

(Blurb)

The end of the world. The collapse of
civilisation. Total war.

And yet, fifty three years later, life goes on in
the proud nation of Ireland. Society as we
knew it collapsed, the rest of the world gone-
yet the Emerald Isle remains. With societal
dynamics flipped on their head and factions
scrambling for control, a profane pestilence
lurks beneath, writhing in the depths.

When a starry eyed wanderer receives a
cryptic message that must-in some way-
pertain to the sudden disappearance of his
father, he finds himself dragged into the sick
depths of conspiracy and the horrors of his
mind alike.

Enlisting the aid of a dreamy foreign pianist
and a pious, truth-seeking commander, he
soon learns their paths lead to the same
destination.

Act 1: Wanderlust

Property of the
Irish Provisional
Society



On behalf of the Light Runner Guild

Delivery Instructions:

Contents of one (1) envelope to be delivered to Court Cross, by way of the N24. Contents to be hand delivered to one Roisin Kavanagh. To be handed over during business hours, at recipients stall in the town market.

Additional Notes:

Bonus payment will be given upon delivery. Package only to be given to and delivered by Blake Pearse.

Signed *Blake P*

16/04

Chapter 1: Verdant Wastes

***Make bringing up foxes a running joke between Blake and Lucius. Lucius brings up foxes and Blake laughs or gets playfully angry. All because of the Fox Incident that one time.

**small detail, But when Macnamara first meets Blake, have Blake have The radio out on a table and have him go back to finnickin with it. Nathan will be like “oh, hey, reql antique youve got there. Wouldnt bother tryna fix it, never seen one work at all i havent. Does that one work?
“Doesent seem to”

April, 2065

Scattered along the old M7 motorway were countless cracks and dents in the asphalt. They were so old and so spacious that each crack served as a home for some sort of greenery, for one plant species or another. And as the years went on, and as more roads and buildings fell into disrepair, more cracks were formed and left

unchecked- and they formed all over the nation. As such, the world fell for a second time. Not to man, but to nature. Each crack was host to its own tiny ecocentre, housing several flowers or blades of grass encroaching on each other's aperture of soil, competing for what minimal space, sun and food they could get. One had a pair of daisies, the one up from it some thistles, and a few feet away was another with a single forget-me-not, a pair of bluebells, and a rogue lily of the valley, all fighting for their well deserved land.

A heavy boot stepped on the crevice and squashed each flower into the ground. A young man tread down an empty, sun bleached road. He carried both an aged canvas rucksack and a scratched up leather satchel, and under them a green trucker jacket adorned with pins, patches and miscoloured seams that kept it all just barely intact. Every few steps he would kick a particular rock down further and further along his path.

The road he walked was completely surrounded by thick rows of trees and bushes that formed an impenetrable wall with their tightly wound branches. Occasionally he would pass an opening or outcrop that would lead to some shallow, stamped-out trail deep into the forest's thickets. He would often travel these paths-learned to do so from his father. But he shook his head. Now was not the time for those thoughts. Thoughts about him. He found it rarely was.

Rather he found these trails and roads some of the only respites from the marred memories of the one he once called dad.

Glancing backwards to check, he jumped onto the ledge of a knee-high motorway divider and balanced atop it, briskly stumbling with one leg after the other, sticking his hands out in a *T* shape and trying not to fall. Just a few steps later he jumped back off and kept walking as if nothing happened. He shook his head and threw the dirty blonde hair out of his eyes, but a childish smile remained.

The major M7 soon split off into a smaller road which he hoped was the N24. A path littered with corpses of cars stripped bare of any useful materials, with not a single one viable for even scrap metal after that had been taken too. Nothing more than relics of the old world, not unlike the countless forsaken buildings swallowed by the thickets.

As he walked he made little noise, save for the occasional crunching of weeds under boots, gusts of wind rustling evergreen leaves, or the clanging of the loose hanging gas mask against the other essentials on his belt. The silence was broken by a scurrying rabbit bouncing out of the brush and tilting its head a little. The wanderer got down on one knee and managed to hand-feed the creature a few strawberries from his bag. Not that either lacked food, but no rabbit ever complained before.

The Byrne's Mill spun smoothly with the rhythm of the wind and denoted the next turn while also confirming he had taken the right path.

Just past the mill the road diverged, this one smaller than the highway. Where the border between asphalt and dirt was blurred, just as it was in most parts of the country, and the wild and untamed thicket of interlocking bushes and guarding trees undisturbed for over fifty years left nothing but a direct path for any traveller.

The shrubbery thinned at a crossroads, where stacks of weeds became less dense and the surrounding waist high grass came to a sudden stop at the edge of town. Painstakingly maintained to fend off its invasive tendencies.

Gourt Cross had most of its houses on the outskirts, each separated by about an acre or two of farmland that stretched back behind the town. Only a few rows of houses lined the small road he walked in on, albeit thinned into a narrow street now. These houses were mostly occupied by trade representatives and local merchants or shopkeepers. A single tailor proudly displayed his craft and storefront, and two pubs that were closer to large houses were denoted only by names like Boyles and O'Briens. What all the roads and houses lead up to, however, was a grand central square filled with brightly coloured stalls and rowdy salesmen and customers alike. Just slightly beyond it, a single radio tower stood out as the only proper piece of technology in the area. Something of a rarity for independent places like this.

The wave of hubbub from the market carried with an echo that bounced between buildings all the way down the street. Stepping into the square he was engulfed by vendors coercing new visitors

or speaking pleasantries with their regulars. After pushing through the first line of stalls, the crowd had thinned out into no more than a pair of people at each.

The smells of countless products, simultaneously earthy yet heavily artificial, were now beginning to assault his nose.

Vegetables, grains, raw leather, amateur gunpowder.

“Fresh butter, nowhere better than here!”

“Oh, only the healthiest. Livestock for beef or dairy!”

“Saddles and saddlebags, whatever you need.”

From his satchel he produced a neatly folded letter lacking an envelope. The delivery instructions named a Roisín Kavanagh, situated here. He read the instructions again in their entirety. As aside from the usual was an added note: *Bonus payment will be given upon delivery. Package only to be given to and delivered by Blake Pearse.* The specific request puzzled everyone at the office and he- Blake Pearse, was encouraged to leave it behind. He, however, was more curious by how anyone knew his full name. Besides, he was never one to pass up an adventure and so he found himself here.

