasatch front. Dad raised me down in the red rocks, along the banks of the Colorado river. Up here they called it Deseret, back when people lived here. Now there's nothing but roving cattle bands and the occasional prospector.

“Maia!” Rue calls, and I turn back my attention to them. They've finished tying up the prisoners and are calling me over to the second-to-last car. I swing my leg off Poppy and dig my boots into the soft soil, pulling my rifle up to my shoulder and running for them. The second-to-last car is shifted off the rails and tilted to an angle, making climbing up

onto it difficult. Colter climbed in first and helps Rue and I up onto the car. Colter kicks the next door down and orders everyone to the floor.

I adjust into the car last, angling one leg up onto what once was the floor and my other leg onto what once was the wall, straddling it and keeping my gun at the ready. The car is dark and dusty and there are coughs and crying sounding from each room. A sleeper car, filled with a dozen-or-so private cabins. Colter calls toward me from the front.

“Maia! Get the upper level!”

I nod and wheel back, finding the stairs up to the second level of the train and climbing them—a series of odd actions as the stairs went up and then turned, saving space as to be compact but making them difficult to climb when the train listed at an angle. Up on the second level there are more private rooms, more dust, but it’s a little brighter as the sun peers in through the windows. There’s coughing here and some crying, although it’s more muted. To my immediate right is a bathroom, covered in stainless steel. A kid lies in there, the door open, with a large gash on his forehead and blood pouring from it. He whimpers and holds his hand over the wound, bottom lip kicked out in a massive pout.

I lay my gun on it’s strap, kneeling and walking in to get a closer look at him. My heart beats at the sight—he’s preteen, maybe 12 or 13. Black, head kept in a close shave but rather unkempt. His face still hasn’t hardened from puberty, and I notice a distinctive ring around his throat. I lean my head to the side to get a better look. My heart lurches in place. I think about the man I shot earlier. A collar is strapped across the boy’s throat. My eyes crease into a furrow and the boy watches me with one eye wide open, the other covered by his hand to stop the bleeding. He is barefoot and wearing white shorts and the blood soaks into them.

I hear footsteps behind me and quickly wheel around, but not fast enough. A young man, older than the boy on the ground but not yet an adult, quickly throws his fist into my gut, punching hard into my bulletproof vest. The blow is strong and fierce but my vest sends the energy out into the rest of my body, keeping me safe. His other hand reaches for my face and I quickly kick out at his legs but he’s taller than me and stronger.

Feeling a rush of adrenaline ping into my heart, I quickly push both hands against his chest and push back with my legs, thrusting him back into the wall where his head slams against wood paneling. His skull makes an awful *crack* as it recoils back into the wall, and I keep him pressed up there as he kicks and flails, keeping my body out of harms way. Strength and power mean little against technique and training.

“Maia?!” Colter calls up the stairs. I feel my grip slipping.

“Help!” I scream. Colter rushes up the stairs and sees the young man. Colter responds in kind and throws his gloved-fist into the boy’s face, and I release the boy and he falls to the ground. Colter proceeds to drop over the boy and meet his face a dozen more times

with his fist. I stand back in awe and watch, feeling my chest tighten even more. Blood pools beneath the young man's head and whimpers utter out of his mouth and Colter finally backs off, panting, and stands. Blood drips from his gloves, saturated into the fibers. My eyes trace a thin band of fabric around *his* throat too. A collar.

I shake my head, "You didn't have to do all that."

"You asked for help." Colter wrings out his gloves, globules of sludgy blood drip out onto the floor. My eyes follow beyond him, into the hallway, and notice more children poking their heads out of their cabins. More children with collars. I proceed down the hallway and push Colter out of the way. The children retreat into the cabins, closing the doors.

I trace my hand over the ceiling and notice that the light bulbs have been removed from the fixtures. The windows have an extra black coating on them, filling the cabin with a yellowish light. Each cabin has a lock on the outside of the door. Most of the cabins must have popped open in the derailment, although some at the end of the hallway are still locked and the voice of children can be heard from inside.

"Maia!" Colter yells, and I whip around. He's standing by the stairs and shrugs his shoulders. "Hard of hearing? We still have one car left."

I nod and follow him out, basically falling down the steps, and follow Colter out of the rail car. Rue holds a knapsack in one hand and a pearl necklace in the other.

"Come on," I call, and walk toward the last car. This car is completely on its side and a man is crawling out of it, blood trailing behind him. Colter pulls his handgun out and shoots the man dead.

Colter follows Rue into the car and I crawl in last. The last car in the train, clear from the layout inside that it was the diner car. Glass litters the ground, crunching under our boots as we walk amidst the carnage. Most everyone in this car is dead. Chunks of glass splinter wood like shrapnel from a grenade, ceramic lays in pieces everywhere, and there is a lingering scent of coffee and blood in the air. There's a bar to my left and the ceiling to my right and tables further down the car, all bolted to the floor. Amidst the carnage at the bar is a man dressed in a white shirt, black vest, and gold nametag. He lays slumped over the beer taps, body caught on them. Blood trickles from a shard of glass embedded in his skull, and at the right angle you can see straight through that piece of glass into the matter beneath.

Bodies lay everywhere else in the car as well. Most of them are on the floor—a couple bodies fell out of the windows on the bottom and were partially crushed. Others killed by the lurch of train, jolting them into whatever object around they could hit their head on. Flying glass, flying ceramics, flailing bodies. A woman in the back is splayed out on the ground in a revealing golden dress that dazzles in the sunlight peering through the viewing gallery. A fork sticks from her eye, but she coughs as we approach and it sends a jolt through my body.

“Ah, Jesus,” Colter mutters, seeing her. She reaches out an arm toward us and her lip quivers. She’s older, maybe in her 60s. Hair grey with dark stripes through it. Curly, like kind of curls that hang loose rather than tight to the scalp. Blood drips from her eye and she seems in shock. She hardly realizes she’s hurt.

Colter raises his gun toward her but I quickly reach out and grab the barrel and pull it down, “Colter, don’t.”

He raises an eyebrow, “Look at her.”

I shake my head, “Just... let her be.”

Colter huffs out his nose, “Whatever. I smell gas.”

“I thought I did too,” Rue mentions. “Propane.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Colter says, but not before leaning down to the old woman and unlatching the gold necklace from around her neck. It slinks off her neck and falls in a pile in her lap, coiling up like a snake. Colter grabs it and slips it into his pocket. I look at the woman’s throat again. Clean, spotless, imperfections abandon. Healthy, for a woman her age.

I clench my jaw and head out of the car. Outside, I realize the smell of death back in the dining car—outside is so much fresher, so much cleaner.

“Oy!” I hollar for the horses. They come prancing over, six of them, like a herd of wild mustangs. They shake their manes and whinny and trot and stamp the ground as they come to a stop, covered in saddlebags of all sorts. Two of the horses, Killjay and Rojan, are actually brown mules. On their backs they carry packs of tents and rations.

There is, of course, Poppy and Arbor—mine and Rue’s respectively. Colter’s horse, a tense black Canadian horse named Oa, a stallion. Mean as wasps and half as tame as a javelina, if he had tusks he’d gore you in an instant. It’s a wonder Colter rides him as well as he does, Oa shakes his reins and stamps the ground and snorts whenever someone’s on him. Still, he goes like a rocket and he’s big enough to bowl anyone over. Just as I expect, Oa chews on his bit as he approaches, leading the rest of the horses.

Colter slings his rifle across his back and pats Oa on the neck, and Oa whinnies in response. Colter is the biggest of us all—six-foot and some change, with flesh wrapped tightly against bulging muscles and a short bed of blond hair on the top of his head. He wears a strange ring around the middle finger of his left hand. I’ve never gotten a good look at it, but it’s rough and dark and metallic.

“Maia!” he calls, holding a bag he picked up off the train: a duffel bag, blue and black. I walk over and he throws it to the ground. “Look at this.”

I pull the zipper open and look at what's inside. Flippers, a vest, a regulator. Equipment for scuba diving.

"Interesting," I comment. "Any of this of use?"

Colter shrugs, "Figured if there's anything there, you'd find it."

I nod and rummage through the bag a bit. I find an emergency canister of air, enough for maybe a couple of minutes underwater but compact enough that I might as well take it. I carry it over to my saddle and pack it in the bags.

Rue is already up in the saddle, pulling the reins and pointing Arbor toward the low volcanic hills to the north. The wind beats into their face, a cold from coming in from the north, and pulls at the green-and-white shamagh covering their face, except for the eyes. Rue never walked around without a mask of some kind. I really only knew them from their eyes. I pull myself up into the saddle and kick Poppy over to Rue. Once we're side-by-side, and out of earshot of the other two, I lean over and ask a question.

"You hear about that house?" I ask, leveraging myself on the horn of my saddle.

Rue nods, once, "Yeah."

"Did you go upstairs in that car?" I ask.

Rue shakes their head, "No, what was up there?"

"Kids," I say, exasperated. "But... like us."

Rue's hand reaches up to their throat and gently sneaks underneath the shamagh, then back. I can see the rage boiling in their eyes.

"There were dozens of them, all locked in state rooms," I continue. "That, coupled with the rumor of that house..."

Rue's eyes meet mine and they scream. Hazel, fluorescent, powerful. "You think he's still alive, don't you?"

I shrug, "Who else would be living down there, in the middle of a wasteland?"

Rue nods.

Colter yanks on the reins and wheels Oa around to face us, "Alright, let's get!"

I nod toward him, "Let's talk about this later."

"Sure," Rue kicks Arbor and I kick Poppy and our posse retreats from the derailment.

We packed up camp last night, in case we needed to bug out, but thankfully that wasn't necessary. Deciding that we liked the previous night's spot, our horses and the mules maintained steady course across the high mountain plain. The horses are happy enough out here—the sand is soft on their feet and the land is open and flat. Still, you can't escape the wildlife that terrorizes them. Colter, riding up front, suddenly has to rein in Oa as he rears and bleats out a terrified whinny. All of the horses get jumpy and spread out, looking toward the ground as we try to hold them steady. Colter pulls out a handgun and fires it into the ground. Poppy shakes her head and the mane on her neck flops from side to side. I flick at a big deer fly that comes to land on my arm.

“What was it?” I call up, holding myself firm on the horn of my saddle. Colter wrestles with Oa—he bucks and kicks and sprints, and Colter holds on as tight as he can. Oa will calm down, and Colter will hold on like his life depends on it. It's not like this is the first time Oa got flighty.

Rue hops down and walks over to the stop Colter shot at. They pick up a long scaly tube, a trickle of blood pouring from it, “Rattle'r!”

A smile pulls across my face and I can't help but laugh, “Better Oa than Poppy.”

“He's a big one!” Rue exclaims. Indeed, the snake is big. I lower myself from the saddle and walk up to Rue, grabbing its tail and looking over its body. Black scales form diamonds across its back.

“Western Diamondback,” I note, pointing to the shapes. “It didn't get Oa, did it?”

Rue shrugs, “I'm sure if it did, Colter'd be on the ground.”

I nod in agreement, “What should we do with it?”

Rue shrugs, “Meat is meat, no?”

Rue pulls out a knife from a sheath in their waistband and separates the snake from its scaly skin, tossing the skin aside and pulling out the guts. What's left is a slightly-smaller tube of meat, which they wrap in a blanket and place in a saddlebag.

Colter comes running up beside us on Oa, who is still whinnying and stamping his feet but he has at least stopped bucking.

“Come on, we're burning daylight!” he yells, then he looks at the dead snake on the ground beside Rue. “You do something to that snake?”

“Meat for a stew,” Rue explains.

Colter nods, beckons Rue on, and we ride.

We made it to the campsite just before dark, as the sun finally sat down on the line of the horizon in the west and bubbled in the heat of the late afternoon air. We chose the spot yesterday due to its proximity to water, a small trickling stream coming off a late glacier on a tall long-since-died volcanic mountain. Several basaltic boulders lay interspersed by mangled juniper trees and in the center of this clear is the campfire we laid the night before. I led Poppy over to a patch of grass beside the river and clicked my mouth, calling Killjay and Rojan over as well. Rojan flicks his ears at me and I can't help but feel a smile inch across my face as he walks over. Mules and Donkeys always seem to have a snarky grin across their faces, and Rojan absolutely knew what it meant. I pat his neck as he approaches and then sneak over to his pack as his head ducks down to munch on the dead grass. I pull the straps loose and unload the tents, handing them off to Rue who has also come to lead their own horse. Colter dismounts over by the fire, patting Oa to tell them to scurry off. Rue hoists themselves off Arbor and tries to slip the bit from her mouth.

"Damn nag," Rue mutters, Arbor twists her head up and away from Rue and sticks her lip up and out in a teasing act. Rue manages to get a hand on the bit and pulls it out of her mouth, collecting it and the reins and packing it in a saddlebag.

"You thought about what we talked about?" I ask.

"I think we need a plan," Rue accepts. "Before we decide to do anything."

"Right," I nod, kicking the ground.

"We can't just get up and leave," Rue motion over to the other two. "You know what happens if we leave."

I nod, hoisting a tent up into my arms. Rue brushes their hands off on their pants and pulls them up to their kevlar vest, pulling on the shoulder straps. "We got a good thing going here. I need to know we are *ready* before we leave."

"What's that mean?" I raise an eyebrow. "Money? Colter's got money—*all* our money."

"I'm sure he wouldn't object to us taking it," Rue gestures, leaning over the back of Poppy. She doesn't move an inch, continuing to munch of the grass.

"You're naive," I reject. "Colter isn't letting *anyone* touch that money."

"Whatever," Rue breaks eye contact and raises their hand to shoo me away. "I'm still thinking about it is all. Talk to me later."

"Help me set up the tents instead," I beckon them over, and they nod and pull their gloves off and stuff them in their pocket. I lay the tent out on a flat section of land and toss Rue the mallet and pull the tent out so it's taut. We anchor it to the ground with stakes and prop it up with a two long metal pole. Each tent is sizable, and we have four

of them. The space inside is enough for a couple people to sit inside while another sleeps in the corner, and tall enough to stand up straight.

We set up two tents and Colter sets up the last one. In the meantime while Rue and I were putting up the tents, he had started up a fire in the pit and got a grill over it. Colter then fetched the snake from Arbor's saddlebags and a grill from one of the mules.

I've had snake a couple times before, it's not a desirable piece of game. Chewy, stringy, extremely lean. But it's edible, and although I'd happily take a steak or a leg of lamb over it any day, I'll admit: it's not that bad. Thankfully Colter is a good cook—a rare talent amidst the presence of a madman—and managed to grill the thing up in small circular steaks seasoned with sage and wild mint.

While the snake steaks grill, Colter fetches a bundle of dried leaves from Oa and reveals them to me.

"Check it," Colter shows me. "Been saving these for a good day."

"Is today a good day?"

Colter nods, "After that train, we're near set. That was a *lot* of money."

"What is it?" I ask. The leaves, all dry, are pointed and aromatic and dark.

"Chinese tea," Colter explains. "Good stuff."

"I'll take some," I nod, then yell over to Rue. "Rue, go get the kettle!"

Rue nods, "On it."

I pull up my pant leg and slide my knife out of its sheath, spearing a disc of snake meat from the grill and bringing it to my mouth. I blow on it softly to cool it and ingest the aroma of fresh grilled meat. It drips slightly, liquidated fat drizzling through the seams, and I make it to my mouth and pull on the meat until I can bite a chunk off. Stringy, just as I assumed—but a little more juicy than snakes I've eaten before.

Rue sits back down by the fire and sets the now-filled kettle onto the grill. Colter thanks them and opens the lid of the kettle and adds several stalks of the Mormon Tea, which he spliced open to better help them release their compounds. Rue also spears a slab of meat, turning their back on us all so their face points toward the darkness. I turn a little, putting my shoulder to their face. I hear the ruffle of their shamagh and then the sound of chewing in my ear.

"How much did we make?" I ask. Colter gulps down a chunk of snake and nods.

"Good amount," he notes. "Mostly necklaces, rings—pearls, diamonds, gold, that kind of stuff. A few of the men had credit cards, but I just figured it wasn't worth it."

I shake my head, “Never is.”

“So all we gotta do now is fence it,” he explains. “This score should put us over. We can finally retreat back out East, buy a patch of land, start hiring people. Start our own company, finally.”

“Where would you go first?” I ask. There’s something interesting in the way Colter talks about his proposed mercenary company. He feels hopeful in his actions, but not in a moral way. He loves the gold and the silver, and the violence especially. For me, I find much more personal satisfaction in it. We never rob the poor, and that’s for two different reasons to us two different people. Colter doesn’t rob them because they have *nothing to steal*. I don’t rob them *because* they don’t have anything to steal.

“Burkina Faso,” Colter says, matter-of-factly.

“Where’s that?”

“West Africa,” Colter shakes his head, disappointed I don’t know. “I hear the government has a hoard of Green Gold sitting in banks out there. Old sequestered shipments meant to go to France, back in the day.”

Uranium. Green Gold is the name Colter always gives it. Swears up and down that it’s worth more than any other mineral you can dig out of the ground. More than diamonds? The answer is always yes. You can kill a few people with a diamond, but you can kill hundreds of thousands with a small amount of Uranium.

“You’re going to take down an entire country from *this*?” I point to the bag sitting next to him. Our treasure.

Colter shakes his head, “This isn’t everything I have. This just *completes* the stash, back East—and yeah, believe it or not, toppling governments is a relatively easy feat.”

I click my teeth and shake my head. Rue pulls their shamagh back over their face and turn back around, facing the group. They set the blade of their knife in the flames until it glows faintly red and then takes it out and sets it on the ground to cool.

“What about you, Rue?” Colter asks, bringing the attention off himself. “Where would you go first, with this hypothetical army?”

Rue shrugs, “I’d take the money and buy a warship. One of those beached ones in Florida. Frigate, or a Cruiser. I’d take it and sail it to Monaco and I’d lay siege to the city until they gave in to my demands.”

“Sheesh,” Colter remarks. “And what would those demands would be?”

“The Principality, of course,” they say. “Monaco is still ruled by a Prince. I’d order the prince to name me as heir and abdicate.”

“And Monaco is rich?” Colter asks.

“Yes,” Rue nods. “Filthy.”

This breaks everyone into a laugh, including myself. Then Colter breaks the laughter and asks me.

“Where would you go?”

My eyes flick down to the flames and watch them bubble out through the logs.

“I don’t know,” I admit, feeling a hold in my stomach. “I... I don’t think I’d go anywhere. I think I’d stay here.”

“There’s nothing left here. Come on, where would you *really* go?”

I shake my head, “I would stay here. I think you’re wrong... there’s more here than you can see.”

Colter purses his lips and nods, “There’s nothing here, Maia. Only a fool would look at this bleak desolation and say it’s worth saving. Look at everything you’ve been through. Everything you’ve seen. You’re from this place, right? I think I heard you saying something about it a few days ago?”

“A little further south, but yeah.”

“See, and look what they did to you. Look what the people of this *land*,” Colter, who was preparing to throw a stick into the fire, takes it and sticks it down into the ground like a blade sunk into my chest. “Did to *all* of us. I don’t want to be like those suckers that sat around and starved to death and dehydrated. I want to be like those people on the train. I don’t care how many bodies I have to walk over.”

“Those bodies are people I loved,” I bite back. “People that I cared about. Friends and family. Those people who *you* want to step over have been stepped over by people like you thousands of times. You really think *they* would let you on that train? You think they don’t talk about you in the same disgust that you talk about people *no different* from you?”

“Respect is earned, Maia. I am earning it,” Colter holds up the bag of loot.

“That’s nothing to them. That’s nothing to their dragon’s hoards. While we have spent the last couple of months robbing a couple of trains and estates, they have spent *hundreds* of years doing the same to my people. To *your* people. They’ll see your pittance and won’t even offer the spit out of their mouth.”

“And that’s why I have to be like them, Maia. We all need to transcend,” Colter waves the stick around, as if orchestrating a symphony of ghosts. “You may not think so, but I

know that we are different from these... these *people*, living in this land. The people that ran away, like cockroaches scurrying across a wall when the lights come on. This..." the bag rings. "...is our ticket out."

The moment sits still between us for a few moments. The kettle whistles on the fire, and I finally bring my hand down to it and remove it from the flames. Clearing my throat, I pop the top off of it.

"Tea's ready."

Colter breaks eye contact—which he had been holding the entire argument—and brings his cup over to me. I fill them up, Rue and I sipping on the strange brew. It's extremely bitter and greeny with a stomach-curdling tartness at the end. We drink the brews and chat some more, about old raids and our military careers before this. After the drinks wore in and the night wore on, we all capitulated to separate tents for the night. I lay back in my cot and stare up at the ceiling, watching the canvas lightly flap with gentle percussion as winds pass over us. In the dark of the night I pull out a small notebook from my pocket, flip it open to an empty page and click a pen and start writing. I don't have much to write about, but I write about my Dad, about our journey. How I got here. Reminiscing about those times.

My mind passes ideas around like a game of catch. I think about my Dad, everything we went through for me to be here, now. He never would have fought for *this*. He never would have put himself in a situation with such an unstable person, I feel it in my bones. Have I fallen so low, or is there something else keeping me here. Something more important. Revenge, maybe, but that just seems low, no?

Dad wouldn't have fought for revenge.

Chapter 2

I woke the next morning at the brink of dawn, just after the sun began rising over the valley. I yawned and stretched and hacked up a lung, clearing the phlegm from the back of my throat, and then walked out to the river where I brought up a handful of water and splashed it across my face. The smell of smoke in the air is damp and cool and the haze of dewed coals hangs over everything. I bring another handful to my mouth to drink and then walk back toward camp.

Rue opens the flap on their tent as I walk by.

“Maia,” they beckon, waving their hand for me to enter. I slip into the tent and they fold the flap closed again.

“Morning,” I greet.

“Have you thought about it?” Rue now asks me. I clear my throat again.

“Yeah. You got a plan to get us out of here?”

Rue nods their head, “It’ll be quick, and we need to go as soon as possible.”

“What’s your idea?”

Rue leans over to their bag and pulls out a long line of tawny rope, tied into a lasso. “A little bit of cattle rustling.”

Coffee brews over the coals as Colter stirs them and adds some more kindling.

“Colter,” I approach, Rue following behind me. “You’re gonna want to hear this.”

“What’s up?” he asks, his voice gruff in the morning.

“Cattle,” I kneel down beside the fire. “Rue was telling me about them.”

“Hmm.”

“You remember that herd we saw a couple days ago, back near the lakeshore?”

Colter nods and checks the kettle, “That group of Angus?”

“Yeah.”

“What about them?”

Rue steps forward and speaks over me, “There’s a rancher out there, lives on the hillside. Didn’t think anything of him, but then.” Rue pulls out a map from their pocket and slaps it down on Colter’s lap. “I found something.”

Colter flips the map open and splays it on the dusty ground. “What am I looking for?”

Rue circles the pit and kneels beside Colter, pointing at a spot on the map. “I was comparing where we are to where we’ve been so far. This is our trail, riding in from the north—“

“I know,” Colter nods. “What’s so special?”

“Look,” Rue points to a section on the map. “This map is Pre-War, shows land claims. Right here, it’s marked all in blue. Mining Deed, old one, but... I was thinking.”

“That’s where that Rancher’s place was?” Colter asks, piecing it together.

“Think about it,” I speak up. “Solitary rancher out here, living completely alone, happens to survive just fine? It doesn’t add up, how does he manage?”

“Exactly, he isn’t growing anything there,” Rue continues. “The growing season isn’t long enough for the hearty plants. He must sell the cattle, but it wouldn’t be enough. With that many heads, he’d have to have help.”

“What’s the point?” Colter asks, annoyed.

“The rancher is sitting on the same property as an old Mining Deed, he must be bringing *something* valuable out of it,” I spit it out.

Colter sits there and stares at the map. The kettle suddenly starts jolting on the grill above the flames and coffee boils out of the top. Colter curses and quickly pulls it off, the hot coffee hitting his fingers. He yipes and sets the kettle down on the ground to cool.

“He must be sitting on a whole stash right now,” Rue explains. “Not silver, not gold. *Has* to be gemstones. He couldn’t wheel all that metal out of here like he can move the cattle. Judging by the age of some of those heads, I’d say he’s getting ready to herd them out West to a yard.”

“He’s sitting on a motherlode of gemstones,” Colter puts it together.

“Exactly.”

“We’ll move right after breakfast,” Colter says, pulling over his mug and filling it with coffee.

I button up my shirt—a black-and-brown plaid button-up—and then pull my plate carrier off of Poppy and slide it over my head, clipping the two latches on the side and cinching them tight. Colter calls Oa over, and the ornery boy stamps his feet as he approaches. Oa passes by close to Poppy, and Poppy reaches up her head quickly and bites Oa in the neck. Oa reacts swiftly and kicks his legs and sprints away.

“Ready?” Rue asks, already on horseback. They’re balaclava-clad, wearing brown cargo pants and a white tanktop. Armored with a plate carrier like mine and a helmet, they sit atop Arbor with an M4 tucked into the saddle and the lasso tied to the other side, swaying and slapping the side of Arbor as they limp around.

I nod, cinching the straps to Poppy’s saddle and then climbing up and kicking a leg over her. As Colter climbs up onto Oa I pull my own M4 from my saddle and slide the magazine free. Full. I slide it back in and check to see the safety is still on and slide it back into the saddle.

“Let’s go,” Colter yips, Oa sprinting out of camp as Colter barely gets situated on the saddle. Rue kicks Arbor and I tap Poppy to follow. We follow the small trail out of the canyon and into the large open valleys of the West Utah desert, watching as juniper groves give way to sagebrush flats. Occasionally a prickly pear cactus would sprout up in a bushel. We had deployed down in the Mojave a couple years back—when Rue and I were both part of a Platoon from back east. Long before we met Colter. Down there, riding was a lot different. The cactus practically jumped at you, and you could do your best to avoid but it was never enough.

We rode on through the day and made lunch in a grove of juniper trees, cooking up packaged MREs. Flying ants terrorized us and made the meal quick, and back on horseback we got and continued riding. The scenery is familiar enough to us all, as we had been through here earlier, but it became more clear when we broke up through a shallow mountain pass and came upon the last valley before the tallest of the mountains suddenly jutted up from the floor. These are the tallest mountains around, all topped right now with icy and snow and their slopes covered in brown grasses and green trees, although a lot of those are gone from when I was a kid.

To our left is a big lake, deep blue and healthy and low, with a long lake shore of mud and silt. I look over to Rue, and they meet my eyes and shake their head. Not yet. We ride on a little further, until we can see the cattle, and Rue suggests we ride down to them and then ride up to the ranchers shack.

Colter follows along as Rue leads, Oa swaying his head back and forth and taking in the landscape. Looking for danger. He’s more tense today than usual—and the usual is quite a bit. Colter has spent the entire ride soothing him, but to no avail. We make it to the lakeshore, where the cattle are grouped and drinking from the waves lightly lapping up at their hooves. One of the cows cranes its head over to us and lets out a long moo. Colter looks out over the water, relaxing in his saddle.

Rue pulls the lasso out from the loop its secured in and begins swinging it over their head. I hold the reins at the ready on Poppy, ready to bolt for him once Rue takes his off his horse. Colter looks over toward the East and Rue lets the lasso go, charging Arbor forward. The lasso connects with Colter but Rue fails to pull it taut, causing it to pull right back off of him. Still, the force knocks him off Oa, and he hits the ground on his back. Wheezing on the ground, Colter begins reaching down toward his holster.

I kick Poppy into action and race down toward him, removing a boot from my stirrup and hanging my foot low. I run Poppy right up close to Colter and swing my boot, connecting it with his jaw and sliding it across his face. With the speed that I hit Colter with, I'm almost thrown off as well. A loud *crack* filled the air and the cows by the lakeshore begin to stir and leave.

I hop off Poppy and walk over to Colter. He's not dead, but blood gushes from his nose and he's out cold. Rue is right beside me and throws me the rope, so I tie his hands and feet together.

I reach into his holster and pull out his handgun, sliding the magazine out and dumping the rounds into my pocket. I toss it aside and pull myself up onto Poppy. They then pull up into their stirrups and come to rest in their saddle. I pull on the reins and face Poppy toward camp.

"Let's ride."

It happened so fast that I didn't have time to think about what we were doing. I knew it had to happen. The only way we got that without contest was to weigh down Colter, and tying him up beside the lake, several miles from camp, was the best option. On the ride back, however, there's nothing to do but think about it. A lump forms in my throat and grows as we ride on.

"I can't believe we just did that," I call to Rue, riding side by side.

"We had to," Rue comforts.

"I feel like, after knowing Colter," I say. "There's no way in hell that's the last we see of him."

"Yeah, well," Rue shakes their head. "Hopefully its long enough to get this done."

"Yeah."

We make our way back into camp and immediately get to packing. I kick the fire out and Rue grabs the bag of money and stuffs it in a spare bag which they lash their horse. I pack down one tent and stuff is on Poppy.

“No need,” Rue shakes their head. “It’ll just slow us down. We’ll cowboy camp.”

I take the tent off and leave it behind. Rue swings up into their saddle and I follow suit. I ride up next to them.

“Where to now?”

Rue studies the map, then looks up at our surroundings and sighs.

“Where on the map did the man say, again?”

I look over the map and then notice the spot, “There. Arches, the man said the house was in Arches.”

“Arches National Park,” Rue mutters under their voice, continuing to survey the map. “There.”

Rue points to a canyon in the distance, surrounded by ancient white pillars with blades hanging off the top like the petals of a flower. “That canyon should take us up and over the mountains and into another valley.”

“Let’s get going then.”

We rode on until dark, which got us all the way to the turbines. Old wind generators which would spin when the wind came barreling out of the canyon ahead. Now they’re old and decrepit and covered in vines and bird nests. The river coming from the canyon is fresh and wide and splices out into a delta where we camp. It’s not long, though, before our camping is interrupted.

A group of soldiers, dressed in a strange camouflage, come bumbling down the river in a skiff, and thankfully its loud enough that Rue and I both hear them coming and hide our camp and grab our guns. We pull ourselves into a patch of bushes and watch as the metal boat comes rolling down the waves with the loud group of young soldiers on board. They speak a language I don’t understand.

“Who are they?” I whisper. Rue’s eyes follow them like a hawk.

“I don’t know,” Rue whispers back. “They’re speaking some form of Spanish, I think.”

“We need to stop them,” I conclude.

Rue shakes their head, “These guys mean business. We need to ambush them and take one for questioning.”

But it isn't necessary. They shift the skiff over and it beaches on a muddy embankment. One by one they hop out of the skiff onto the beach and begin building a fire and playing music. By the sounds of their voices they are quite happy to be out here.

"Maybe it's not that drastic," I suggest. "Maybe we can sneak up on them, scare them a bit, and then just..."

"Ask them," Rue nods. "Sure, why not. These men sure don't look like they could hurt us."

"Don't be sarcastic," I tell them. "Here. You lay here, provide cover fire if it goes bad. I'll go up and swoon them, see if I can't get them talking. I'll bring my rifle, but I'm not going in threatening."

Rue nods, "That might work."

"If there's soldiers out here like this, then there's trouble," I say. "If there's trouble, we need to know about it."

"Alright," Rue nods. "Do it. I'll cover you."

I slither away from the bushes and throw my rifle across my back. I sneak around so that I'm facing the direction Rue is aiming from and emerge from behind the shrubs, walking across a small eddy of river onto the muddy embankment they've stationed on.

"Hello, boys!" I call up, walking with my arms up. Several of the men shout out and raise guns, but when they see I have my hands up, and that I'm a woman, they quickly stop and tell their buddies to lower their guns. "Any of you speak English?"

Several of them raise their hands, and then I roll my eyes. "Any of you speak it *well*?"

Only one hand remains up, so I walk over to his side.

"What can I call you?" I greet, all eyes on me.

"Giovanni," he introduces himself. A young man, early 20s, brown hair on his head greasy and thin and plastered like it's painted on. He stinks like man—they all do. "What are you doing out here, all alone?"

I shrug, "Hunting, I suppose."

Giovanni turns and relays the information.

"Say," I get his attention from the stirring men, all happy to see a woman in their camp. "What are all you boys doing out here? I heard y'all speaking something strange, figure you ain't from here?"

Giovanni nods, “We’re private soldiers, hired to guard a big chunk of land south of here. I-I don’t think I can say much else.”

“Oh, come on,” I play. “Like little ol’ me is gonna get in the way of your plans. What’re you all here for?”

“Money!” a boy at the end of the party calls, and they all nod and jeer in agreement.

“We’re with a company, called LaGuardia,” Giovanni tells me. “We’re a... military, for hire. People call us, we show up, guard some stuff, and if push comes to shove...”

A boy across from Giovanni makes a finger gun and pretends to shoot it.

“Sounds like good work,” I comment. “Haven’t seen any of you boys out here before, must be far from your command, no?”

They all nod in agreement.

“We’re down here on recreation,” Giovanni explains. “We’re all stationed at the far guard post of the territory, up in the dunes south of here. A place called the Dell.”

“Oh,” I say. “Y’all looking for help? I can’t say I’m too bad with a gun—“

“Oh, the Commandant would be glad to meet you,” one jeering boy calls out, and gets an elbow in his ribs.

Giovanni rolls his eyes, “What he means is, yes, but you’d have to meet our commandant, first. We are always looking for good English speakers, but you need to speak a little Italian.”

“We can teach you,” another boy calls out, and they all laugh. I humor them with laughter of my own.

“Who are y’all guarding down here?” my curiosity gets the best of me. I want to hear them say it. I need to.

“It’s, uh, a place called the Lobby,” Giovanni explains. “But we aren’t allowed to know much more than that, we’re just hired guns to guard the territory.”

“The Lobby?” I comment, backing up a little. I look toward the bushes and see Rue poking out from under the undergrowth. The light from the fire flashes from eye-to-eye and reflects off their scope. “I heard there’s a... *treasure* there.”

Giovanni looks at me weird, twisting his head. The rest of the group stays silent, looking at me strangely, before Giovanni’s chin hangs slack in his jaw. “Your throat.”

The soldiers quickly reach for their guns, and in the same moment Rue begins opening fire. I jump out of the way, taking cover in the river and swinging my own rifle from behind my back. The soldiers are now turning toward Rue and shooting, but falling just as quick. I wheel my gun up and fire at them too, and in a few seconds as this all happens the entire group is mowed down.

The air lingers with the stench of gunpowder and blood and mud. Rue walks out from the undergrowth and I walk up to the fire across from them.

“Good shooting,” I comment. They lift a body up with their toe, then set them back down.

