

In Hendry's hand lay twenty-six blister packs in which there were six pills each, enough to last for the rest of his patient's lifetime. In each transparent pill were an assortment of herbs, each he had painstakingly harvested, grinded, and rationed himself. Five years of work and all it amounted to was some shoddy painkillers.

He took his gaze off the pills and to his patient eating on the other side of the table. Her eyes were still, but the slightest shakes of her pupils told him the anxiety that lay beyond. With a quiet sigh, Hendry slid the pills over the table to his patient, knowing it would not help save her life.

"Here," he said, "take it three times a day after every meal. Your pain should start to subside after a few weeks, and eventually, you'll make full recovery."

"Oh, thank goodness," Jo said. "Hendry, you're a lifesaver—the only lifesaver around, really. You hear that, Mel? You're going to get better!"

"Thank you, Doctor," Mel said. "I don't know what we would do without you."

He gave her a small, trained smile. "Just make sure you don't exert yourself too much. Medicine won't be any good if you don't take care of the body." His own lies tasted like poison on his tongue, but like medicine, the bitterness had become easier to swallow from habit.

"Of course. I'll do my best to help her with the chores." Jo took the pills and stood up from the table, his sister following suit, and headed for the door. "Again, thanks for everything, doc. Same time next week?"

"Yes. Record any irregularities with her condition and the effects of the pills."

"Right. See you for the hunt later."

Hendry nodded. "See you there."

They both gave him a wave as they closed the door, returning his makeshift examination room into grey dimness.

*She won't last much longer*, he thought. Those pills wouldn't do anything; at least none meaningful for treating her illness. Terminal illness is not usually a surgeon's job to work on, and neither is prescribing medicine beyond painkillers, but when you have only one physician for an entire village, you ignore the details. Consequently, when you start to ignore the details, even simple painkillers can give you a few more days—weeks if you're lucky—in your otherwise short lifespan.

He remembered his first meeting with the siblings, back in that iron coffin the mainland called a ship. Jo's eyes were jittery, flicking from person to person as they were crammed into

the ship until it became hard to distinguish where one body ended and another started. His arms were tightly gripped around his sister, Mel, frail and sickly even then, who did her best to sink into her brother's arms and avoid eye contact with everyone else. Their first proper meeting would not come until the ship landed, but even then he could tell that something was wrong for the both of them. With hindsight, their current relationship was inevitable.

Sighing, Hendry stood from his chair and walked away from the table. It was no use ruminating on their fate and circumstances. Mel's illness was afflicted on her the moment she came out of her mother's womb; Jo, sharing that womb, had no choice but to take care of her, and they were only in the wrong place at the wrong time when the raid happened on their slum. The hand that they got was not dealt by kind hands; there was no play they could make that would grant them what they desire.

He could not say the same for himself.

The wooden floorboards underneath creaked rhythmically with each step Hendry took as he made his way to his kitchen. Light faded in and out from the window as the sun peeked ever so slightly from its hiding spot among the grey clouds, as if too ashamed to show its grace to the island. He hated how uncomfortably mediocre the weather was on the island. He hated almost everything about it. The weather, the house, the village, his assigned role in their provisional society. And yet, it was all the consequences of his own choice.

"Dad?"

"Lily." He turned towards the small voice—his adopted daughter's. From just behind the corner leading to the kitchen, half of her face peeked through inside the room and towards him, her blonde hair cascading down to almost touch the floor. "What is it?"

"Well, um, I woke up a few minutes ago and I heard someone else," she said, her small feet pittering and pattering as she slowly entered the kitchen. "Was it Mr. Jo and Ms. Mel?"

"Mhm. I was just giving her the pills she needed."

"Really? Does that mean that she won't go away forever now?"

He frowned. "Who told you that?"

"No one," she said quickly, averting her eyes. "You and them just talk kinda loud sometimes."

The walls *were* thin, Hendry conceded. Every part of this house—and every house in their small village, for that matter—was shoddily put together with whatever scraps and wood they could gather without veering too deep into the island. In the five years since his arrival, he had gotten used to taking lighter steps, and opening his doors so slowly that the creaks almost

became grating on his ears, but he never quite cared about privacy, not with only he and Lily being the only occupants. Not until now, anyway.

“I’m sorry, you weren’t supposed to hear that. But yes, Mel... Mel won’t go anywhere now.”

“Really? Yay! You’re the best, dad!” Her voice was sweet saccharine in his ears.

“Yes, yes. Now go and sit in the dining room. I’m going to make us some steaks for breakfast.”

“Okay!” Lily said before making her way to the dining room with a pep in her step as the woods groaned with each thud, no doubt spurred by the twofold good news he had given her.

Hendry’s gaze lingered on the empty doorway until the sound of Lily’s footsteps faded, dying down to a few measly steps before settling down to silence. There was warmth lingering where she had stood, and always when she was present, but never did it reach him.

Turning away and making his way deeper into the kitchen, Hendry was met with his few appliances messily strewn about all over the kitchen table, with some on top of each other in the sink like a poorly planned structure. He rolled his sleeves to his elbows and reached into the pile, pulling from it a steel pan which had on it several stains from last night’s dinner and washed it with only water and a steel wool, and put it on his Portable Prana Stove. He twisted the knob on the stove several times, before the last one turned with the distinct click. The air around him shifted, and invisible energy condensed around the stove, before it erupted into flames beneath the pan.

Prana appliances had been on the rise last Hendry remembered. Why, his aunt had even boasted about getting one of these stove models herself not too long before he made his escape. “Gone were the days of inefficient prana conversions!” He remembered the commercials. “It’s time to go full Prana with your appliances!” He had to give some thanks to his aunt, and an apology; he wouldn’t have thought to steal the device on the way to the ships otherwise.

Taking off a spatula from the kitchen’s rack, Hendry scraped off a chunk of boar fat from its container and threw it on the pan, the chunk melting with a hiss. He reached into the larder below and grabbed two cuts of boar meat, before laying one of them on the smoking fat and seasoning it. Salt. Pepper. Nothing too fancy. There were herbs around the outskirts of the forest nearby, but he wasn’t confident enough to decide which could impart taste and which could kill him.

As he waited for the steak to cook, Hendry bent down and looked into the larder; there was barely any meat left inside. He had only two mouths to feed, and his own weekly rations had almost been depleted—and he considered his portioning conservative. He could only imagine how Horace and his family of four further down the shore managed with their own rations.

Briefly—*just briefly*—he thought how avoidable it all was. If only that day twenty year-old him didn't stick his nose where it didn't belong. If only he didn't so stubbornly force out an answer from the head nurse. If only he wasn't so impulsive enough to save a nameless baby from that horrid 'research' five years ago. If he just minded his own business, he would not be stuck on this godforsaken island.

He would still be living the life he had worked so hard for!

He took a sharp, deep breath as the emptiness in his lungs made itself painfully known, and followed with several more controlled breaths. Gathering his bearings, he returned his attention to the stove and flipped the steak; it had become charred—too much for Lily's liking, or his for that matter. He briefly closed his eyes and let out a resigned huff. This one would be for him, he supposed.

*That's in the past*, he thought, chiding himself. *No use thinking about it now.*

Indeed, the deed had already been done and there was nothing that could reverse an already done decision. Really, it was just a brief, simple, fleeting thought. And more important than any thoughts, they needed to fill their stomachs—survive another day.

*How many more? Until when? Why?*, a voice inside his head asked him. He did his best to not acknowledge it.