He tucked the note away next to the actual sealed letter he was to deliver and walked around the stalls again. Declining offers of mostly milk, meats, baked goods and other weekend market essentials while absolutely refusing to ask for assistance, Blake wandered around and examined each stall. Pushing away from a particularly persistent merchant, he managed to catch a glimpse of

a colourfully painted sign below some blue tarp. *Roisins Emporium*, boasting a meager selection of scrappy, hand-repaired pistols and a single shotgun consisting partially of piping that would surely explode in your hands if fired. He waited for the few customers around her to disappear before announcing himself. “Roisín Kavanagh? A letter for you, Light Runners.” Blake dug his thumb into his jacket pocket as he handed the letter over. “Right, thank you.” She took the letter without looking up from her stock. When Blake remained, looking at her expectedly, she moved her hands off the guns and slightly into the air as her posture bolted upright “Yes, yes! Of course. Something for you here too.” She leaned behind her stall and from beneath it pulled out a brown cardboard box, pushing the display guns aside. “Tell me, I’m not too familiar with your work, but payments like this are not normal, are they?”

“No, no they are not.” Blake muttered, opening the box in front of her and revealing an old portable radio with wooden decals and a folded up antenna. The two looked at each other with the same puzzled look. “Yeah, I had about the same reaction. Had hoped it would mean more to you than it did to me.” Roisín muttered. Blake picked it up, expecting some grand spectacle to occur but was left wanting. “Curious. Well, it’s gotta be something. Say, who gave it to you?”

“I don’t know. It was some weird fella. Had this big metal mask, like some sort of stage performer maybe? Didn’t wear normal clothes neither, had a big cape of raw cloth, something someone who can’t sew would sew. So this madman walks up to my stand,

hands me the open box, and says that a runner will arrive here. That I'm to give him- give you, I suppose- this box, and then he just left."

Blake tilted his head slightly and the woman just returned a shrug. "Look kid, I'm as curious as you are, but I think that was just another crazy fella. No shortage of those around. I think it's better if we just leave it at that. Some of us have actual jobs, no offence." She nodded to the customer behind Blake, who despite telling them to take their time was getting visibly impatient.

Blake nodded, thanked her for her time and set off with the bulky radio under his arm. He set it down on a small bench away from the commotion of the market and began examining the antique brick. Indeed there was nothing that made it special on the outside. No writings or engraving, no loose wires or panels. In actuality its casing was surprisingly well maintained. He turned it over, and examining the underside found a spot of white. Pulling at it revealed a tightly folded up note. Written in pen was simply *16:05*.

He tried switching the radio on to no avail. Even replacing the batteries with some mismatched spares from his bag produced not even static. He turned it around a few times, wondering where to go from there. Eventually he looked up, and looming over the trees and stalls was the radio tower.

"Ill give ya a fiver."

"No?" The man in the ill-fitting shirt behind the plainly labelled *Technologies* stall looked a mix of offended and confused. "What

even is this? What you want me to do with it? Never seen a radio like this. No.” He kept shaking his head when Blake wouldn’t leave. “Worth a try.” He muttered on his way back, palming the few silver coins that bore the imperfectly minted faces of members of the Irish Provisional Society back into his pocket, knowing their total did not equal five.

Eventually he sat back down with some sourdough breadrolls and just decided to wait for the time indicated on the note.

Only after eating did he consider the possibility that the radio was related to his father in some way. The only person he was sure knew both his last name and occupation. But that explanation was the most uncomfortable, and still made no more logical sense than any other. The machine itself was also strange. Though he had never before seen a radio with the antenna inexplicably pointed down, he couldn’t shake its familiar nature. Though this he choked up to its simple design or mere coincidence.

Radios as a whole were something of a rarity, reserved for the wealthy, the military, or the keen-eyed scrapper. A creative tinkerer could use one to listen into a frequency from the Peacekeeping Corps, but those and any others today were neither reliable nor long lasting. They were relegated to communications between large infrastructures or light entertainment, and neither of those seemed to fit Blake’s peculiar gift.

The radio tower was just a few minutes walk from the market-surrounded by collapsed, empty and overgrown houses forsaken

for repair and thick walls of impassible shrubbery too dense to hold back. A larger portion of Gourt Cross was like this, with residential estates whose inhabitants never returned after the Collapse, and which the current residents were unable to reclaim. A common sight amidst the Evergreens.

The radio tower remained as a part of the old infrastructure, and was one of the only buildings away from the market still in regular use. Carved out between the imposing vestiges of verdancy was a narrow path propped up with a feeble metal fence in a pitiful attempt at suppressing the growth over the pathway. A pathway which led into a small building at the base of the tower.

Blake crept up along the path but saw no one around, and to his fortune the door had been left unlocked. He pushed it open slowly, careful of any creaking, then laid his bag down and pulled out a contraption of a few tin cans on a string filled with whatever metal junk he could find. Even taking them out caused a small rattle, and he hung them by the door to be alerted if anyone came in after him.

Slightly further in was an imposing console with a series of switches, dials and multi-coloured lights. Two fold out chairs stood next to a plastic table, with another chair folded on the floor. A game of cards lay out unfinished, and a large rifle was slung over on a coat rack by a back door opposite the one he came in through. The whole room was basked solely in a faint, artificial red glow as the concrete building lacked any windows. He shuffled towards the console and set the newfound radio down atop it. Attempting some form of jury-rigged connection, he pried open

the casing and got to work with the transistors and circuit boards which, other than a few odd design quirks, were a familiar beast. With the pulling, stripping and plugging in of just a few wires, he had linked the small radio to the tower. Before he could consider how much simpler this was than it rightly should have been, a soft static crawled out of the speaker, but one which automatically corrected itself over the next few moments. Something was happening.

Blake looked at his wrist, a cracked field watch, and saw it was about ten minutes to the time designated on the note. He had waited just long enough, and if all was right he would hear... something. Only now did he realise how little he thought this whole thing through. But he was not going to back out. As he waited he began to work at opening the back door, finally finding a left out key and leaving it in the now unlocked door.

Soon the white noise of the radio faded out and a much fainter and garbled voice began to come through the storm of crackling emptiness. "Yeah, Site Twelve, that's uh 51,59,02 North, 8,50,37 West, you know we shouldn't be- yes that's right, all of them- dump them, get rid of what's left- nothing left- but no, that's not up to me, I told you I- the project- Evergreen is still- priority-yes yes- back to tunnels- alright remember- no more comms- until we're-" The voice on the radio ebbed and flowed before crackling out completely.

Blake furiously scribbled half of the coordinates down on his left forearm with a fading pen before his head turned.

The cans chimed.

He bolted to the side and dived down behind a countertop. Hidden, he managed to scratch down the rest of the coordinates. “The hell is this?” Came a voice, followed by furious shaking of the chimes before they were yanked down. “Someone was here.” Said a female voice, but Blake didn't dare look. He watched his own chest rise, heard his heart beating in his head. It only died down a little when he focused in on the footsteps. Footsteps which got heavier and closer, but seemed to circle around first. “I don't think they took anything.”

“Think they still here?”

“Shit, yeah, shit look there. Someone hooked up a damn radio.”

“The fuck? AS model? Those aren't supposed to work anymore. What is this?”