“Didn’t think you’d talk that long,” Rue says. “If I didn’t know you as well as I do, I’d have thought you enjoyed that.”

I snicker and shake my head, searching Giovanni’s pockets. I find a map in a plastic bag.

“What’d they say?” Rue asks.

“They’re with a Private Military Corporation called ‘LaGuardia’. Italian, called in by a place called the Lobby, someplace south of here,” I explain, unzipping the bag and pulling out the paper map. “Controlling a huge swath of territory south of here, in the direction we’re going. I think the house we’re after is close to this Lobby.”

“If not that entirely?” Rue questions. I nod, and unfurl the map. A few spots are marked in Italian, one that keys my interest is the northern-most post, not too far from us, called ‘corpo di guardia’.

“Ah, I don’t know my Italian,” I mutter. “I think this is where they came from, though.”

Rue kneels down by my side and looks down at the map, lit by the fire. “That’s not too far from here, they say they come far?”

I shake my head, “No, figured it’d be close though. Plus there’s nothing else on this map.”

Rue nods, “This screams ‘preventative intel breach’ to me. Keep all information on the down low. No soldier has the map to everything. Wherever the Lobby is, they’re not gonna have the map, and this ‘corpo’ place might not either.”

“It’ll piece together,” I think out loud. “I feel it.”

Rue nods, “What else is there?”

“They marked this spot with a circle,” I show Rue, a small marker circle around a river up the canyon. “It’s a little out of the way of the corpo place.”

“Like a days travel,” Rue mutters and then stoops to think. Finally coming up with an idea, they come back to me. “What if we split up?”

“Not usually a good idea.”

“Think about it,” Rue says. “If these guys were from this post, then there’s gonna be almost no one there. Easy pickings. I can go and check out this marker, see if there’s anything interesting up there. Don’t waste a whole day on it. How’s that sound?”

“And if there’s more than I can handle?”

Rue shrugs, “Do recon, make sure you know before you go in, and if there’s too many then leave. We’ll set up a meeting spot and go in there together.”

I lean back and notice the stench of bodies around us.

“I like this fire,” I comment. “Let’s get these guys out of here.”

Rue grabs the ankles of Giovanni and we haul his body to the water’s edge and throw him in. He bobs in and out and disappears down the delta.

The guard post is the northernmost of the Lobby’s, at least as the intel suggested. It’s an old made-to-look-log cabin, partially sunk into a sand dune, which overlooks the gypsum lowlands where Junipers waged border wars against Antelope Bitterbrush. Two guards stand point out on the deck, conversing while waiting for the two in the pit to come and relieve them of duty.

After leaving Rue, Poppy and I made our way to these dunes, called the Dell, and I left Poppy by a stream of water and continued on foot. I moved through the dunes throughout the day and finally made it to the place by sunfall.

The sun is getting low on the horizon, casting long shadows across the valley. Tall mountains shortened the day here, calling for sunset far earlier than back East. Fingerling shadows stretch their way across the quartzite substrate, slowly making their way for the cabin. I sway my rifle off my back, shouldering it and flipping the cover off my optics. Red arrow flicks across the small post, my mind making notes about the soldiers. One leans against a wooden post holding the porch roof up, the other leans against the railing. Both of them suck on electrical devices, pouring out large plumes of steam from their lungs.

Movement shudders inside the house, some curtain brushes sideways as someone within moves around the house. This was a small post, the cabin is not big and doesn’t have a basement or second story. I can’t imagine more than 4 guards stationed here at a

time, not including those deployed at the pit. My suspicions hold that there is one more within the house who I don't see.

A large radio mast sticks up above the house, standing just short of the nearest dune. It's enough, though, to get messages in and out. I have to take it out before engaging, if I can. The less information passes around, the better.

The house is powered by a diesel generator standing on the north-facing wall, which I'm looking toward. It rumbles away, powering the HAM radio and whatever other electronics are inside the house. As it is the evening, the wind is beginning to pick up, and sand begins pouring over the peaks and saddles of the dunes; in a similar way to how snow is carried across drifts, stretching the height of mountains beyond their earthen limits.

Most dunes move slowly, like this one above the house, swallowing a quarter of it under yellow sand. Others move quickly, making the terrain of the Utah territory virtually impossible to predict. Thankfully the desertification hasn't fully taken course and these duned plains are really just relegated to the valley basins.

I have the wind in my face, which is favorable. Wind at my back means wind pushing my scent to the enemy—always men—who I learned the hard way always pick up that I am there. Back East, with more people mulling about, it's not something you notice, but out here? It is desolate, and often times you go days to weeks without seeing another person. For these young LaGuardia boys, they likely haven't smelled a woman in months. The wind carries my weeks-old rank along with it, and they always discern it isn't their testosterone-smelling buddy next to them, like an elk in rut.

The safety flicks off, but a rumbling comes from the road. A truck, carrying several other soldiers, comes rounding the bend, it's tires digging into the side-by-side ruts of sand which lead to this place. The driver comes to a stop at the cabin and gets out. He wears a red military beret, a higher class than the other measly soldiers. Likely a commandant.

The soldiers hop out, scanning the tops of the dunes.

I watch the soldiers closely, but realized my security is at odds as they barrel out and begin sweeping the dunes. I can't pick up on the conversation, ditching the attempt and ducking further behind the dune. I pack my rifle onto my back, shift my backpack on, and saunter to get further from the guardhouse. If I can retreat back up the slope I might have a better angle.

I can also swing west and use the light of the setting sun to obscure my position. I'd be closer—easier to shoot if the cover didn't work.

I weigh my options. A closer shot is an easier shot, and an easy shot is the best choice.

I scuttle down into the valley of the dune I was atop, feeling the temperature drop significantly near the bottom. The temperature variation of the desert amazes me, how quickly it can change from one side to another, both equally antagonistic. I skirt the dunes and follow their curves, finding myself climbing a shorter dune which I can then shelter behind. At this position the flare from the sun can obscure my position and brightly illuminate my opponents. Turning around and looking in the direction my opponents would have to face I feel confident in my choice. The sun is bright and huge against the horizon, casting long sharp shards of light into my eyes.

The commandant speaks with the soldiers on the porch, who are more at attention now. He seems stressed over something, and then out of the front door comes two more soldiers. My intuition serves me correct, the guard post *is* staffed by 4. The guard leaning against the wooden post speaks into his radio, then holds it to his ear for reply. He speaks again. No reply. Trying to contact the guards at the pit.

This goes on for several minutes, finally the commandant takes the radio and speaks into it himself. Again, no reply. He barks orders at the congregation, all of whom pack themselves into the back of the pickup—save for the four soldiers stationed at the base. He swings himself angrily into the drivers seat and speeds up the trail, toward the pit. Now is my chance. Once the truck is out of sight, I let fly.

Two rounds each, except for the shortest of the bunch, who gets a bullet in the chest—one I am sure isn't instantly lethal. They were all waiting for it on the porch, lined up like ducks in a row. One shot in the stab-vest for each, another in the cranium when they are down. Again, except for the smallest.

I waste no time, rushing up to the guardhouse to investigate while the commandant is busy at the pit. Blood pours off the porch, pooling in a raucous line that stretches across the entire porch. Blood meeting sand always leaves dimples, and the moisture is lost quicker than I can even arrive. The shortest one feigned death, so I grab him up and press him against the wall. I hit a lung shot, I won't have as much time as I wanted.

"Where is the Frequency Book?" I ask, holding my foot on his groin. He groans out, the sound coming moist and bubbling.

"Inside," he motions, the sound from his mouth a mixture of pain and an Italian accent. From his bloody breathing I can tell that is all I'll get from him. I throw his body aside, passing through the threshold. My boots cause the wooden slats to groan, and I assume that if the Frequency Book were to be anywhere, it will be by the radio. Large buzzing electronic machines sit piled together on a table, with an old microphone and headset plugged in. Several machines flash numbers, others have dials and lights which indicate other electronic properties. I pull out drawers to this desk, scanning through documents thrown together. Finally I find it, a spiral bound notebook with a large list of frequencies scribbled down inside. I tuck it under my arm and come back outside, where the young lad is laid over on his side, blood pooling out of his mouth. I snatch the radio from his

chest, turn the volume down, and sneak it into my pocket. The blood foams as it mixes with the dry-rotting wooden boards of the porch, bubbling that familiar feeling in my chest which rises from my gut.

I still have time, so I venture back into the guard post to look around. The bed quarters, with walls covered in personal effects and strong pornography, but nothing of use to me. Their belongings are scarce and I assume that they must have more stuff at Base Camp.

The radio room is empty too, except for the desk radio. I pull out my knife, cutting through several bundles of cord that hook the radios together. Not impossible to fix—in fact, not even hard—but it *will* slow them down, and it *will* strain resources. In war, you take any millimeter you can.

The kitchen has a large jug of water and a pantry filled with canned goods and MREs from various times and places. Old US Military, French Foreign Legion, Royal Marines, even Russian Standard Rations. The Royal Marine kit is ‘Braised Chicken Breast in Butter curry, banana cookie, raspberry jam, and standard and confectionery.’ My favorite one. I snatch it.

I fill my backpack bladder to the brim from the water jug, then make for the door. However, my luck turns south. The truck rumbles back down the path, and immediately screeches to a halt when it sees the blood pouring off the porch. Several exclamations are made as soldiers bound out of the back of the truck, with the commandant yelling several orders in Italian. I get my rifle out, taking a deep breath. There are 8 soldiers, not including the commandant. They swarm the front of the building, scanning the surroundings with their rifles. I hear two sets of footsteps entering the front of the building.

“*Attenzione!*” A soldier exclaims, entering the building. I spy out the north-facing window, and see the bundle of power cords snaking into the building, keeping the glass window propped open. The back of the truck is visible from the window, and with it I can also spy the generator and a yellow plastic canister.

Diesel fuel.

It doesn’t burn well, but it will cause enough commotion to give me leverage.

I aim the rifle and fire. A round penetrates the bottle, and luckily strikes flame in the fuel. Instantly, thick black smoke begins pouring into the air, followed closely behind by tall licking flames. It’s no explosion, but it is enough to catch interest. I pivot from behind the wall and kill the two soldiers in the cabin, who are staring at the broken window. Next I let a volley fly out the doorway, killing at least one who is standing over his fallen comrades.

Bullets come flying back in, so I slide back behind the wall. Bullets still penetrate them, sending drywall dust and fiberglass shavings into the air. Black smoke is filling the cabin

now, and flames lick in through the open window, already burning through the dry log exterior. The flames are roaring, tumbling over one another, and the heat is searing the side of my face. I don't have much longer until it cooks me inside this place, and now my only way out is the front door.

I dart across from the kitchen to the pantry, grabbing a half-drunk bottle of high-proof alcohol, then grab a dishrag and stuff it in through the neck. A couple inversions and the rag is doused in the alcohol. I don't know if this will work, but it's worth a try. I scamper across the house to the flaming side, and following me are several bullets. The soldiers are standing at the doorway. The paint here is peeling off of the wall, dropping in hot globs to the ground below.

I raise the bottle and slap the wet dishrag into the flames. I bring it down, take a deep breath, then throw it. My body uncurls from its cover and, in the same movement, lets loose the Molotov cocktail. It makes its way clear through the front door, smashing into the soldier standing in the opening. Chaos erupts, giving me ample time to reposition, throwing myself into the bed quarters. I anchor my rifle on the wall, scanning out the front window. I see two soldiers ducking behind the truck and fire at them to keep them down.

A whiff of noxious gas from my right fuses caustically with the gut-wrenching scent of burning flesh, bringing my gut to do somersaults. I push up toward the front door again, seeing two bodies fallen over, slowly melting into the others. This leaves 2 unaccounted, and *then* the commandant.

The timber along the wall lets out a horrendous moan, popping as flames erupt into the house. I suddenly became very aware of the thousands of tons of sand above my head, held up by burning timbers. I have to move. I fire more rounds at the truck, then dive for the front door. I jump over the burning bodies, landing in the sand. I immediately dash up the sand dune to my left, pushing myself up the slope as bullets whiz past my head. Once over the crest, I throw myself into the ground, laying on my back with my rifle pointed at the peak of the dune, where the soldiers will undoubtedly arrive. If they come up, as I suspect they will, they will silhouette themselves on the sky, giving me the opportunity to fire the first shot before they even got their guns over the edge.

Sure enough they fall for it. As soon as the edges of their helmets poke up above the pale yellow granules carving curves into the skyline, I let fire enough shots to ensure they are down. One of the soldiers falls backward, tumbling back down the other side of the dune, while the other falls face first toward me and slides downward a few feet, stopping as the blood soaking through his wounds sticks into the sand. I start moving again, this time moving east and curtaining myself with the thick billowing black smoke.

I am running up on the flank of the commandant when the guardhouse collapses, sending up a spray of sparks. The smoke immediately deadened as the sand fills in the burning cavity and snuffs out the flames. I take it as a big enough distraction so I poke

my head up above the dune I was skirting and level my rifle towards the commotion. One soldier, yellow-bellied, stands beside his commandant and looks around, his rifle not even at the ready. I hadn't counted this one, he must have stowed himself away in the truck the whole time. I level the fluorescent red arrow on his helmet, firing a round. The bullet rips low, blowing through his throat, tossing his body down to the ground. The commandant is all that's left.

I immediately begin moving, again following the flank to get around to the back of the commandant. I approach the dune I originally perched on when I arrived, walking back up the same steps I made earlier, and perch. My rifle balances on my arm, and my optic levels on the commandant. Scared out of his mind, he stays beside the soldier I had just slain and whips his head around wildly. I pull out the radio from my pocket, noticing a slip of paper tucked into the plastic housing.

117.9KHz - Mauro crew

121.0KHz – [illegible]

133.3KHz – comdt Tuilli

I tune the radio to 133.3, clicked the button in, and speak.

“I could have killed you for the last 5 minutes,” I whisper-mutter, not to reveal my location. “If I wanted you dead you would be. Surrender and your future may still have length.”

The commandant, hearing me through his radio, lays his rifle down and slowly, sheepishly, raises his hand into the air.

“Toss your sidearm,” I click the radio.

He reaches down into his boot holster, tossing a handgun across the sand, and puts his hands back to the sky.

I snap the radio onto a vest loop and vault the sand, sliding down the steep side to his feet. His surprise is unmistakable—clearly he knew they were under attack, and without my ability to read minds I'm not sure if he is surprised I am a woman, or a lone assailant, or both. I think both.

Commandant Tuilli's lip quivers, and it looks picturesque framed with the smoldering cabin behind him.

“You are a commandant, no?” I ask, rifle leveled on his head. He nods. I make sure to keep my distance—after all, a rifle is useful from many distances, but worse up close. “You can make good use of the rest of your life. I heard through the grapevine that the Lobbyist has a pet, no? A new one, freshly picked.”

Tuilli gulps, and speaks with a far better grasp of English than the other LaGuardia. “I don’t know, I’m deployed out here. I haven’t been back to command in—”

“Shut it!” I bark at him. “Any prisoners lately?”

Tuilli gulps, straining his eyes closed as hard as he can, and nods.

“Where are they?”

“Napoli Checkpoint,” he says. “North of here, I-I-I don’t have the coordinates but—”

“Shut up,” I bark, but it’s a polite bark. A quiet bark. A bark that tells him that I am in control. It seems to sober up the blabbering commandant.

I pull the trigger, and a large hole appears in his throat. Blood pours out as he coughs and gasps, falling face first into the sand. In his hand, a knife. He had reached for a hidden knife under the truck. I watch blood piddle down his face, drawing the contours that formed it, his musculature forever cemented as rigor mortis engages. The coughing and liquid gasping slowly bubble out of the hole, his body flailing as if it had lost all control. Surprisingly, he took long to die.

He is dead but his body is not, proceeding through the checklist before the night is over. There is a sudden aching silence in it all. Forever would he grip that knife.

I get up from the ground, walking among the bodies. The cabin is nothing but smolders and a small envelope of smoke rising in the air. The heat of combustion will linger under the sand for months, leaving it hot to the touch even in the dry night. I sweep my rifle over my shoulder, fingering the mode switch back into ‘safe’.

I rip the door of the truck open and pilfer through the glovebox. There is an assortment of maps, all with scribbles and none completely accurate to the terrain around. I do, however, find the one I’m looking for. Glazed over with red ink, a circle is drawn on a spot on the map and labeled, ‘Napoli.’

The dunes are nestled in a dry valley surrounded on all sides by old volcanic peaks, which were once towering cascades of basalt but are now nothing but mere hills with sharp granite contours. Their slopes are covered in sagebrush and grass tufts which reach out and snag their seed pods into your socks. I make my way up the side of the mountain until I reach a spot that isn’t covered in foliage, and is instead still made up of brightly-colored loose dirt spread out along a relatively flat section of the mountain and terminating in a perfectly-flat top. Old mine tailings, dug out from the side of the mountain over a century ago.

Atop these tailings, which are a challenge to trudge up, my horse waits. I reined her up next to the decaying rusted corpse of an old work truck which had been left by someone or another just a decade after the mine opened, I'm sure. Calling it Pre-War would be an understatement—the thing probably predated the second World War, for Pete's sake. I undo the reins and toss them up onto the saddle and pat Poppy on her neck.

Camp is somewhere to the south, nestled in the shadow of a tall mountain not too dissimilar to this one. As Poppy walks, tracing back the steps we made on the way here, I pull the map out of my pocket and angle it in roughly the right direction. Napoli Checkpoint isn't too far from our camp.

Something catches my eyes and I pull on the reins, stopping Poppy in her tracks. The glimmer of a shiny object, just at the mouth of the mine, which I hadn't seen before. I kick my boots from the stirrups and walk over to it, mine tailings crunching under my feet. The shine is stronger as I get closer, until my hand rests on the silver handle. It burns from the heat of the sun but I pick it up anyways and look it over. A small handheld mirror, clearly ancient, but still working. There is a large stain across the mirror but I hold it up and examine my reflection—black hair, wavy and cut at my shoulders; sun-worn features and my complexion a mix of Navajo, from Dad, and Welsh, from Mom; a small mole just above my right lip; soft cheeks, still waiting to solidify from years of soldiering. If Dad could see his little girl now.

I slip the tiny notebook out of my front pocket and scribble down a few words. Napoli checkpoint, the quarry, the cabin. I write about Rue and I write about our future journey. Short words, nothing too extensive. I click the pen and slide them back into my pocket.

I don't want to linger on that thought. That one isn't right. I set the mirror on the ground and sigh, turning back to Poppy and pulling myself up into the saddle. I better get to camp before nightfall. Despite the action, my eyes are extremely heavy and I realize I've been up and at the action for almost a full day now. As Poppy trots on down the path I came, I find my eyes slowly drooping until the world went dark and night set in through my body. Limp in the saddle, Poppy kept on through the night.

Chapter 3

Hard amber pearls, viciously pulled apart in the center, formed a ring around a diamond-shaped pupil. Despite our distance, I could feel the intensity in her gaze. I had only ever seen one of these in pictures, seeing one in the flesh was a strange feeling. She stood there with eyes pulled back to expose even the white surrounding her fire-burned iris, back arched, perfect white teeth bared in a snarl. Imagine my surprise seeing their beauty manifested in the scope held up to my eye. Large padded paws thumping the silt beneath her long and agile body. Her coat turned gold from drinking from the Gold River, or so the old folks tell. Even her pink nose, turned into the shape of a heart. The eyes, I couldn't help going back to the eyes, and they peered back into mine and I felt that it could see far deeper into me than I could into it. Into *her*.

"You gonna take the shot?" Cleo shoves me in my side. I grunt in protest, breaking from my thought. Pulling in a long breath—like my father taught me—I squeeze the trigger. The rifle blows back, almost leaving me winded. I readjust myself and level the sights back on the mountain lion, seeing it laying neatly on the ground, unmoving. I sputter out a sharp length of air, pushing the rifle to the side.

"You got it?" Cleo presses excitedly.

"I got it!" I shriek, throwing the rifle across my back. If our parents hadn't heard the gunshot there wasn't a change that they missed out on the our banshee-like exclamations of excitement. I memorized the spot on the hillside, watching it as I scampered through the ages-old thickets that lay between me and the prize. I heard the two, Cleo and Yvan, take up their positions behind me as I battled through the small sticks, closely woven together and dried to form sharp, splintery edges. Finally the southward side broke, and I sprinted across the dry river bed. I hobbled over well-smoothed stones and eventually jumped over the small muddy patch which still held onto life, before once again climbing up the other side. Yvan trips behind me, and Cleo helps her up.

I crash into the thickets again—European, apparently, introduced shortly after the colonizers trudged through these lands, and for a long time invasive. I battled them apart until they broke away and I found myself climbing the hillside. Here I unshouldered the rifle, sliding back the bolt and checking if a round is chambered. I lugged up a bit of the way, each step only counting as half as the sand that made up the hillside gives way underfoot. Finally, though, I spot it.

The sand had already soaked up a bit of the blood, turned the same color as it turns when water is poured onto it. There is no movement from the animal, and I see I made a clean shot through its lungs. Cleo plods up behind me.

"Look, Maia!" she pipes. "It's a whole tiger!"

“Mountain Lion,” I correct, running my hand over the creature’s beautiful fur. I’d pet a housecat before—Yvan’s family had one before. Despite being so much bigger and so much wilder, she felt very similar. Soft, thick fur lacing through my fingers. “Let’s get it back to everyone.”

Cleo grabs the hind legs, and I take the front. We hoist the animal up, but that only lasts for a second as Cleo drops the thing. It was hundreds of pounds, too heavy for a young girl. Pressured on by the stirring of an argument, we both quickly settle on dragging instead of lifting.

We take it through the thickets, with Yvan following close behind. Its body gets caught on the stones as we pull it across, but a quick push from Yvan frees it. I look down the riverbed, spotting an adult kneeling at the mud, pulling it apart to extract what little water is there. I call out to them, showing them the cougar. Excitedly, they run back to tell the others. Cleo and I hoist the puma up onto the shore on the other side, continuing up the slope. By this point it’s become very tiring to pull it, but thankfully the adults appear.

My dad and Cleo’s father arrive, hooting with happiness. Dad ruffles my hair, pulling me into a hug.

“I couldn’t have made a shot that good when I was your age,” Dad remarks, seeing the distance. He helps Cleo’s father, Paul, haul the carcass up to the road. We kids follow closely.

We arrive back at our temporary camp, where our caravan was waiting beside an old dirt road. 3 old SUVs, kitted out and carrying everything we had. A fire is crackling in the center of camp, tended by Yvan’s mother, Anna.

“Anna!” Paul calls. “Get out the spit!” Together, Paul and my father lay the mountain lion by the side of the fire pit as Anna paws through her car, pulling out a long cast-iron spit rod. The adults go about setting up the thing, and I watch from my collapsible camping chair. After getting it on the spit, Anna runs off to find some local garnish and my father scurries to my side.

“I’m so proud of you,” he wraps me in a hug. “You’re our dedicated hunter for now on.”

I giggle with him, he rubs my lap with his thick gloves.

“I’m fine,” I tell him.

“It’s been getting chilly,” he insists, and I knew that. I was just so happy from the shot that I wasn’t bothered. “I don’t want you catching a cold.”

With this, he pulls a blanket from the back of the truck and drapes it over me. He brushes the hair from my face and plants a wet kiss on my forehead. “You get first dibs.”

Yvan's dad pulls out a long knife and begins cutting the pelt off of the cougar, just enough so that the meat inside was accessible, and after it was he began cutting out slices of meat and handing them off to Anna. Anna skewers the meat on a large cast-iron spit, which she had set up over the campfire, and once the skewers were all loaded up the adults added wood to the fire and began turning the spit so they would cook evenly. I watched them as they did, feeling cozy and, despite my hunger, satiated. Dad sets the rifle against the truck, then leans back into the blue metal panels and lets out a long sigh. I watched dad stare into the fire for a while, unblinking, running his gloved hands over one another to keep warm.

Seeing him so cold, I hopped out of the camping chair and walked over to him, presenting to him the blanket he laid over me. He smiles and scoffs, "Maia, that's yours. I'm okay."

"You look cold."

He shakes his head, "As long as you're warm, so am I."

~

I stir, feeling a breeze slap over my cheeks. The sun is already out, painting the valley in an early morning yellow. It bears down on me, warming my face and breathing life into my stable bones. The pain of everything makes its way back into my reality, and I stretch out my back. Suddenly I feel a fleshy mass hit the top of my head and I quickly recoil and look at whoever is behind me.

Poppy's sweet face looks down at me on the ground, her lip curling up slightly in a sneering horse smile. I brush her away and mutter, in a low morning voice, "Good morning."

I look around at my surroundings. I'm up on the side of a mountain, resting on a trail that snakes along it. In front of me is another mountainside, forming a sharp valley. To my right, it opens up into a large basin and to my left it continues to climb. At the bottom of the valley is a winding complex of concrete and steel and a river which has carved its way through all of it. Piles of old cars, stacked end-to-end, cloud the patches of the old highway that is still intact. Towering pylons stretch above them, some of them collapsed but others still standing. At the mouth of the valley is a tall set of white masts, once holding out long white blades but those have long since broken off.

I lean back into my resting spot and look up at Poppy, who looks down at me.

"Uhg," I mutter, feeling the pain of last night in my back. I don't remember anything after leaving camp. I was already so tired, and riding through the night set me into a confused daze. I definitely don't remember stopping here. "Where's Rue?"

As if on cue, the clopping steps of Arbor sound off to my right and coming up the trail is Rue, leading Arbor and the Mules. Rue hobbles slightly, letting go of the reins as they reach the trail. They walk over beside me and fall backwards, resting beside me. They smell strongly of body odor.

“Morning, soldier,” Rue situates themselves into their seat. “Don’t look at me, it was Poppy that walked you all the way here.”

I let out a long, tired sigh and relinquish the pain throughout my body. I look back up and see Poppy looking down at me and I pat her on the nose.

“How long have I been out?”

Rue shrugs, “You showed up around 11 last night, it’s 9 a.m. now.”

“Where’s my bag?”

Rue gets up and picks it up from behind Arbor and brings it to me. I zip open the top and pull out an MRE and crack open the contents. Rue hands me their mug and I thank them and pour in some water and the coffee grinds.

“You find anything good?” Rue asks, watching me eat.

“Yeah,” I finish chewing. “There’s a guardpost, maybe 50 miles from here. Napoli, it’s called. These guys, LaGuardia, name them all after Italian cities. It’s a big checkpoint, the Commandant came from there. What about you?”

“I found the river,” Rue mentions. “Followed it up a ways, found it’s pretty navigable, wide, shouldn’t be too hard to follow. Sounds like you got up to a lot more adventure, though.”

I roll my eyes, “You don’t know the half of it.”

“Well,” Rue gets up. “Let’s get going, then.”

“There,” Rue points off into the distance, and there I see where they were taking me. A small encampment is there, newly built with tents and webbing and a radio tower.

“Naples?”

“Yes,” Rue explains. “I’ve been trying to gain intel on the Lobby, but so far I haven’t had the strength to raid much more than a lonely command post. With you, though, I think we could take them.”

“What’s their importance?” I ask, scanning the tents. I spot some movement, but otherwise there isn’t much going on down there.

“I think it’s a central command base,” Rue explains. “I’ve seen them staging and deploying soldiers from here. I’ve also noticed that some of their slave labor is processed through there. If there’s any data down there, it’s gotta be good. Plus, if the words from Tuilli are anything to go by, there might be a prisoner down there with a *lot* of good information.”

“And that mine?” I ask, pointing to a hole in the ground dug into the side of a dune. There are clear markings of entrance and exit, planks on the ground to walk on and a wire strung inside from the generator.

“I think it’s a bunker,” Rue says. “I’ve never seen inside. Lights up at night. Definitely not a mine, they don’t bring anything out. Must be where the prisoner is...”

I pass the binoculars back to Rue but continue to stare at the compound. It isn’t much, but it *is* fortified and they are packing heat, not to mention it’s only the two of us. This isn’t like any other ambush we’d done back with the team, this is different. We are properly on our own. No backup, no exfil, no ground support.

I shake my head, “I don’t like it... Can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead, cougar,” Rue pulls the binoculars to their eyes.

“Where *is* the Lobby?”

“A few days from here if you take my route,” Rue explicates. “There’s a few shortcuts, but I can’t tell you ‘em yet.”

“And how many guards are there?”

“Don’t matter, I won’t be near any of them.”

“And where will you go when the job is done?”

“South,” Rue says. “Follow the old highway, probably.”

“So then what’s the point of this if you know exactly what you’re doing?” I try to rationalize. “We’ve done a number of ops together, so *I* know that *you* know that this looks like a stupid move. Pulls too much attention toward us. I already hit a command post yesterday on my way looking for you, they’re going to be on alert.”

“Like I said, I’m looking for intel,” Rue starts, holding the binoculars and watching the outpost. “I have my suspicions about a person and I want to see if they have any data that might be useful. If I’m right, everything hinges on them. I...”

“What?”

“Hold that thought, look,” Rue passes me the binoculars, then points toward the opening of the bunker. I watch as a truck rolls into the outpost and out of it comes a couple of soldiers and a man, bound and hooded, who is dragged into the bunker.

“Hmm.”

“We hit it tonight,” Rue says. “Come on, lets go prepare.”

We move in, not under the cover of darkness but under the cover of twilight.

The sky is purple overhead and the ground is black, but the guards have yet to switch their floodlights on. This gives us a chance to move in, out of their range, and attack. Rue has given me their handgun and a couple of mags, which I shoved into my waistband. I also have a knife, which I hold in my non-shooting hand.

Rue is ahead of me, and then we sweep around to set up our flank. Rue will lay some suppressive fire to distract the guards while I make clean, tactical shots at them. Once they noticed they were being attacked from both sides, we would have the advantage.

We counted the guards before heading in, there are 12 in total over the night shift. 6 for each of us, if we killed with foresight. No battle ever went that way, but you plan for it anyways.

I am in position and listen to the camp around me. A couple soldiers talking in Italian, then walking off. I heard another unscrew the cap off the generator, lifting a bottle up. Diesel.

Rue catches that too and fires a shot into the bottle. The bullet goes through it, but fails to ignite, and sends the soldier dead into the ground. Diesel fuel spilled all over the ground, dumping over a sandbag which I am on the other side of and soaks into my shirt. I quickly whip out of the way, rounding the other side of the bag.

On the other side of the bag a soldier is standing, and he sees me round the corner. Shocked, he begins to shout something but I quickly raise my gun and shoot him. The camp is scurrying around like ants looking for Rue, so much so that my shot goes unnoticed. Rue shoots again, and a flame sparks on the generator, billowing up quickly once the poorly-flammable liquid finally bursts. Thinking quickly, I rip my shirt off, throwing it aside. The flames are close enough to me that my shirt ignites as I toss it away.

I turn my attention back to the camp, all of whom are focusing their attention on the heavy rifle fire sent from Rue. Leaning around the sandbags, I get a good view of the

camp. There are several tables and chairs, a radio wired to the tower, and some crates of weapons and ammo and other materials. I level my handgun on the nearest soldier and fire.

This quickly draws the attention of the mercs away from Rue and toward me, and a bullet wizzes past my head. Rue fires some more shots and chaos quickly erupts. The fire is getting out of hand and I fear being too close to the generator if it explodes, so I quickly lunge across the gap to another sandbag embankment and listen. Being attacked from both sides broke the cohesion of the group. The sand obfuscates any footsteps, but I can make out where their voices and commands are coming from. Rue shoots another soldier dead, and I see their figure hide behind a dune. Moving.

I run quickly back to the generator and spot the yellow fuel container, spilling fuel out with a small flame billowing out black smoke erupting from the hole. Burning my hand as I do, I grab the handle and swing the fuel canister toward the commotion of cowering LaGuardia.

Screams erupt, I must have gotten a clean hit. I lean up over the sandbag and level my gun on a soldier. Pop. His body goes limp and falls to the ground. The commander is writhing around on the ground, attempting to put the fire out. Rue finally repositions, the rifle fire is back, this time coming from above the entrance to the prison.

There are 6 soldiers left, and I take out two who are cowering behind cover. Word has finally made it around that they are flanked from both sides, and the soldiers begin to make about like chickens with their heads cut off. One soldier tries to run off into the darkness, but Rue takes out their knees. Another makes for the prison and I take him out right as he passes through the threshold. I pick off one last one before changing mags.

This is inopportune as another soldier rounds the bend and spots me on the ground. The man lunges onto me, and I make out his features pretty quick. Gristly sideburns, not recently shaved, and his hair is white. Older man, pudgy—in the way that an old body builder gets—and a sick expression across his face.

Because he has me tackled behind the sandbags, Rue doesn't have a shot on him. Even if they did, we scramble too much to give Rue any sort of clarity. I'm weaker than him, but I have far more training in grappling combat. An elbow made into my gut, I manage to snake my head backward and grab a bit of flesh into my teeth, ripping it as hard as I can. He sticks a knee between my legs—a move that would normally incapacitate a foe—and I meet that move with a head-butt back into his face. It is a hard shove, and I feel his nose crumple against my skull.

He moves his attention to my face and a thick finger makes its way into my mouth. I bite down—hard—and the man wails out in pain but doesn't relinquish. I take several shots into his ribcage with my elbows, finally managing to break from his grasp just slightly.

I quickly swing my body around and deliver a kick to his face, and once he is wheeling for breath I make for his chest, wrapping it underneath my legs and holding firm. Despite my smaller size I know his center of balance—something which can easily turn the tide of a fight if you can control it. With his arms locked underneath my legs, his own legs kick out furiously. My hands rush for his throat.

I lay over the man, holding the flesh of his throat in my hands and squeeze as hard as I can—so hard that my knuckles go white and the sound of the world pierces away. I feel the weight of the man kicking and spasming beneath me but I have the upper ground, and I have the technique. Blood coursing through his jugular is slowed in its procession through my fingers, sometimes stopped outright, but never ceasing. His heart beat faster and faster, and I kick my knee into his liver to pull his concentration away.

The man emboldens rage, and I collapse all sense I have and feed into him. Once I am sure I have a proper grip on the soldier's throat, I proceed to pull and bash the man's skull into the ground, over and over again, keeping that death grip. Crescent-moon-shaped cuts appear all over the back of his neck and his flesh accumulates in my fingernails.

His spasming comes to an end, eventually, as life ceases from his eyes. They bulge in their sockets so that his eyelids are no longer sufficient in covering them, and as his eyes bulge his tear ducts collapse and cause a cascade of saline liquid down his face. Letting out a deep, long-held breath, I release his throat and lean back, staring down at my kill.