“Alright, maybe we figure that out after we find who put it there.” Fortunately for Blake the room was rather dark, particularly around the corners as only a single lightbulb illuminated the enclosed space. In his own corner he made himself as small as possible. Then the footsteps got heavier. He leaned out just an inch, and the gun hanging on the coat rack was gone. He tried to control his breathing, limit it somehow. Inhales were taxing and exhales felt deafening. His hand then reached to his hip. His holster. His gun. He knew he wouldn't be able to shoot two gunmen that quickly. Not that he would even if he could. Still, it offered some comfort to know he had that option.

Letting go of the gun he noticed the steps getting further away now, ever so slightly. He chanced a glance and witnessed the two

murmuring in the middle of the room, but more importantly, the radio still on the console. He couldn't risk opening his bag, so patting his belt with his hand he picked out a screwdriver and chucked it lightly over the counter, so that it would hit the metal closet on the opposite side of the room.

Seizing the brief moment their attention was shifted, he dashed out around the counter and grasped the radio, yanking it with both hands and ripping some of the wires attached to the console clean off. In doing so he turned around, just for a moment, and looked at the two in the room. At their blue uniforms and loaded rifles. His stomach sank- these were Peacekeepers.

His shoulder took the brunt of the impact with the back door, easily forcing it open as he threw his entire body at it then fired outside without losing much momentum. He took a hard left and dove into the brush. Powering through branches as they ripped into his hands and jacket alike, he tried to keep both arms up to protect his face. He pushed on in what direction felt like the opposite of town, until eventually the thicket spat him back out onto a muddy roadway of some sort. Catching his breath he checked his arm, scratched up and bloody, but the scribbled coordinates still legible. He transferred them to a notebook before unravelling a roll of bandages, more to wipe than wrap his arms.

He had to find shelter. The potential of pursuers wanting to bring him to justice was one motivator, but what changed it from a preference to a sudden necessity was the sharp beeping coming

from his wrist. He flipped his bloody arm over and looked at a small dial he had affixed on the underside of his watch, which somewhat accurately monitored the quality of the air. An indicator that really only searched for one thing. Spore particles. When carried by wind, breathing in too much leads to a fate worse than death, a fate Blake did not want to think about right now. He fumbled with the gas mask at his hip, struggling to unclip it before finally shoving it roughly over his face and fixing the strap. He took a deep breath and walked on. His eyes darted around for any shelter, and his pace increased to an awkward cross between a hobble and a jog. After just a few minutes of hobble-jogging, Blake approached a single cobblestone building almost completely veiled by shrubbery and camouflaged by ivy smothering its walls. Had he not been looking out for it he likely wouldn't have even noticed its presence. He hoped it would conceal him from others as much as it would the elements.

Chapter 2: Local Law Enforcement

He barreled inside, pushing the door open with his shoulder after twisting the handle. The building was unoccupied, and that's all he needed to know before working on covering it up. He rolled up a filthy rug and shoved it under the door. Then threw down his bag and pulled out an off white picnic blanket and hung it over the only broken window in the room. The blanket already had four corner holes in it from previous such tricks, and despite the harshness of the wall, he took out the four toughest nails he had and managed to hang the blanket up so that it served as a barrier and hung taut. A cursory glance suggested no other structural weaknesses, so he sat on the ground and pulled out his watch. He tried not to focus on the scratches on his hands but their sight was hard to avoid.

The spores from the wind had probably already gotten into the building but they wouldn't live for more than twenty minutes in a closed off space. He took note of the time and counted out twenty five. His filter would last at least a few hours, but the winds could go on for longer. Even with that, he would be safe inside for now.

After a few minutes of rest he got bored and decided to check out the building. The place was particularly sparse in furnishing- a rusty bedframe lacking a mattress, grass poking out of most

crevices, little leaves in the walls and ceilings where paintings once used to be. Several cupboards but all empty or picked clean. A single bookshelf had maybe three legible volumes that weren't soaked with water, or what he hoped was water.

After the search he sat down in the least overgrown room which still had a sizable patch of grass with a bundle of daffodils covering the floor. Only now had he the time to process what had happened. A mysterious radio signal from an even more mysterious delivery order. He retrieved the radio from his bag and examined it further. Fidgeting with it proved futile, and he found himself replaying the broadcast in his head. 'Site twelve. Evergreen. Tunnels.' It disturbed him, whatever it meant. More so that it was indirectly addressed to him, somehow. But what bothered him most was its familiarity. He felt he had heard it before. Something like it. A similar broadcast. A similar voice. Just as he had also seen that unusual sort of radio before. He had hoped he got this familiarity as a sort of inaccurate recollection or cruel form of *deja vu*. But to give these thoughts some closure- already knowing it a foolish idea- right there he decided he would seek the coordinates out.

Another thought crossed his mind. He wouldn't be able to return to that town. The Peacekeepers saw his face, at least one of them did. And so did the woman at the market. With how the keepers operate, he didn't discount the possibility of a bounty being placed on his head. Perhaps even a sketch on a wanted poster, printed and reprinted and put in surrounding Peacekeeper towns.

Some sort of outlaw from a western comic. He would have to deal with that first. He shook that thought away too. They didn't know his name or where he went, and he had no tendency to stop anywhere for long. Another habit he picked up from his father. He shook his head. Surely nothing would come of this. When he took the radio from his bag he also took a spoon and can of tomato soup. He would have preferred it warm, but he didn't complain. Much.

Something began to thud against the door. One impact, then another which knocked the rolled up carpet out of place. With the third the door swung open and someone barged in. He shut the door right after and pressed his back against it hard. Eventually he looked up, his rapid breathing amplified by the mask he wore. He looked at Blake, and Blake looked back- his hand ready at his holster but not actually touching the gun. They looked at each other in silence until the intruder eventually raised his hands up at shoulder level. Blake glanced down to the sturdy roll of carpet kicked across the floor. He nodded to it and the intruder took a step forward and jammed it back under the doorframe. "Are we good?" The man asked, his head covered completely by a scrappy sack mask that made him look like a contemporary scarecrow. "Sure. We're good." "Grand." The man responded and walked towards Blake, then past him, away from the door. He pulled the front and back of the mask from the bottom and yanked it off. A shaggy head of hair and ugly scars littered his face. His shirt and pants were a green

and brown camo print and a rusted rifle was slung over his shoulder. He pulled a thick padded glove off and offered that hand to Blake. "Nathan MacNamara, of the New Angels."

"Blake." He shook his hand, his grip noticeably weaker than Nathan's, then turned his head and refused to maintain eye contact.

"Look, I won't bother you, I take it we're both honest men weathering the storm. No need for anything to go down."

He waited for a response but Blake only looked up and gave a brusque half smile. Nathan then turned around and began pacing between rooms.

The winds outside had begun to ease.