I look around and see that no one else is around. Rue stands over another body with a handgun leveled on the head and a hole where the gun points. Rue watches me and their eyes lunge directly into mine. Perfect browns shoot laser focus into mine, and the question is clear. The answer is silence.

My hair stands on end and only in this moment do I realize it. My face is flush red and my fingers shake. I am so angry, and I don't even know this soldier. I stared deep into his eyes and took his life. Black and brown bruises outline his throat where my hands were. His body, for the rest of its existence, will display the way he died. Strangled in my hands. I had to. I had to. He attacked me.

"Thanks for taking the rest," I finally manage to speak through airy breaths, racked with shadow sobs.

Rue nods in recognition, "I always was the better soldier."

I throw Rue an accusatory glance and then chuck the handgun to them. I sheath my own knife, finding it in the sand, and then follow Rue around the camp. Rue tosses the extra sidearm to the sand, beside a dead body, heading straight for the bunker. We made quick work, and the sun is completely gone from the sky. Following Rue down into the bunker, it is clear we are not destined to find what we are looking for.

The bunker is large, with a very low ceiling supported by wooden ties or sandstone pillars carved from the ground. The bunker is quite deep and within it is an expansive storage full of crates.

“What’s in ’em?” I ask, and Rue is already ahead of me, slamming the butt of their rifle into a box. It splinters and allows them to pull it open. Inside are dozens of assault rifles. Rue squats down and examines them.

“Kalashnikovs,” Rue relays. I examine other boxes, noticing Cyrillic writing on most of them. There were several hundred boxes of ammunition, all with Chinese writing. Rue continues. “Five-five six, seven-six two, even some five-four five.”

“They’re building an armory,” I speak our shared thoughts. “None of those guns are NATO?”

Rue shakes their head, “Nope, straight from the manufacturer in Kazakhstan. Says right here on this tag.” Rue holds up a paper tag, tied to a rifle. I walk over and examine it. The writing is in Cyrillic.

“Wagner?” I ask.

Rue shakes their head, “Wagner wouldn’t supply guns without men. LaGuardia must be buying these direct from the Kremlin.”

“The ammo is Chinese,” I note.

We continue through the bunker, examining more boxes. Grenades. Landmines. Artillery shells. Ledgers full of Italian and Russian. My mind racks over the possibilities.

“What are they preparing for?” I ask aloud.

Rue shakes their head, “No clue. But whatever it is, it doesn’t involve us.”

“Look,” I point off into the distance to a man tied to a chair. He is bloody, and upon further inspection he is completely dead. The man we saw taken in here earlier.

Rue lifts up his sagging head, examining his face through the bloody mess. Rue shakes their head and lets the head fall back down. Unanalyzable, there is nothing left. I dig into his pockets and pull out a small circular dogtag. Stamped into it is a simple 9-digit code.

“The Path,” I say, noticing the dogtag. “The Path wear these kind of dogtags.”

Rue nods, “The Path have been operating covertly just south of here. Makes sense.”

I take a deep breath, leaving the tag where I found it. I then look at Rue.

“Got what you needed?”

Rue shakes their head, “Doesn’t look like this place will have what I want, and we don’t have forever to search it. Let’s get out of here, we can do without.”

I look across the room and spot another chair. Another body. Flies buzz around it. How many more of those are down here?

Chapter 4

Dust billowed up behind Cleo's car, scraping across our paint with light little taps, reverberating through the steel panels. Dad held onto the steering wheel tightly, following behind the next car in the convoy far too close for comfort—as always. I melted into the seat, listening to the ping of gravel caught in the tire tread, flinging into the metal archways.

“God damn roads,” Dad maundered under his breath as the relatively-smooth dirt road we were on begins rattling, sickened with wash-boarding which seems to go on forever. The car vibrated, like it would shake apart, as we barreled down the road. I was used to these kinds of roads, but they never felt comfortable. Dad always worried the shaking would knock something loose; something that could never be fixed.

I watched the world pass by through the window, sagebrush intermittently interrupted by an old oil derrick. The plateaus that stretched along in the distance seemed to sport faces, looking westward.

“How you doing, kiddo?” the road smooths out, and Dad leant over to look at me—only in minor glances, as he tried to keep his attention on the road.

“I feel full,” I told him, shrugging. Dad reached one hand over and squeezed my shoulder, a spot which I find particularly ticklish. I scrunch over his hand and giggle.

“You shrug like your mother did,” he comments. “And you better be full, because you ate a whole leg yesterday.”

I giggled again, looking over at him. The sun silhouettes his body so I can clearly make out the angles of his face. I noted, as I always did, the roughness of his jaw and the pits on his nose, following scars which seemed to dance like spirits across his cheeks. A small scar, stretching up through his forehead, always manages to hide itself among his bushy brow. Thick creases—four when he was happy, five when he was tired, and six when he was angry—stretched in varying lengths across his forehead. At that time there were four.

“Did Mom ever hunt like you did?” I asked about mom, feeling her close to me even after a mere mention of her name.

Dad cleared his throat, bracing himself against the wheel and leaning back into his seat, “No, your Mom was good at a lot of things though. She cooked well, tied knots well, set traps well.” Dad looked over into the sun, then back to the road. He cleared his throat again, sniffled, and rubbed his nose. “When she was your age she got into trouble a lot. I thought she was annoying and troublesome.”

“You thought she was annoying?”

Dad smiles, “Well, when I was a kid, yeah. It was kind of... kind of something I thought because my Dad thought it too. But I grew up, and she did too, and we changed as people. I kind of liked the fact she was rambunctious, that she didn’t do exactly what people told her to. She was... free.”

“Oh,” I said, looking out at the road with him.

“You, however, should definitely listen to the adults around you, young lady,” Dad switched back into his Dad-mode.

Our conversation is interrupted by another section of washboard roads, which rattle the plastic together, converting our landship into a mobile percussive instrument.

“Do you miss her?” Dad asked as the wash-boarding dies down.

I nodded, but it wasn’t a big nod, and I didn’t really know how to feel about it.

“Yeah, I miss her too,” Dad sighed. “I’ve missed her for a long time.”

After the long climb, the road finally began winding downward. Before, however, we pulled the convoy over to fill the cars up. The gas station was crowded as many people, all with the same idea, waited for their turn to pump gas. This station was perched at the summit of the highway, and up there it was very cold. I sat next to Dad, wrapped in a blanket, playing with a plastic puzzle toy. It was something my grandfather passed down to my Dad, and he then passed it down to me. Colored squares, aligned in a grid, pointed their icy neon glare at my eyes, mixed together in a displeasurable way. All I needed to do was align them, with all of the same color on one side. I couldn’t, for the life of me, figure it out. But it was fun to fidget with.

The sun was down now, with the only light being offered was by the headlights of our cars. Dad had shut our engine off to save gas, so we were a little cold waiting in line. Cleo’s car was ahead of us, and Yvan’s car was to our right, which still made us third in line (or last, depending on how you looked at it). Dad’s eyes flicked up to the rear view mirror as another car rumbles off the highway and rolls into position behind us. Their headlights remained on, blaring icy white rays throughout the interior. Dad mutters something under his breath.

The car behind us suddenly blares their horn, as if telling us to move up. Dad cracked his neck and stared out the rear view mirror. They blared on the horn again, and a hand came waving out of the window. Dad popped the battery on—twisting the key in the ignition—and flashed his lights at Cleo’s car.

“Dad, what’s going on?” I asked, feeling a pit of acid bubbling in my stomach.

“It’s alright,” he said, staring at the mirror. I could hear a slurry of expletives spewed out from the car behind us, and Cleo’s dad stepped out of their car. Dad cleared his throat and reached into the center console. “Stay in the car.”

He pulled out a handgun and popped his door open. Cleo’s dad rushes up to our door and hides behind it, aiming a similar handgun at the driver of the car behind us. Dad aimed his gun, and the man behind us raises his hand in submission.

“Get out of here!” Paul exclaimed at the driver. The driver yells out again, sloshing his words to the point that they came out like a drivel of molasses, melting all the words into one long bumbling mess. The driver threw the car into drive and hit the gas, careening to the side but not before making contact with the bumper of our car.

The thud shakes our car as the drunk driver made collision with the drivers-side corner. The thud is followed with an echo of metal scrapes and Dad screaming out a flurry of expletives I wasn’t even allowed to hear, let alone say. The drunk driver careens through a patch of grass and back onto the road, a fireworks show of sparks following as the car bottomed out on the road. My tiny heart was beating so fast that my vision went blurry and I felt my stomach perform somersaults.

“Asshole,” Paul muttered, and Dad rounded the car to check the spot where the driver hit us. I pushed my door open, stepping out into the cold and swung around the passenger side of the car and examined. Our rear bumper had a big dent in it and hung down on the drivers-side, but all things considered there was very little damage. Red paint lay hatched into our own car’s green.

Dad saw me round the corner, “Maia, get in the car please.”

“Is it going to be okay?”

Dad scrunched his brow and slid his gun into his waistline, “Everything is *fine*, Maia. Please get back in the car.”

My heart was pounding so hard that I could barely hear him. I didn’t notice the anxiety in the moment, but as everything was cooling off I felt the blood rush into my face like hot twisted steel. My stomach churned and I felt sick just standing there. Dad uttered a groan as he saw a large dark patch creep down my pant leg.

“Oh, Maia,” he soughed, picking me up and running me into the attendant store. He barked at the Gas Station Attendant, asking for the bathrooms, and then rushed me into the back room where a grimy toilet was. He set me on the toilet, but I can hardly feel my body. I stared blankly into the wall, feeling my mind moving in my head. Questions pushed the matter around, claiming space and growing bigger as they fed off of every anxiety bubbling to the surface. Why did I have to be like this? How long would Dad deal with me until he had enough? How long would this last? Would I ever be strong?

Dad stepped back from me and looked away, staring into the ceiling and running his hands through his hair. He then quickly pulled them away, cursed, and ran to the sink. He pressed down on the plastic nozzle of an antiseptic bottle, spreading it across his hands. The faucet head is old and rusted, with decades-old hardwater grime left over on the porcelain. A knock comes at the door and Paul hands a backpack through the door. Dad thanked him and shuts it. He pulled out a fresh pair of clothes, which I slip into.

“It’s okay, Maia,” Dad rummaged through the bag to see if he forgot anything. I stood silently in that room and pulled the pants tight up against my little body. The whole time I shook like I had a fever, and Dad noticed and looked at me with a sheepish frown.

“I’m sorry,” I whimper, feeling sensation return to my body. Dad put the soiled clothes in the sink and leaned down, wrapping me in a hug—the warmth of which I can still recall. His muscles are huge and tensed against my frail little body and he squeezed my sorrows out. I still shook on my fingertips, but the numbness had begun to subside.

“It’s okay, Maia,” he said. “I know everything is scary but I’m... I protect you. I’ll always protect you.”

He held me in this hug for a while longer as we both sat on the unwashed tile of the bathroom. I whimpered in his arms and let his warmth soothe me back into humanity. For that small segment of time I felt more ghost than person and I felt as if my bones would never work again under my weight. Images of Mom came back into my head and I saw her figure staring out at the distance, swinging on the front porch in that chair swing we had.

“Why did Mom leave us?” I whimpered, pulling myself even closer to Dad. He lets out a long sigh and stirs but stays still.

“Mom left... because she had to,” Dad whispered to me. His voice barely overcame the sound of the buzzing lights above our head; but I could hear him just fine. Dad leans his head down and kisses the top of my head. “She had to go because this world wasn’t for her anymore. She wished she could have stayed, sweetheart. But she couldn’t.”

“Why do *we* have to stay?” I pant, thinking about Mom. My last memories of her were laying in that casket, why couldn’t I have thought of her in any other way? Why was that the lasting impression?

“We’re not like her, Maia,” Dad comforts. “There is still life for us. We live on for her.”

Our moment was interrupted by a knocking at the door. The metal hinges rattled against the metal doorframe and Paul’s voice came through it, muffled.

“Atlas, I pulled your truck into the pump,” Paul spoke through the door.

“I’ll be right there,” Dad said, getting up and grabbing the soiled pile of clothes on the ground. He swung open the trash can and tossed them inside, then turned around and offered his hand to help me up. I held his hand as we walked out of the rest stop, avoiding the empty aisles before opening back up into the cold night air. I walked out of there on my own two feet, and Dad let it happen reluctantly but I assured him I could do it. No more carrying, it was my own power under my own feet. Dad helped be back into the truck and swung open the gas flap, inserting the nozzle into the truck. I watched the yellow numbers tick up on the glowing LCD display, feeling my eyes grow heavy. Why did the world have to be this scary? Why did these things have to happen to us? My little heart scratched at every question until the fear of the world was enough to lull me to sleep.

~

The Path. A name that leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

We rode on for a few hours, making a good distance between us and Napoli Checkpoint. The whole time it’s all I can think about. Back when Dad and I packed up the car and roved around looking for water, the Path were alive and well.

Following the Great American War, the states were split into a thousand pieces. Warring factions, roaming bands, genocidal maniacs, and if you were lucky you might find a few small communities making it through by the skin of their teeth. It was like that for a decade, and when starvation and migration drove most people out of the lands things cooled off for a bit. The Path arose somewhere in deep in Arizona, moving people and guns around through the southern territories into Mexico.

Everything changed when they took on the government still hanging onto power down there. It was big news, according to my Dad. He told me about the Siege of Phoenix, when the Path took down the nation of Arizona and commandeered its military. They were good people with a good goal, according to Dad. It just didn’t last long enough to do good.

They quickly invaded the land Dad and I lived, but this was before I was born. Took command of its industry and agriculture. Liberated people, brought them democratic reforms and ideals and laws and morality. Before then the entire land was ruled by a theocratic whip. Hard to tell that now, but people lived in this land everywhere.

And then everything fell apart. Bureaucratic institutions beckoning back to the old days of the American Empire completely collapsed and nothing was done about the Colorado river. Chaos ensued. People couldn’t live here, they couldn’t make it work. There wasn’t enough water, wasn’t enough food. I was born in this time and when I was old enough to

remember it was always problems. Finally the Path completely dissolved itself, and everyone was left in anarchy.

They haven't been seen since. Until now. Those dogtags weren't old either, they weren't some relic. Those were freshly pressed.

They're still down there. Still operating, in the dark, and for some reason this is an unsettling realization. Ghosts of the past drifting aimlessly around those dark recesses of these abandoned territories, these lifeless cascades.

I pull on the reins and utter a low, 'woah' to Poppy as Arbor stumbles to a stop in the basin of a large winding river. Rue swings their leg off and walks down over to the shore.

"This where we're stopping?" I call down. Rue nods and beckons me over. I nearly trip out of the saddle, catching my foot on one of the stirrups, and then walk over to Rue under the blanket of a thousand stars, casting themselves from one horizon to the next.

"This is the Green River," Rue explains, kneeling down next to the water and running their hand through the stream. "Still going, although not as strong as it once was. I say we camp by it tonight, think of a plan from there on out."

"That map should give us a good idea for where to go next," I agree, then look back at the horses. "Plus, they need a break."

Rue nods, "Let's cowboy camp it."

Following their lead, I walk back to Poppy and untie my basic sleeping essentials from her back. I then loosen the saddle and pull it off their back and I loosen the straps on their halter and let them roam with Arbor. I roll out my cot close to Rue's and watch as Poppy and Arbor trance down to the river to drink.

The night was cold and restless. I don't think I'd had enough time to let the adrenaline drain from my blood and the future prospects of our journey kept my mind wandering through labyrinths. In the morning I awoke still groggy and found Rue kneeling over the map we had recovered.

"This map," Rue says. "It's old, Pre-War. Look at the markings."

I turn my head to look. Labels like 'National Forest' and 'National Park' are labeled clearly on the large sheet of paper, and the map itself it yellowed at the edges.

"So?"

Rue shrugs, “I’ve been thinking about it all night. What if it’s coded?”

“What’s coded?”

“The location of the Lobby?”

“What do you think the code is?” I ask, taking a seat next to Rue and pulling out my morning MRE. Rue points to a large section of the map marked in an orange color. “I think the house is up here.”

The area is labeled ‘Arches National Park’, and my eyes drift down below it and see the name ‘Moab’ plastered over a small town just south of it. Dad and I were from Moab.

“How do we know, it could be all the way up here,” I point to the top corner of the map. Rue shakes their head and pulls an object out of their pocket.

“Look,” Rue shows me, and it’s a patch—an old one. It’s in the shape of an arrowhead and, while it’s difficult to tell, says ‘Arches’ on it. There are other words but they are hard to discern.

“Arches,” I recite. “That’s as good of a lead as any. How do we get there?”

“We’re here,” Rue points out a spot along a winding blue marking. “We came from this spot, marked on the map.”

I agree and Rue drags their finger across a stretch of black markings. “These are old highways. Even if the roads aren’t there anymore, it’s still the fastest route through the terrain.”

Rue returns to out spot.

“If we take those highways, we’ll be dead or doomed. They’re too easy to follow, will take too much time. But look,” Rue traces their finger down the river we are on, and points to a spot marked on the map. A trailhead.

“The river dumps us right here,” Rue explains. “Then we take a jaunt through this canyon and boom, right there. We’re right next to the house.”

I shake my head, “We still have no idea where the house is, could take weeks to find out there. Those red rocks are like a maze.”

“It’ll be easy to find from there.”

“Only one problem.”

“What?”

“We still have to walk the horses down these canyons.”

Rue sits back and, under their mask, smiles at me. Their cheekbones raise and I can see the corners of that mouth pulling up like a strange marionette. “I have one.”

Rue gets up from their spot and finds their saddle, then unrolls the large plastic object they had brought. Sure enough, once unraveled, it was clearly a raft.

“Why’d you bring that?”

“Bug out plan,” Rue explains. “Pop one of these bad boys on a river and you can make it away from anyone. Out in those canyonlands it’s basically impossible to follow a river on foot.”

The plan pieces together in my head. Yes, it can work. There’s new challenges, but yes, it can work.

“What do we do with the horses?” I ask, looking over at Poppy and Arbor. They both sit in the grass, looking at us as we stir.

“We come back for them, I guess.” Rue says, softening their voice. They hadn’t thought about that part.

“Let’s get it aired up, then,” I conclude, kicking the dirt and walking back to my cot. Ever closer, inching ever closer.

I pull the halter off Poppy and lay it next to her saddle. Rue was already pushing Arbor off away from the beach and hauling their backpack into the raft. Poppy slaps her lips together as I rub her head, clearly feeling what I was feeling. It’s been a good ride with her, several years in fact. As much as I want to believe Rue—that we’ll come back here—I know in my heart that the chance is slim. We’re descending into the heart of darkness, the expectation is that hope is left here. Only trust remains.

I finally say goodbye and walk off, feeling the heavy feeling on my chest. I pick up my bag and haul it into the raft, Where Rue is sat on the edge and holding the oar in their hand.

“Ready?” Rue asks. I nod, and they push off of the bank. Immediately the raft bobs in the water, following the stream downward, to the south.

As the sun falls behind the western cliff faces, Rue and I decide to pull the raft into the bank and camp out for the night. We watched our surroundings all day and felt it was safe enough to camp on the bank. No one is left here. Rue and I paddle and bring the front of the raft into the sand. Rue hops out first, rope in hand, and heaves against the current. I hop out and help, pulling the raft from the side until it is properly beached.

With our kit packed on our backs, we entrepas away from the river a ways, battling through thickets of dried cattails and rickety rushes until we come to a clearing which we could stake a camp out. The spot we choose is a large flat rock which had tumbled down from the top of the canyon wall millennium ago. It had fallen in such a way that there is easy access to its flat top from an outcropping of sand and stone and creosote bushes. Upon the rock a circle of stones is already placed and within are old ashes and a charred log.

I lay my kit out, Rue doing the same behind me, before turning and looking up at the cliff wall. Then, suddenly, Rue freezes and pulls a finger up to their clothed mouth, flicking their head in the direction they are looking. My heart drops and I slowly look over my shoulder at the mountain.

It's hard to see, but a white mountain goat is perched up on a stone just below the sheer cliff side. Rue swings their rifle off their back and looks through the optic. After a few seconds Rue pulls the trigger and the power of the gunshot rings through the canyon, up and down its walls and up into the sky.

"Down!" Rue screams. "I got it!"

I throw my kit onto the ground, "Well, let's go get it then."

Rue and I follow a small semblance of a trail up to the wall and locate the body. A bright red stain mats the mighty creature's white fur, its two pointy horns holding its head up so its eyes stare into the sky as we approach, and it lies limp against the stone. Rue grabs the horns and checks the animal, and sure enough it is dead. I grab the hind legs and together we carry the animal back to our campsite.

My mind can't help but wander in the midst of our haul, carrying the couple-hundred-pound animal, and I think about the animal's life. Living here is not an easy feat, these goats usually don't come down this far from the Wasatch. I wonder why it's so far south? Had these animals begun to migrate down here when the people left? Was this their home all along, and when humans moved they had to migrate? Whatever the answer, it all leads to the animal in our hands.

We lay the animal on the rock and Rue cuts it open, letting its guts spill over the side of the rock onto the soil below. Rue begins hacking at the animal's coat, so I come over and help.

“The best meat is here,” I place my hand up on the animals back, just in front of it’s pelvis but behind its ribcage. “These are the tenderloins. There’s also the front here,” I place my hand on the animals sternum, feeling for tender meat. “But it seems like this guy is too skinny for much meat to be there.”

I cut away a small section of skin and fur and hack out the tenderloins, placing them on a small aluminum pan that Rue had brought out. I carve these tenderloins into smaller pieces to cook better.

“We can cook these a lot better by laying them on some flat stones,” I tell Rue. “That little pan won’t do much good.”

“Okay, I’ll go get some,” Rue hops off the rock and goes to fetch some flat stones. I look over to them and call out.

“Clean them in the river first, get the loose sand off!”

Rue did as I told and came back with a healthy looking slab. I laid the stone on and Rue fetches some sticks to start the fire. By the time the sun sets for good the meat is sizzling away. We sit together by the fire as I tend to the loins.

“How’d you know how to do this?” Rue asks, watching the meat hungrily.

“My Dad showed me a lot of this when I was a kid,” I tell them. “As a kid we would go camping every so often, but after my Mom died and the Colorado dried up, we were almost constantly on the move to find fresher pastures. During that time we hunted most of our food and cooked it over a fire.”

“I knew you and your Dad were refugees, I didn’t know you had a Mom,” Rue says solemnly into the flames. “That must have been hard, losing her and then your home?”

I shrug, “When you’re a kid you kind of just take what you get. It *was* hard though. Lots of nights with empty stomachs. Sometimes you would get sick from the meat—‘cause the animals were suffering, too. Not just us.”

“Hmph,” Rue chorts.

“What?”

“Nothing, it’s just... you get an accent when you talk about your childhood.”

I sigh, “Yeah, that’s my Dad coming through. I never heard my Mom speak, but she had one too, apparently.”

I look over to the rotting body beside us.

“We better get this thing away from camp, coyotes are going to have a feast.”

“But first!” Rue exclaims, digging a fork into a tenderloin and pulling it off the cooking stone. “A feast for us!”

Rue serves themselves and turns away from me and lifts their mask, bringing the food to their lips. I can’t help but smile, and it hurts my cheeks, and I dig my own fork into my own steak and begin chowing down.

The fire out, the night fully set in, all I can do is stare into the sky and watch the stars draw overhead. A couple hundred feet from camp I can hear the squalor of coyotes ripping into the goat carcass. They yipe and cackle and howl into the sky and occasionally you can hear the visceral tear of tendons and viscus.

It’s been a long time since I heard coyotes. I used to hear them all the time at night, most often toward twilight when I would lie awake in my makeshift bed. Dad would leave the windows of the car cracked ever-so-slightly so we could get a bit of a breeze and carry the humidity out. I don’t know if Dad ever sat up and listened to the coyotes as well—during their gorgonian laughter there was nothing in our car but silence.

Those sounds are nothing different now. Splitting and tearing and hollering and hooting. Tearing body, tearing tendon. I picture them gathering around me and feasting on me—careless to the fact I writhe in pain and shout for them to stop. I imagine what it would feel like to have their enameled teeth sinking deep into my flesh, tearing at the sinews that hold everything in place. What would the blood feel like pouring from the wound? Would they break my bones, scoop out the marrow within? What organ would they go for first? I always heard that dogs prefer liver. Or was it that liver is a dominance tool. He who eats the liver eats first?

I imagine it for a while and settle on my brain. They would eat my brain first. Their teeth would rattle at my skull, deflected off its round surface, but they would continue to gnaw. Once they broke the bone I think they would feast on the soft tissue, lapping up the cerebral fluid, engulfing me. Becoming me. My thoughts and my memories and the names I remember and the things I always wanted to do. Loves, hates, fears, hopes. They would then be for the coyotes to worry about. For the coyotes to enjoy. For them to understand and take into themselves. My neurons, and their millions of little connections, would become part of them. I would live on forever. I wouldn’t decay and they wouldn’t be lost. Or, at least, not in the coyotes lifetime. Which would be short. Retrospectively.

I wonder then if the coyotes would know what most of my thoughts meant. If they would understand the names within. Dad. Cleo. Mom. Rue. Colter. I wonder if they would understand the meaning of ‘hopelessness’. The meaning of ‘unrequited passion’. The meaning of ‘fear’. I wasn’t fully convinced they could know fear the way I knew it.

I wonder if they would know what 'love' meant.

I wonder what they would do with my hopes. I have so few, there wouldn't be enough to go around. I wonder if they would see my memories. They would see me writhing around as a child, a collar over my throat. Yes, they would know about those. Surely. Something so familiar to them. Epigenetic memory, ancestors caged and grueled and beaten and collared. Yes, yes, they would understand that. They would understand and they would howl for me and they would cry—if dogs could cry, they would cry.

The coyotes would know me. They would consume my mind and they would know me.

Chapter 5

The car pulled to an abrupt stop, the momentum pulling me from my dream state. I looked around, feeling the tension in the car. Dad immediately reached over to the radio, clicking the receiver.

“Paul, get out of here,” he pealed. “It’s a trap, run!”

The lights shining at us from behind suddenly whirled around, snaking across the tight canyon walls and burnt logs, and were replaced by glowing red ones which shrunk in the mirror. My heart immediately began racing, and I looked around the car bewildered.

Flashlights ahead of us suddenly pierced the windshield, and a man dressed in tactical gear jumps onto the hood of the truck, aiming a gun at us. Several gunshots were fired, splitting my gut with the reverberations, as bullets from other assailants fly toward Cleo’s car speeding away. I feel the horror filling my chest and my eyes are glued as wide as they can, watching my dad. He had his hands raised in surrender, but I could see it in his eyes—that little fear speck that flowed whenever we approached something unsafe. I saw it the previous night, at the gas station, and here it was again.

“Open the door!” a command is yelled at us, and dad props the door open. Immediately another rogue pulls his door open all the way, urging him out. Suddenly, my door is swung open, and a blast of cold mountain air slaps me in the eyes, driving tears out.

“Dad!” I scream out as a man grabs my arm and pulls me from the car. I’m escorted rather gently to the front of the car where the light was casting out. Dad was wheeled over to the front of the car and pressed against the hood, his hands held behind his back. Two other assailants—who look more and more like well-equipped soldiers—began going through the truck. The soldier holding me speaks into a radio.

“Bring mother out.”

The darkness of night produced a pomp looking man and woman, walking side by side, escorted by two soldiers. The woman leads, a wide smile on her face as she examines the scene. Once her eyes lock onto me I feel a wash of shame cover me. I felt the dizziness in my bones, and a warm relinquish in my pants. The woman was dressed in brown canvas pants and a tough crème-colored safari shirt tucked into them, buckled together with a silver-encrusted crocodile-skin belt. Around her shoulders was a very small sweater—too small to fit her—draped like an animal pelt.

“Hello, sweetheart,” the woman speaks softly, squatting slightly to get more-on-my-level. Dad squirmed with the soldier holding him.

“Don’t talk to her,” Dad cut, either at me or the woman. The soldier shoved Dad’s head into the car hood, denting it. I yelped at the sight, and this disturbed the woman.

“Please, soldier, take him out of sight,” she growled at him, as if astonished the man would do such a thing in front of me—or her. “We can’t be worrying this little poor girl.”

The soldier took dad and brought him around the car where I couldn’t see him. The fear in my mouth was so intense I failed to say anything, instead just staring and feeling the urine in my pants start to soil and chill.

“Please, little poor girl, tell me your name?” the woman asked gently. I noticed her partner next to her, a broad-shouldered man wearing a tweed suit. He smiled as well, as if amused by me. I gulped and shook my head. “It’s okay, sweetheart. All your worries are over.”

I backed away from her as she advanced, but the soldier behind me kept me in place. I feel my breathing heaving in and out, the force pulling against my entire body. There was something in the woman’s stillness that set off alarm bells in every ounce of my being, as if she were the very stranger I was told to worry so much about. She set off the same fear as spiders, bears, and rabid dogs. I felt as if I were put in a cage by the way she smiled so falsely—the smile was almost engineered, designed, crafted.

“Oh, Harold, she’s so scared,” the woman backed away momentarily, clutching to her husband.

“Give her some water,” Harold suggested, and the mere mention of water stiffens my corpse, straightening my back. They notice too.

“Oh, she want’s water,” the woman noticed, and pulled out a canteen which was slung around her back. She unscrewed the lid and then slowly handed it over to me, as if I were a rabid animal and was afraid I would bite her.

I snatch the canteen from her and pull it to my mouth, filling myself with water. The cold stuff flowed down into my stomach and I felt every bit of it. The woman clutched to her husband, watching as I poured it. They were amazed at me.

“How can she drink so much?!” the woman exclaimed. “So much water in such a tiny body!”

“It’s amazing how the poor survive,” the husband responded, almost matter-of-factly. “Their bodies seem to *adapt* to hold so much water!”

“Oh, Harold, this is the one!” the woman’s excitement it almost contagious.

Harold nodded, “Let’s get her home, then.”

“Call forward, tell them we’re coming with a little poor girl,” the woman spoke to the soldier next to her, who nodded and committed to her orders. She then stepped forward

to me, and kneels down so she's perfectly level. Now, with her this close, she caught a whiff of my soiled pants. Her nose crinkled up, but she kept a calm composure.

"We have a lot more water at our house," she told me. "We have toys you can play with, and even a bed for you to sleep in. Oh, we're so glad to have found you. Let's get you home, we can clean you up."

A trance whipped over me, I'm not sure if it was from the lack of sleep or something in the water, but I felt a calmness come over me. She extended her hand, and I take it. It was cold, moisturized, almost oily from lotion. I followed by her side, hearing my dad screaming out for me in the background. I felt myself wanting to run to him, but something in me stopped. Perhaps the woman had a thorn in her hand, which injected venom into me as I walked. Or, maybe, I was lost in the exhaustion.

"Please, take care of that man when she's out of ear-shot," Harold told a soldier. "The man is causing a ruckus and it could attract a wild animal. A cougar, perhaps."

"Perhaps, sir," the soldier responded, then walked away. I noticed now as we ascend up the road that the couple had come from their very own car—a large SUV like Dad's, except far more modern and luxurious.

"Harold, honey, the little girl has soiled herself from fear," the woman told her husband.

"Sir, would you get a towel for the car so she doesn't stain the thing," Harold commanded a soldier, who opens the back of the car and produced a white shag towel, the most luxurious fabric I had ever seen, and stitched into is the mantra, *'This house prefers peace.'*

The soldier placed it on the back seat of the truck, and then helped me into it. I'm buckled in and immediately notice how comfortable the seat is. Leather against my back nearly envelops me, and I'm lulled deeper into exhaustion. The husband and wife take the front seats and start the car. The woman whipped around the seat, looking back at me.

"What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Maia," I peep, the last unburdened word I'd ever speak. The woman smiled, leaned forward and opened the glove compartment, producing a dog's collar. It's a fine collar, nicely stitched with leather on the inside and a fine silky finish on the outside. A steel ring waggles on the opposite side of a clip.

"We'll get you a tag with your name on it, Maia," the woman ensured.

Her body contorts to get back to me, moving her body like smoke billowing out of the vents and the floor and filling the nooks and crannies and sucking out all of the air. Before I could contest, she clicked the collar across my throat.

The compound in which they lived was intense.

It was the largest house I'd ever seen, and maybe even the largest building. The entire perimeter was fenced in by concrete walls topped with barbed wire, and the gate was a heavy steel-reinforced thing with a guard post outside of it. As the car rolled in through the gate, I saw the house.

It was a modernist building with large glass walls exposed to the south, made of concrete and painted steel. There was an expansive lawn, a nice driveway, and a nice manicured pine-forest island in the middle of the lawn, held in with edging stones. Beyond these tall pines was a small brook which bounced over stones, pouring from the side of the mountain. The sight of the water, moving and clear, made my heart leap.

The car pulled into a garage built into the side of the house, which reflected the house in style with its simple box shape and black-painted corrugated steel siding. The car shuts off, and Harold helps me out of the car. The woman, Mother, grabbed my hand and pulled me into the house. She instructed me to kick off my shoes, which I did, and they plopped directly beside a few other pairs just at the entry way of the house. These shoes, pristine and spotless, juxtaposed themselves against my shoes which were soiled and muddy and falling apart—the sole of one peeling off from cracked glue.

Mother took me into a room just opposite of the garage, which is blanketed in bright white light. Two large machines stand side-by-side here, and linens and clothes are packed in baskets all around the room.

“Now, I’m as embarrassed to tell you as I’m sure you are to hear it,” Mother started, her voice almost quivering. “But this household is for *civilized* people. We must all be potty trained, you see? Are you able to go in a lavatory or do you always...” Mother gestured to my soiled pants.

I gulped, “I’m potty trained.”

Mother quickly pulled the edges of her mouth up across her botoxed face, “Good. Here are some new clothes, since those ones you’re wearing are dirty. I take it you do that out of fear, now do you?”

I nodded sheepishly, feeling a flush of blood to my cheeks.

Mother cleared her throat, “Yes, well all animals have defense mechanisms, we can’t fault you for that. Hopefully you’ll find life here peaceful enough that we won’t struggle with wetting ourselves, will we?”

She handed me a stack of clothes. I throw off the old ones and put on the fresh ones, feeling far more comfortable in these than my old sweaty cottons. I didn't have a lot of clothes that fit anymore, so the give in the waistband was refreshing.