Blake sat down, and eventually laid down on his back, looking up at the moldy, chipped ceiling. Every few moments he would turn his head without lifting his body and make sure the newcomer was still somewhere in sight. He sighed. It could've been worse, but armed freedom fighters under the Angels banner never made him particularly comfortable. Not that he ever bought into one side or the other, but in his circumstances it was certainly better than an armed Peacekeeper.

At one point between glances, Blake could no longer spot the New Angel, and this lack of knowledge made him bolt up.

Instead he found him leaning over a table, pressing an arm down on each side with a paper map spread out atop it.

Blake leaned just a bit behind the doorframe, far enough not to be noticed, close enough to see.

McNamara did not appear to take notice, instead he measured out roads and trails with a piece of twine and a snapped wooden ruler.

“Where are you headed?” He asked without looking back, and the runner almost jumped when he did. “South,” He coughed, turning around and feigning a previous idleness. Poorly. “Carrying a letter?” Nathan finally turned around, his hands still resting on the table behind his back.

“Huh?”

“You’re a Light Runner. One of them post boys, no? Because you sure aint no soldier, and got too much gear on you to be a farmer.”

“Yeah, sure. A letter. And I’m looking for a place to hold up.”

Blake muttered. His thumbs dug into the deepest crevices of his pockets. He wished he didn’t mention the last part.

“Look at that, I’m heading southwards too. Tell you what, why don’t we go together for a while? I never got how you lot walk all those miles all alone. Roads tend to get dangerous.”

“Not when you know them all.” Blake tried to sound confident.

“Suppose so, suppose there’s that. Still I never liked walking them by myself.”

“You’re by yourself now, no?”

“Not by choice lad. Got separated from my men. Told them to pull back someplace but now they’ve disappeared on me. And I’ve bloody wound up here.”

“Well then.” Blake muttered with neither certainty nor eye contact. He peered out of a window and saw both the trees and shrubbery were now still.

The plants all grew different here, along the roads and into the untamed forests and thickets that stretched for miles beyond. Grew far wilder than they used to- so Blake was told by people much older than him. Grew more freely, were more abundant, so that most of the landmass that wasn't carved out by man was a thick maze of primeval wildwood or an endless sea of waist or chest or even head high grass that swallowed up cities and explorers alike. This was somewhat due to the sudden decrease of people across the island, but anyone who knew anything about it knew that wasn't the real cause.

This level of growth was unprecedented before the collapse, a gardener's dream, he heard it called once. That there was something in the air, something in the soil or the trees themselves that caused this rapid expansion that dominated all land and rock that stood in its way. And what wasn't claimed as road or farmland was now an all-engulfing jungle. But the exact reasons still spurred debate.

The road the two walked was lined now not by swarming trees but suffocating prairies of yellow-green grass with blades reaching up to Blake's shoulders, but many individual strands surpassed him entirely. They were in a grassy tunnel with no roof, a barrier of reeds on every side. The road itself was weathered and Blake found himself counting the holes or following the little trails of cracked asphalt beneath his feet as his eyes pointed down.

The radio message played back in his head. Site 12, Evergreen, tunnels. And a set of coordinates. A treasure map with an X. Or a warning for a place to avoid. He hadn't considered the possibility of it being dangerous. Genuinely dangerous. Something he could actually get killed over. But it couldn't, not with how it was given to him. He was meant to hear it, find it. Was it something about his father? Though unlikely, it was the only possibility he couldn't stop returning to, and not for a lack of trying.

For this reason he was quite glad when Nathan began to speak.

“Earlier you mentioned needing to hold up somewhere. Did you just mean a place for the night or- and don't take this the wrong way if you are, now- but are you running from someone?

Something?”

Not the ideal conversation to get his mind to stop spinning, but it was an improvement. If there was anyone who would understand a Peacekeeper fiasco, it would be a New Angel.

“You could say that.”

“Keepers or Ollies?”

“Peacekeepers. Well, they're not like, right on our tail or anything, but my name's probably on some posters by now.” He reassured Nathan, looking up from the road only when explaining himself.

“And do ya intend to do anything about that?”

“Well, probably just wait it out, give it a few. Will be fine eventually will it not. Hope it blows over, anyway.”

“Them Keepers are bad business now, don't think I gotta tell ya that though, do I. Persistent bastards, they are. Don't trust nothing they say.”

The road continued down a subtle decline with the change in gradient nearly imperceptible. Tall ferns and conifers began popping up along the right side of the road, stretching onwards and heavenwards. Nathan had overtaken Blake by a few paces, but suddenly stopped and straightened up and doubled back some steps. Before Blake could ask why, a pack of figures appeared in his sightline, their helmets jutting out just over the horizon. He mirrored Nathan and the two of them backtracked a bit until they were sure they were out of sight.

“Oh ya bastard, whole squad of keepers.”

“Right, in here, quick!” Blake flicked his head towards the brush on their left and entered, pushing the blades aside. No express urgency. Not to leave the grass too obviously disturbed. He hit the dirt and flattened out, navigating into a little ditch in the loose earth and laying there. He crawled backwards until he could no longer reach the road if he stretched his hand out. A safe distance, what his father used to say. He hated how often he would fall back on his advice. Hated that it helped him.

Nathan Macnamara was now submerged in the reeds by his side, rifle in his arms. False hope. The thought of even attempting to outgun so many was ludicrous. Planted in their spots, there were little gaps in the tall grass that gave them a fragmented mosaic of the road ahead. The storm of unsynchronised marchers dawning closer, their boots louder.

They went by in pairs or threes. Two. Four. Seven. Nine.

No, those two weren't soldiers. Legs shackled and arms bound to one another, they tottered ahead awkwardly. The rearmost soldier pushed one forward but they both stumbled, almost falling once they did. Though the soldiers were mostly obscured, their rifles or pistols were hard to miss. Still from what little they saw, their appearance was undeniable. Clad in kevlar vests, metal bracers, mismatched kneepads and marked riot helmets, whatever they could fit over that navy blue uniform. Undeniably Peacekeepers. They didn't hurry- took their time. One of them banged a baton against the chains binding the prisoners.

On the soldiers' shirt sleeves were the letters RPC. On one of the kevlar vests was the title painted on in full, Republics Peacekeeping Corps.

Just after passing their observation spot a series of laboured coughs echoed out and the group stopped. "What's with em?" The dreadful silence was broken by a harrowing belch, cut short by a hollow wince after the thud of a blunt strike.

"Christ, leave him. He's a joke. Wasting our damned time." Keys jangled and shackles clanged against asphalt. Bodies shuffled around for a moment. "Nah, waste of a good bullet, that is." Blake tried to drown out the brutal sounds that followed. But they only got worse when the victim stopped making noise and his assailants continued anyway. Nathan grit his teeth, face cringing and looking away.