Back in the hallway, Mother walked off and Harold—Father—showed me to my room. I felt a tinge of excitement hit me at the realization. I could have my own space again, with a bed, and clothes, and toys, and a mirror, and a window to see the world! I could almost smell the fresh bedsheets, feel the curtains in my fingers as I pulled them back. The excitement almost saved me from the feeling of the collar around my throat, which felt tighter as we walked. The house had a unique floorplan which followed the contour of the mountain side. There weren't 'floors' of this house as much as there were several lower and higher areas complemented with lofts, decks, and balconies. We walked past the entryway and down some stairs to the dining room, which was directly beside the kitchen. He walked me down a hallway beside the kitchen to a dark corner, which bent and ended at a large steel door. I noticed two bowls, a rubber pad, and a doggy bed in this corner. My heart lifted again. They had a dog!

"Here we are," Father said, stopping so abruptly that I bumped into him. "Oh! Where are you going, child. Right here."

I looked away from the large steel door down to his gesture and see him pointing to the bed. The bowls, painted in pink, had water and cereal respectively. I felt my legs quiver and my gut sink. Father patted the top of the bed, showing its fluffiness. The thing was barely big enough for me in the fetal position.

"This is your space, Maia. This bed, this food. If you must use the restroom, its on the opposite end of the hall. We don't permit you walking around the house at night, you should be asleep when we are and awake when we are. The bowl here is only supplemental, we serve breakfast, lunch, and dinner at reasonable times. I guess you'll get all that in the morning. Until then, child."

I followed Father's gesturing hand and saw a new sight. A setup, much like this one given to me, tucked into the corner near the bathroom door. In it, a little kid was tucked into it as tight as they could get. They looked a little younger than I was, with thick-and-tangled brown hair and two great hazel eyes which stare out from the dark.

"Oh, and that is your sibling," Father remembers. "Rue, meet Maia. Maia, Rue."

Rue didn't move, their eyes penetrated through the darkness and sunk into me. I sat down on my own dog bed and watched them.

And the dark came, with the night, and Mother and Father went to bed in their own separate rooms. I was left on the floor. No wishes goodnight. The cold of the stones seeped through the bed and I felt a need to move and so I did—not before looking over at Rue. They still stared, and they didn't budge when I got up. I wandered the house and

looked over the vastness of it, feeling anxiety poking me in the stomach and reminding me of the rules. Empty, blank, a vacuum of emotion. I walked over to the south end and looked out the vast windows stretching from floor to ceiling and I watched into the darkness at the hard black edge of the mountainside against the slightly lighter dark-blue endless hole of space.

With their silhouettes as black as the world, I watched as a pack of coyotes scurried across the mountainside and cut holes through the fabric of space around me. They capered through the brush and their ears touched the sky and their tails pointed toward the earth and I noticed how scrawny they looked. Emaciated little things, holding themselves against the vastness of the universe, as if raising a fist to the impossible vastness of everything and declaring their stead. Declaring their home. This world, so dark and turbulent and uncontrollable. It is here in the cosmos, and it's not going anywhere.

And I was there too. I was there in the cosmos. The coyotes scampered off, returning to their ventures in the land of man. I couldn't help but feel a little stronger. Maybe *they* were looking out for me.

Time moved very slow the first few days. Waking up early to the family chef chopping and blending and brewing in the kitchen. Then Mother and Father would wake up, and they would make their way into the dining room and be served. After a few minutes alone, they would call me and Rue into the dining room.

"Rue, Maia," Father would stand in the threshold to our hallway. "Come."

The first morning, I watched and learned from Rue. Rue was quick to their feet, which lightly pad over the tiles. They are dressed in a two-piece cotton pajama set with princesses kissing frogs, and I notice they grip their shirt as they walk. I'm quick behind them, following closely. They smell of flowers and mint. They also have a collar around their throat.

Once in the dining room, Father and Mother would be seated and eating and Mother would gesture to two plates on the floor. On them there are some waffles and corned hash and in a small crucible is an egg—soft boiled. A bowl of orange juice is placed beside the plate. Rue—who walks around with their head down and their neck bones sticking up into their skin—finds their place at one of the plates and folds their legs underneath their body and begins feasting. They use their hands, pulling some of the food apart and shoveling it into their mouth.

"Go on, Maia," Mother orders. I find the plate beside Rue and begin eating with my hands. It's not entirely weird to eat with my hands, I ate a lot of my food with my hands

ever since leaving our house. This food was really messy, though, and soon oil coated my hand. I tried the egg and didn't like it, recoiling at the wet yolk. Rue eyes me as I cringe and giggles a little, showing a smile. A rare bout of emotion from them, something I didn't realize I wouldn't see for a long time again.

"Grow up and eat your food," Father says, stern in his voice and fist clenched on the table. I made quick work with the food, filling my rather-empty belly. The orange juice was great, even if I had to drink it from a bowl. Rue was finished far before me and sat at their plate, waiting.

Once I was close to finished, I sat back from my plate like Rue and looked over to them. This is the first time I've gotten a good look at them in the light. Rue has big eyes, brilliant white surrounding a circular pool of brown-and-black mosaics. Their skin is darker than mine, but only by a bit. I then look at Mother and Father and notice that their skin is very pale, not like mine at all. Like Rue, I also have curly brown hair, although Rue's is a little curlier and better kept than my curls. Rue has a few freckles and an upturned nose, and it makes me think of my nose. My mom's nose, apparently. Larger, only slightly hooked.

"I like your hair," I comment to them, and their eyes go wide.

Mother pipes up immediately, "No speaking in the dining room. Eating is peace, you do not have conversations in here."

I scrunch up and avoid her gaze, looking back at Rue with a surprised look across my face.

"*Maia!*" Mother's voice breaks through the air and Father drops his fork on his plate. I quickly turn back to her. "You *will* apologize. We are *civilized*, not savages. You will address me as a superior and when I correct you, you *will* apologize!"

I gulp quickly and can't escape the tension across my throat, "I'm sorry."

Father gets up from his chair and comes around the table and grabs Rue by the wrist. Rue whines and Father pulls their wrist up to the table and holds it there. Father then takes his free hand and digs it into Rue's waistband and tugs them down, exposing her butt. I quickly avert my eyes.

"Maia," Father urges, his voice low but unstable. Angry, anger beyond anything Dad ever showed me. "Look at us."

I bring my eyes back to Father and Rue. Rue's face points down toward me and it's scrunched up in pain and fear.

“In this house, we perform Altruistic Punishment. It’s proven to be the most effective,” he explains. “When you act out, or do something you aren’t supposed to, Rue get’s punished. The same works for Rue, and you will be punished.”

Father brings his hand down on Rue and the room fills with the horrendous sound of flesh-on-flesh and my mind flashes images of Dad in my eyes—he would never do this. Father hits Rue hard, and each hit Rue grips the table and utters a small sound. Over and over, Father hits Rue eleven times. Finally he pulls their waistband back up and pushes them down onto the ground. Rue adjusts their pants and avoids my eyes, staring down at their plate and slowly rubbing their bottom.

Mother speaks now, “We hate doing this, we just hate it. But we *have* to have order. Without order, we have chaos—and Chaos breeds resentment and hurt and pain. If you think *this* hurts, imagine how we feel? Imagine how it would be *without* the order?”

Rue sniffled and held their arm, staring down into the floor.

After breakfast was over we moved immediately to getting changed for the day. While our typical day at the house was uneventful, that first day of mine included an afternoon activity for Mother and Father.

The mansion didn’t operate alone. Mother and Father brought in a servant to clean, a chef to cook, and a stylist to change *something* in the house. There was also the Nanny, Miss Lincoln, who helped Rue and I throughout the day. First was to change, so Miss Lincoln took us into the washroom and changed us from our pajamas and into brown canvas pants and a button-up plaid shirt.

Miss Lincoln eyes are kind, peering into each of ours as she helps us. Miss Lincoln asked Rue if there had been any punishments, and Rue nodded. Miss Lincoln pursed her lips and bent Rue over her knee and pulled down her undies, exposing Rue’s cheeks again. Miss Lincoln then produced a bag of wipes, and went over the bruise now forming with one. Rue’s eyes are welled up with tears now and they fall like raindrops into the tile floor. Miss Lincoln gently pulls Rue’s pants back up and adjusts their clothes and looks them over, dropping the wipe into the trash.

“I’m sorry,” Miss Lincoln says. She then takes Rue over to the mirror and begins lacing their hair back behind their head, tying it together with a bow. It was my turn next, and Miss Washington did the same to my hair. As she pulls the strands back, she speaks softly to me.

“If ever you are hit by Father,” she coos to me. “I can do just what I did to Rue. Those wipes can take the hurt away.”

I gulp and nod my head, watching the collar across my throat in my reflection.

The days melded into each other. It was surprising how undefinitive they were. One moment I was waking up and the next moment it was dinner. My mind couldn’t even remember it. Days turned into weeks, not much longer than that we met our third sibling.

Mother and Father had wanted to play golf, and they had Miss Lincoln dress Rue and I in our outdoor best and brought us out to the edge of the property, where Mother and Father waited with their golf clubs and their balls and a gold cart. Father is dressed in a pair of slacks and a white shirt tucked into them, sleeves rolled up to his elbows and a sweater too small to wear tied around his neck. Mother is dressed in a similar get-up, except her pants are plaid and she wears loafers instead of sneakers. She smiles at us as we walk by.

“Get into position, please!” she gestures to the woods. Rue and I took each others hands and walked into the woods. At this point we had played this game enough times that a trail had been carved where we walked. We made our way a few hundreds paces before stopping in a small clearing in the undergrowth beneath a big tree. We sit with our backs against this tree and talk. It was our only moment to do so.

We talked and Mother and Father hit balls into the woods. If they landed close we would fetch them, if not we would spend some time after they were done to collect the last ones. We had a big bag which we put them in and after they were done we brought it back out to them and then went back into the woods for them to go again.

It goes like this all afternoon. They hit the balls, Rue and I talk, and then we fetch the balls and bring them back. That day, however, when we brought the third round back, Mother was on her phone and she was giddily cheering.

Mother turns to Father, showing him the screen of her phone.

“Harold,” she says urgently. “Look what the guards just found!”

“Oh, my,” Father says, looking into the screen, that strange monotone enthusiasm in his voice. “That’s perfect.”

“Come, let’s go get him!” Mother springs up.

Father turns to us, “Finish finding that ball. Mother and I are going to fetch you both a new sibling. This one is *very* special.”

Mother’s face is plastered with a wide lipless smile and a baring of her bright white veneers. She outstretches a hand and takes Father’s, and they both make their way back into the house.

“What are they doing?” I turn to Rue, asking them once Mother and Father are gone.

Rue lets out a long sigh, “That’s how they talked when they went to find *you*.”

The boy looked at us with large, wide eyes that pierce blue and a skinny face not so well-fed. His lips are sealed tight, and you can see the glisten in the corners of his forehead that sweat is starting to bead on it.

“This is Colter,” Father introduces, and Colter avoids our eyes, staring down into space. The collar around his throat is blue, polyester, with a large holding-handle sewn into the back. Colter’s tag flops around on its ring, the metal wore orange. “Colter, this is Maia.”

Colter’s eyes flash over to mine, and he looks me over, and his eyes stop on my collar. His collar jitters as he gulps.

“Well, say hello, you two,” Mother urges.

“Hi,” I greet.

“Hi,” Colter’s voice struggles. His collar doesn’t hang as loose as mine.

“Let’s go meet Rue,” Father suggests, and peddles Colter past me and down the hall. Mother follows, leaving me alone to scrub. After they turn the corner, I leave my stuff and walk over to the mudroom. Inside, I find Colter’s old stuff packed in pile on the floor. Old velcro sneakers, white but stained black by something I couldn’t quite figure out at the time. His shirt and pants are dirty and similarly covered in this black sooty particles. My heart lurches when I notice the substance sticking to my hands and not coming off, staining everything.

I scurry over to the big tub-sink and open the tap, pouring water out all over my hands to try and scrub it off—to no avail. My heart is thundering in my chest, knowing that Mother and Father will see that I got into something I shouldn’t. Colter’s old clothes were none of my business. None of mine, at all.

I hear footsteps behind me and quickly throw myself into a corner, hoping not to be seen. Instead of Mother, or Father, I see Miss Lincoln enter the room, headed for the pile of clothes. My nerves calm a little, but I still worry about telling her. I guess I made a stir, and Miss Lincoln turns around and sees me in the corner.

“Maia?” she asks, her voice low. “What’s wrong, sweetie?”

I step forward, and she sees the soot all over my hands and feet.

“Oh, lord,” she shakes her head. “You touched his clothes?”

“I wanted to see,” is all I can say, my voice quivering. “They’ll get in trouble.”

“None of that,” Miss Lincoln brings me over to the sink and squirts a few globs of handsoap onto her hands, smothering it across my arms and hands and scrubbing with her nails. “Let’s see if we can get it off of you.”

She clears her throat and scrubs, and the white froth turns grey with the soot.

“Coal,” Miss Lincoln says, her lips pursed and her expression heavy. She takes a deep breath and lets it out in a sigh. “My father worked coal. Shoveled it onto big trains, the trains took it away someplace. I know this stuff from anything else in the world. Nothing sticks like coal, nothing stains.”

She leans over and kisses the top of my head, “But we’ll get it off, sweetheart.”

Neither of us heard the footsteps, and Father walks into the mudroom. His voice immediately cuts any comfort I felt and spiked my nerves.

“What’s going on?” he asks, as stern as ever. Miss Lincoln almost screams, jumping in her skin in a sudden moment of panic. “Miss Lincoln, what is going on here?”

“Oh, Mister,” she shakes her head. “Maia’s hands were dirty and I was just cleaning ‘em—“

“You take me for a fool, Miss Lincoln?” Father’s voice cuts any connection between Miss Lincoln and I. She steps back from me and bows her head low.

“No, Sir.”

“Then what the hell is going on?” Father’s voice cuts again, like a sledgehammer to the chest.

“Maia, sir... she got into Colter’s clothes. I’m cleaning the coal dust off.”

“And you’re hiding the evidence?”

Miss Lincoln quickly shakes her head, “N-No, sir. Cleaning her off, else she’d get coal dust everywhere she goes.”

“Leave,” he gestures to the door. “And send for my wife... and Rue and Colter, have them come here too.”

Miss Lincoln stops the sink, stepping away from me and slinking out the door. Father looks at me with a gaze that could kill. I think it did. My heart was practically stopped at this point, and the suds on my arms are falling into the sink. Many minutes pass, and Rue and Colter come through the threshold guided by Mother.

“Harold, what’s going on?” Mother asks, then looks over and sees me. Her gaze becomes confused.

“Maia broke the rules,” Father says. “Miss Lincoln thought of herself a saint and tried to hide it.”

“Maia,” Mother shakes her head, scolding me. She lets out a sharp huff out of her nose. “You *know* what happens.”

“I’m sorry,” I try to deflate. Father shakes his head.

“Who do we start with first?” Father asks, gesturing to Rue and Colter. Rue looks at me with pity, and Colter with confusion. My throat is caught, unable to let out a sound. I couldn’t. I couldn’t choose.

“You’re eying Colter,” Father says, and I quickly look to Father and shake my head. Father’s face, for a moment, inks out a smile. Then it fades, back to stern, and he takes Colter by the arm and brings him over to the sink. With both Colter’s wrists held in his hand, he holds them firmly against the ceramic ledge and looks at me. Colter whimpers and looks around, confused. “Colter... in this house, we perform ‘Altruistic Punishments.’ That means, when others misbehave, their siblings are punished. Maia misbehaved, and wasted water, so you and Rue are to be punished.”

Colter whimpers and Father turns around to me, “This was a serious misbehavior, Maia. We have no tolerance for waste.” Father turns to Mother. “Momma, your suspenders.”

Mother looks at him puzzled, but then unclips them from her pants and hands them to father. An X-crossed band of polyester holders with four metal clasps at their ends, each toothed and sharp. He takes a deep breath, and then pulls at Colter’s waistline until he is completely pantsed and exposed. Rue moves her eyes away, and Colter squirms. Father’s hand is unmoving, keeping him planted bent over.

Without words, Father brings down the suspenders and the metal clasps make a sharp *clack* against Colter's buttocks. Colter lets out a ringing cry, screaming into the ceramic sink, and goes completely limp. Father jolts him around and snaps him out of the screaming cry into a sobbing mellow.

"Get a hold of yourself, boy!" Father exclaims, the loudest I've ever heard him speak. It wasn't quite a shout, but close enough to it. Colter steadies himself again and Father brings the suspenders down again, and another ear-splitting *crack*. Colter whimpers, screaming behind closed lips, but even his lips break and the cry rings out. Father shakes his head and drops the suspenders, wrapping the other hand around Colter's mouth to silence him.

"Momma," Father gestures. "A few more lashings, will you do it please?"

Mother curls her mouth in a slight frown, but steps forward and takes the suspenders. She winds up and slaps them against Colter's behind, letting out a slap that's the loudest of all. Colter's screams are muffled behind Father's hand, but they're loud enough to register. My palms are soaked through with sweat and I look over at Rue and she just watches and cries, tears streaming down her face. Tears are curling down my cheeks too, but I hadn't noticed them until then.

Mother doesn't hesitate to do another strike. Then another. Then another. Colter is practically limp at this point, with no strength in his legs, and a trail of blood trickles down his leg and wets his undies around his knees. One more strike, and Colter slips and bites a big chunk into Father's fingers.

Father wheels back, cussing and letting Colter go. Colter drops to the ground and Mother quickly yipes and moves over to Father, looking at the bite mark. It's deep, puncturing a few spots. Father waves his hand and cusses.

"Damn!" he exclaims. "Stand him up!"

Mother quickly picks Colter up, and he stands before us with his pants around his legs. I can see his face now, and his eyes are blood red and his shirt front drenched in tears. Father cups his hand and cuffs Colter's ear—not once, twice, or thrice. He hits the kid ten times, until Colter is completely collapsed to the ground and pulled himself into the fetal position, holding as much cover over his head as possible. His ear is bright red and turning purple, and I can hear Rue gasp a tiny gasp, silent to anyone but me.

Mother stands Colter back up and bends him over again for more strikes, but Father pushes her aside and takes Colter by the throat and holds him against the wall. The kid writhes and gasps for air, wiggling his legs.

“You *never* touch me!” Father screams at him, and this, undoubtedly, was his scream. It fills the room and makes my ears ring, a terrifying screech that’s low and shaking and high and piercing. Mother takes a step back and shakes her head. “You *never* bite!”

Colter’s eyes are bugging out, and Mother steps in and grabs Father’s shoulder, “Harold, that’s enough.”

Father drops Colter and Colter falls the ground, limp. He doesn’t cry, doesn’t shudder, and doesn’t slink away. Instead, he wraps himself up in a ball. Father is panting, huffing and puffing, and turns to Rue.

“I didn’t think I’d have to do that,” Father admits. “I thought it was a given. But, Colter has learned. So have you two.” Colter slowly cradles himself and rocks back and forth, the welts on his rear turned bright red and dark purple and his ear turned completely purple and black.

“Rue,” Mother gestures, and Rue looks at me with terror in their eyes. Rue eyes me as Mother pulls their wrist over to the sink, and Father grabs the suspenders from the ground and pulls Rue’s pants down. I look away, and my eyes meet Colter’s, and he stares at me with a burning fire I’ve never seen before. My heart sinks deeper than it already has and I can’t avoid them, staring back into mine, and Rue whimpers as the metal clasps meet her flesh.

~

I make a marking in my notebook as we float along, watching as the dark morning unleashes the light. A small drawing of a coyote, whose eyes peer off the page and into mine. Rue sets the oar aside and lets the raft drift toward the bank, so I slip the notebook back into my pocket.

We hoist the raft into position on the riverbank, pulling it completely clear of the water and lashing it to the last tree of the canyon. The sky is clear except for a few wispy clouds high above, which is a delightful sight as there are hardly any clouds overhead anymore. Rue ties it down proper while I throw my shoes on. I gently massage the sand out of the cracks in my sole while Rue throws on their pack and clicks the clips. Out of the raft also comes their rifle, which they withdraw from a waterproof bag.

I tie my boots and follow Rue down a deertrail which carves upward toward the cliff side. Rue seems to know where we are going and marches us directly up to the side of the red cliff face. I have no clue where we are going until we get close enough to make out the slight crack in the side of the canyon.

What lie ahead of us is another canyon, except far—*far*—narrower. A slot canyon, carved by wind and rain, which is only wide enough for each of us to walk single-file. Rue straps their rifle to their back and motioned for me to enter first.

“A short cut,” Rue explains. “This slot canyon is a couple miles long, but it cuts us having to go around the whole mesa. Map says its shorter, I mean.”

“Is this safe?”

Rue nods, “Very. No one is out here, Maia. We’re properly alone.”

“Lead the way.”

We march into the gap in the earth and became surrounded on all sides by sandstone. This canyon, just a few-foot gap in the rocks, is closer to a hallway than any natural rock formation. It winds like a snake, with some sections dipping low and others climbing a bit. There are sections where water covers the path and we sink to our waists. Other sections require climbing up boulders lodged in the path.

As we walk through the sun marches overhead and for a short period we have direct sunlight. During this time Rue suggests we rest for a bit and eat some food. I crack open an MRE, digging into the mushy contents with the provided plastic spork. Rue eats some of their own and watches the sky.

“Clouds,” Rue comments. “I didn’t see them this morning.”

“A lot of them?”

Rue cranes their neck, “I can’t tell, but it seems like it. They’re moving quickly.”

“Should we be in here if—“

“No,” Rue cuts me off. The question wasn’t necessary. Of course this is a bad place during the rain.

“How far do we have to go?”

Rue shrugs, eating quicker, “Until we get out the other side.”

I shovel in more food, and we finish our MREs and are back onto the sandy trail. When the sun dips behind the western cliff we are met with a frigid breeze. Rue was always cold and calculated, but seeing them now they are fleet-footed and deliberate, ensuring we are keeping a good pace. A hellish landscape, dry and desolate, and it happens to rain today.

We arrive into a wider section of the canyon and feel a little more at ease, with higher ground easier to scramble up to from here. Now the sky is blotted with dark clouds, and they rumble with thunder.

“It doesn’t even have to rain here,” Rue yells back at me.

“I know!” I yell back.

Flash flooding. Intel talked about it, but it seemed like such a minuscule issue in the moment.

We sneak out of the wider section of the canyon and manage to fall into a narrow section again. Rue is pushing on quickly, but I feel something is wrong. A dampness in the air, a stillness of breath.

“Rue?” I call after them, but it’s too late to turn back.

A rush of water comes gushing from the canyon curve ahead, brown and black and full of twigs and sand. Rue braces themselves against the impact, taking most of it before getting pushed back by the rushing water. It is at our knees at first but quicker than I can even register it is beyond our shoulders. The water gushing by is far better equated to liquid sandpaper, as it cuts at my clothes and my skin. Rue’s body, limp, pushes against mine and soon we are taken with the torrential flood.

Slamming into the walls of the canyon, we are tossed and turned and hit by rocks and twigs and grated by the walls and the sand in the water. Each moment is suddenly a fight for survival as the water is well over our heads now. Rue sputters at the surface the same time I do as we hold each other close, careful not to drift apart. This does more harm than good, together our bodies are not slim enough to fit through some of the narrows, ending in us getting lodged and then overcome with water once again.

We finally break into the open section of canyon, carried by the water at a speed I found hard to comprehend. Mere moments after flooding out of the narrows, we are approaching the next section. I push hard against the current and manage to find a handhold in a section of cliffs that ran right next to an uplifting part of the canyon that seems to climb toward the heavens. Rain is now falling torrentially, so even that slope is gushing with water, but it isn’t a river and it will be safer than here.

I drag Rue’s wet body against the current and pull myself up onto the side of the canyon, feeling grip restore itself in my boots. I pull myself from the water and, still holding onto Rue, turn to help them out of the water.

Rue is screaming for me to pull, and I do, but it is hard as they are severely waterlogged with all of their gear. At the top of a canyon I hear a horrific splitting sound, accompanied previously by a crack of thunder, and I turn my head to look. A spire of stone, previously standing near the top of the canyon, is now split in half and a round boulder is rolling down the gently-sloped canyon toward us.

I try again to haul Rue from the water, listening to the stone bashing against the canyon as it rolls toward us. I manage to get a good grip and will all of the strength left in me to pull Rue clean from the water.

But the stone isn't done rolling, and while it misses me, it smashes right into the canyon wall, clipping Rue and lodging their arm against the sandstone. Rue screams out in pain—a scream one does not forget, for it only happens once in someones life—and the stone begins to roll again and falls into the river.

I pull Rue away from the wall, causing a splitting cry of pain in Rue. Rue has no energy in them and falls to the ground, the water rushing down from the top of the canyon splitting around them. I kneel down on the ground and look into their eyes, scanning their body. Rue's eyes are something that, again, I have never seen from them. Dark browns shuttering in fear, gripped by massive pain.

Rue grips the rocks, water rushing around them. I lace an arm through the crook of their armpit and pull their limp body up the rock, heart racing. I glance a few times at Rue's arm and cringe at the sight of it. Twisted, flattened, there is little chance that they will ever recover. I pull their body until I can't anymore and then I lay them down and sit next to them. The rain has started to subside already.

I dig into my backpack, pulling out a black bag with a red cross, and then dig out a small packet labeled 'xtampza', of which I break open and feed a small white pill to Rue. They swallow it graciously after a handful of water is also poured in, and all I can do is watch in anticipation.

"Hang in there, soldier," I speak through my teeth. All Rue can mutter is a low, long grunt and a splitting sob splicing through. I run my hands down Rue's body, checking for any other injuries. Their foot is mangled and bent backward in the socket, hanging limply. The boulder must have mashed their foot too. I check their arm and notice that it had popped from the socket. That's good, mean's they can't accidentally use it and cause a contracture.

"How's the feeling?" I ask. Rue has had their eyes closed, breathing heavy and full breaths trying to fight back the pain. Rue open's their eyes and stares at me.

"Not... good," Rue manages, voice cracking.

“I’m not going to try to move you until that pill kicks in,” I tell them, laying down next to them. The sky is blank with clouds but they are starting to break up and bits of blue sky shine out from above them in tiny pimples. How dare the sky try to tease me with such a premonition. The sky is always blue above the storm. How dare it.

“We lost your bag,” I say.

“I lost it,” Rue rebuttals. The pills are setting in, they talk a bit more clearly.

“Regardless, we need to move quick and ration supplies. Especially water.”

I watch as the torrential flow of muddy water slows and drops. The water picks everything up with it in these places, clouding it thick and turbid with sediment which makes it almost completely undrinkable. There are ways to clean it, but they aren’t effective. Not to mention now we have even fewer troclosene sodium tablets, so even if we *can* find a clean source of water we won’t be able to purify it as easily. Scenarios of our mistake flow through my mind one after the other. Food. Water. Shelter. Warmth. I rake my brain trying to find a way out of it all.

“These pills are starting to work,” Rue manages, calm filling their voice.

“Good,” I say. “Time to bite a belt and hold on.”

I hoist Rue onto my shoulders. I walk up the shallow slope and toward the cliff face at the top, which is about 12 feet high and has an overhang. The boulder had been dislodged from the rock wall, leaving a passable section which I can climb out of. Carefully hoisting their body behind me, I carry Rue out of the slot canyon and into the desert above.

It’s stony here, and I don’t know how long to carry Rue. We walk for miles, following the slot canyon as it writhes, and I watch the storm clouds drifting away. Blue pockets of heaven digging their claws through the grey fluff so that there is no doubt that it is there. Joshua trees, junipers, sagebrush, indian paintbrush; they dot the environment where sand has pooled in pockets of sandstone.

Despite the power of the painkillers, Rue urged me to stop moving and let them down and so I do. We lay inside the cover of a large juniper tree, whose trunk and branches twist and curl skyward and splinter off in an almost spiny bark. Waxy berries hang from the blister-like petals and give the tree its familiar scent—smokey and sweet and bitter. Now that the rain has stopped the flies have come out from their burrows and their hiding places and swarm around the tree and the puddles. It’s a bad place to stop, but there isn’t much better.

Rue strains against the trunk of the tree as the bark digs into their back and props themselves up on their good arm.

“Need more painkillers?”

Rue shrugs, “How much did you give me before?”

“I can give you another dose,” I say. “But not another after that. Maybe in a few hours.”

“Hit me,” Rue requests, so I pull out the health kit and pop another white pill from the blister. Rue swallows it themselves, taking a glug of water from my bottle.

“What are we going to do now?” I ask, sitting beside them and swatting at flies. Little ant-like bodies with filmy wings and they stick in your hair and swim toward your nose and your mouth and your ears.

“Keep going,” Rue says.

“Keep going where? To the Lobby? How are we supposed to get in there with you like *this*?”

Rue pinches their eyes shut and shakes their head. They speak with a continuing monotone expression, called into sleep by the painkillers. “We came all this way. I don’t think we can stop now. I don’t think *you* can stop now, can you?”

I sigh and lean back into the rock, “This is crazy. It’s a suicide mission, don’t you realize that?”

“Didn’t you?” Rue manages, each word taking more and more effort. “Please, we can’t stay here. We’re still miles from the Lobby.”

“You seriously want to keep going?” I assure. “We can walk right back down to the raft and follow the river up to the horses. Be out of this hellscape in a week tops.”

Rue shakes their head, leans over to me and looks at me with watery eyes.

“We have to do this, Maia,” Rue urges, their voice rough. “We have to finish what we started.”

I huff out of my nose and shake my head, “I guess I’m carrying you?”

“My legs still work,” Rue winces. “Partially.”

“Let’s get moving then,” I shake my head, thinking about rest. Thinking about Rue’s arm. Thinking about the Lobby. What are we doing here? We’ve walked into a hornets

nest of our own making. I hoist Rue up with their good arm and they wince through the pain. Hobbling toward the East, we make our way toward the two pointy mountains in the distance, bordered on the lower horizon by a line of red rocks.

I haul Rue for miles, carrying them and myself across the expanse just before the mountains, which grows up from the flat valley before me with great prominence. Between them and me is a great flat desert of rolling dunes and strange rock formations, dotted with cheatgrass and sagebrush and bushels of prickly-pear cactus. The grasses are hip-tall and scratch at my arms, sinking their seed pods into my socks so that they stick sharply into my skin. The cactus is even worse, but easier to avoid. I walk and walk and the world stays the same, the mountains only growing mildly closer with each footfall and the rock formations swirling like a mirage about my head. Arches, pillars, and shapes all mesh into feelings as I barely have the strength to make it through. Phallic, yonic, and everything in between fuses from these rocks and my eyes aren't sure to avert themselves or find humor in stones carved millions of years ago taking on an appearance capable of triggering my mind this way.

By the end of the day I'm completely beat and hobbling, my joints crying out in pain. Rue is deep in pain too, having run out of painkillers for the day—the result of a rationing scheme I proposed to get the supply to last longer. The sun dips below the horizon and I lay Rue down on a rock escarpment, breathing heavy and wiping the sweat from my forehead. Our water is running low.

Rue checks the sling around their neck, cradling their limp arm against their body. I check the makeshift splint around their ankle and notice that it has come loose. I kneel down and adjust it, and Rue barks out in pain. I pull myself back up and sit beside them. My eyes grace the inside of the sling and notice the horrific red-black color filling in the flesh of Rue's arm.

“Pain getting better?”

Rue shakes their head, speaking from a state of barely-conscious. “Worse.”

“Yeah,” I note.

“Compartment?” Rue asks, noticing me looking.

I grate my teeth against themselves and my eyes spin looking at it. I gulp and nod, “Yep.”

Rue tries to stand, and I help them up and pull them into a carrying position, starting off again through the valley. Darkness falls over the land and in the distance I can make out a few hazy lights, split up and swirling by the hot air rising off the land. Animals scurry

in the undergrowth as we walk—mostly field mice, marching in lines from burrow to burrow. I trip a few times on their mounds, and each time I feel like kicking the little fuzzy things into the stratosphere. Alas, they are far too quick with their little legs, scurrying down into the earth to munch on grassroots. The lights are up on the horizon a bit, clearly built into the mountain side that is beyond the red rocks.

Eventually we come across a spot almost too perfect to be true. A river winds beside a large pond, an oasis, spurting water straight from the ground. Green shrubs are nestled into the sand and a large sandstone formation towers over it with an overhang. It provides a place for shelter and I doubt we are going to find anywhere better. I set Rue down and begin unpacking our stuff.

I pull out the equipment and give Rue another pain pill. I set up my own sleeping spot and then hear a knife slip out of a sheath. I turn to Rue and see them in the darkness, holding up the knife toward me.

“What?” I ask, Rue’s eyes shine with starlight and beg.

“It’s compartment syndrome,” Rue says, as if we are continuing a conversation. They pant as if they had just run a marathon, sweat saturating their balaclava. “I know what it’s like—watched a buddy with it suffer for a week—it was a long time ago, but I remember. Pain so bad he wanted to off himself. Arm didn’t make it either. I just need you to get this over with.”

I take the knife from their hand and level it, staring into the steel.

“You want me to cut your arm off?”

Rue bites their lip and nods. I shake my head.

“This is crazy.”

“Just get it over with,” Rue begs, holding themselves up on the knees, their bad leg pushed out to relieve the pressure from their foot. “The arm isn’t going to heal, and the pain will only get worse. Please, Maia, cut it off.”

I hand them the knife back, “No way. I’ve never done an amputation. We only have so many meds—”

“I’ll show you how!” Rue puts the knife aside and hobbles their body up, hope springing into their voice. “Please, you know how to cut. I’ll just show you how to do it. And then we’ll sew it close, we have plenty of sutures.”

I sigh, pulling my eyes closed. My heart raced at the thought of cutting their arm off. Their shooting arm. An arm which wouldn’t get better. I nodded to myself and opened my eyes. Rue still looked at me in a pleading sense, like a puppy begging for a treat.

“Okay,” I accept. “If it’s what you want to do, I’ll do it. But I need to build a fire first, collect some water.”

I leave my flint striker with Rue and hobble over to my bag. I take the pot and carry it through the thick sagebrush and fill the pot and two bottles with water from the spring. Coming back, Rue has already stacked firewood and kindling and is lighting it ablaze, blowing a stream of air into the flame.

“Ready?” I ask, placing the pot on the flames once they have grown. Rue nods and watches, flames dancing across their face, as I lather an antiseptic soap over my hands and then wash them off with water. I take the knife and place the blade into the flames until it glows red hot and then douse it with water so that steam erupts and carries up into the sky and dissipates and maybe, one day, it would rain on me. If I was lucky. Rue and I would see that water again.

“Look,” Rue takes the knife and points it to their arm. “It’s easy. You’ll need to tie a tourniquet to stop the bloodflow. You won’t be able to stop all of it, but it will help. Then you need to take the knife and cut everything away, so that all of the bruised skin is removed. Cut at the joint, it’ll be a cleaner cut and it looks like that’ll take most of it. It will be hard to get through the cartilage so use as much pressure as you can.”

I take the knife and look over the spot. The knife cool, the water ready, I undo the sling and let Rue’s arm fall limply to the side. Rue lays on their back beside the fire and the flames lick light into their eyes and that light shines back out and they are glossy and wet and a tear trickles out the side. I pretend I don’t see it.

I take the boiling pot of water off the fire, which is now reducing to coals, and carefully pour the stream lightly over the area which I am to cut. Rue barks out in protest as the water blisters their skin and leaves a red burn mark. I try to ignore their plea to stop, as it is necessary to disinfect the area before cutting. There is only so much we can do to prevent infections out here, but we have to do it all.

“Here,” I take off my watch, handing it to Rue. It’s a small silver watch, military spec, and the band is made of paracord. “Bite on this so you don’t lose a tongue too.”

Rue places the cord between their teeth, sweat beading on their brow, and I take the knife in my hand and pull the shoulder close to me. I take a tourniquet from my first aid kit and tie it as tight as possible around the shoulder joint. I’m not sure it’s enough, but it will restrict at least *some* of the bloodflow and give me time to suture before Rue dies from blood loss. The black-red-purple mess of skin stops right at the joint, which is good news because I won’t have to hack through bone. A clean cut right through the shoulder joint and the arm will be gone.

“Ready?” I ask Rue, and they bite an expletive at me.

The knife sinks into the skin and Rue breaks out into screams, their body writhing. I quickly pull the knife out and set it aside and look at Rue. Their eyes are full of tears and they breath heavy. Rue spits out the strap and looks at me.

“Sorry,” Rue struggles through the pain. I nod.

“Rue, are you really sure about this?”

Rue nods.

“Alright,” I reach behind me and grab my bag. “Then I’m going to have to tie you up so you don’t writhe out of control.”

I pull out a bundle of rope and lash Rue’s legs together at the ankles—just above their fracture—and then their thighs. I lash their arm to the chest and stomach and the straddle their body, holding them secure with my knees. Rue looks at me as I’m atop them, tears streaking clear marks through their dirt-saturated skin.

I wipe the blade clean and bake it in the fire again. I quench it, cool it, and then lean over Rue’s body and place the watch strap in their mouth. I don’t warn them this time, sinking the knife deep into the flesh. The knife hitches and catches on strong sinews and bones and as I cut through the freshly-blistered flesh there is a stream of saltwater coursing over the blade and sticking into the wound. Rue cries out in pain as I dig into their flesh, writhing around but under my control. The cutting takes a lot longer than I expect it would, and I’m sure any field medic would look at my work like a work of impressionist art than a proper surgical amputation—still, a cut is a cut, I hope.

I take measure to leave an extra flap of skin to seal in the wound and cut and slash at the meat. It’s different from stabbing someone, there’s far more texture and reality to it. Finally my knife breaks through the cartilage around the clavicle joint and I feel a horrifying feeling next to me as Rue’s arm rolls away from their body. Blood barely leaks from the severed limb, slowly trickling out through the meat and the veins. Rue’s crying quiets a little as the cutting is done and, undoubtedly, they are going into shock. That will give me enough time to suture without them freaking out.

I quickly toss the knife aside and pull the suture kit toward me. Not thinking as I do, the movement kicks up dust which coats the needle and thread. I curse out and quickly take the needle and dip it into the boiling water on the fire. I cool it and dust off the suture wire.

Lacing the two together, I bring the flaps of skin tightly over Rue’s open wound. Rue barely flinches, clearly heading into shock, and the blood leaking out of their wound slows. I begin lacing—crudely, at first, just to secure the skin. Truth be told, I wish that Rue told me what to do in this part because the extent of my suture work was patching up a bullet hole or two. I’ve never had to sew anything bigger than that. I decide that my intuition will have to be enough and continue lacing.

I go in with more precision and pull the wound tightly closed. I then take out gauze and wrap the stump. By this time I'm breathing heavy through my mouth. I put the tools aside and get off Rue, pulling the cord off their arms and pulling Rue aside. Rue is barely responsive—in shock, and deeply, so I pull them over to the side of camp and lift their feet up onto a rock to flow blood back into their brain.

Rue starts to come to after a few minutes and I place another painkiller pill on their tongue and help them down it. While it kicks in I clean my suture kit and carefully put it back together in my bag. I let out a long sigh. It's over. Now Rue just needs to recover. Rue is awake, surely, but they keep their eyes shut closed and make no move. Their breathing slows and deepens as the painkiller kicks in. I bring the suture over to the flame and run it through the heat until it turns red, then set it aside to cool.

In that moment I feel a calm wash over me. My feet and back start to ache severely so I unlace my boots and set them aside and pull up my sleeping pad and place it beside them, laying down and feeling the pressure ease off my back. Almost instantly a few shots of pain fire up it. We've made incredibly-good progress today, despite Rue being wounded. I feel a bump on my arm and check it and notice a large bruise. Must have been the ordeal in the canyon. The rest of my body is covered in cuts and scrapes. The fire crackles.

A hear a twig snap in the distance. Sagebrush, just by the way it was softened. I crane my neck to the side and look out into the distance. The darkness has set in, covering everything in a blanket of stealth. My heart doesn't lurch like it normally would. No doubt it's just some animal. Out here, there's nothing to get us. Nothing coming for us. No one to ambush. Properly alone, in the land of solitude and dissolution. It used to be my home, and when it was there were so many people and they all loved and danced and sang. Where I lived, there was a bustling town—not too many people, but enough that there was always something happening. The bar down the street was having a battle of the bands, or the high school was having a football game. Some kids playing soccer in a backlot. They all left when Dad and I did. Left when the river dried up.

Now it's a land of nothing. Sand and history, that's all it has; and a man, which I never wanted to see again. What has Rue gotten me into? These stupid games of retribution have never gotten anyone far, nor do they ever end well. Look at us now, Rue lost an arm and I'm stuck with the job they set out to do. A job for two. What's in store after it's all done? What will we do when the blood is finally on *our* hands?

Chapter 6

Father burst out of his bedroom screaming for his wife. For Mother. The screams were so out of the ordinary for me that I thought the world had opened up beneath me and I was being swallowed by gates of Hell. I quickly scampered up from where I was lying—alone on the cold stone beside my water bowl—and looked around for what to do. The collar across my throat choked horrendously as I strained against it. I hadn't been here too long, I thought. Had it still been long enough to grow? Was I bigger than I was before this strange adoption? Were the scraps they fed me more sustenance than I'd had in the last two years? I forgot how long I'd even been here, time seemed to stop once you passed through the doors to the compound.

Father came into the kitchen with a bag around his shoulder and in it he threw utensils—the gold plated ones, and the ivory ones, and with them he also made sure to grab his antler-hilted knife. Mother came scurrying behind him and she was clearly panicked as well. She hadn't even done her hair yet, however there was always time to dress and dress she did into her exploration clothes—a light tan outfit best befit for a British explorer rather than a crazed post-American aristocrat. She scurried alongside Father, almost tiptoeing, and she beckoned for him to go quicker. Mother, quickly walking right past me, trips on Rue and Rue yipes as mother's sharp boots hit them. The look on Mother's face told me all I needed to know—she wasn't even thinking about us, and if Rue hadn't been there for Mother to trip on, she would have walked out that door and never even thought to take us with her.

“Rue, dear!” Mother scampered over to them, tight and proper and trim as she always was, even at this hour of the night. “Dear we haven't the time to dress you, you'll have to go in that. Maia, please go and get your brother, Colter.”

“What's going on,” I struggled to speak, trying to clear my throat. It didn't help at all.

“Crazed looters! Vagrants! Individuals of lower mindsets!” Father screamed obscenities as he packed. He grabbed a crystal vase from the table and chucked the flowers onto the floor, the water they stewed in splashing against the wall, streaking down the wall and then pooling on the ground. He stuffed the vase in the bag. “They've come to the compound!”

“Oh, dear, they wish to *kill* us!” Mother exclaimed to me. “They wish to take everything we've worked for! Hurry, Maia, go get Colter!”

I sprang up from the tile and walked through the house, bare feet slapping against the stones. Colter was in the front room, by the door, looking around with wide eyes and that unspeaking pursed mouth.

“Colter,” I grabbed his pajama shirt, tugging. “We have to go.”

Colter shook his head and grunted.

“Colter, come on!” I urged, tugging on him. Colter’s eyes hurriedly narrowed into a piercing gaze and he yelled at me.

“No!” he screamed, tugging himself out of my grip. Tears filled my eyes and I turned around and left him in the front room. Back in the kitchen, Father and Mother were running for the car port.

Father took Mother’s arm and rushed her for the car, and I followed behind them. Father stuffed Mother into the car and rushed over to the driver’s side, stopping only because he saw me standing at the stairs beside Rue. He looked at us with an expression of disgust for which I’ve only ever seen then and never again—as if he had witnessed something so vile that it left him speechless. His expression lingered only for a moment before he screamed out an obscenity and lifted me from the stairs and placed me in the back of the car. He then slammed himself into the driver’s seat and started it. Mother leaned back against the seat and looked at me and asked me to buckle up.

“Don’t piss your pants this time!” Father screamed from the front seat, pressing a button on the headliner.

“Where’s Colter?” Mother asks.

“He wouldn’t come,” I whimper. Father splits out a laugh.

“Serves him right!” Father scoffs. A crack of moonlight began to flood the dark carport, gleaming off the polished chrome of the sports car parked beside us.

Father slammed on the accelerator, burning rubber as we skidded out of the carport and began speeding down the driveway for the front gate. Father was right, there *was* a crowd of people gathered around it and the first had just managed to scale the slick iron gate. Father stopped the car and pressed another button, and the gate began to swing open. The engine roared but Father’s foot remained steady on the brake. The gate wasn’t open yet. Mother stared at Father with wide eyes.

“Harold, please, use caution!” she uttered in a panic state, grabbing the handle on the roof and bracing herself.

Father lifted off the brake and the car stuttered forward, plowing into the group of people rushing in through the gate. The headlights immediately went out as they shattered against the bones of those Father plunged the car into, and accompanying the sounds of crumbling steel were the sounds of bodies flying into the ground. Despite the car engine and the speed, the car did slow and eventually the weight of the bodies Father was trying to plow through exceeded the capabilities of his vehicle.

I reached over to Rue and grabbed their hand and held it tight and Rue sobbed, the tears sticking their hair to their face.

A baseball bat broke through the front window and arms reached in to unlock the door. Father reached into his pocket and revealed a six-shot revolver, which he began firing out of the door. I felt my body locking up with fear and my ears rang explicitly as each shot was fired. With every pull of the trigger a shockwave was sent through my body and my bones vibrated and my teeth shattered against each other and terror filled every space in my body. After the last shot is fired, the world grew quiet and my ears rang like a reverberating bell. Mother screamed from her seat as her window is smashed as well and Fathers door is sprung open. My window is then smashed, but I am so frozen in fear that the glass merely falls atop me with no reaction. I felt a warm spring coursing down my leg and a ping of gratuitous fear in my heart. I couldn't breath.

Then the hands came, reaching in through the window and pulling on me like a child taking toys from a toybox and the feeling of those hands wrapping around my arms and torso and pulling me up out of the car pulled something in my mind and I let out a banshee scream the likes of which I'd never made before and never made again. This scream was guttural and understanding and complicated, contorted inside my body and pent up and sounding like the voice of thousands of others who made that same scream once. The same scream that Mother was uttering as they dragged her from the car as well. Rough hands gripped my body and pulled and I felt my shirt tighten and their grasp was viscous and desperate. I kept my hand tightly grabbing Rue and they were pulled out with me.

The man that won out over the others suddenly screamed for everyone to stop, and they eventually did, and he lifted me up for everyone to see.

"Look what they have done!" the Looter screams, showing me to the crowd. "Look! Tie a collar around this babies' throat! Like she's a *pet*!"

Screams echo again and a few friendlier faces pull me aside from the car and my hand still stays clamped to Rue's, and by this time they noticed that we were inseparable and kept us together. The mob strings Mother and Father together up toward the house a little, and out of the corner of my eye I watch as a guard—hired by Mother and Father—comes racing around the property and begins firing wildly at the crowd. Screams echo through the concourse and the yard and the people who had pulled Rue and I aside pick us up and begin sprinting for the gate.

They made it close to the threshold when the person carrying Rue was shot, and fell to the ground. I saw it and I screamed out, tears streaming down my face. Someone behind them picked Rue up and sprinted toward us.

The guns stopped eventually, but we kept moving. Eventually, when the adults thought we were far enough, they stopped and let Rue and I to the ground. My tears had dried to my face at that point and Rue was pale in the face.

“Let me help you with this,” a young woman, no older than my mom would have been, pressed her fingers tightly against the steel clasp and it fell loose to the ground. The motion brought back memories into my mind of snake hunting with my Dad. They would fall like that, after they were limp and dead. My breath was returned and I immediately felt a calmness. Accompanying this feeling was another that was just as great, if not greater.

“Maia?!” a familiar voice comes, and I craned my neck to see who said it. Paul, Cleo’s dad, broke from the crowd and came running up to me, throwing me into a tight hug. A *fathers* hug. A hug that I missed, and for the first time in what felt like years I felt love and warmth.

Paul held me close and tried to comfort me but I was wailing. The silence I sat in for the last few months—what felt like decades of my life—came out suddenly in a burst of noise that shook the ground and brought the heavens down onto the earth and integrated us all with the cosmos and with it we saw everything. The dead crashed down into the earth and with their hands they held onto the sinews and the soil and their teeth gnashed and trumpets blared and horses with heavy hooves matted the ground with their feet and bashed against reins and bits. It was all too much for a little girl to watch, and so I shielded my eyes from the reality and it seemed to phase away—my head tucked into the belly of Paul.

My little sobs racked through his body and shook everything in myself loose. I was already forgetting what was happening. What had just happened. What *had* just happened?

“It’s okay, Maia,” Paul coos, holding his giant hand over my head gently and offering a comforting shoulder which I bawled into. I bawled and bawled and my face was red hot like magma and I thought I was melting right through him and I would appear on the other side and he would be dead and I would have killed him.

The thoughts racing caught me off guard and I quickly pushed away from Paul and his expression was so sorrowful and sheepish and kind that I knew I had to be wrong. I couldn’t hurt Paul. Paul couldn’t hurt me.

“This little one was found with her,” the young woman, from before, spoke to Paul. His eyes look over and look at Rue and he nodded.

“I’ll take them,” Paul said. He stretched an arm out to Rue. “It’s alright, little one.”

The morning breaks with the sound of Rue stirring beside me, shaking me with their good arm. I stretch every muscle in my body and keep my ear out for any sound. Nothing but Rue, and maybe a bird. I sit up and stir the coals and place on a new stack of kindling and blow on it to bring the flame back. Once it starts crackling I lay on a couple thick trunks of sagebrush that I had found yesterday. Rue stirs again and mumbles.

“I don’t have many painkillers left,” I tell them, looking around at our surroundings. It’s early in the morning with the sun casting long shadows from the East. “I’m going to follow this wash up a ways, see if I can’t find some Mormon Tea.”

Rue lets out a sigh, “Can you bring me water?”

I lean over to my pack and pull out my canteen. I unscrew the cap and hand it to them, and the carefully balance it and dump the water into their mouth. I lace up my boots and listen to the chugging sounds behind me. Rue clears their throat and sucks in a gasp of air, handing the canteen back to me.

“There... shouldn’t be too far for water,” Rue mumbles through desperate confusion. My heart leaps every time I look back at them and see that missing arm. Every time I expect it to be there and it’s not.

“Keep quiet if you can,” I tell them, standing up and checking my sidearm. “We’re close by to the Lobby, there’s no telling where their patrols go.”

I swing the canteen over my shoulder. Rue drank nearly the whole thing.

“I’ll try to be quick,” I comfort, then march down into the wash and follow it uphill. The wash is relatively wide, which gives me hope of *something* at the end of it. Mormon Tea, that’s what I’m after. Goes by a couple other names, none that I know. Dad showed it to me once, a long jointed stalk of grass which, if boiled down into a tea, and help relieve pain. I followed the wash for a bit before smelling flowering cattails and lumbering upon a sizable stagnant pool of water. Frothy green algae piled in section of this pool and along the shoreline there are tall stalks of cattails and, at their base, patches of straw-like green grasses. I quickly pluck a bunch of them, smooshing them together until I have enough to make a potent tea.

A trig snaps behind me and my muscles go stiff. Frozen in time and space, I can feel a presence behind me. Someone has been there the entire time, how have I not noticed? Slowly, and with my hands up, I turn around. Standing on the top of an overhand, looking over the wash, is a man. He’s crouched down with a shotgun laid across his lap, but the colors and features of him are hard to make out as he has his back to the sun. A cowboy hat is atop his head and he breaks his silence.

“Y’all move faster than I thought you’d move,” his voice is distinct, a Southern Texas drawl that is subdued but still present. Still he makes no effort to move.

My heart lurches in place, “Colter?”

Colter lowers his head and walks backward down the bank to a spot where he can get into the wash. He approaches a bit closer to me and I can make out his features now. He wears a pair of cowboy boots and jeans and a cream-colored button up, rolled up to his elbows.

“Been a second, sister,” he greets. His boots scrape the pebbles and make an awful sound.

“Colter, I can explain—“

Colter sharply raises a hand, shushing me, “Oh, Maia. No need for that. It’s alright.”

Colter’s mouth contorts into a smile and he stops walking forward. We are a few paces apart now, so close that I can smell him and he reeks of man. His fingers awkwardly grip his shotgun and he looks away.

“I was planning on killing you,” Colter explains. “Honestly not even waiting, just doing it first time I got you in my sights. But... I couldn’t do it.”

“A sudden change of heart?”

Colter clicks his tongue and shakes his head, “Intel changes *everything*, don’t you agree? You up and left with *my* money to do... what, exactly?”

I don’t answer, but the look on my face changes and he breaks into laughter.

“Oh, golly!” Colter breaks out in laughter. “You really thought I wouldn’t figure it out? I’ll let you in on a little secret: I’ve known he’s been out here this whole time. Ever since we met back up and decided to ransack these lands for everything they’ve got, I’ve known. Every day that we’ve gotten closer, I pushed us toward it. I *knew* what you and Rue wanted.”

My throat is caught in a knot. Grief shook my body—a strange reaction, one that I didn’t expect, but it did. No, he’s lying, there’s no way he’s known. There’s no way he was behind this. My palms fill with sweat and I think to my sidearm again.

“What are you talking about?” I ask, breaking from my stupor—or at least trying. “You’ve... known this whole time? Known that we were going to steal your money?”

Colter breaks out in a laugh, “Honestly, that wasn’t expected, sister. Was that your idea or Rue’s?”

I don't answer, and I guess the silence is enough for Colter. He nods, "Rue's."

"What happened to you, Colter?"

"You know damn well," Colter bites, the red scar across his throat larger and fresher than either mine or Rue's; the first time I've seen it.

"You chose not to come with us," I back up a bit, ready to drop the plants and run. Or reach for my sidearm. Whichever was quicker. "I... I begged you to come, Colter."

"How could I trust you?" he asks, slowly walking toward me. "After what *you* put me through?"

"I'm-I'm sorry," I beg.

Colter shakes his head, "Mother and Father came back for me. Treated me quite a bit different when you two were gone. Even took the collar off, eventually."

"So you've been with them?" I piece together. "You didn't escape. You were captured again."

"They always knew you'd come back," Colter says. Despite the intensity in his eyes, he stops walking and stays in place. "Took longer than they expected, so they sent me out to corral."

"If you know what we're going to do, why haven't you stopped us?" I've backed up as far as I can, my back meeting the bank of the river.

Colter stretches his shoulders and neck, then loosens his figure. "I'm intrigued, Maia. A curiosity found itself home in me and now I am salivating at the prospect you two are suggesting. Not entirely because the outcome is something I want, nor do I care for the process. I'm so intrigued by the outcome, Maia. I wish to see, with my own eyes, the chickens come home to roost... and your choice, of course. What will you choose?"

"What choice?"

Colter turns his back on me and walks back toward the shore and disappears into the sagebrush.

"Colter! What choice?!" I exclaim at him, but he's gone and I hear the stamping of a horse's hooves. Taking the moment, I turn and sprint down the wash, putting as much distance as I can between him and I.

I arrive back to camp and find Rue sitting up against the rock wall.

“What took you so long?” Rue asks, pensive face staring at me and then into the fire.

I take the pot and fill it with the last of the water in my canteen and place it over the coals, breaking up the Mormon Tea and placing it in the water.

“What happened,” Rue asks again. Their voice is rough and dry.

“Colter,” I spit out, stirring the grass and wincing at the heat of the water.

“Colter!?” Rue exclaims. I quickly turn to them and hush them. Then I nod.

“Colter,” I confirm. “He... he ambushed me. He knows everything. He brought us out here knowing what we might do.”

“Where is he?” Rue asks. “Did you kill him?”

I shake my head, “No, he just... left.”

“What?”

“He... he was taken back in by Mother and Father, after we escaped. Been with them for a while, it seems. Said he’s... curious. But I don’t know.”

Rue shakes their head and utter expletives into their shirt. After a few minutes, the plants have broken down well and the water is turned into a shade of brown. I pull the plants free and set the pot aside to cool. My mind rakes over his words. What terrible darkness have we descended into here?

“What do we do now?” Rue shakes their head.

“I guess we... we keep going.”

“I can’t go anywhere,” Rue argues. “Not like this, Maia. I’ll be an anchor out there.”

I let out a long sigh through my nose, “So I need to go it alone?”

Rue shrugs, “What other choice do we have?”

I sigh, “Not Colter, that’s for sure. I don’t know what he’s doing, what he wants. All I know is that he won’t get in the way, not yet. I... I can finish the mission alone. We’ve been planning this for decades.”

Rue nods, “I know.”

“So I have to go out and do it alone,” I explain, both to Rue and to myself. “That’s the plan.”

“What other choice do we have?” Rue moans, closing their eyes and laying their head against the rock.

I let out a long sigh. They’re right. We don’t have any options.

“I’m going now,” I pick up my bag. “You can handle yourself, right?”

Rue nods, “I won’t let this be a weakness.”

“Good,” I pull the straps and tighten it across my back. “If Colter even comes close, kill him. I have a feeling he’s going to wait until we’re done.”

“Good luck, Maia.”

I passed through the same sagebrush-filled valley before making it to the red cliffs, and along this cliff I saw many red arches blown like bullet-holes in the side of the world. I followed, sparingly, a small road which wound up through these cliffs into the tall mountain beyond Arches and there I found the Lobby. By the time I arrived it was night.

Surrounded on all sides by a tall concrete wall, and guarded by LaGuardia soldiers, there is a sizable campus of steel and glass perched up with dry-loving pine trees and the relatively lush mountain environment compared to the rest of the desert we’d spent days traveling though. Here it was though, no doubt about it. My mind lingered on the face of the man who spoke of this place. His twisted grin. The pain I felt after seeing him.

This was no place for a flashback like that. I had to keep going.

The Lobby is placed on a mountainside and a loud whirring comes from the building. Behind the main house area is a sprawling complex with large fans on the top of the building, wafting up steam. A computer center, surely. Nothing this big could be maintained with as little people as was out here. Father was probably the only one taking care of it.

Water had to be coming from somewhere, and I found the answer when rounding the back of the facility. A giant pipe, easily 10-feet in diameter, stretches from the top of the mountain all the way to the complex—an easy 200-yards. Doable, I have the rope for it. Entering and leaving through the front was a death sentence—with or without a ballistic vest, which I lost I left with Poppy.

Getting back up, that’ll be hard. A memory pings my mind and so I drop my bag and dig through it, pulling out a small respirator-device with a canister hooked to it. I shake the bottle next to me ear and, sure enough, I hear sloshing. The canister is full. If I climb up the rope quickly enough, it should work.

I put it back in my bag and climb the mountain, following the rumbling pipeline. The water rushing through it shakes the ground and my vision and I feel the world through my feet, coming up and grabbing me and pulling me in. This is it, this is *everything*. After I start this, I can't stop. Next stop was Father, and it terrified me to see him again.

Chapter 7

Paul sat Rue and I down next to the car and cracked the door open. Through it he snuck out a pair of pants and undies for each of us.

“Cleo’s in there sleeping,” Paul whispered. “Here.”

Paul reached up and pulled out a curtain stowed on the tailgate, which expanded into a ring structure. A camping shower, one like Dad had. I slipped inside of it and, still feeling numb, changed into these new clothes. Cleo was bigger than me so the clothes didn’t fit especially well. Rue went next, and they took longer and I could hear them whimpering inside.

Paul was sitting by a fire he had made, and while Rue and I changed the people walking by slowly whittled away until it was only us. The night was cold and I could feel it leeching into my skin. He had a beer in hand and a couple camp chairs pulled up and he gestured for me to sit by him.

“I’ve been hanging around that band of crazies for the past while hoping they’d give me some clue about where you were,” Paul explained. “Reckon I’d find you close by to where your dad... well...”

“Did he die?” I asked coldly. I don’t think I had any hope that he was still alive at that point. I think I’d accepted that. I didn’t understand it, and I couldn’t bear thinking about it, but I did accept it.

“Your father was a good man,” Paul choked out, careful to say anything about it around me. Paul cleared his throat. “Pains me that he... brought someone so bright to the world and didn’t have the chance to see her shine her brightest.”

I hold my hands together and stare into the fire. The pure energy of the wood burning before us danced alongside flurrying embers and a soft drift of snow downward. The flakes were thick, falling lightly in the way a paper falls when you drop it from high up, sliding to-and-fro, sometimes up, but always down. The blaze curled up in a way too perfect to explain, hugging closely its darkened pine logs as if it were worried someone would take them. The twigs crumpled under their own weight, glowing white hot in the center of the fire. Amidst the flames I thought I saw my mothers face. Shame, it was the sad one she always wore.

“Did you know my mom?” I asked across the fire as Paul sniffled and rubbed his nose with his jacket sleeve.

He clears his throat again, “Partly, although most of what I knew of her I knew from your father. She was a beautiful woman, taken for granted sometimes by your dad. Then, well, the war came. That changed everything. When Atlas—your dad—brought her

home, to Moab, she never was that giggly person he told me about. When I was over to help out, which was a lot when you were young, she would usually be sitting on the front porch, swinging in that swing of yours—you remember that swing?”

The memory of the swing brought a chuckle to Paul, and in all honesty it brought some brightness to myself. Many hot summer nights I would swing on that bench with Cleo, both wagging our feet off the end. We talked about anything, really. But it was mostly things kids talk about. Sometimes the adults, after they thought we were in bed, would go out to the swing too. They talked about much darker things. Adult things. Things too stressful for children. I would stare up at the popcorn ceiling and think about the things they talked about.

It was never too stressful for me, though. Paul found out his wife had cancer, and that was where he told my dad. Mom was never in the headspace for information like that. I don't know if she and Cleo's mom had ever met. I don't know if Cleo knew, or if that was the moment she found out too. She was silent during the whole thing, staring wide-eyed up at the ceiling.

“I remember that swing,” I cooed, sniffing from the cold.

“She would swing for hours, just staring at the horizon. I wonder... I wonder if she ever got bored, you know?” he sniffled again, staring into the pit of the fire. “Your mom, she must of stared out at those cliffs and plateaus for days, she probably examined *every* detail left out there. I can't imagine, seeing every curve and crack and cranny of those rocks. P'rhaps that's why she left, she...”

Paul's voice trailed off, in a realization that he had said something unseemly. I didn't exactly mind what people said or speculated about her, she was nothing but a ghost throughout my life—even when she was still bound to her flesh, swinging on the porch.

“She didn't leave,” I feel the need to correct. I don't know why it was so important to me, but it was. “She died.”

“I-I shouldn't have said something like that, I'm sorry,” Paul apologizes, seemingly avoiding my correction. Or maybe he was embarrassed. Rue comes out from behind the curtain, dressed in clothes that fit them a lot better. “It's getting late, let me help you to bed, Maia.”

I followed him to his car, where he slowly cracked the door so not to make a sound. The hinge still whined, and he cursed it out for that. He boosted me up into the back of the truck, helping me get situated beside Cleo, wrapped under a big old blanket. He helped Rue up next, and it was tight but it kept us all warm.

Paul tucked Rue in and looked at them and asked, “What's you name?”

“Rue,” Rue said, and I could tell they trusted Paul already.

“You’re safe with us, Rue,” Paul told them, brushing his hand against their head and pulling the hair from their eyes. “No one will hurt you. You’re safe.”

Before leaving me, Paul cleared his throat again and whispered to me.

“I’m sorry, Maia, for everything that’s happened to you. I’m sure you’re used to the expression: ‘life isn’t fair,’ and, well, it ain’t. To lose both your parents, that’s just something a child shouldn’t ever have to experience. Cleo and I, and Yvan, we’re your family through the rest of it. I made a promise to your Dad, before you were even born—I vowed to protect your mom, and everything that came with that. Well, you came with that, and so my obligation still stands, even for your friend.

“Sleep tight, kiddo. I promise things’ll be easier from here.”

Paul closed the door and the world outside went silent. Frog sirens muffled in the midst of the car. Cleo shifted to get comfortable as I squeezed next to her. She didn’t open her eyes. I stared up into the headliner and my eyes couldn’t close. My heart was racing.

Apparently my leaving awake was enough for Cleo to eventually open her eyes and notice. Groggily, her voice piqued into my ear.

“Maia?” she asked. “You okay?”

I laid silent and still and scared.

“It’s okay Maia,” Cleo pulled the blanket tighter over me.

I leaned my head over and looked at Cleo.

“You want a hug?” Cleo asked, her eyes black with the night sky.

I nodded.

Cleo’s tiny arms warp around my trembling body and tears drizzled from my eyes, staining Cleo’s shirt.

“I’m sorry about your dad,” Cleo said, the night around me stirring. Eyes watched from the bushes and the trees and I felt a danger in my chest. A danger I did not know. A danger from within.

Rue was asleep quicker than I, and I felt them tremble in their sleep. The night outside was a silent noise of crickets and frogs and not once did I think about Colter.

~

Stretching before me is the largest glacier I’ve ever seen. Colored golden-silver, it stretches up the slope of the mountainside for hundreds of feet, terminating at my feet

in a large pretty-blue lake. Sand embeds itself on the surface of the glacier, hiding it from view. The glacier is positioned in a lucky spot, secluded from sunlight for most of the year. Around the glacier and blue lake is plenty of foliage: cinquefoil and alpine sunflower, gentians and primrose, columbine and even a few small subalpine fir. I hold my hands under the surface, chilled by the nearly sub-zero temperature.

At the other end of the lake is a large concrete structure funneling the glacier water into a large tube. I walk up to the structure and run a hand over the rough limestone surface, looking down over the Lobby. Father sits so peacefully within his computer complex. I follow the pipeline with my eyes, watching as it dropped down into a concrete structure at the base of the main building. From here I can clearly see the layout of the entire facility. There's the main server building, billowing out steam, and then there are two large cisterns. That's likely where the water flows for storage. No doubt where I'll end up. There's the main house, secluded from the computer complex with its own yard. There's a guard complex, but it's far from the house, and the distance between the house and the water tanks is minimal. Minimal lighting, minimal guards inside. Perfect.

Night has fully descended now. I zip my bag open again, grabbing out the rebreather and a drybag. I zip up the bag, hiding it beneath a large rock in a scree patch. I proceed to strip to my skivvies, tossing the clothes into my drybag. Before sealing the bag, I blow into it, filling it with air. Once it's closed, the bag is airtight. I take a long line of rope and secure it to the boulder with a few loops and special knots, then toss the bundle down into the pipeline.

With the drybag in hand I jump into the pipe, sucked down with the current. The flow is faster than I'm expecting, but thankfully the rebreather works well and the dry bag keeps me oriented toward the choppy surface of the water. At the bottom of the long pipe is a big basin and then I flow into the cistern.

It's dark here, using the drybag as a floaty I swim to the edges of the cistern and feel around for anything to grab onto. Finally my hand meets something along the metal walls, a ladder, and I look up and see a small sliver of light pouring in from a door. Waterlogged, I haul myself up out of the water and up through the door.

I quickly look around for cameras or guards, seeing none. I quickly brush water off myself, straining it out of my hair. The cistern opens up into a staircase, winding around the side and depositing me at the bottom. Once down, I throw on my clothes and stuff my rebreather into the drybag, leaving it at the base of the stairs.

Looking around as I go, I find the courtyard completely empty and quickly hop the fence into the residential yard. Soft grass meets my feet and a strange stillness fills the air. The house is right in front of me, and the lights are off inside. Everything is still. Time is held in place. I wound around the side of the house and found the security panel—often these are kept in the house, but with a complex as complicated as this one, it seems they left it

out here for issues. I pull a leatherman from my pocket and unscrew the panel, flipping the cameras off. It would raise suspicions, but not soon enough for it to be an issue.

With the leatherman back in my pocket, I made my way for the garage door.

The only sound in the house came from a low rumbling air conditioner. I don't feel the need to snoop around. I glance up at the camera pointing at the door I came through, and note that no light shines on it. I guess it worked. Upon entrance I notice that the floorplan of this house is exactly the same as the one he kept me and Rue and Colter locked up in. The mudroom, cleaned to perfection, is about me.

Since I left my shoes up at the top of the pipeline, my feet softly slap the bare tile. I follow the hallway to the right and then the left, passing the spot I used to sleep. Seeing it rocks my heart—that's where I used to be. Over there, that's where Rue laid.

I'm in the kitchen next, of course. A low yellow light comes from the lights overhead and they cast everything in a sickly haze. I follow my path past the dining room to a long hallway and stop in my tracks.

At the end of the hall is Father's room. On my right is the sunroom, and out of the corner of my eye I spot a pink dogbed. My heart stops completely and I have to close my eyes and steady myself and order it to beat again. No, I cannot let that stop me now. I cannot let it drive me from my task. Colter's words come back to my mind and I push on toward the bedroom. I push the door open, finding the lights are still on and Father and Mother are inside, awake.

Sitting on the bed, her face down in a book, is a woman, and her aged features couldn't hide the truth underneath; this was Mother. She stares down into the pages, flipping one as I enter. She sees me first, yelping as I enter. Age threatened her youth, and thus much work has been done to tighten that which gravity loosened. Still, her hair is silver and the flesh of her body is gaunt.