After some excruciating moments the former prisoner was discarded and the group moved on. Blake crawled forward while Nathan got up to his feet and was already prepared to leave. Before

doing the same, Blake roughly grabbed Nathan's shoulder and forearm and dragged him back with more success than he expected. While he was still stunned from the surprise, Blake covered his mouth with one hand and placed his other hand's index finger to his own lips, gesturing for silence. His eyes wide open, they darted to the road where he managed to see a pair of boots, then another two pairs. Blake nodded slowly and raised an open hand for Nathan to wait. After waiting for longer than they probably needed to, Blake released him and Nathan MacNamara breathed a deep sigh then wiped his lips. "They gone?"

"I think so."

"Christ, bastards almost saw me there. Would've been shot were not for you"

"Hey, don't mention it."

They pushed out of the tall grass and got back on the road, breathing heavily as they composed themselves.

"Tell you what, given you're after helping me, I may not have been the most forthcoming with some information that I think could help you."

"How so?" Blake said, his head up.

"I know of a refuge. A safe place where people hide out from the keepers. It's hidden and barricaded, and they're mostly self-sufficient. Or so I've heard anyhow."

"Hm. Can't say I'm familiar. Where is this secret clubhouse?"

Nathan clicked his tongue and ducked his head “That’s the issue. I don’t right know, never been there myself. I know it’s in an old hospital or someplace, buried in the Mahony Fields.”

“Huh.” Blake muttered and Nathan chimed in again.

“Hey, I know it’s not much, lad. But the keepers are serious pieces of work. If you need someplace to stay for longer, I’d try find it. A resourceful runner like yourself has ought to have some connections. And them fields ain’t filled with keepers either.”

A small spark lit up in Blake’s eyes and his head shot back at Nathan “I think I do know someone. Someone who would know the area well enough.”

“There ya go lad, never doubted ya for a moment I didn’t.”

“Right, well then. Was good getting to know you, Nathan Macnamara.” Blake said with hesitation.

“And you, Blake. And you. I hope next time I’m in trouble I run into you. You seem to me a good lad. Till we meet again.”

The two parted ways, Blake having a more specific destination now as he headed for the Mahony Fields. The mysterious refuge seemed a tall tale, but it reminded him of a friend he could call upon, and he wasn’t one to pass up an adventure.

Chapter 3: Pestilence

The road wove and wound around itself as it narrowed, what once was done to avoid land borders now seemed completely arbitrary, with the vast greenery overtaking empty fields and grand infrastructure alike, shrouding their past like a thick mist of nature.

The road eventually rose up an incline, then at the top went right down again, ever so gradually. From the short-lasting high point, a small town came into view, smothered by colossal trees and canopies at every side. The buildings bore sheet metal roofs, mismatched coats of paint, bare wooden fencing and signage, and other signs of recent developments. Though those were falling apart just as much as the original buildings themselves. A town twice forsaken.

But despite some apparent form of grand exodus, the place was certainly not empty.

Pausing at the top of the hill, Blake pulled out a pair of binoculars, wiped the cracked lenses with his sleeve and looked down, confirming his concerns.

The entire town had been taken over by Pustulus, a violent post-Collapse spore. While some blame the spores as the cause of the Collapse in the first place, these views are treated as no more than baseless conspiracy, and its accepted knowledge the spores came sometime after.

He saw them there, spherical in shape and unnaturally swampy green, stuck to several walls of buildings around town. Some had root-like tendrils jutting out that stretched across or below buildings, while others were actively respiring and releasing a thick green cloud of particles that would disperse and lose its distinguishing colour but not its threat. These particles could be picked up by strong winds, but they were worse when directly inhaled. That was an explorer's biggest threat when travelling. The spores, and the threat of those who already inhaled them. Those dubbed the Sluagh

Looking through the cracked glass, the runner planned a way in that passed the least spewing Pustulus. He also took note of several blurry figures shuffling or crawling on all fours in front of the empty storefronts, certain that more were either inside or out of reach, but even the few he could see would prove too dangerous a threat to fight. Too foolish even for him.

Fortunately, no Sluagh seemed to near the edges of the town for now, making his entry smooth and painless. He crouched down behind an old, discarded market stall, far enough away from the wall to not be in danger of a potential Pustulus emission. Peeking his head out, something grey crawled just out of view. Retracting back to cover, he took off along the opposite side. Most of the buildings by him had open doors or broken windows, so he would rely on them for shelter.

Clutching his large knife tight, he skirted along the edge, looking between the spores on his right and the currently empty street to his left, until a certain metallic glint caught his eye.

Under one of the bigger shop's doors lay something that reflected the sun's rays with a particular brightness, but he could not tell what it was. He turned his head just before he reached it, seeing something else in his peripheral. Something else that moved above the buildings. On top of the buildings. On one of the roofs. And he was sure he saw a similar glint up there too. That of glass, or particularly polished metal. Could that have been a Sluagh? He didn't think so, but the chance of a stalker or a sniper up above concerned him more than any spore.

He scooted forward a few steps but couldn't get an angle at whatever was up there. Realising he had stood out in the open for far too long he sprung forward with his dominant leg and dashed into the building where he first saw the glint on the floor.

Through the open double doors and into a large area sectioned off by near identical cubicles. All with small desks and tables, old books and scattered papers, and computers so aged that the dust had begun gathering dust.

His knife remained drawn while he scoured around, finding a large locked safe standing by one of the larger cubicles. The keypad and handle had been recently cleared of dust, but the container appeared intact.

Blake kneeled down then haphazardly punched in 1-2-3-4, to an unsurprising yank of failure. Still, he insisted to himself it was always worth a try. His eyes then drifted up above the safe to a

poster on the wall, of which there were several copies around the building. A big, faded red print with a picture of a crossed out bomb. *Nuclear Disarmament. But is it enough?* Blake chuckled to himself, a single exhale. Clearly wasn't.

The central room he found himself in was hazy, illuminated only by beams of light piercing through the darkness as a result of the holes in the roof, crumbling walls and grimy or boarded up windows. While he knew this place was a small town not too long ago, he could tell why this building in particular was left forsaken by even the new inhabitants. Declaring the building a likely unspoiled treasure-trove from before the Collapse, he got around to wandering between each cubicle, looking for nothing in particular.

Despite a lack of any real expectations, the haul was still disappointing. The only things of note being a few loose bandages from an unlocked first aid cabinet and a curious contraption consisting of five metal balls on strings which sat on one of the desks. Despite not knowing its purpose, if it even had any, he swiped it into his bag. As he took the contraption he pushed aside an old note on which the ink had not yet fully faded away:

23/10/2012

They did it. I heard England got hit today. Apparently London made it, had some missile defences. I think, I don't even know. The rest of it is gone, that's what they're saying. I don't know if we're next but I'm going to prepare. Bunker down. If you, or anybody else, comes down for me, then I've already left. Do yourself a favour, do

what I did and get the hell out. If it's too late the safe code is 1988. I won't be needing it anymore. God knows what will happen but I'm sure it won't be good. May God have mercy on your soul.

Blake tossed the note aside, thanking its long gone writer and entering the safe code. Inside lay some old and now certainly worthless cash, contracts and other documents, but so did a few loose bullets which Blake scooped out greedily. With a near lack of proper ammo presses, old world bullets became one of the most valuable commodities accepted for trade by all but the RPC, who made their own. The bullets happened to fit into Blake's handgun, and he was grateful to not have to walk with an empty magazine anymore. Still, he hoped to only ever use it as a deterrent.

Doing a final sweep before leaving he scooped up a bone dry broadsheet that could prove good tinder. Finding no other stories he gave it a look over. *Government goes silent following reports of war reaching Europe. Leave radios in their wake.*

That's where he saw that strange radio! As storytellers told, just before the Collapse, the highest people in power disappeared and had the military distribute the exact radios Blake had received across the entire island. Here the storyteller would clarify to the fascinated children or mildly-entertained adults that this was an old and different army and not the Republic's Peacekeeping Corps. Not those sorts of Peacekeepers. They would then call these radios the biggest mystery of the Collapse. How they never broadcast anything and couldn't be used to send either. But for Blake, at least one worked- and he had to know why.

He folded the paper up as much as he could and put it in his bag. Could make a useful read later. Or useful kindling.

He scanned between rooms with a bulky flashlight, illuminating walls as he did a little circle. The beam of light flickered then eventually passed over an open doorway into an adjacent room. Two figures stood there, motionless. Sluagh- dormant- hiding in the dark. He smothered the top of the light with his hand once he saw. The creatures didn't move. With their presence noted, his movements became that much more deliberate.

Lifting the flashlight back up he carefully pointed it at the wall beside the door. The nearest other doors were narrow and metal, closed and unmoving when pushed despite having no handles. A relatively familiar sight, they usually lead into a shaft that runners sometimes hid small stashes or go bags in as marked caches. No sign of such a cache here, but he tried anyway. With a slight gap present between the two doors, he took a prybar from his bag and wedged the flat side in. One side of the door came loose after two leveraged pulls. But they were not the only thing that came loose. Right after his forceful entry a packed bunch of metal blocks fell down the shaft. He recoiled back, and as he did the entire elevator came barreling down with a violent thud. His ears were ringing and he coughed up all the dust that came at him with the fall. When his senses cleared, the two Sluagh from the adjoining room had made their way inside. He turned but that only worsened his situation, as even through tightly boarded windows he saw the approaching shuffle of plagued feet.

Fumbling with his gas mask, the room got enveloped with creatures barging through winds or shuffling through surrounding hallways. Bodies in very early stages of decomposition neared the young runner. Other than the green or grey discoloration and emaciated lack of body mass, the Sluagh resembled their previously human form to a scary degree. The glaring deformity being the large, bulbous spore protruding from somewhere on their body.

It often covered- or looked like it replaced- the victims head, with more appearing with age, bursting out of their chest, back or limbs. Their source of false life, and their only weak spot.

Blake aimed his pistol with one hand and held a large hunting knife with the other under it. Firing one shot at the leftmost Sluagh burst its spore, and the creature fell with a gaseous explosion. Despite the mask he held his breath, clenched his weapons tight and made a break for it. Dashing out through the window the now-dead Sluagh had just created got Blake out of the tight space but not out of the Sluaghs reach. If he felt outnumbered inside, the small horde now gathered in the streets made him completely overwhelmed.

If the elevator's crash wasn't enough, the recent gunshot served as a dinner bell for every creature in town to converge on him.

Until multiple other shots rang out from somewhere. They held up the walking corpses' attention long enough for Blake to start a sprint across the main street before finally diving into a narrow alleyway. There he stopped, predicting all the creatures were

headed for the source of the gunshots or were still on their way to the original disturbance rather than after him.

Trying to catch his breath, a harsh burn snatched at his arm.

Yanking it away he saw a Sluagh with its spore open, exuding a vile, thick gas behind him. The mask shielded from infection, but whatever was in the gas still caused a painful reaction.

Another few shots echoed, louder this time. Closer.

As Blake attempted to drive his knife into the creature's exposed maw, another approached and forced itself between Blake and the other Sluagh. Grazing and flailing slashes had little impact on the creatures around him, and the added weight pushed all three of them down to the ground. Another still had begun crawling towards them as Blake's swings became more frantic and less hefty. He struggled to keep the two away, slashing blindly by this point. He kicked as much as he could, until yet another Sluagh approached from behind and attempted to force its way to Blake's face. Its claw awkwardly pulled on his mask strap, and the runner could barely move. As the face shield slowly rose up, one of the front Sluagh gave out a sound reminiscent of a scream, and another vile cloud appeared, this one targeted at Blake's face.

A gunshot cracked just ahead.

The pull on the strap was eased, and the mask fell back into place just as the fumes came over his face. While it did protect him, even the filter could not cover up that stench of decay. As more shots were fired, more Sluagh collapsed in noxious explosions. Before Blake even had the chance to get up, a young and armour clad

woman who held a submachine gun in her left hand extended her right to help him to his feet.

“You alright? Kept that mask on the whole time, didn't you?”

Her voice had a thick British accent. Despite that, she was the most beautiful woman Blake had ever seen. The opinion surely aided by her having just saved his life. He stared at her for another moment. At her pale skin, short black hair in shaggy curls. She was familiar, oddly so. Not in the sense where one feels they saw that specific person before but scratches their mind for when or where. Rather like seeing a sibling or parent of someone you know. The uncanny similarities. You've seen certain particularities of that person, somewhat, but you haven't seen them specifically. That was the precise feeling Blake had about his saviour. A familiar beauty.

Seeing her dark and stained combat armour snapped him out and brought the young runner back to his senses.

“Ah, yes- yes I'm good. Still not dead.”

“Excellent. Then let's bug out of here.” A somewhat older man exclaimed, a man whose presence Blake wasn't aware of until that moment but in hindsight made plenty of sense. Both of them had matching weapons and armour. Armour of the Royal Expeditioners from across the sea. Around such highly trained and well armed soldiers Blake felt as close to safety as he could, given the circumstances.

The two Expeditioners cleared off the main street with a manner of such brutal efficiency he thought it must have been rehearsed. With ammunition to spare they killed just about every Sluagh that

stood in their way. Soon they had escaped to the opposite edges of town, crossing through side streets and holes in buildings until they made it into a mostly intact pub. Sitting down on some old barstools, the three got acquainted.

“So that was you that got all of them riled up?” The male expeditioner asked.