Father whips around, his age showing as well. Gristled cheeks, salt-and-pepper hair, but a strong body with muscles torsioned against a tight blue button-up shirt. He doesn't say a word. They both stare at me in silence. I examine the room. Simple 4-poster bedframe with sharp bedposts coming up like pyramids, a luxurious set of walnut cabinetry that integrates a closet straight into the living quarters. A large mirror behind me. The room has a scenic view as its west and south facing walls are made exclusively of tinted glass. The bedside table beside Mother has a short glass of brown liquid.

Father takes a step backward, his mouth agape and the primordial invention of words bubbling at the fringes of his voice box—nothing comes out that resembles words. Just mumbles of confusion.

Mother is the first to speak.

“Rue?” she whimpers, but not for my sake. Rage claws fervently to the forefront of my heart and he licks his lips and beats at my ribcage.

I fire my glance over to her. For some reason words are vacant from my lips. There’s nothing I can say to her that will make sense, nothing to say that hasn’t already been said. My gaze passes back over to Father.

“Press your panic button,” I mutter, watching as he fumbles with it behind him. “I’ve cut any connection it had with the outside, and I dispatched any guards that could save you.”

I pull open the closest drawer and examine the contents. Leather belts, nearly aligned in foam.

“You can scream, but no one will hear you,” I remind him.

I pull out a pair of leather suspenders with sharp metal clasps on the end.

“I always knew you would come back,” Father finally speaks to me, finding his words. “Perhaps this isn’t the right way?”

“*Right way?!?*” I scream, flicking the metal clasps into Father’s face. It doesn’t draw blood but it does leave a bright red welt. “When have you *ever* cared about the *right way*? Was the way you *abducted* me the right way?! The way you treated me?! Was tying a collar around a little girl’s throat and making her eat scraps off the floor the *right way?!?*”

I tackle Father, pulling him to the ground. Despite his stocky build he’s easy to take down and falls like a sack of flour to the floor, my knee butting up into his spine. I pull his arms back and lace the suspenders over his wrists, pulling it tight. I then slip his own belt off, pulling it around his ankles to hog-tie him to the ground. I then flip him over so he rests against the dresser and can see the bed.

I kneel down and stare into his dead eyes, full of fear for the first time in his life.

“How does it feel to fear?” I ask him. “Dad knew fear, my *real* father, the man you stripped from me. Every day he feared—for me, for himself, once even for my mama. Every day of my life sleeping on the cold floor I felt fear. I feared you and I feared Mother and I feared everything you could do. I don’t fear you anymore. You will know what it’s like to have your love stripped from your eyes. You will finally feel powerless. Just like how you made *me* feel.”

“*Please,*” he whimpers, but I ignore him, turning to Mother.

Mother tries to scoot away but I grab her by the back of her neck, throwing her across the bed. I mount the plush mattress, gripping her skull in a brutal way, a primal way, my fingers weaving in and out of her hair as my palm makes contact with her scalp. She is so frail and tries to get away but she can't. Father looks at me in horror.

"This is for my Dad," I spit, raising her head up in my hand and then swinging down like it's a stone, jamming her head down onto the bedpost.

I bring her face down onto the post, pushing my body into it. The pop of bone comes with the first few hits, the rest are a mixture of spasms throughout her body and the mush of matter which made up the face and the inner cavity of Mother's skull. Gelatinous mush which squelches out with each hit, spraying crimson across the sheets and down onto the floor and across my arms and face and down onto Father.

"Noooo!" Father screams, watching in horror. Shards of jaw fall to the floor, clattering against the hard wood floor. Blood stains the comforter and flows down the post and pools at the bottom, a dark patch of black slowly building among the blocks of the hardwood floor. It's the squishing sounds that made me stop, letting her body finally fall limp over the post. The sound of the air rushing out of her lungs—mixed with the scurrious lump of face she has left—utters a sound which very few have ever heard. No sound on earth is more horrifying than it. Flatulent and crude, like a balloon deflating by itself but fleshy and rotting and smelling of iron and sulfur. A human bagpipe letting out one last note.

Father sputters and bawls, looking away from the mess. I jump from the bed down to the floor and pick him up by his shirt. I hold him up against the dresser.

"*You monster,*" he accuses.

I scream into his face, "I am what you made me! I am the result of your works!"

I drop his body, and he makes no effort to hold himself and falls limply to the floor. Tears stream from his face. I pace the room, feeling the tightness across my throat. Rage pounds against my ribcage and screams and his scream fills my lungs and I want to scream it too.

"Please, I'll do anything," Father begs. "I have money, I have everything, you can have it."

"You whimper like a dog!" I shake, feeling the world crumbling around me as the horror sets in. No, not yet. You musn't let this feeling win. We are only halfway through. I tense my hands and push the buzzing feeling away.

"Please!" he begs. "I'll do whatever you want, I submit. I submit to you."

Father doesn't wait for a reply, suddenly lunging at me with his hands toward my throat. I grapple with him and he pushes against me with great strength, and we tumble together exchanging blows until his foot slips in the blood and the weight of my body carries him down into the edge of the dresser. His back lands first, a great *crack* filling the air and he flails and coughs and screams and hits the floor. I'm panting now and rub my nose. Broken. I stand over Father as he writhes on the ground, an arm reaching back toward his spine.

I kneel down over his body and slam my fist down into his face. One. Twice. I repeat this until the pain in my fist overcomes the satisfaction. His face is a purple-and-red pulp and bleed and is loosely held together. He mutters out in pain, blood pooling on the floor from his nose and mouth. My own fist is covered in blood—whose, I do not know. My knuckles are broken open and they sting.

"Beg," I stand over him.

"Please!" he screams, coughing up blood.

"*Beg!*" I stomp my foot on his lungs, causing him to inhale more blood.

"Ahhh!" Father screams, no more words coming from his mouth. He sobs and withers around on the ground like a worm.

I turn away from him, walking past the corpse of Mother, and open the door to their bathroom. Luxurious, bigger than their bedroom, there's a large walk-in closet and a set of sinks and a shower and a bathtub. The toilet is sequestered to its own room, it's high-tech and Japanese. I leave the bathroom and find Father squirming on the ground and I grab the back of his skull, wingers lacing through his hair, and drag him through the bedroom into the bathroom and up to the toilet. He's so distraught and so badly hurt that he barely manages a moan of pain.

I lift the toilet seat and balance his head above the pool of water.

"I am what you made me."

I plunge his head into the water and immediately he begins seizing against me, kicking and thrusting and trying to get out of my grip. The water splashes but I hold my entire weight over his head, keeping it submerged. He writhes in my clutches longer than I expect, his feet squeaking as they press against the tile. My heart races faster and faster until he finally gives up and I feel his body die. I feel his last breath, and the water filling his lungs. My heart stops.

I pick up his body and drag it back out to the bedroom and, for good measure, and I pull out my leatherman and slit the knife across his throat. Blood slowly pools out, mixing with the other blood on the floor and I feel exhaustion enter my body.

I stand over their bodies for a while, feeling the breath heaving in and out of my chest. The people that kidnapped Rue, Colter, and I, lay dead at my feet. It's unavoidable, the blood runs throughout the room and it drifts up my feet and splashed all over my hands and chest and face. I sit on the bed, thinking about how lucky I am. How lucky I am that Mother and Father died so quickly. I thought about how lucky they were to be put down the way they were. Still, I can't help but feel the truth bubbling in my chest. They would never know what it was like to live through this.

I think about Rue and I imagine them smiling, but there's no need. Rue steps in through the threshold of the room, wearing a balaclava on their head and mercenary clothes, no splint or broken limbs and their arm still attached to their body. Rue walks carefully through the room, careful not to step in the blood, and looks down at the bodies in quiet humility.

"You did it?" Rue asks, eyes flicking up to mine.

I'm sobbing, I realize now that I have been sobbing the entire time. Tears drench my cheeks and salt dries on my chin.

"*I don't know*," I manage out, the sound coming out as softly as when I was a child. When I was just a little girl. "I don't."

Rue looks down again, holding their hands together, fingerless gloves clasped. Their nails are red and black and brown, with much residue caught underneath.

"Did I?" I ask, still as soft, breathless and amidst sobs. Tears stream down my face and in the quiet of the room I can hear the blood soaking up by into pillow strewn on the floor. Soft white noise as the sinews within saturate with ichor. I can feel the temperature of the room drop, no longer sustained by three bodies. Now one.

"I don't know," Rue remarks. "But *you* know. We know."

Rue is gone, and I am alone. I withdraw the notebook from my pocket and look at it. I read the notes. Nothing explained this part. I fold the notebook and place it on the bed, but it slips off and falls into a puddle of blood, just beside a shard of bone. I watch the blood soak into the pages of the notebook, turning them bright red. Rue never planned anything after this. There is no escape plan, there is no exfil. Violence lead me to this

almost as if it were a curse. I glance down at my hands and notice they are shaking. Not just the buzzing sensation, but actually trembling.

A snarl catches my attention, and my eyes whip over to the door and watch as a golden cat walks through the threshold and pads her paws through the blood puddles and lets it lap up into her fur and she watches me as she walks into the room, standing over the bodies and looking at what I've done. This is the cougar from before—I know her, and I know her for I see her belly. Claws dig into the wooden floorboards. Blood darkens her fur. Her tail hangs just above the stuff, wagging back and forth and feeling the room and the air—stuffed thick with viscus and blood and iron and the scent of exposed fresh offal.

The cougar watches me with her great big horrible eyes which are gold and green and silhouetted in black and they say so many things that I can't believe. They say that I'm safe and that everything had been done and that nothing else matters and that I have things to do. Many things to do.

The smell is too intense. My bare feet are saturated with blood and I stand back up, into the puddle. Iron-oxides fill my lungs, mixed with the scent of curdling fluids from other parts of the body. Excrement, urine, all of it mixed. I'm in it. I am in the scent of death, and it will never leave my nose. I have to step out. I am done.

I limp down the master bedroom steps, feeling the buzzing in my hands subside. Blood drips from my fingertips, pattering onto the stone tile which my feet find themselves on. Muscles throughout my back are tensionless, even my spine feels lighter. At the bottom of these stairs the sunroom catches my eye, and I turn to look out at the view. My feet pad onto carpet, looking over the sun setting in the west.

I look to my right, seeing a little girl curled up in a dog bed.

Flashes of memories take over my sight. I hear my Dad screaming out my name, I hear the gunshot. I see Mother. I see Father. I see them both dead, and I see their blood on my hands. My mind feels as if it will disintegrate and flow out of my nose. I'm scared again. So scared.

I kneel down, stretching my hands out to her, then notice the blood. I quickly wipe my fingers clean on my pants, then stretch out to her again. The child shakes uncontrollably, her wide eyes fearfully watching my hands and looking at the blood all over me. My hands ran along the tight collar, feeling for the clasp and undoing it from her throat. It slides off her skin, clinking onto the floor. The way it slithers off her body ruptures visions back into my skull. I see Father's body going limp, slithering down and slamming into the floor with a meaty *thud*. I see the plume of blood erupting from Mother's body as she's shot point-blank in the yard. I feel hands over my throat.

“It’s done,” I croak to her, feeling the tension across my own throat loosen. Memories can’t hurt.

The girl gulps, her big brown eyes staring deep into mine. I know the look. I was the look once—she’s free to stare into the eyes of another human, free to feel the touch of skin. She is free to stand on her two feet. Free to breath. The fear, however, is ever present and present in the way she flicks her eyes back and forth, looking every which way for a possible threat to this new peace. Her dark hazel hair falls just below her shoulders and its thick and lightly curly. Her skin is like mine—brown like fresh clay, soft to the touch. Unlike mine, her’s is scar-free. Her face is pocked with freckles. Like my freckles.

I pick the collar up. My finger flips the tag over, revealing a well-worn metal face with four letters laser-engraved, ‘nova’.

“Nova?” I gesture to her, dropping the collar. The girl slowly nods. “That’s your name?”

Again, she nods.

I offer her a sheep smile, “I like it. I’m Maia.”

I look back out at the sunset, watching lines carved into the atmosphere by jagged peaks around us. The Lobby laid out before our feet, people toiling away in fields and soldiers mulling about. Despite this tremendous obstacle, and the further hundreds of miles of desolation between us and civilization, I feel as if my odds were never better. I have to get back to Rue. They will want to meet Nova.

“We should get going,” I tell Nova, standing up and walking toward the kitchen. Nova steps out of her bed, following close enough behind me. As she steps foot into the hallway, I catch her sneaking a glimpse towards the master bedroom. Her eyes watch the blood pool on the tile.

“You shouldn’t,” I shake my head, and she whips her head back to me. “It’s okay.”

She follows me into the kitchen, I wander over to the sink and pull the tap. Fresh water flows out at high pressure, flooding the basin. I run my hands through the water, watching as crimson leeches into the stream and passes from my flesh. I clasp my hands together and bring a splash up to my face, rubbing out the tension. I reach up and grab a glass from a cupboard—a wine glass, thinly blown. I fill it up with water and offer it to Nova.

“It may be the last fresh water you see for a while,” I comment, Nova has already begun slurping it down. I watch her eagerly holding the cup to her mouth, some of the liquid spilling out as she vigorously slurps. I shake my head, astonished that anyone would subject her to the horrors I was subjected to. “There’s plenty of water, and we’re not going anywhere until we’re both full to burst.”

This comment cracks a smile out of Nova, a shy thing which lingers only a moment. I take the empty glass from her hands and refill it. Nova slurps it down. I grab another glass, filling it up for myself. Oxygenated and metallic, I down the glass just as quick as Nova. We both stand there, bare feet on the stone, gulping down water until we are threatened with throwing it all up.

The front door swings open, and the Diplomat comes up the stairs and into the dining room and sees Nova and I. His eyes are wide in shock, no doubt seeing that I am covered in blood.

“You should leave,” I say, and without word he closes his hanging jaw and heads down the stairs, leaving the house. Nova looks up to me with big eyes, staring intently—she looks like I just bestowed her with life-changing knowledge. I don’t know what she’s thinking, but I can tell it’s important.

The sun is completely down now, and ambient light is coming on in the house. I filled my glass up one more time, holding it out in front of me. I then tilted the glass sideways, pouring water across the floor. This move urges a sound out of Nova—a sort of yipe—and an expression of shock over her face. I smile and shrug.

“You try,” I tell her, filling her glass and handing it to her. She looks at the glass wildly, then chucks the whole thing at the wall. Glass shatters and water splatters, dripping down the oak-paneled wall. I wasn’t expecting her to chuck the whole glass, so this erupts laughter out of me. I can’t even remember the last time I laughed.

Nova, too, giggles. Cheerful bubbly laughter forged in her gut and spills through her mouth—it’s quiet and subdued. I walk back toward the sunroom and watch the purple sky drifting slowly black. I lean over next to Nova’s bed and I open a cupboard and pull out a few pair of clothes and hand them to her. I tell her to stay put and to put socks on, then walk to the bedroom and step through the now sticky pools of blood. The blood was slippery and muddy and almost dried, caking to the bottom of my feet. I rummage through Mother’s drawers and pull out a sweater and a pair of pants that I think will fit.

I carry them with me and urge Nova along. I stop at the kitchen and wash the blood off my feet and then throw a pair of socks on. I hand Nova the clothes I grabbed. I gesture to her, and she follows me around the kitchen and out through the door I slipped in through.

“Do you have any shoes?”

Nova, whose wide-eyed expression remains grim, nods her head. She shows me the cupboard—hidden in the wall—where her shoes lay, and I help her lace them on.

With Nova’s hand in mine, we charge out of the house, our feet making their way through the soft grass and heading toward the cisterns. As we near a fence I hear shouting behind us. Quickly, I push Nova up to the top and she clambers down. A

gunshot cracks through the night air and a bullet whizzes past my head. I make it over the fence too and run—nearly carrying Nova—toward the cisterns. Nova is panting is sobbing and more bullets whiz past our head, crackling like fireworks behind us.

I usher Nova up the stairs of the cistern and stay planted at its base.

“Once your at the top, jump into the water!” I call after her. I pick my rifle up from my bag and aim it at the LaGuardia guards, firing a spray of bullets. The suppressive fire works, hopefully keeping them back for long enough. I take the rest of my gear from the drybag and leave it there.

I race to the top of the stairs and jump into the water. Nova is already in there, treading water and holding onto the ladder on the side. I quickly hand her the gear I can’t hold and lace on my harness, pulling it tight under the water. I then look at Nova and curse, realizing she’s with me.

She was not a part of the plan, but I’m determined to make it work. The pipeline is about 100 feet long, and with its angle I think it’s roughly a 125-foot ascent. I pull on the harness to make sure it’s tight and then make for the extra rope in Nova’s hand.

“We’re going to climb up this pipe,” I swim over to her and begin tying a series of knots around her legs, fashioning a makeshift harness. “It’s full of water so we’re going to share a respirator. This is to keep you attached to me.”

I do a few more loops, securing her tightly to my harness and then grab the rebreather bottle. I pull out a plastic cover from the mouthpiece and chuck it aside.

“Hold this in your mouth—yeah, like that. Breath in through your mouth only, not through your nose,” I show Nova how to use the respirator, which she quickly learns, to my luck. I see the shocking fear in her eyes, so I bring a hand up to her head. The maneuver is familiar—despite it being an action I doubt she has ever done—and calm her.

“We’re almost out of here, just this bit and we’re free.”

She nods to me. I take the respirator from her mouth.

“I’ll need some air too,” I tell her. “So I’ll take it from your mouth every now and then for a breath. There’s plenty of air so don’t suffocate yourself. Breath in through your mouth and out through your nose.”

I grab the rope I have tied to the railing and lace it through my belay hook and install it into the ascender, tugging the rope to make sure it runs smoothly. I make a few adjustments, as the water-logged rope has more friction than I predicted.

“Alright, you ready?” I ask Nova, and she sheepishly nods.

I pull us through the icy water, and Nova shudders from the cold. She grips me in a tight bear hug, gripping my shirt tightly as I tug on the rope, pulling us skyward.

The water pressure isn't nearly as tough as I'm expecting, but its pull downward still puts strain on my muscles. Making up for the water flow is, of course, the extra drag of Nova. It is pitch black here, the darkness consuming everything as I climb up the rope, slowly but surely. After 30 or so seconds, I grab the respirator from Nova and catch my breath, quickly handing it back to her. As I climb I am showered in bubbles from Nova's breaths, reminding me to keep climbing. The rope is rated for very heavy loads, so I have no fear it will hold us. Even so, the current whipping over the line causes it to oscillate in the water column and utter a horrible noise.

Three quarters of the way up, things go wrong. Nova takes the respirator from her mouth and brings it upward to hand to me. The water current, however, sweeps it from her hand and it tumbles downward. Nova tries to reach for it, letting out a stream of bubbles, but she can't catch it.

Realizing the plight, I immediately begin huffing it upward, tugging on the rope and driving it through my ascender. I was already struggling for air before the respirator was gone, so now I felt the burn building in my blood. My muscles begin cramping as moonlight comes peering in through the top of the water, and I can feel myself beginning to convulse.

I break through the surface of the water and immediately reach down, tugging Nova's head out of the water. She takes in a deep breath as I'm huffing in and out, holding us steady on the rope.

Nova's breaths immediately convert into apologies, a stream of sobbing sorries.

"It's okay," I pant, bringing one arm up to cradle her in the water. My face instinctively goes to hers, placing my cheek against her head and hugging her body close to mine. "It's okay, you did nothing wrong. You did *nothing* wrong."

Once we both catch our breath, I pull us out of the water and undo the harnesses. The cold of the desert night has swept across the land as we sit there, drying off. I have no other pair of clothes for Nova, but I know they would soon dry. I just need to build a fire. Nova shivers and sobs lightly and coos to herself and holds herself close.

Down in the Lobby, chaos ensues as people ran to and fro, like ants in a drowned colony. Nova is already shivering beside me as I change into the fresh pair of pants. I take her shirt off of her and threw my dry one over her body, soaking up a lot of the water across her body. Once she's dry enough I pilfer her extra pair of clothes from the bag and hand them to her and help her dress and warm up. I wring out the wet clothes and strap them to the outside of my backpack to dry. I've been going for the 24 hours and my eyes feel

heavy and my muscles tired beyond belief. I look over the vast geology and take note.
There is still so much to do.

Chapter 8

Rue and I lived together, with Paul and Cleo and Yvan, for a long time. Most of the rest of our childhood was spent with him. We escaped the rocky mountains and traveled east, through many checkpoints, before making it to a place along a river. Paul took up a job working barges up and down this river and would be gone for days at a time sometimes. Together, all four of us took care and managed as best we could. We lived in a small house with relatively good property and eventually, when it came to move out, Rue and I stuck together through that too.

We joined the army—a small militia of a relatively small territory calling itself a nation. We trained and fought one or two skirmishes before being given the option to leave. Neither of us chose that route, so we continued on with them. The world was changing, and we with it. Soon the small territory we once settled it was larger, and its industry powerful, and we saw ourselves deployed more. Special Operations soon came for us and we adjust to that role just fine.

But something deep in our hearts pulled us. The whole time it pulled and as we both got older that hook sunk deeper, and it pulled more. We were being dragged out of the service and we both bought horses and let the line pull us back wherever we were being pulled. We found that place, in west Texas, in the oilfields. Colter. He was at a bar when we walked in and we knew immediately it was him, for he had the collar mark around his throat too.

He told us his plan. Rob, steal, and cheat our way through the Utah Territory until we had enough to make a career with our skills. Quickly he let us onto his team, and we got early to work.

~

Nova and I hiked for a long time, circling around the Lobby and making our way toward the big flat prairie to head back to Rue. My mind races in circles with everything that has happened, tangled up like a ball of thread. Every moment I can I pick at it and try to pull those strands loose but every moment I feel like they come back and the ball gets bigger.

Nova walks behind me, a few paces back. It sounds strange, but there is something comforting in her presence. Every time she scuffs her shoe against the ground I feel a pring of happiness summoned in me. She doesn't talk, keeping to herself as we made way, but she kept up at least. Still, my focus lingers on her every now and then, and then back to the future.

Rue never had a plan, I realize this now. I saw that, once Father's blood painted by hands. There is no plan from here, no way of getting back or getting home or getting anywhere. No plan to have a home. No plan to escape. The whirlwind of memories and traumas from his hand were never meant to leave. Everything Mother ever said and

did—even our abductions—were to stay under that roof and die with us. Rue always thought Colter died; not on that day we were rescued, but surely not much longer after that. I never asked why they thought that, just that they did and I didn't think about him at all.

I wonder what Rue will say when they see Nova. What they will feel. If Rue walked into that house and saw Nova laying in that bed, would they have done what I did? Suddenly the nipping of the thread was no longer possible. Nova was an entire new line and it was, without us knowing, already linked to us. Who knows how many other threads there are? How many leads lead to people with these scars like we have? How many people have I personally seen that hide it, or I didn't look close enough? Are there other families, other Mothers and other Fathers? How foolish we are to think that we're done with this, even without Nova. How we are fools now, indeed.

Father's blood is painted on my hands, and Mother's blood cast on my feet. Everywhere I walk I leave her tracks and everything I touch I leave his impact. Of course Nova isn't free of that, Nova wears that blood the same as I do. I stop for a moment and look back at her and my mind screws with me and for a moment I see her little frame awash with that black crimson stuff and my heart lurches and then it is gone.

"What?" Nova asks, her little voice tickling my ears like a game. Something so silly about that sensation, but I just can't help it.

I shake my head, "Nothing, just thinking. How're you doing?"

Nova shrugs, "Fine."

"Feet don't hurt?"

Nova shrugs.

"Alright, tell me when they hurt."

As if summoned by my own worries, I hear over the heat of the day the clacking of horses hooves on stone. I raise my head and look around quickly, and the source of the sound revealed itself quickly. As if rising straight from the world itself, a large black stallion appears and on it's back is a familiar figure. Colter.

My words are caught in my throat and I thank them for that. I still don't trust him. Regardless, he see's us immediately and rides over.

"Well, well, well," Colter greets, swinging his feet in the stirrups and pulling on the reins to stop his horse. The black beast grunts and stamps its feet in the soil. Colter's eyes swing right past me and lay on Nova, and he looks at her for a moment or two before speaking. "Who's she?"

“Nova,” I introduce reluctantly, her name barely escaping my lips loud enough for him to hear. He leans forward in the saddle and stretches against the horn.

“Nova?” he inquires. “Well, would Nova like to ride with me back to camp?”

“What’s going on?” I interrupt in, standing between Colter and Nova. This sudden friendliness is unexpected, and something being unexpected from a figure so unexpected is dangerous; I don’t care where you come from or what you’ve done.

“I don’t know if you remember,” Colter explains. “But yesterday I told you I’m excited to see what choice you make today... and, well, you made that choice. Quite interesting, I must say. Little ol’ Maia, doing something so... horrific.”

Colter cracks himself up, bent over with laughter which is both hair-raising and doubtfully genuine. He steadies himself and continues. “Best part is, you probably don’t even know what I’m talking about.”

“Why are you offering to help now?”

Colter shrugs, “That decision... was *fascinating*. Truly didn’t see it coming. I have to get to the bottom of it.”

I look over at Nova and feel a ping of guilt. She balances on one foot over the other, clearly hurting. Nova riding with Colter wouldn’t be *such* a bad thing, would it? What if he takes off with her? Why would he?

“You ain’t gonna just dart when I lift her up there?”

“Oooh!” Colter exclaims. “Listen to that. How peculiar! Of course not, N-N-... Nova, right?”

Nova nods.

“Nova and I will ride right next to you.”

I shake my head slowly, but I feel my handgun by my side and feel confident in getting a shot in if he tried to dart. Besides, Colter taking in a little girl? Just doesn’t seem like him, despite my little knowledge of who he’s become. Just no way.

“Fine,” I agree. Nova smiles and walks over to the side and I help her up. Colter scoots backward in the saddle and seats Nova in front of him, holding the reins and then placing them in Nova’s hands. She smiles and I can’t help but feel a little happier.

“Pull’im so his head faces the way we want to go,” Colter instructs, pointing toward camp. “That’a way.”

Nova pulls the reins and the horse moves its head and contorts its body in the right direction. He lightly kicks the stallion into gear and the horse stamps its hoof and begins walking. I walk beside them and keep pace with the beast. Occasionally he snorts out a stream of upset and clearly I can see he wants to run, but Colter keeps the stallion in check with Nova in the saddle.

Colter being this willing, this... normal. Something isn't right anymore. Something is *not* right. I check my surroundings often as we walk, Nova smiling as she rides along and Colter smiling a little as well. Maybe, just maybe, Colter changed the same way I did when he saw Nova. Maybe there was something important in her that changes everything. She *does* change everything. Is she the glowing prize I deserved? The reward at the end of this all?

"Where are you from, Nova?" Colter stoops over her.

"Don't talk to him, Nova," I assert, and Nova looks quickly over at me with wide eyes and then back at Colter and turns her head and looks forward, her mouth pursed.

"You aren't any more the boss of her than the sky," Colter says to me. "Nova is free, is she not?"

I lower my voice to myself, "None of us are free."

"Or do you think she's *just* like us?" Colter continues. "I don't have their blood on my hands. I'm clean. If Nova is like anyone, she's like *me*."

He's trying to get to me.

We make it across the prairie toward midday and hike in to the small canyon where camp is made. I smell the distinct mildew of a put-out campfire and it dampens my smell. Something else is there, something metallic. My heart has been racing since Colter showed up and it still races now, pulsing blood to my brain. My eyes trace the ground as the campsite comes into view and my heart lurches in my chest.

"Rue!" I scream, running forward. A rope has been thrown down from the top of the cliffside, tied to a large sagebrush bush at the top, and a body hangs from it. Rue's fingers, the only ones they have left, are covered in blood and are mangled and they hang a few feet from the ground. The distinctive purple and blue color in their face makes no mistake to me—they've been dead for a while. Likely a little under a day, but no sooner. This happened right after I left.

I quickly wheel around to Colter and grab Nova violently from the saddle, holding her heavy body against mine and wheeling backward. Colter spits laughter out cackling like a hyena. The morbid atrocity, committed right after I turned my back. Why? Why is *any* of this happening. What did we do to deserve this?

“Maia!” Colter calls after me. “Take a deep breath, Maia. Your choices, Maia. It’s all what you decided!”

“What’s happening,” Nova asks, her voice quivering and soft. I hush her and set her down and at this point we have backed far enough away that we are now in the wash. Gravel crunches under our feet and the sun bakes everything from straight above. Colter still heaves out with laughter and walks his horse toward us.

“Stay back!” I scream, pulling my handgun from my holster.

“Altruistic punishment, Maia,” Colter shakes his head and clicks his tongue. My mind races through a thousand different scenarios but I can’t seem to get my feet under my body. Rue’s body, hanging there in front of my eyes, I can’t stand to look at it.

I aim the handgun at Colter and squeeze the trigger. The gun explodes in my hand and the bullet rips out and hits his shotgun, causing a chunk of metal to fly off and smash into his nose. He keels over and I feel my heart racing ever quick. My hands buzz but I ignore it and grab Nova’s hand and rush her away from the oasis, out into the desert. Nova breathes heavy and fast and I’m just as close to sobbing as she is.

Colter killed Rue. He killed them. Colter came all this way to kill them while I had my back turned. Why did I even trust him? Why didn’t I just level him out the first time I saw him? I see visions of Colter getting beat by the suspenders again and I understand it, but it fills me with fury. This isn’t the same, how could it ever be?

With Nova in tow, we backtrack through the large open desert, battling through grass and the occasional brush and hop over hidden washes and skirt dunes. The day is hot and beats down on us. Nova hobbles slowly—far slower than I expected to move. Nova’s bag bounces on her back as she walks, loaded with the extra food and her own extra clothes, and it becomes the rhythm of my march.

Eventually Nova insists we stop and rest so we walk down into a rather deep wash and take up the shadows cast by the opposite bank. Nova sighs and rests against the dirt and looks around.

“You get to see much of the desert before I saved you?” I ask, popping open a canteen and passing it to her. She takes two hands and lifts the canteen to her lips, gulping down a few glugs before pushing the canteen from her lips and sucking in a deep inhale. I chuckle and take the canteen, “Careful, don’t drown yourself.”

Nova shakes her head, catching her breath. I lift the canteen to my lips and drink. The water is warm now from the sun.

“I never got to leave the yard,” she says, once she can. “But I... I think I lived in the desert. Before.”

“Before?”

Nova nods, “It was different I think.”

I smirk, nodding my own head, “Yeah, well that’s okay. You’re about to get more desert than you’ll ever want.”

Nova chuckles and the giggles bring life back to my head.

“That’s funny,” she says in between giggles.

I clap my hands together, her laughter reinvigorating me, “Alright, we gotta keep moving.”

Nova and I find a way out of the wash and keep across the desert, heading for the patch of red-rocks ahead. While we walk, Nova notices something and stops in her tracks.

“Maia?” she utters, and I stop and look back to see what she’s looking at. In the distance, about a mile out, is a man. My heart skips and beat and I lunge into my bag and pull out a scope. I hold it over my eye and watch the black silhouette on the horizon, bobbing up and down. Colter, riding aback Oa, walking slowly but methodically in our direction. Blood smears his face, under his nose. I bite my lip and pull the scope away from my eye.

“Let’s go,” I usher her along toward the canyons.

The way down into the canyons is the same way I carried Rue up, only this time it’s far drier save for a few puddles still lingering in the shadows. Nova and I make our way down the slickrock cliffs and into the wash and follow it down toward the river. Occasionally I’d note a log lodged in walls several feet above our heads. The water really did climb that far. The impression the flash flood made is clear as day: a thick layer of dark silt still lingers on the walls and stretches at some points to 15 feet up the canyon walls. I drag my feet thinking about that flood. The sound of the boulder crushing Rue’s arm. It makes my spine tingle to think about how they screamed.

Nova watches the narrow walls as they curve and twist and shift, gawking at the height of the walls and the narrowness. Occasionally I have to grab her and help her down a sudden drop, or climb over a blockage of driftwood and rocks. Still we make time, all the while I wonder if the rider will even be able to get his horse through this canyon. There are some sections so tight that I don’t think it’s possible.

Finally we break out of the wall and follow the washed-out desert land all the way down to the riverbank. Tall cottonwoods are still here, grown out great and expansive and almost planned—as if the trees are perfectly placed an equal distance from each other.

Beneath them nothing grows and the sand is soft. Nova kicks at it and drags her feet through it, making long flat trails. The raft is lashed to one of the trees, and I spot the red rope. A sound, however, whips my attention around.

The horses hooves crack through the crust and can be felt from afar, breaking through the brush into the wooded clearing and stopping as the rider pulls back on the reins. The horse, a large stallion whose black hair shines with an oily sheen and whose long mane slaps his neck, stamps its hoof into the ground and whinnies, drawing up wet sand from beneath the dry surface. The horse lets out a snort as the rider leans to one side and unhooks a boot from the stirrup, climbing down from the saddle.

“Maia!” Colter screams, his voice cracking with rage.

He walks forward, his boots leaving deep impressions in the sand. His horse whinnies behind him, uneasy and wild. There is a stench of death in the air that approaches with him—carrion and rot carried in the breeze. The type of stench to make your stomach turn, no matter your will. The wind carries off toward the river and his shirt flaps lightly in it.

“Don’t come any closer, Colter!” I call at him, pushing Nova into the raft. I’m quick to undo the lashing.

Colter doesn’t say a word, just charges at me. I drop the rope and dodge him, his mass taking him careening into a bush. He throws a few punches and they knock my stomach and his boot kicks my leg hard.

I lunge forward and grapple with him, catching him by surprise. He tumbles to the ground and I throw a kick into his groin and a punch into his face—which he catches and deflects and pushes me into the river. I splash around while he grabs me by the back of the shirt and pulls me away and throws me to the beach again.

Colter falls on top of me and he’s heavy and I struggle but manage to get a crack of an elbow into his side and a proper kick into his gut and then into his ribs, driving out a cutting boiling grunt. He rolls off of me and I roll on-top of him, and I land a few punches. His face tanks it and he quickly throws me off and knocks the wind out of me again.

Colter gets up and meets me fist-to-fist, throwing a heavy jab into my face and crumpling my nose. I feel it give in and I fall back and feel a gush of blood down my lips and chin. I dodge enough hits and he trips over a plant, falling to the ground. I quickly make for the beach again and pull the rope free from its tie, letting the raft drift down the river.