“Well, yeah. An accident really. I didn't even know anyone was here. I didn't mean it to happen.” Blake stammered, then immediately looked over to the woman for her reaction. She flashed a quick, almost instinctive smile. “Suppose it's a good thing we showed up when we did then.”

“Good for him maybe, a bloody costly mistake that was. Them scattering all over the shop could have well ruined all our research.”

Blake looked down, sheepish, uncertain of what he was supposed to say.

“Oh lay off him Al. Not like we would have found much more here anyway. And it's not like it was his fault, bloke's a Light Runner.”

Blake's head shot up and she looked at him with a pang of worry.

“You are a Light Runner, correct?”

“Ah, yeah, I am. Not that I was exactly- ah nevermind.”

“You know, you really shouldn't walk alone.”

Blake didn't get to explain himself as the other Expeditioner came back from checking the area outside and cut him off. “They're still moving around out there. Too unpredictable. We should head

back to the lab, we've talked enough." He beckoned the woman towards the door and chambered his rifle, checking the bullets. "Oh, alright alright." She said getting off her seat, and doing so seemed almost disappointed. Or so Blake hoped. "I'm Vera, by the way. Was nice meeting you."

"Oh, yeah, I'm Blake. Thanks for the save, by the way."

Vera smirked then took off. "Anytime, runner."

"Sure... nice meeting you too." Blake said, but the two had already gone. Then he was left sitting alone in that decrepit pub.

Back on the road and alone at last, Blake finally felt comfortable. No uniforms or guns or Sluagh, just him and the verdant expanse. The thought of Vera returned to him. Several times. She was familiar but he didn't know why. Or how. And he could not stop thinking about it. It was more than a gut feeling. But he thought about it so much that his head began to hurt and the image of her face, blurry and distorted by his own imperfect memory, became burned into the back of his mind. And the thoughts of her would crop up as he walked. Why was she so familiar? Where had he seen her before?

Chapter 4: Two Shorten the Road

The road had now run out of asphalt and transitioned to one of trampled dirt and weeds seeping in from the sides. It was difficult to tell how much of the original trail had been consumed by them. A sunken lane amidst the trees. An estuary off the side of the motorway. The walls of dirt surrounded them like an all-encompassing trench, and two men just barely walked together without brushing shoulders.

“I mean the N19 is solid.”

“Sure, but would you deem it a favourite?”

“Guess it is more of a safe choice. M22 has some killer views.”

“That one has bandits.”

“It does got bandits.”

“How about the N4.”

“You always talk about that one. You gotta see some better roads, man. That one's basic. And filled with Keepers. Peacekeepers” Blake corrected himself but the one beside him didn't mind.

“Heh, it was a good route. But no, I try to avoid passing that way these days, fortune permitting.”

“Right, the Peacekeepers, yeah. My bad.” Blake put his hands back into his pockets and clicked his tongue.

The other one was both slightly taller and older than Blake. Naturally tanned with thin glasses and hair kept about as neat as it could be after trudging through a thicket. He wore a brown bomber jacket with the fur on its collar surrounding his face, and

lacked the overstocked gear Blake carried on him. His name was Lucius and he walked with a very particular rhythm, his left hand swaying much more than his right.

“Big Bridge is nice.” Blake suddenly broke the silence.

“Big Bridge!” Lucius exclaimed as if spotting an old friend,

“nowhere has better sea views. And those cliffs, oh man.

Picturesque sights you would not believe. Oh, such vistas.” He

mused. The exact reaction Blake had expected.

He had considered Vera’s advice of not going alone and stopped at Lucius’ place, goading him out with the vague request of needing a favour despite him actually needing very little convincing.

“I have not forgotten I posed the question to you first. And you still have not answered.”

“I know I know.” Blake said despite not knowing. “Guess I gotta give it to the M18. It’s the one we were on when we first met.”

Lucius smiled, having the same thought as the two began to laugh.

Blake continued, “hey it’s just a good road overall. Don’t let that get to your head. Light Runner favourite. Met a lot of good people along there. A lot of good memories, that road.”

“Mhmm, sure. Sure. Whatever you say.” Lucius flashed a smug smile and Blake shoved his shoulder with a laugh.

The dirt path eventually evened out and the trees cleared somewhat, making the usually impassable thickets passable now. The two took a turn into a narrow, mostly paved road where the trees overreached onto the path, and they had to weave under and

around branches. They took a turn at the Fallons farm that doubled as a general store and tread onto another dirt track. Blake navigated seamlessly like water slipping through cracks while Lucius followed sluggishly behind, each turn making less sense to him than the other.

Eventually a more prominent, forsaken road emerged from within the brush- with a set of tall apartment blocks popping up behind the treeline. These tall towers were different to the usual ruins on the sides of the road, as they appeared actually unfinished rather than otherwise lost to time. Some had entire walls or roofs missing, and scaffolding lined many of the exteriors. There were a few hidden behind the others that were mostly complete and looked almost liveable.

Blake turned into the stamped out trail without hesitation and Lucius followed behind, faltering and nearly missing the abrupt turn. They wade through enveloping, ankle deep foliage with deliberately high steps. Until finally they reached one of the better quality buildings, only to pass right by and enter a ruined one beside it. The metal door already hung open, desperately clinging onto a single upper hinge.

Ascending the stone stairs Blake counted the stories, stopping at the fourth. He went down the hallway and to the furthest door on the left. Rooting around his bag's smallest pocket, he produced a keychain with no less than ten different keys, each marked out with a number or coloured piece of tape or some other distinguishing feature. He jangled them for a moment, then

picked out a rusted key with an inscribed number that matched the one of the room. The door gave way instantly.

Inside was dusty and unkempt, but not dirty or ignored either. Furnished and lived in, but not recently or for long. The place was by no means abandoned, as Blake promptly explained to his friend, it was one of the many safehouses for Light Runners. Hidden in plain sight. Backed by the Irish Provisional Society; the grand trade council connecting cities and establishing trade across the island. A source of stability in an uncertain time.

The apartment itself was littered with various small amenities and mismatched personal effects: movie posters, sports bobbleheads, pencil sketches and a jar of seashells. Upon discovering a small tea drawer, Lucius asked for permission then began to boil a cup of water by starting a fire on a small firepit which happened to be set up on the outdoor balcony in an absence of electricity. Meanwhile Blake, uninterested in tea, took the chance to check out the secure locker protected by a code. After shouting a resounding no to Lucius' offer, Blake spun the dials to 2015, the year the IPS was founded. Years before Blake's time.

In the locker lay a small supply of synthesised energy drinks, gas mask filters, and an even smaller stash of assorted ammunition with just a few individual bullets scattered around haphazardly. Blake didn't take any of the supplies, someone else would probably need them more and no bullets matched those for his gun anyway.

What he did take however was a neatly handwritten cursive pencil note lodged at the back of the locker. He unfolded the letter and already recognised the author by the familiar type of manilla paper she used.

Hey there Blake

(If you're not Blake please kindly stop reading. Should go without saying.)

Hope the road's treating you well. I know there's a few foxes around these parts but hopefully you weren't too scared. You know, given your history.

Make sure to stock up on filters too, this time I won't be here to carry you to safety. And even if I were, that's never happening again. You owe me for that. Big time.

Anyway, I heard about that weird letter left for you. Kind of hoping you took it, I was really curious. The other part of me is really hoping you didn't get killed by some crazy axe murderer or jealous ex or something. I'm kidding, you would never have an ex.

If you're coming my way, I've been held up in that surrounded estate. Been working on it, figured it could make a decent caravan pit stop. You should come by, see what you think of the drapes.

*But seriously Blake, watch yourself out there and take it easy.
Kate, the one and only.*

A smile lit up his face. He folded the letter back and put it in his pocket, stuffing it amidst some matches and old cloth. He then hung up his bag and jacket, but sat there admiring it for a moment. Formerly his fathers, he wore it proudly- and he wore it better than him. He wondered about the little signs and patches sewn onto the sleeves with symbols he never understood, but he had reclaimed it as its own by stabbing some pins into the front pockets and lapel. Before collapsing on the couch he fixed a small grape soda bottlecap pinned onto the jacket's breast pocket then allowed himself to rest.

Lucius finally returned inside, proudly holding a teacup and sitting himself down gently in a surprisingly well preserved armchair that somewhat faced Blake. "So. Why am I actually here? I am by no means complaining, but I also take it this is not merely a social call." Blake nodded then pointed to his backpack "It's in there." He mumbled, stretching his body out after the several days of walking. Lucius seized the bag and was about to ask what to look for, but the blocky radio was impossible not to notice. "Huh. AS model. Why are you carrying it?" Lucius lugged the brick out and set it onto a coffee table with a thud. "Heh. Ass model." Blake chuckled. Then he got a pang of worry as he braced to explain the situation. Lucius wouldn't judge, but that somehow made it even worse. What he said came out in one rapid, clunky burst. "So I got the radio from a job and then it started playing some creepy message and coordinates but then these Peacekeepers saw

me and I thought they might be after me and I ran away from them and so I asked you for your help and now I don't know what to do.”

Under his friend's instruction he took some breaths and then properly explained the story from the beginning.

“Wait, so you heard something on this radio?” Lucius nodded to the AS.

“Yeah, strange isn't it?”

“Strange indeed. More than strange- it should be impossible. You know, they were sent all over by the government after the collapse. Sent out two messages then just gave up on them. Gave up on everything really. Pretty sure the old government was one of the first things to break down post collapse.”

“Do you ever talk about anything other than old history?”

“Hey, I know I tend to drone, but this could be important. Besides, you *literally* had me pick out my favourite road. You are no better at conversation topics than I am.”

The two laughed, hanging their heads a little as they did. “Sorry, sorry. But you're saying that a message on this shouldn't be possible?” Blake finally asked.

“Pretty much. Since the start these radios were unable to send and had nothing to receive. Could only pick up their own wavelength, and there was nothing to be picked up.”

“Until now?”

“Until now, I suppose. But even then. Hmm.” Lucius sat closer to the table and pulled the radio towards himself. “I might take a look at it, if you would be ok with that. I believe-” He cut himself

off when turning the radio on its side, “I believe you said something about Peacekeepers too?”

“It’s not that urgent. I don’t think. But I’d rather just be sure. This guy I met, he mentioned a place we could hold up. Like a safehouse, kind of.”

“Alright. Shall we head there then? Spend a few nights like common hoodlums?” Lucius said, his voice soft and reassuring.

“Sure, but after we rest up here.”

“Right, after we rest up here.”

“Hey Blake, I was thinking.”

“Oh no.” He muttered, lifting his head up slightly and seeing his friend still hunched over the radio with his shirtleaves rolled up.

“Heh, you can tell me if I overstep, but I’m wondering if this could have something to do with your father?”

Blake did not respond, and Lucius didn’t want to look his friend in the eye when he asked the question. “Just with how you said, how he disappeared-”

“I know what I said. It’s not- I mean- maybe, but I don’t think- I don’t know.” Blake said in a way that stopped the conversation, but didn’t exactly shut it down with any finality. Hearing Lucius out more than he had wanted or expected to.

“Hey, my bad. We can drop it. It’s alright Blake.” And Lucius went back to fidgeting with the radio like a clockmaker at work, and Blake soon drifted off to sleep, lulled by the echoing voice of his father he was unable to suppress tonight.

A familiar dream enveloped him, though he would surely forget it in the morning- nor would he ever reckon its significance in any way that mattered. He was running. Playing. A laugh that sounded like his in spite of sealed lips. He was a child again, and there was someone behind him as he ran. A girl- no older than seven or eight. She spoke funny and always got her dark hair in her eyes. In every dream it was her, and in every dream they were running. Through hallways, or playrooms, or sometimes a doctors office. And in the end she would outpace him, run ahead somewhere and tell him to keep up. And every time he would follow. Out of the building. Out of the dream.

Chapter 5: Pursuit

The two stepped aside and out of his way despite the walkway being wide enough to accommodate the three of them and more. His umber overcoat draped behind him as he walked- the two followed him in and made sure he was not kept waiting.

“We found out his name was Blake, sir. And that he is a Light Runner.” One of the Peacekeepers at the radio tower said when the other insisted on staying silent. “Is that all you know about him?”

“We know the direction in which he ran away- mostly.”

“Then that’s all I need.” His voice was raspy and harsh like the two impact holes in his kevlar vest. Two more soldiers followed behind him, Peacekeepers that lacked visible insignia but not visible weapons.

“Sir, if I may speak my mind. Your skills are wasted here. Nothing was stolen or damaged, no one was hurt-”

“I did not say you could speak your mind.” He snapped with his back turned. When he faced them, his hands were cupped around a flip lighter and lit cigarette. He looked at the other Peacekeeper who was previously silent. “You said he had a strange radio with him.”

“Correct, sir. AS model, I believe, sir.”

The left corner of his mouth bent into a small crooked smile.

“Fascinating.”

“Sir, I have to advise that this is not as serious a threat as you think.” The first Peacekeeper juttred in. But before he could say anything else he was silenced and told to step forward.

“Show me your sidearm. Routine inspection.”

He handed it over after a moment. The man in the overcoat then took the handgun and fired a shot into the Peacekeeper’s leg. He cried out and fell to the floor with the gun landing next to him.

“I will not have my authority questioned nor motives second-guessed. And you will show me where you last saw our fugitive.” He turned to the uninjured Peacekeeper and followed her out to the still disturbed thicket nearby, his two men tailing closely behind.

“Oh yes, tracks still fresh. The Lord will reveal your truth. He knows what lies in darkness.”