“Maia!” Nova screams as the raft goes, but I’m not in it. Colter makes it to me and throws an arm around my throat and pulls tightly. His muscles bolster into my flesh and pull at my throat, threatening to crush it. He pulls me off the ground, and my legs flail

uselessly. Thinking quickly, I jab my mouth down on his arm and bite and bite so hard that my teeth hurt but they make it through the flesh and pop into the meat below. Colter lets me go and stumbles backward. I turn around and throw a jab at his face and it stuns him and throws him onto his back. I quickly grab a piece of wood from the ground—a gnarled log of a juniper, laying there in a pile from a long-dead tree—and swing it and it comes across his face with a meaty *thwack*.

Colter falls backward, completely stunned. I sprint away, following the shore and looking for the raft. 50 feet down. Colter screams out and comes sprinting for me, holding his hand over his face as blood courses down it. 30 feet away. 20 feet. I lunge for the water and break through the surface, tossing arm-over-arm and swimming for it. Nova holds an oar into the river and I grab a hold of it and pull. Nova's body gives—not strong enough to pull me in, so I quickly jab a hand out for the rope hanging around the raft perimeter and use it to pull myself inside.

Nova throws her arms around me in a hug and sobs into my wet shirt and I turn and look back at the shore and watch as Colter turns around and heads for his horse. Blood showers down his face, the log having split a long gash across his forehead. Once on horseback he veers back the way he came and he is gone from sight, headed opposite our direction. Somehow him not following is even more foreboding. I reach down for an oar and begin paddling, putting as much distance between him and I as I can.

Chapter 9

We've made a good distance today, heading even further south and now we have begun passing into the redrock canyons of the southern Utah Territory. Monolithic sandstone cliffs colored orange and red and yellow with large black marks of bacterial mats. The rivers edge here is rocky and narrow with little in the ways of foliage and banks. The water is murkier and thick with mud and silt.

"I grew up around here," I tell Nova, watching the familiar route pass by. I'd never been in this canyon, but Moab is well within the redrocks and even the littlest notion that I could see my old home again brought excitement to my heart. "We may be able to see the house if we get far enough today."

"Do your parents live there?" Nova's sweet question licks a ping of pain in my heart and a warm comfort in my stomach. I crack a smile and shake my head.

"No one lives down here anymore," I say. "And both of my parents died when I was about your age, so they aren't anywhere."

"Oh," Nova turns back to her hair, fiddling with the ends.

I think about Nova and I wonder about her past. So many things to ask, so few answers. Eventually the river turns around a bend and I hold the raft steady and notice houses coming up along the bank. My heart drops seeing it. Even though I spoke it to Nova, I never expected to actually see it. A 2-story house, built before the war, clad on the side with plastic and barely holding itself together after all this time. I quickly drifted the raft to the river bank and beached it and I got out and pulled the rope taught and tied it around a stone.

Nova stands up in the raft, "Is this it?"

I clear my throat against the dry, "Yeah, this is it."

I lead her around to the front and then to the garage door, pulling it up and open. The inside lays relatively similar to how dad and I left it. A few gas cans, now empty and stinking of old gas. A lawn mower, with the engine removed. A shovel with a chipped tip, now rusty. Lots of old cobwebs, with the decayed carapaces of bugs from nearly a decade ago.

I twist the knob and open the door into the house, stepping up the wooden stairs. Inside it is ransacked. Sand flows in through broken windows, paint peels off the walls, and the ceiling is mostly caved in. The back of the house is a husk, made up of burnt timbers and cracked drywall.

“Looks like time has taken a toll,” I tell Nova, although mostly to myself. “It’s not safe in here. We can spend the night in the garage.”

Nova walks back out to the garage, mulling about. I keep into the house, looking at the old furniture that still stands above the sand. I make my way upstairs, where the house creaks, and find my old mattress. I push it through the broken window, and it slides down the weathered roofing tile and onto the ground outside. I then peel back the door to my closet. To my surprise, things are still in good condition.

I pick around the clothes, pulling a few off the hangers and folding them in my arms. They look like they will fit Nova. I notice the stuffed animals up on the top shelf—the animal kingdom stares back with glossy black eyes. The delegates stood up to the test of time, representing the continents and oceans—a manatee, a brown bear, a giraffe, a deer, a mouse. I snatch the brown bear, holding it in my hands. The fur is so familiar and so matted down with love. I bring it up to my nose and take in a deep breath. Smokey. I guess not everything can remain in limbo—only feelings.

I tuck the bear in with the clothes and rummage through my things. Only toys remain. I snag a few pair of underwear from a pile and then make my way for Nova.

But I stop, just outside my parents room. The door is closed.

I sneak my hand down to the knob and push it open. The bed is still there, pristine, except the sheets are gone and sick yellow stains remain. The bedside tables are there, the clocks, the lamps, the shades over the windows. I step through the threshold, feeling that the carpet is even the same. Time stands still here. Nothing moves. I continue up beside the bed and lay my hand on the frame, feeling the wood grain in my hands. I remember this grain. Quickly, though, those memories are replaced by images of blood and bone pouring to the ground. Of rage. Of crying and of funerals and of running.

I walk to dad’s side of the bed and sit on the mattress. A picture frame sits on the end table, the photo obscured by dust. I set the clothes down and rub the dust off the glass, examining the picture inside. My heart almost leaps out of my ribs upon seeing my father’s face again. Gristled texture follows his jawline as his five o’clock shadow stands out as I remembered it. I can feel it pressing up against my face, giving me a kiss on the cheek. Mom stands beside him, her arm wrapped around his shoulder, and the signature frown strewn across her face. Despite the happy nature of the photo, she stares off into space and is nowhere. Not in the photo. Nothing seems to capture her spirit. I’m in the middle of the photo, a tiny child who doesn’t know the extents of the world quite yet. I can’t help but feel a crooked smile cross my face as I see her. The little girl, and she looks quite a bit like Nova.

I snap the clips off the back and take the photo out, folding it and placing it in my pocket. I pull the drawer open, looking at the trinkets inside. Not much is left, but I notice a bottle of cologne long-since-dried. Still, I bring the tip to my nose.

It smells like him!

It still smells like Dad. I feel warmth fill my heart and cherish the bottle. I then set it back in the drawer. Loose buttons and receipts are all that lay in there.

I walk over to the other side of the bed. Mom's side. There are no picture on the desk, and no clock, but the lamp remains. I pull the drawer open, and look inside. Sitting, face down, is a photo with a note scrawled on the back. Curious, I pick the photo up—an old Polaroid—and read the note.

I didn't know I could love.

I flip the photo, seeing it for the first time. My Mom and Dad, embraced, young kids—neigh older than 18. Dad is behind Mom, wrapping his arms around her, a wicked smile across his face. Mom is the subject of the photo, dressed in a plaid dress which I have never seen before. Another thing I have never seen shakes me. Mom's smile. The long lost thing which I always wondered about, here it lay. Hidden, all these years, in her bedside table; and it's beautiful, and it declared to the world that it's there, that it is *beautiful*. The way it creases her face, the way her teeth shine through. My breath is stuck in my throat. A tear drips down my face, which I quickly smother away. I can't cry. I can't cry over a smile.

I take this photo, too, and slip it into my pocket. I then walk out the door, closing it as I leave.

Nova has dragged the mattress into the garage and is sitting on it, looking out into the distance.

“Hey,” I greet, throwing the pile of clothes on her lap. “These fit you?”

Nova pulls up a shirt and compares it with her torso, “A little big, but it fits.”

“Good,” I say. “I have a surprise, okay?”

Nova nods, eyes watching me. I pull the stuffed bear out from behind my back, and Nova cracks a wide grin. I hand the bear to her, and she cradles it, then hugs it. The sound of the weighted plastic beads in his limbs fills my head with memories of the past. Of sleeping in a bed of my own, or long summer nights with the window open and listening to the world as I drifted off to sleep.

“He was mine, when I was a girl,” I tell her. “Can't believe he's still here.”

Nova's smile is incurable, precious across her face, “What's his name?”

“Beary,” I tell her, then mutter under my breath. “Real creative, I was.”

Nova cradles the bear, then changes into the fresh clothes, discarding her old ones in the corner. I make dinner, then we both squeeze onto the mattress and fall asleep. I lay on my back, Nova softly breathing by my side. Before slipping into sleep, I pull the photo of my young mother out again and caress the picture. The lost smile.

Nova erupts from her slumber in a racket of panting rioting. I’m shaken awake by it and immediately lunge for a rifle that isn’t there. I look around in the dark carport and immediately find Nova, who is still screaming out a mixture of sounds so horrifying that I find no words to describe them—but I know, deep down I know. Squelching beats of breath split up with intermittent sobs and the sound of feet slapping helplessly on the ground.

I throw myself up out of bed and come to Nova’s side and hold her still as her body flails and her hands grasp desperately at her throat. Nothing is there, and if Nova is anything like me—for which she is—she also knows there is nothing there to grasp. Still, the baby girl grabs at the callouses on her neck and sputters out choking sounds which are far more horrifying to hear when they aren’t your own.

“Nova, it’s okay,” I try to comfort her, holding her body close. Occasionally her chokes are broken up by a sobbing inhale, and in those I can hear her true voice and I know she is scared. I hold her close to my chest and begin to sob as well. As I do I can feel Nova’s limbs grow tired and the choking stop. She is free from the terror. She is free from the flashback.

Nova lays nearly-lifeless in my arms and pants deep breaths of sorrow into my chest, which her face is fully planted in. Her arms wrap themselves around me, just as I wrap mine around her, and she sobs while I sob. My eyes see little in the dark but my mind sees Rue holding me after my own episode and my sobs whimper away. There is strength in being like Rue.

Nova eventually calms down and I settle her back into bed. I share stories about my commando career—those which I know she is old enough for—and eventually Nova slips back into sleep. I myself crawl into bed but I don’t find slumber. My nose aches, but thankfully I don’t think Colter managed to break it. Still, it’s finally grown blue with bruising and hurts to even think about.

Nova wakes groggy from sleep, woken by the rumbling of her belly. I remained awake for the rest of the night, which isn’t very long. I pull the garage door open, letting the sun stream in. Nova squints her eyes against the bright and braces her arm over her forehead. She brings a hand up to her throat and gently brushes the calloused scar. I sit

back down on the mattress and Nova squeezes up next to me and leans her weight into my side. I feel a strange calmness in it.

As I prepare our breakfast—another MRE, Nova perks up and asks me a question.

“I had a stuffed animal,” Nova says, her voice sounding different in the morning. Something more happy in it, something less afraid. “Want to hear about him?”

“Sure,” I smile, pulling the packet open and leafing out the contents.

“Well, his name is Buffles,” Nova starts, holding Beary in her hands and folding his arms as she talks. “He was my friend, he helped me sleep and I used to like him a lot. But Mother and Father didn’t like me having him too much. They want me to leave him in the sun room.”

“What kind of animal is Buffles?”

“A buffalo!” Nova guffaws, bringing her hands down to her lap as if my question was outrageous.

“Aahh,” I pull open the packet of coffee and pour it into a cup and fill the cup with water, stirring with the toothpick.

“Did you know that Buffles has a family?” Nova’s voice piques.

“No,” I shake my head. “He does?”

Nova nods her head fervently, “Yeah, he has a lot of family. He has a brother and a bunch of sisters! And-and he has a *grandma* and a *grandpa*.”

“Really? Does he have any parents?”

Nova thinks about that question, pulling on the bear’s arms and manipulating him into poses. Finally, she comes to a conclusion, “No.”

“Why not?”

Nova’s brow is scrunched and I wonder if she’s thinking about being truthful or spinning another thread of story.

“He doesn’t have parents because he doesn’t know why,” she says, her voice recovering from a spit of consciousness. Back to that jubilant roar and playful spirit. I pull the packet of food from the heating pouch and it steams and I cut it open and hand Nova a spoon.

Nova scoots forward and takes the spoon and shovels food into her mouth.

“Shan he wis a weawy goo danfer,” Nova speaks with her mouth full.

“Hey, no talking with your mouth full,” I correct, but I can’t help but smile a little. I wonder what I was like when I was her age—after everything that happened. I hope that I was like her.

Nova gulps down her bite, “Hmph, no fun.”

“Get used to that, manners still matter.”

The words are so strange to hear from my mouth. So many years I’ve been comfortable with the idea that I’d never have children. I don’t have any friends outside of Rue, and I’d never even imagine talking to them about kids, so I assumed I’d never really have to deal with them. I myself am never going to have any of my own. But here I am, Nova sitting next to me. I felt a longing in my heart I never thought I’d ever feel. I think about Dad, and I think about what he’d say. He always knew what to say.

“I’m grateful I found you, kiddo,” I tell her and sip my coffee and it’s cold and bitter.

Nova smiles and looks up at me, “I’m happy too.”

Nova turns her nose up, smelling the air. She takes in a few breaths through her nose then pushes it out sharply. “I smell smoke.”

I’m carefully applying oil to my handgun, cleaning dirt out of the crevices, as she says this. I furrow my brow and set the gun aside, standing up and walking over to her. Sure enough, the pinching stench of smoke fills my nose.

“Stay here,” I instruct, opening the door to the house. A large pillow of smoke rolls out and up into the ceiling of the garage, assaulting my senses and send me into a coughing fit. I quickly push into the house and feel the heat. The back of the house is engulfed in flames who lick and roll and reach up and over the ceiling and melt the paint off the walls. The flames spoil through the timbers of the wall rapidly and my heart lurches in place. My eyes burn as black smoke pours out of these flames, and with the smoke I push out of the house and back into the garage. Nova is sitting on the mattress and coughing into her arm.

I quickly usher her up and we walk out of the garage, both hacking up the smoke in our lungs. Nova’s eyes are red, and I’m sure mine are even worse as they sting—either opened or closed, doesn’t matter.

“What’s going on?” Nova asks. I have no idea until a dark shape moves around the corner of the house.

Colter, riding on the back of his great black stallion, hurls a flaming bottle toward the house and it cracks and splashes those flames out across the walls. They catch instantly on the plastic siding and curls up into the air, hurling a plume of black smoke with it. Once his eyes latch onto us, his face curls up into a smile and he swings himself off the saddle. I push Nova away and try to tell her to run away, but my lungs catch and I can't stop coughing. I heave against them but nothing comes out but a thin line of mucus.

"Funny, isn't it?" Colter calls to me. His foot lands on my back and holds me down, pressed into the concrete. "How much it burns in your throat?"

I cough out an expletive and roll out from under his boot. The new rush of adrenaline seems to soothe my lungs enough to move out from under his heel and stand. Nova scurries off to the side, putting distance between herself and Colter. Colter isn't focused on her, though. Everything about him is focused on me.

Flames lick the sky above Colter's head, smoke billowing from my childhood home. Colter huffs and puffs, staring at me like a predator staring at an injured bird, flapping her broken wing into the ground. Easy prey, easy meat.

"You know what's so exciting about the choice you made?" Colter calls to me, clenching and unclenching his fist. His nose is still smashed into his face and he makes clear effort to breathe through his mouth instead of his nose. "It's that you probably don't even know what choice I'm talking about, do you?"

I shake my head, feeling the pressure of sadness and exhaustion pulling at my face. "Whether or not I'd actually do it. You didn't know if I had it in me."

Colter chuckles, wringing his fingers together. "Oh, Maia. No. I wasn't curious about that. I knew, once the moment was upon you, that you wouldn't hesitate. I knew that the fire of rage that burns inside your chest is hotter than any furnace, and that the only thing that could finally put that fire out is the blood of those two. I knew that. No, the choice you made is bigger than that. The choice came after you did that, don't you know? You couldn't have made that choice before, but now that Father and Mother are dead you could make it."

I look over at Nova, standing and watching the two of us bicker across the concrete drive at one another, fire billowing out of the house behind Colter. He stands between me and my childhood home and he burns it to the ground. I bite my lip and look back at him.

"It's her, isn't it?"

Colter smiles, "Oh, Maia, I knew you'd get it. I knew you'd get it eventually."

"You knew they had her," I tell him. "You knew and you did nothing."

“It wasn’t my choice to make,” he drags his feet toward me. “It was yours. All along, she’s waited for you.”

“Stop it!” I exclaim at him, feeling that heat boiling in my chest. The same heat that took down Mother, Father, countless before him. I saw the man I shot, I feel the sinews of the neck of the man I choked out.

“Nova, that’s her name?” Colter asks, seeking no answer. “Yes, she’s waited for you, Maia. Everything you’ve ever done has led to this moment, to her being here, to you being with her. All the pain and suffering for this, and you made the choice I didn’t expect you to make. You made it without even thinking. You chose to keep her.

“She would have been just fine without you. The guards would have found everyone dead and her alone and would have scrapped everything they were doing, called it quits, and flew back to Italy for their next assignment. They would have taken her with them, gotten her out of this wasteland—this land of horrid violence, as you have called it. She would have lived a good life.

“But you chose to take her with you. You chose your own path for her as well, a path of wandering in the wilderness. A path of strength, true, but whose virtue is to be strong? Whose virtue is to be strong at the expense of safety? Nova no longer gets to choose whether she wants to be strong. Whether she wants to be brave. Whether or not she wants to live somewhere she can call home. No one calls *this* home, Maia. A land where violence has been bred into every living soul, where killing is a virtue, where sickness is normalized. This sickness of the head we all share; it’s her’s now.

“My question to you, Maia—my *last* question—is, did you even consider it? Did it even cross your mind that *this* is the choice that you made?”

I look over at Nova and watch as her eyes flash between Colter and I, her little mouth flattened into a grimace of hopelessness. I see myself, standing in a mirror, staring at my bruises and my scars and feeling the cool blowing of the air conditioner on my back. I see thousands of sleepless nights and sobbing tears at being me. At being myself. Is Colter right? Is this all truly *my* fault, is this what Nova has in store for her? Simply of being chosen by me? Was my attempt to save her the action that doomed her?

I turn back to Colter and walk closer to him—up until our faces nearly touch—and thrust a fist into his nose. Skin-on-skin slaps like a snare and the crunch of what is left of his nose runs up through my arm. Colter wheels backward, clutching for his nose, and then turns immediately into a flurry of rage. He jabs a fist into my gut, I try to block the next one but it lands too. The blaze burning behind Colter fills both our lungs with smoke, and both of us heave and cough. Nova cries out behind me, but my ears hear nothing.

Colter is bigger and stronger than me, and despite my training he is, too, well trained. I dodge a few more punches before missing one. He levels me onto the ground and I feel

the wind rushing from my lungs, his hands make for my shirt and pick me off the ground. He thrusts toward the house, pushing me with him, until we break through the front window.

Immediately the skin on my neck and the hair on Colter's face singes and burns. While the fire was relatively quite on the outside, inside the house it roars like a train and bites with a heat I've never quite felt before on my skin. Smoke billows up over the ceiling and flames lick through the archway separating the front room from the rest of the house.

Colter and I struggle on the ground, each throwing a punch and recoiling at the heat. It's intense, and the smoke billows into my lungs and the oxygen is gone. Colter struggles too, heaving and coughing, and before I know it we're both fighting nothing but the fire and the smoke in our lungs and the burns on our flesh.

I finally make my way to the front door and push it open. Behind me the fire knocks a beam loose and it makes a horrifying squalching noise as the roof caves in deeper in the house. A rush of even hotter air blows past me and I swear I can feel it burn the skin right off my back.

Outside, I relinquish in the cool air and drag as much oxygen I can into my lungs, but it feels like taking air in through a straw. Everything hurts, everything is pain, skin holds loose on my face and I feel like I've died and been sent to hell. I hear footsteps behind me and the heaving lungs of rage.

Colter takes me by the hair, dragging me back into the corpse of my burning home. Beams crack and fizzle and pop above our heads, the heat wafting outward. Before the door, where flames now billow out, Colter stops and pulls me to my knees, leveling a pistol on my head. The flames lap out of the doorframe and bend the plastic siding with heat. Black smoke billows out of every orifice and in that smoke I see my childhood. I hear laughter in the strain of the house collapsing, I see the tramping of coyotes through those billows, and I watch my mother smile in the flames licking up before me.

Colter then drops the gun beside me, the pistol clattering to the ground, and heaves.

"This is it," Colter says. "For the both of us."

"You didn't have to do this," I strain, barely hearing myself over the flames.

Colter's whole body weighs down on mine, and I feel everything in my body. I kneel at the doorway to my childhood home and watch as the flames break the swing hanging on my porch and cause it to fall to the ground. Behind me, the loud crack of a gunshot rings out and the weight of Colter dissipates. I feel almost as if I'm in a whirlwind, and everything happening has already happened and I'm just remembering it. I wheel around and look behind me in confusion, and the last shot of adrenaline fills my bones.

Colter lays dead on the ground, a pool of blood collecting from the back of his head. A grimace frozen on his face forever, melted by the heat of the fire. His flesh is pink and shiny and his head completely vacant of hair. I'm sure I look just as bad. Behind his body is Nova, who holds his handgun. The blood has splashed backward and covered her face, dripping down onto her body. She breathes in and out in sobs and looks at me in desperation. She drops the gun and comes to me and pulls on my arm, bringing me away from the house.

Everything is a blur of pain and the last shot of adrenaline my body has carries me alongside Nova, who holds my hand, down the landscape to the river where our raft is tied down. Behind me I hear another loud pop and turn and watch as my childhood home completely collapses, flames crawling higher than before and licking the sky. Nova keeps the pressure, bringing me to the edge of the water.

My hand shakes as I dip it into the silty water, bringing it up cupped and full of water and splashing it across Nova's face. She helps by rubbing the water in, draining the blood from her skin. The adrenaline that was there is now completely gone from my body and the pain fills the gaps, sending thunderous shocks from every part of my body. Still I ignore it, bringing wet hands up to Nova's face and washing the blood away. Nova's sobs had restrained themselves, but as I go and as the pain increases Nova begins to cry again.

"What's wrong?" I ask, finally wiping the rest of the blood away with the hem of my still-wet shirt.

"You're... You're hurt," she winces, her eyes looking over my entire body with horror. The feeling is strange, I'm recognizing the pain but it isn't affecting me like I'd expect.

I soo to her, "I'll be alright, Nova. Let's get moving on, we can't stay here."

Nova snuffles and nods. I look around at the river and notice the raft—now flat—has drifted into the bank and gotten snagged on the wild bushes poking their sticks out into the stream. With Nova by my side we trudge through the river and feel the hard current pulling at us and I brace against it with all my strength and manage to get us to the other side. We walk along the bank to the raft and I pull the bag I left here from under the water. It's soaked through and I've probably ruined everything inside but my food, at least, is fine. Nova had grabbed her backpack before the house was engulfed in flames, so she still has everything there as well. Together we march alongside the bank, pushing through bushes and avoiding cactus as we make our way down the winding canyon.

Nova insists, however, that we patch my wounds up. She pulls out some extra clothes from her backpack and rips them into strips and ties them around parts of my body that she can, but the injuries are everywhere and there's not much she can do. She does it all on her own, pressing hard down on the bandages to make sure they are secure. She splits the fabric with her teeth while I sit on the shore, exhausted.

I'm not sure how far we hike, I just feel my body start to move and Nova follows beside me. The canyon walls push in to a choke point and here there are remnants of an old dam, since pushed down by some cataclysmic event. My limbering feels almost zombie-like, and I can't yet convince myself I'm not yet dead. We crawl over it to a far wider section of canyon and the walls here drop down much lower, so that the rounded red-stone cliffs are now more yellow and brown and jagged and layered. We hike up a ways to get out of the canyon, following a small arm of the river that stretches up the canyon and brings us up and out of it. We walk together to a spot and the sun is going down overhead. A cliffside, all smooth stone and perched above the desert expanding out before us. Arid highlands slowly dropping down to dry lowlands. Dry. Oh so dry.

I feel short of breath and my head sways. There's a numbness in everything. Nova sits next to me and she looks sad and watches me. I look at the way the wind pulls at her hair and the way she tucks her knees up into her chest. So much like I was. Two beautiful girls watching each a past and a future. Nova and her bravery, her righteousness, her belief. Me in my pity and my sorrow and my fortuitousness.

"I feel like I was just your age," I say to Nova, as we both sat on the slick rocks. Nova has her knees tucked up into her chest and her backpack still lingering on her back. "It's funny how fast the time seems to have moved."

Nova says nothing, her face in a pout. An anger ruminates in her stomach.

"I don't remember how long it's been," I tell her. "Time has this funny tendency at your age to drag its feet. You're forced to suffer through the horrors of childhood. Unlike myself, you aren't allowed to forget yet. Your brain won't filter out the bad. You probably won't remember a lot of it, but it's not like that matters. Right now you remember it."

Nova snuffles.

"I can't go any farther than this, you know?" I look over at her, and Nova meets my eyes. Rage in my belly has all but keeled over now. I think the shot clipped him. He's there, but he's unmoving.

"I know," Nova says through a twisted frown.

"Beyond this point, everything is yours. Every experience and every footstep. The views and the smells."

"I know."

"And I won't be there to moleskin your feet."

"I won't moleskin then."

"I know."

Nova digs into her fingernail, and I watch innocently beside her. She stared at me as I talked to her. There was something new in her eye, something I hadn't placed before. I saw the star of belonging flickering in her iris, reflecting back into my own eye. She knew what I was talking about, and she knew how I was feeling. We are far more alike than she ever thought—but I knew. I knew the moment I saw her. It was like staring into a mirror.

"There are a lot of good people out there," I attempt to console. "And I'm sorry you haven't met them. I hadn't met them until I was saved. The reason I didn't starve out there... was because of kind strangers who found me and took me in."

I felt my fingers pricking the palm of my hand, and attempted to untense them.

"Down south, down there, I know there are people," I instruct her. "My Dad talked about them, and the whispers have only gotten stronger since then. I hear about people rebuilding what once was. I hear about egalitarian living. I hear about people breaking the reins of oppression which have driven us for the last three hundred years. They are your people. You must know them."

Nova stared out at the horizon for some time, but eventually she spoke to me, and in those words there was the throbbing of sobs just slight on the cusp of her lips. "I'm not ready."

My eyes trace over the little girl's outline, feeling the water lapping at my feet and then feeling the water disappear with a buzzing. Her tangled brown curls, her turned-up pouted lip, her stern gaze at me. Too scared to be sad, so she turns her stomach toward anger. I see her and she is me, feeling everything I ever felt and everything I wanted to. Her eyes weighed down by the universe, she stares at me with the utmost contempt. How dare I take me from her, how dare I fall down. How dare I put her through this. How dare I save her. How dare I not. How dare I leave her. It all chokes in my throat. How is there anything in life without this, a woman looking at the little girl she once was.

And I can't hate her, of course. Everything I've ever felt about myself—the horrible, nail-biting torment I've subjected myself to—all sours in my gut. I wasn't hating myself, I wasn't hurting the person I never wanted to be. I was hurting *her*. Every spitting insult said to her face. Every punch in the gut into hers. I break into tears watching her, knowing what I put her through. I reach my hand out to her, but she doesn't take it. She watches it and shies away.

The pain in my gut is unquenchable. I feel soft-headed, weak, like I could blow over with the pass of a gust of wind. Moreover I feel that the world is sick as well, and in my keeling over I feel the baseless destruction of it all. Wriggling offal bursting in far corners which mankind has yet to abandon, but it is abandoned here. I know there is a semblance of calm that's to be in this, but that is not comforting. I fear death, ultimately,

and I know I am nothing but one to fight it. There is no comfort in the end of my tragedy. There is no comfort in seeing those I have already lost. There is no comfort in Nova laying down beside me, softly cooing tearful sobs into my ear. Everything is incredibly dizzy.

And still I wonder about things. I think about how I got here, and then I think about violence, and I think about Dad. I see him holding his rifle, and I see the picture of himself that he had and he was a young boy. I wonder how he could have indentured me with that violence—that sick, twisted affliction which took over my whole body and brewed rage who shook with sorrow in my stomach and wondered if he would ever be free. Now he was, truly. I didn't even feel him anymore. I think he saw the hole in my stomach and he crawled out of it and entered the world, leaving me behind.

But then I think about Mother and I think about Father and I think about how free they were from that violence. From rage and from the coyotes and from the mountain lions—until everything collided and it came for them and they couldn't fight back. I think about the comfort and the dis-familiarity with a gun. I wonder if she had ever even held one before. Why had I to be the one that was taught about recoil and how to properly dial in a scope and how to load a round straight into the chamber and how to oil the parts and how to disassemble the barrel and the internal magazine and how to pull the trigger and how to breath when doing so. Mother never knew any of that.

I see myself as a soldier. I see myself and who I worked for. I see Rue and I see Rue's Mother and Rue's Father. I see the cougar. I see the pack of coyotes. The world held up and the cub in the other's mouth and they both watched me. Why am I the violent one? Why did I get this turn in life. Why didn't they?

And then, squatting right in front of me and staring into my soul, is Rue. Their eyes peer out of the hole in their balaclava and they watch me silently as I die. Their eyes glimmer and I see them again for the last time. Nova doesn't see them. Nova is staring at me and she is sobbing.

And I am dizzy, and everything is disappearing.

"I don't want you to go," Nova's words fall out numbly, and as I lean my head in her direction I see that she shakes in sorrow. Or in fear, which is the child's best interest, but I can't tell her that.

"I can't help it anymore," I struggle out, feeling the words come just as numbly.

"What will I do?"

"Anything but what I did, Nova. You have everything ahead of you," I mutter, feeling a strange softness coming through my body. The softness is real this time, not a sensation I think I am making up. This is truly what it feels like. This softness, neither gentle nor erose but inconsequentially there.

Nova sits there as well and I don't know what she is feeling because I have already begun to forget anything but excruciating pain and softness. My brain racks itself over this contemplation and attempts to feel anything else at all, and I am amused when it pulls up nothing. I know there are other sensations, I know that I can feel other emotions, but nothing comes up.

I open my eyes once again, in an attempt to see the sky one last time, and all I see is a dull white, and the sensation that I am sliding and then I am not. I look around and I see Rue and they stand over me and offer a hand down to me and I reach up and I grab it.

~

Dad's hand rests firmly against my back, calloused and confident against my shirt. He's huddled close and, despite his intention, I find it distracting. His breath sprays out of his nose and washes over me and I smell jerky on his breath. Still I concentrate, looking through the series of glasses with a thin cross down the middle.

"Good," Dad says. "Like that. Smooth, shallow breaths. Hold them down in the pit of your stomach, not in your lungs. It'll make you top heavy. That's it, keep your mass down low."

I wiggle and adjust myself, the wood of the rifle butt pressed into my cheek. Decades of grime and oil and varnish are wormed into the wood and they press into my skin. My finger feels the trigger of the rifle that my father shot when he was a boy. Now it's my turn.

"You see it now?"

My eyes focus hard through the sight, landing on a target he had setup a hundred feet away. In the sight the target is large and hard to mistake. I gulp and nod.

"Good, keeping it subtle," Dad instructs. "Don't ever speak. If that were a deer it'd be spooked off. They're jumpy, and they're more adapted to this forest than you or me. They'd hear that from miles off and spook."

My eyes follow the lines of the scope and level on the center of the target. Dad watches as the barrel of the rifle sways.

"You're focusing on the reticle," Dad notes, reaching a hand out and steadying the barrel. "Look past the lines, look at the target. If you keep your eyes focused on the target, the reticle will find its way to where it needs to be. Look beyond it, Maia. The reticle will find the target."

I do as he says, watching as the black lines go blurry behind my focus. The target is in sight now. A wooden block with a few circles painted on it. Steadily the world becomes a

steady whirlwind of mess and I feel the pressure on the trigger. The metal sears into my skin and stings a little and I wince but in my head—externally I am as a stone.

“Take the shot.”

I take in a deep breath, then exhale and shot. The gun jumps back and pushes my body with a force I’ve never felt before, leaving me without breath. I feel as if I’ve been woken from a slumber and notice my heart rate jumping up. Through the scope I can see a thousand things happen at once and they all make my heart jump even more. There is truth to the words that my father speaks to me and I feel that this object in my hands is much more than just a tool. What I hold is a future. What I hold is a key and with it many locks spring open.

Dad laughs and takes the rifle from my hand and looks through the sight at the target.

“Alright!” he exclaims over the cool mountain air. “You hit it! Bullseye!”

I giggle and sit up from my prone position, leaning back against the pine tree we are under. Dad takes the rifle and leans it upward, undoing the bolt and letting the shell fly out into the icy soil. It sizzles and steams as it makes impact. Dad smiles widely and watches me and then the view.

“Daddy,” I ask, staring down the range.

“Yes, sweetheart?” his fingers carefully trace the figure of the casing, picking it up from the ground and blowing into it to clear it of any debris.

“You’ve had this gun for a long time, right?”

Dad’s thumb rubs the worn varnish, “Since I was born, basically. My Dad gave it to me, and I’ve kept it all these years and kept it in good condition. I... knew from the moment that I saw you that you’d one day shoot it, Maia.”

I scrunch up my face and nod. “How many times have you used it?”

Dad shrugs quickly, “Oh, hundreds of times. Maybe thousands.”

“Have you ever killed anyone with it?”

Dad freezes for a moment, looking out over the view. He rubs the rifle’s worn figure and takes warmth from the barrel. He snuffles and clears his throat.

“Yes,” he admits. “Yes, this gun has taken a life. A human life.”

I look at the gun differently now. Instead of seeing that multifaceted future I see, again, a tool. A simple mechanism capable of exacting a will, yes, but not without a figure behind it. Dad continues.

“You see, Maia... a gun isn’t a tool,” Dad shakes his head and brings his view to me, his eyes peering into mine. They’re the same color as mine. “A gun... well a gun is a vestige of a primitive way. A gun is more than what a man can use it for, because the gun is also a symbol. Sure, a gun can kill a man... but that also means it can kill an idea. It can kill an oppressor, and it can kill an oppressive system.”

“What did *you* use it for?” I ask, childlike curiosity getting the best of me. Dad sighs again, and it makes a big steam cloud.

“I used it to kill ideas,” Dad tells me. “Simple ideas, one’s you wouldn’t even think were bad if you heard’em in passing. Ideas, like, ‘What if some men are made better than others?’”

“They aren’t,” I recite carefully, not that I was coached by my Dad, but we’ve talked about this before. “All men are created equal.”

Dad nods his head, “Very good... Still, those ideas persist. Those ideas... they hurt people, you understand? An idea isn’t just something you think, if you take that idea and create structure and tell others about this idea and spread it, well then it becomes more. And many people are fools who do not question ideas when they are given to them.”

“You did?”

“Yes,” Dad tells me, smiling and brushing a lock of hair from my face. “And I am proud of that decision every day.”

“But, Daddy,” I mutter, looking at my fingers and feeling a wash of feelings coursing through my brain. “What if too many people have the idea? Do you kill all of them?”

Dad takes a deep breath through his nose, uncomfortable with the question. He thought about it a lot when he was a boy, dealing with the rise of those ideas he so vehemently disagrees. Finally he comes up with something to say.

“Depends on the idea, Maia. An idea, like ‘What if some men are made better than others?’ is an idea which must be rooted out. I see so much beauty in people, so much passion and creativity and purpose. I see you in every person I’ve ever witnessed. Some of these people... they have that idea—and they’re given a choice, mind you. I wasn’t just wheeling around with a gun shooting anyone I saw that might have that idea. Like a sickness. Like putting down rabid dogs. No, they all had a choice. Many people had the idea and didn’t even care to think about it. Alternatives were something they picked up just as quickly when they came into fashion. But while that dirty idea still lingered, well, it festered in people’s hearts and they got complacent in it.

“Other’s, well, they liked the idea. They defended it, with guns just like my own. When they have guns and they have ideas like that, well... you don’t just wait for them to attack first. Them arming themselves is enough of a decision to know which side they’ve

chosed, which choice they turned their back on. Yes, I killed many men like that. Never once did I—or *have* I—thought twice about that. No, Maia, I did not.”

I sat with his words for a while, stirring over them in my mind. My Dad, someone who I’ve only ever really known to be a peace dove, is a killer. A killer of many. He did it all for me, and how am I supposed to understand that? How am I supposed to look him in the eyes and feel that passion which he killed so rightly for?

But I do. I understand it completely.

Dad hands me the rifle and I hold it against my body.

“This,” Dad pats it, and the metal rattles. “Is important, Maia. In your hands is your liberation.”

I take a deep breath and let it out and look over the range again and think about shooting the gun. Feeling it kick my in the shoulder, and thinking about what Dad said.

“What does *adapted* mean?” I ask.

Dad clears his throat, “Oh, from before? Evolved, adapted—uh, *prepared* I guess. Means the animal has certain characteristics that makes it better in the forest than us.”

“We aren’t adapted?”

Dad shrugs, “We are to different things.”

I looked down at the rifle in my arms, thinking about how easy it was to shoot. How quick it came to me. “Like shooting guns?”

Dad’s expression stays stiff and thoughtful and he watches the frosty mountainside. My eyes trace his outline against the sky and follow the contours of his jawline. He lingers for a while, his eyes looking at everything around us and his face pulled into a contourous maze. I’m little and still figuring out the world but in that moment I come to a conclusion that is stark and mature and realized. I find my mind forming this new central idea—that my Dad is a human just like me, that he was a kid like me, that he once looked at the world from the same height that I am in this moment. Dad shot a gun for the first time before. He was probably good at it like I am. He probably asked this question too, and now he was trying to remember what *his* Dad told him.

Or, if I’m lucky, he’s finding a new path for me. A new way to explain everything and anything and all of it encompassing. The lesson of life and the story of how we got there. Dad contemplated the virtue of every lesson that I would go down from that point, and he came to a conclusion.

Dad leans against the tree and brushes some snow off himself and he turns and looks directly at me.

“No. I don’t think we’re adapted to shooting guns. I think we’re adapted to killing. To suffering, committing it and surviving it. We have an astonishing ability to take the hurt and the pain from our fellow man and keep going... and it’s a horrible cycle. Each generation gets tougher, and so each generation gets meaner. And more violent. And they kill more. I don’t know if there’s a way out of it either. But that’s it. Guns are just... things we invented to make it easier. We kill with them, and we kill without them. We are perfectly adapted killing machines. It’s in our blood and maybe that’s why we spill it. Let the blood, drain ourselves of this disease. But it’s not a disease. It’s just adaptation.”

“Are guns ideas?”

Dad takes the rifle from my lap and pulls the bolt back, exposing the amber-colored casing within, tipped with a shiny bullet. “Guns are the antithesis of ideas. Guns are action. Guns are what we have when ideas don’t work.”

I let out a long sigh and my mind absorbs his words but I don’t think about them. I don’t think I really have the tools to understand what he said, and maybe that’s why he is so honest. I scoot up closer to his body and he drapes his arm around me in a hug and in that moment I stare down the range at the target in the snow, all the way down the range, and it is painted red like blood. You can see it for miles.

Epilogue

As Nova sobbed, an animal rounded a bend and its eyes stared deadly into Nova and Maia. The creature standing there shined against the setting sun, reflecting gold across the ground and into the sky and into Nova's eyes. Nova felt its presence and turned her head ever-so-slightly, looking at the creature that stood there. Staring back, two large hazel eyes—almost gold—shone back and they stared intensely. Nova gripped Maia, holding the body close, and the mountain lion only stared. Frozen in time, the only thing that the mountain lion has to communicate with the little girl is its eyes. Its peering, shining, piercing eyes. Nova peered back, her eyes just like the animal's. Nova's pierced sharper than the animal's fangs could ever pierce. Nova stared deep into the eyes of the cougar.

Finally Nova had enough of the catamount, and shoo-ed it. First her shoo was soft, and the animal didn't budge. Then she lashed out more violently, screaming at the creature, and the mountain lion stepped back a few steps, its paws padding the ground so softly that they made hardly a sound.

"Go!" Nova screamed at it again, her voice frying with sobs that shook her body. The cougar turned and walked and away it went, before stopping and looking back and watching the little girl crying over her friend. Her only friend. The mountain lion thought of shedding a tear, but it didn't. There is no need to cry over the little girl. There was no need to cry over something so much stronger than itself.

But then a miracle happened, and Nova watched in horror as a small creature crawled up beside the cougar and it snarled and bared its teeth and Nova felt the pain increase even more.

Nova watched the cub. The mother cougar watched her with glowing eyes reflecting the light back. The cub—small and wobbly—watched her with the same eyes of its mother but they were more innocent and told far fewer stories. Nova saw the story of his birth, and the story of his first meal, and nothing else.

The mother cougar watched her with a particular keenness, eyes washing over the little girl as she cried and huddled beside her dead friend. The cougar grabbed her baby by the scruff of the back of his neck and carried him away, silent as can be, the cub making a few squeaking noises before the world was thrown entirely silent again. Nova was lulled to sleep by her own sobs, and the desert was thrown into the cold again, and she slept. In the morning she rose and found that Maia did not stir. She picked herself up and continued walking.

Nova's shoes scuffed the dirt as she made her way South, following the old asphalt trails which snaked across the landscape, plowing through mountain sides, splitting deserts.

The gravel worn from tar crunched under her feet as she walked, and walked, and walked.

Nova for a long time thought about Maia. Maia was the only thing she could think of. That night, when Maia died, Nova slept beside her body in the cold desert frigidness and in the morning she attempted to wake her friend. Maia did not stir. Maia was dead.

Nova was heartbroken, but she took Maia's words in stride and she began to walk.

In the mornings Nova ate half a meal and in the evenings she ate the rest. At night she curled up in the wool blanket and shivered until the morning sun made her warm again. She dodged rattlesnakes and hushed her voice at the sound of coyotes and prayed she didn't see a bear. Little did she know that no animal dared touch her. She was different, and they *all* could tell.

Despite these tribulations, Nova made her way South. She passed by old front lines, examining the carcasses of military equipment long since rusted away. Tanks, trucks, artillery, helicopters, missile systems, and trenches. As she ventured south she emerged once again into a land where green grew and sand is packed into soil. The sparse creosote bushes open up into large valleys with Joshua trees and goldenheads. She knew little about these plants.

Her little legs ached every day and her little feet blistered and popped and blistered again. One time, after a long week of hiking upward over a mountain pass, her feet blistered so bad that they bled for a day and she felt dizzy afterward. She took a day to rest, but knew that she couldn't risk resting for too long with her dwindling food supply.

From then on it was mostly a downhill trudge, with Nova avoiding the appearance of rotted old towns and keeping to her asphalt trail. Occasionally she would find a bite to eat in the form of packaged food stuck in the carcasses of old cars, and one time she found a fishing pole. With this, she would stop at pools of water and fish and occasionally she would find success in this. Pools of water became scarce as she entered the Mojave and thus she left the pole behind.

She saw much of the desert as she descended back into the land of her ancestors. The sights and smells of the Mojave were ancestral memories which she, too, tapped into. When she would pass by a fruiting Joshua tree, she would pick the green fleshy fruit and gnaw on the pulpy interior as she walked, soaking the juices into herself. Occasionally she would spot an aloe, and with it she would treat her blistered feet and they would heal. Living off of the land, she forgot all about the feeling of blood splashing her face, of the tension of a blade piercing skin. A scarce few times she would be approached by men and women on horseback, dressed in leathers and flowers and feathers and rifles slung across their back, and they would ask about her. Never would she speak to them, for she was walking a different path than they were. These visitors would glance amongst themselves and part, leaving Nova to wander the wilderness and trudge south.

“Let the child go,” they would say. “She has clearly emerged from a place unspeakable and we are not yet far enough from it.”

“And perhaps she was a warning,” they would say.

But despite her size, and the length of her legs, and the grumbling in the pit of her belly, she continued to make her way south. She would eventually enter into the lands of the saguaros and she would relinquish in their beauty, wishing to pat them as she went along. There were so many here, and they grew to various heights. Some had brown rotting joints, others were young and just beginning to bud off different arms. She would often see bird nests perched on top, or red plants dug into their side, and at their base she would see all sorts of lizards and tortoises and bugs meandering in the night.

Amidst the saguaros she would hear the sly laughs of coyotes and she would feel unafraid. In the mornings she would tremble at the sight of horrendously large flying wasps with black bodies and orange wings, and she would crane her neck to see buzzards flying above her head, circling the sun as if in worship of it. Her feet would take her down canyons, following the old asphalt trail until she had descended further into the desert.

Nova would then come across a huge concrete basin, dug deep into the earth, carrying with it a torrential flow of water. The concrete basin was long and straight, with not the slightest deviation in it, and it flowed almost full with brackish silty water. She would sip from it and feel full again. She followed this concrete river for a ways before stopping dead in her tracks. The view on the horizon was impossible to deny, neither mirage nor reality. A line of green trees, glowing that emerald shine in the morning sun which had just brought its head up above the mountains behind her.

Nova walked through the morning before stopping on the outskirts of this place, seeing a long stretch of trees planted in the ground in a series of perfectly spaced rows. On each tree there were cute flowers sprouted all over, and bees and flies passed from one flower to the next in a frenzy for pollen. Nova stood steadfast on her wobbly tired legs and stared at this sight. The trees, in her mind, went on forever, planted out here in the desert where nothing ought grow.

But the trees were not the only thing in her view. Perched on ladders, going from tree to tree, were children of various ages. Most were older than her, in their early teens, and they wore working clothes and moved from tree to tree snipping off small branches or painting the trunks a white stain, like sunblock. They all eyed her as they worked, but none approached her or talked with her. She stood there for hours, watching them work in silence as they talked amongst themselves, occasionally looking out at Nova and then back to their friends and whispering.

“Hey,” a young man, teenaged, finally approached Nova with a gaggle of other young ones in tow. He had leather working gloves over his hands and a line of sweat trickling

down his forehead. His hair was cut high and tight and it was curvy and glossy and black, like Nova's. He stripped the gloves from his hand and stuffed them in the front pocket of his overalls. "I'm Ontonio."

Nova nodded to him in greeting. Ontonio looked around at the gaggle of young ones, as if seeking reassurance, and then looked back to Nova.

"You alone? Where are you coming from?" Ontonio, despite his clear evidence of leadership among the young ones, had a passionate friendliness about his voice and expression that Nova caught onto.

Nova spoke for the first time in weeks, "I have no one. I'm coming from up north."

"How far north?" another boy, younger, piped up from behind Ontonio.

Nova shrugged.

"Come on," Ontonio approached Nova, laying a hand on her back and pushing her toward the orchard. "You look hungry."

And this was true. Ontonio was told of a scrawny child, merely flesh and bones, and she was that. The children which ran to tell him were as worried as he became upon seeing her. Severely atrophied muscles clung tightly to her own flesh. When she spoke, she spoke with no gums and bared teeth. When she walked, she wobbled.

Ontonio offered to carry Nova, and Nova accepted. He lofted her into his arms, walking toward a large white building in the center of the orchard.

"What is this place?" Nova managed to escape the words from her mouth, barely a whisper emanating from her living corpse.

"Valhalla," Ontonio told her. "Valhalla Orchard."

Nova wished to cry, but she can't.

"I'm a bad person," she told him, a wisp of words coming from her mouth he barely managed to understand.

Ontonio shook his head, "How can that be?"

"I don't know," Nova sobbed, no tears coming from her eyes. "I don't know why I feel this way."

"You're a child," Ontonio told her.

Nova's eyes were glazed over, watching her surroundings move around her.

“I don’t deserve to be carried.”

“Everyone deserves help,” Ontonio pleaded with her. This little girl confused him more every second.

“I hurt people. I never stop hurting people,” she cooed. “I’m a killer. I’m a bad person.”

“We’re getting help,” Ontonio’s breathing was rushed as he carried Nova, pushing himself into a jog. Ontonio carried the shockingly weightless body with him toward the house, barely managing to feel a breath or pulse from the little girl. His mind scoured his experience and wondered what the little girl meant. He wondered if what the little girl said was true. How could it be? The world was a horrible place, but could it be that bad? To turn a child into a monster?

Nova’s eyes were skyward, watching it move overhead. Cloudless. Blue. Occasionally the green sprig of a tree branch would float into her view and then be gone. Nova laughed to herself—an act of great pain and confusion—as she realized that she had never seen the sky quite like this. She realized that she may never see a sky quite like this again.

“My friend died,” Nova spoke again, gaining a little more strength.

“You’re alright now,” Ontonio was rushing through the orchard, carrying the girl that weighed close to a feather.

“Am I going to die?”

“No,” Ontonio assured her. “No, no one dies here. You are in a good place. We will help you.”

Ontonio carried Nova quickly, the quickest he had ever ran, and together they arrived at the Bunkhouse—a rambler-style building, cheaply assembled out of multiple portable buildings, which was the center of Valhalla. Kids mulled about on the steps to the door and they helped hold the door open as Ontonio approached them carrying Nova.

“Who is that?” one of the boys asked. Ontonio doesn’t answer. He’s rushing too quickly to the infirmary to answer. Under his breath, in a whisper too quiet for even Nova to hear, Ontonio ushered out the word of prayers for hope and health. He didn’t understand them, but that didn’t matter.

Ontonio pushed through the corridor, his footsteps thundering through the building as he ran. Some doors were open, others closed, to each of the rooms in the Bunkhouse, but none of these were his target. He passed by girls and boys huddled together enjoying their day and instead rushed to the end of the corridor, where the infirmary laid. Bursting into the room, he quickly laid Nova’s frail body on a bed and held his ear closely over the girl’s mouth. Yes, there was still breath.

Whitney, the doctor, was nowhere to be seen. Quickly, Ontonio mashed the ‘PANIC’ button on the wall, which would page her. Ontonio then moved to a cabinet on the wall and began searching through it for supplies. IV needle, tubing, medication vials. Then he moved to another sanitary cabinet and pulled out a saline bag, proceeding to hang it on a hook beside the bed he laid Nova on. Ontonio was rather unique in his knowledge of how to setup a saline drip—seeing as he was the Doctor’s apprentice.

Ontonio grabbed Nova’s arm and held it in his hand. So thin, so small, so fragile. It brought a lurching sob to his eyes and out of his chest and he couldn’t fight it back. Quickly he sniffled snot back and wiped his eyes so he could see clearly. Needle in hand, he quickly examines Nova’s arm to find a vein. He slides the needle in, puncturing the skin and causing a spurt of discomfort in the small girl. Nova is hardly cogniscent, but the prick causes her body to lightly lurch.

Whitney swirled into the room, hair ragged and clothes skewed together. She had sprinted across the entire Valhalla campus to get here.

“What’s going on?” she quickly asked, moving to Ontonio’s side. She then saw Nova, and took over for Ontonio—now sobbing uncontrollably, backing into the wall and holding himself. Ontonio rubs his arms together, peering out through clouded tearful eyes and soothing himself with a soft rub of his thumb on his tricep. Whitney and Nova split into a kaleidoscope of a thousand different people as the tears latched onto his eyelashes.

“Ontonio, who is this?” Whitney asked, holding a thermometer in Nova’s mouth. The saline supply was now entering the girl, hopefully nurturing her enough to bring her back from the edge of death.

“I don’t know,” Ontonio raked out between sobs. “She—She just showed up this morning near the edge of the orchard.”

Whitney shook her head and stepped back, taking the thermometer back, “Poor girl is emaciated. Help me get her out of these clothes and into a gown.”

Ontonio wiped his tears away from his eyes, clearing his throat and attempting to stay focused. Whitney closed the door to the infirmary and whipped out a small medical gown. She then pulled out a pair of blunt nosed scissors and slid it onto Nova’s shirt. Ontonio unlaced the girls shoes, noticing their state as he did. Ontonio had often seen well-worn shoes, but nothing like this. The small things were brutalized, worn completely through the rubber sole in places and barely holding on in others. The laces were well frayed and speckled through with seeds from various plants. Sand fell from them in copious amounts and the stench of infection lingered from them. Upon slipping the shoes off, he realized why.

The girl was sockless and her feet were bleeding profusely from both old and new wounds. The bottom of her feet were peppered with little indentations, like the surface

of the moon, and from some of these great callouses grew. Others, blood poured out, and in a couple there were small pockets of white-yellow puss which stunk with the sign of bacteria. Ontonio couldn't help but let out a lingering expletive upon seeing the state of Nova's feet.

Whitney glanced over while cutting Nova's pants, "Jesus... I've never seen anything like that."

Ontonio helped pull the gown over Nova, lacing the back and then laying her peacefully back into the bed. Whitney sighed, stepping back, "Not much else we can do for now. I'm going to hook up the heart monitor and do a little bit of blood work once she's better hydrated."

Ontonio nodded, but he can't look away from the little girl.

"Did she say anything to you when you found her?" Whitney asked, pulling off her gloves and throwing them in a red bin. "Like her name?"

"She didn't say much," he told her. "She said she was coming from the north, and that she has no one. Says she had a friend who died."

Whitney shook her head, also staring down at the little girl.

"Said... said she's a bad person," Ontonio holds back sobs again. "I don't know what that meant. Said she was a killer. I don't understand that."

Whitney let out a long sigh from her nose.

"You look in her bag?" Whitney asked, after a pause.

Ontonio shook his head, noticing the backpack that he had thrown on the ground after laying Nova down. He crouched down and picked it up. It was also dirty, about as much so as her clothes were, and he zipped it open to examine the contents. Out of it he pulled out wrappers of MREs, all of which were completely cleaned out. He then pulled out a water bottle, and in it was some water.

"She wasn't drinking it," Whitney noted.

Ontonio then pulled out a stuffed bear, and it was relatively clean compared to everything else. There's a name written into the polyester tag, but its illegible and old, long since faded.

"I'll clean it for her," Ontonio said to Whitney, moving it to the side. He then reached deeper in a pulls out a knife—a folding knife, black with dried blood but beneath appeared to be pink. Whitney furrowed her brow, taking it into her newly-gloved hands.

“Interesting,” Whitney said. “I don’t have the tools here, but we might be able to sequence the DNA. See what our database flags.”

“That’s it for the bag,” Ontonio put it back on the floor.

“She had something in her pockets,” Whitney said, pulling out a slip of paper from the cut jeans. Ontonio grabs it, looks at it, and realized its not a scrap of paper but instead a still photo. A man and a woman, happy looking, holding each other. Scribbled on the back, ‘I didn’t know I could love.’

“Think this is her parents?” Ontonio asked. Whitney looks closely at it, then back at Nova.

“Maybe,” Whitney says. “Keep a hold of it.”

Ontonio took the photo and sticks it into the frame of a mirror, so that it hangs and the couple look over her. They both turn back to the sleeping girl.

“What now?” Ontonio asked, feeling calmer now that the girl was stable.

“I’ll give her some strong antibiotics,” Whitney said. “See if we can get those infections in her foot to stave. We can hit them with something more direct after we culture a sample. I’ll have to ask around for some strong painkillers, I don’t think we have anything like that right now.”

“What should *I* do?” Ontonio asked.

Whitney shrugged, “You’ve done enough for her already, Ontonio. If you want, the girl needs a wash. Have you ever washed a patient before?”

Ontonio shook his head.

“We’ll do it later, I’ll show you how. After dinner. In the meantime, take word to Martin, tell him about this girl. May want to send someone out to see if her friend is anywhere close.”

Ontonio walked out of the infirmary, shutting the doors behind him. Whitney stared at the little girl pensively. Something pricked her attention, so she leans in and examines the little girl’s throat. A thick ring of callouses, evenly distributed in a ring around her throat and onto the back of her neck. Another thing Whitney had never seen before. Whitney pulled out a stethoscope and places over the little girl’s ribs and listens to her heart. Weak, but fighting.

She rubbed her finger across the little girl’s forehead and brushes her ratty hair from her face.

Martin stood beside Whitney, looking over the young girl laying in a hospital gown and the boy sitting beside her, passed out in the chair. In Ontonio's hand is a white cloth, which he had used to dry the girls skin. Beside the bed was a small bucket of soapy water, well dirty with mud.

"A few cuts and bruises but nothing bad, except for the feet," Whitney whispered to Martin. Martin passes a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair and grips at his scalp, feeling the grab of his stubble latch at his arm.

"I got a call from up north, around Flagstaff," Martin said. "Some rancher said his cowboys found a little girl walking alone, wouldn't talk to them or anything."

"How many days ago?"

"2 weeks," Martin said.

"Must be her."

"Why?" Martin asked, looking down at the little girl. He also observed the boy stirring in his seat, waking up from their voices. Ontonio blinks his eyes and stirred greater when he noticed he was being watched. "Best head off to bed, son. You've done your job, go get some rest."

Sleepily, Ontonio shook his head, "No, I have to stay and watch her."

"Ontonio," Martin dropped his voice, looking more sternly. As headmaster of Valhalla, every boy and girl came to know him in varying degrees of respect—but respect it always was. Ontonio was one of the oldest boys and was big and strong, and because of this he worked closely with Martin in being a 'big brother' for a lot of the younger boys. Because of this trust that Martin gave Ontonio, Ontonio respected Martin.

"Yes, sir," Ontonio dropped his head, putting the towel on the side table and getting up from the chair. Before leaving, he turned back to face the girl and looked at her, then turned to Martin. "I don't know what it is, sir, but something about this girl makes me feel an immense duty to protect her. Like... I'm not sure, sir. But someone so frail and tiny and hurt..."

"We can't help but feel a duty to those suffering," Martin comforted Ontonio. "It's a great gift you have, Ontonio. Humility, Respect, Bravery, Hard-Working—all of those traits are unimportant in the face of Protector. What you see here is injustice. You tremble from it, you are driven on by it. Cherish that feeling, Ontonio. This girl will grow to be strong once again, and that's because of you. Thank you, son. Now please, go get some sleep."

Ontonio nodded his head and walked out, headed to his own bunkroom to sleep. Martin turned back to Whitney.

“She’ll be alright?”

Whitney shook he head, “It’s too early to tell. If she makes it through the night, then maybe. But she’s frail, Martin. She’s frail and hurt and sick.”

Martin sighed through his nose, turned, and went off to bed.

6 months later

Nova’s foot hits the ground hard, pushing the weight of her body off of the rubber plate. Her other foot lands heavy ahead of her, and together they propel her body hard toward the next rubber plate, following a white line of painted turf. She isn’t strong, but she is small and quick, and this propels her body faster than anyone else on the team. Her helmet is thrown off to the side, and she lands on the base.

Safe!

Several Valhalla children cry out cheers of happiness as Nova gathers herself once again, looking over the baseball field. As she secures the base, a bell rings in the distance and a chorus of disgruntled children boo the call but pick up their things anyways and head toward the Bunkhouse. Ontonio rushes out of the dugout and picks Nova up, who squeals out in happy torment.

“You did it!” Ontonio praises.

Nova giggles, a smile held wide on her face. Ontonio grabs her arms and hoists her up to his shoulder, where she rides while he walks her back to the Bunkhouse. She was perfectly capable of walking the distance herself, but Ontonio insisted. Nova steadies herself on his head as they go.

“I can’t believe I hit that ball,” Nova comments, her voice unrecognizable from her voice just 6 months ago. She is loud and expressive and she laughs and giggles and guffaws. There is emotion in the girl.

That’s not to say Nova is healed. She regularly receives injections in the infirmary for a variety of needs. Most often it’s a monthly treatment of hormones which her body refuses to produce, and these allow the sickly girl to grow strong as normal. Slowly her fragile bones strengthen and her appetite returns and she is growing. Small for her age, but growing.

Nova finds solace in Valhalla. She's never considered herself an orphan, but with no parents or family in her recollection she is as orphan as anyone else in Valhalla. She has made friends—something truly new to her—and her best friend is Ontonio, who cares for her like a brother.

"Look," Ontonio points to a greying man standing outside the Bunkhouse, watching the kids running off toward the meal pavilion. When the man, Martin, sees Ontonio and Nova he raises a hand to call them over.

"Martin!" Nova calls out, her voice high pitched and excited. Ontonio hoists her to the ground as they approach.

"Good morning, Nova!" he greets. "How about you head off to lunch and come back to my office?"

Nova sits on the chair, her legs barely touching the ground from the chair. Martin sits in his own, across from her at the desk.

"It's okay if you can't answer," Martin tries to bring a response from the girl. Anything, really, even just a fearful coo. Nothing came from the girl. She stared at the object sitting on the desk, eyes fixated so studiously that they threatened to dry out. Martin exchanges a worried glance with the social worker sitting beside Nova, in a chair of their own.

The social worker, Trevon, watches the little girl as she fidgets. Whatever the object means to her, it brings back memories she does not want to reckon with. Nova pulls her legs up into the chair and holds them close to her chest. Trevon looks at the girl's neck again, noticing the line calloused into her throat. Even after so much time, it hasn't worn off yet.

"Nova," Martin speaks to her again. "It's... it's okay, sweetie. If you don't want to answer, that's alright. Why don't you go?"

Nova kicks her legs out and makes for the door, leaving it open as she runs out. Trevon stares at her path with a furrowed brow, sadness filling his chest. Martin lets out a deep sigh and mixes it with an expression of old curses.

"It explains the callous," Trevon breaks the silence. "And it gives us an idea of who she was last with, at least."

"Do you think this person was her friend that she talked about?" Martin asks, picking the object back up. The small metal tag twinkles in the sunlight coming in from the windows, glittering it around the room. The short name engraved into the anodized steel: Nova.

“We can’t be sure until she’s ready to talk,” Trevon says, folding his hands uncomfortably.

Martin lets out another sigh, out of his nose.

“They tried to test their fingerprints,” Martin says. “But the skin was melted off, nothing was salvageable.”

A knock comes from the doorframe, and a small woman stands in the doorway with brunette hair and a manila folder, “Martin, I’ve got something.”

“What’s up?”

“You told me to look for anything strange recorded by Harvest Company when they marched north through the Utah Territory,” the woman lays the folder on the desk and sits in the chair beside Trevon. Martin furrows his brow and leafs open the folder, inspecting the paper within. “Turns out Colonel Westland reported something about 5 months ago, in fact.”

“Mmhmm,” Martin responds, reading through the file. “A small child and an adult woman headed south. Woman carried a rifle and appeared as a soldier. Likely a mercenary. Who reported this?”

“One of the LaGuardia POWs we captured,” she explains, pointing to an item in the report. “Apparently she had coordinated the attack and made off with the kid. He won’t say where the little girl came from, but what we found at the Lobby was... strange.”

Martin holds the collar by the tag, looking at the small blood stain on the back of it. A fingerprint.

“The body at Glen Canyon was too decayed to tell the cause of death,” the woman continues. “But it gives us something to ask Nova, if anything. Oh, and another thing.”

“A woman?” Martin asks. The woman nods. “She wasn’t one of ours?”

The woman shrugs, “There’s no indication.”

“If I may interject,” Trevon cuts in. “Over the last few months I’ve been doing counseling sessions with Nova. She gives all the indications of serious past trauma, childhood PTSD, OCD tendencies. It’s... disheartening, seeing the pain and fear that some of her memories give her. Coming from a professional, who sees children like her a lot, I don’t know if she will ever tell us. It’s not something we should hope for, not after something this... traumatic.”

Martin places the folder down and still fidgets with the collar, examining it.

“In all my years, I’ve never seen someone in as bad a condition as her,” Martin’s eyes stay locked on the collar. “She was... nothing, I didn’t think she would even make it through the night. But, here she is. Healthy, all things considered.” Martin sets the collar on the table and it rings out like a bell as it hits the metal of the clipboard. “That little girl will surprise you, she’s special. There’s not a lot of people in this world that can bounce back from things like that, but *she* can. I think she’ll surprise you, is all.”

Trevon purses his lips and looks up at Julia, “My point is, we must all do what we can for her. That includes putting aside our expectations.”

The three linger in the room, sunlight pouring in filtered through the paper blinds over the window, casting a beam through the dust floating in the air. A beautiful cacophony of orchestrated particles beaming and bashing through the infinite space between each. Martin clenches his fist and lets out a defeated sigh.

“What horrible feat this all is,” he shakes his head. “We give this all to our children.”

“What do you mean?” Julia asks, shifting uncomfortably in the doorway.

“All this pain, all this suffering,” Martin picks up a pen and clicks it in his hand.

“Childhood is just... the time we have to try to reduce it’s damage on them. They will collect all of it as we give it to them and they just *carry* it through their lives. Through everything they have to carry, that... violence.”

Julia clears her throat, “Then we have to prepare them.”

“How do you mean?” Trevon asks, and Martin glances at Trevon.

“I mean, we have to prepare them for that violence,” Julia explains. “They’re all going to encounter it, no? They’ll all be victims to it, some way or another. If all we do is protect them when we can and then just let them go, how are we helping? We are delaying the unfortunate, yes, but we aren’t *helping*. A delayed gunshot is still a gunshot. We... we need to teach them how to dodge. How to heal themselves after it’s happened.”

“Seems an awful bleak world for this to be our option,” Trevon says, staring blankly down into the floor.

“It’s an awfully bleak world,” Martin acknowledges. “That’s why we’re here, doing what we are doing. To make the world better, to fix that human condition.”

“Paving a path forward,” Trevon nods.

Martin clicks his tongue and picks up the collar again. Everything makes sense, yes, except this. Except this small detail.

“How do you explain this?” Martin asks.

Julia sighs, “We wouldn’t be fighting this fight if there weren’t people who stood opposite.”

Martin shakes his head and tosses it into a drawer.

Nova eats her tray of food on the metal stairs, facing toward the mountain in the background. Ontonio, finally finding the girl alone, walks up the stairs and sits beside her, with his tray of his own. Nova doesn’t greet him, instead staring down into her tray. It’s not bizarre behavior for her, but it does make Ontonio worried.

“You alright?” he asks.

Nova shrugs. Ontonio loses his smile, digs into his tray and produces a strawberry.

“Want my strawberry?” he holds it out to her. Nova shakes her head. Ontonio sighs, placing it back on his tray. “What’s wrong, Nova?”

Nova shrugs, tucking her knees into her chest, “Bad memories, I guess.”

Ontonio breathes strongly out of his nose, decompressing, “It’s okay to have bad memories, Nova.”

Nova shrugs again, “It doesn’t feel like that.”

“I know where it comes from,” he says. “That feeling.”

“Where?”

Ontonio looks around, eyes scanning for anyone close by, then stops and rolls up his shirt, revealing a litany of long scar-marks across his belly. They’re old, healed, but are still pale and clear to Nova. She looks at them with a confused look on her face. Ontonio pulls his shirt back down and clears his throat.

“That,” Ontonio says. “Well, not that. It causes that too. Spiraling thoughts, helpless feelings of doom. After those things happen to us—those things behind all our bad memories—we feel sick just for remembering them. We feel sick for thinking it’s normal. But at the end of the day, that feeling is just... us.”

“Us?” Nova asks, staring off into the distance.

Ontonio nods, “Yeah. That’s us—they are scared, and they are desperate, and that’s us. We don’t want to have those bad memories because we feel like we’re so much different from one another. But, I guess I’m not trying to just say that. Of course we all have bad memories like that, things that happened to us that we just wish didn’t. Of course we can’t get that time back, that’s not my point.”

Ontonio stumbles on his words and sighs, leaning back and slowing his ever-racing speech. His face turns back to Nova and he feels himself crack a little but stops.

“The cure, Nova, is this. People.” Ontonio gestures to Valhalla.

Nova snuffles, feeling back in the foyer of that evil man’s home, wearing the collar around her throat. “But people... did this to me.”

Ontonio nods, grasping the back of his neck and biting back sobs.

“Yeah,” he resounds. “But... people saved you; and look around.”

Nova’s eyes draw up from the ground and look around Valhalla.

“All of these people want to help you,” Ontonio says. “What’s one person versus all of us?”

Nova scratches her throat. Ontonio clears his throat and nods.

“A lot, I know,” Ontonio speaks for her. “It takes time, Nova. But we have each other. You will *always* have someone to look after you, and be your friend, and be there to comfort you.”

Ontonio looks at the marks on the little girl’s throat and continues.

“You don’t have to tell anyone what you went through, not if you don’t want to. You don’t have to talk to anyone ever again, frankly. But this place, it’s home, whether you realize it yet or not. Everyone here... we’re just like you. We want to be your friend, and we want to help you through this.”

As Ontonio said this, he stared deep and hard into the amber rhinestones placed throughout Nova’s eyes, which shimmered gold from the sunlight hitting her tears. He couldn’t help but feel them pierce his own as he stared into them. Nova wraps her friend in a hug.

Nova whispers into Ontonio’s shoulder, “I’m scared still.”

Ontonio lets out a sigh, long and labored and risking of sobs, but he steadies himself. “Trust in people, Nova. It’s the greatest, most fulfilling, most liberating feeling in the world.”

Nova and Ontonio eventually break from their hug and each is soaked in the other’s tears. Ontonio grabs the hem of his shirt and blots his eyes, Nova rubs her nose with the back of her hand. Ontonio clears his throat and turns to his tray.

“So,” Ontonio picks up the strawberry again, voice on the verge of sobs. “You want the strawberry?”

Nova cracks a giggle and takes it from his hand and bites down. Sweet, slightly sour.
Nova looks out over the orchard.