

NANOWRIMO 2019

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Credit due to *Eidetic Memory: The Mercy Dolls* by David L. Pulver in ***Pyramid #3/90: After the End*** with *The Redeemers* by Jason "PK" Levine in ***Pyramid #3/88: The End Is Nigh***

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The sound of a gunshot made it to the Purifier in the village, and he kicked his horse into an immediate gallop, riding in the direction whence it came, riding in the direction of the farmhand shack. He started counting in his head—the resounding boom was likely a musket, and, in the hands of one of these folk, it would take too long to reload. It'd take his horse some 40-odd seconds to make it down the path to the shack. However, it only took three seconds for an older lady to run on out, her arms flailing, waving the musket—he called it—over her head. As she ran, screaming, her eyes found the horse and the black duster of the Purifier, and one word came out over and over again: “Monster!”

He pushed his horse faster as his eyes scanned the fields—it was either hurt or lookin’ for a fight because it sure wasn’t runnin’. Then, he leapt clean out of the saddle when he was close enough to the shack. When he landed on his feet, he had already drawn his revolver in one hand and his saber in the other. Looking beyond the thrown-open door, he saw storage in disarray, a hole blown out of the rotting wall, and, beneath the hole, a bleeding mutant. This one was covered in spines and thick leathery skin—all except for the chunk taken out of its side by the musket fire, though it should’ve ripped off more than it did. The Purifier cocked his revolver and kept aimed at its slumped head—after all, that’s where the thing’s brain *oughta* be—as he kept the saber held at length in a defensive stance.

“Please...” It managed to groan words between ragged breaths. “Food... Please, food...”

So, it retained some of its humanity. “I’ll give ya mercy.” He about pulled the trigger, swiftly ending its misery, but the Purifier noticed something odd between strands of the mutant’s greasy black hair.

It looked up at him. “Food...?” And there it was: a scarred ‘V’ emblazoned in the middle of its forehead.

“A Vector,” the Purifier said, smirking, and he de-cocked his revolver. “No mercy—you’ve violated your parole.”

“Plea—” Then, it just twitched and shuddered as the Purifier’s blade slid through its eye and into its brain. There, the blade twisted, and the abomination slumped once more.

The Purifier withdrew his saber, flicked the blade, spattering the mess across the mutant corpse, and then he wiped the rest off with a rag and threw that at the body too. Then, he spat on it—for good measure, of course.

Some of the Digsby villagefolk, including that scared old woman still clutching her spent musket, gathered about halfway up the path. Their faces were relieved of their grim complexions when the Purifier strode out from the farmhand shack. His nod unfroze them. They went to work, preparing for that evening’s public cremation outside the village.

Noa’s amber eyes were ignited by the reflections of the dancing flames. His gaze was fixed on the burning body in the distance, far enough away from Digsby that he didn’t have to inhale the scent of smoking flesh. He took a swig from a jar. It didn’t matter what it was—it all tasted like shit and it all got him drunk. Who wouldn’t want themselves a little celebration knowing that another one of those monsters was dead? Well, given that he was alone on the rooftop of the farmhand shack, maybe it was just him. And the Purifier, of course. Noa saw him and his horse just up the path, watching the pyre as he would, making sure there was no more trouble. His

fingers clutched the jar even tighter as he went for another swig. That was just it, though; the other villagefolk went on, pretending like nothing had happened, families supping on the same stew. His own family went on, pretending like nothing had happened. Or they tried to. But Noa wasn't lying to himself.

When nothing but ash was left, the Purifier mounted his horse, and they made their way back toward the village. Noa hopped and stumbled down from the rooftop with still a little something left in his jar. Another man might've jumped at the movement in the night, but the Purifier's eyes had found Noa from the moment he had turned back toward the village.

Noa held out the jar. "Wan' some?"

The Purifier shook his head. "Go on."

So then, not even the Purifier was celebrating tonight. Well, maybe he already had some of his own. "How many of those sunzabitches 'ave you killed?"

"Not enough," the Purifier said, and he gestured toward the village. "Go on now."

Noa stumbled in through the doorway of the two-story shack he lived in with his two older siblings. It looked like a haphazard puzzle of wood and aluminum panels, but it was sturdy enough to have served his family for over a generation with some repairs here and there. Noa shut the door and even remembered to lock it, but he turned back around to face what he had willingly forgot about: Dafne.

"Dammit, Noa!" She groaned. "You off drinkin' not to be found?"

Noa rolled his eyes. "Back off, Daf. You're not my mom. Tonight's a celebration."

"I'm *not* your mom," Dafne said and grabbed a fistful of his dark hair, "but I am your older sister, so you'll listen to me."

"Let go of me! Cut it out!"

"If I want you home before dark," Dafne said, "you'll be home before—"

"Hey! *Hey!*" The eldest of the three, Wald, stormed down the stairs—still careful not to break them underfoot—and into the common room of their home. "*What* is going *on* in here?"

Dafne let go of Noa's hair and folded her arms behind her back.

Noa threw the jar to the ground where it shattered. "Daf's bustin' my—!"

"*Hey!*" Their older brother clenched his teeth and lowered his voice. "Come on now. You'll pick that up and you'll stop worrying your sister. You're gonna worry her to pieces, alright?"

Just a glare was all that Noa had for his brother.

So, Wald got in his face. "Go on, take a closer look. You'll listen to her, *alright?*"

"Yeah."

"Good," Wald said. "Tonight's not a celebration. Show some damn respect."

Noa huffed, and he shuffled toward the stairs.

Wald sighed. "You and I both know that could be one of your pals next—or you."

Their sister's eyes widened. "Wald! He's almost seventeen!"

"He ain't outta the—"

Noa's fist made sloppy contact with Wald's face. "Fuck you."

Wald only stumbled a step, but he rubbed his jaw.

The youngest brother spat out his next words. "Asshole. It shoulda been you."

“Hey, now,” Dafne said, and she pulled Noa away. “Clean this mess up, find somethin’ to eat, and get yourself to bed.”

Wald stormed out the same way he stormed in. He disappeared up the stairs, then there was the slam of a door and the unmistakable *thunk* of a fist hitting a thin aluminum panel.

“I didn’t mean...” Noa fixed a sobered stare on the glass shards.

“He knows,” and Dafne left it at that. She made her own way up the stairs to her room.

Noa was alone.

Digbsy had already returned to its usual self by the next morning, many of its villagefolk rising well before the rise of the sun to get a head start on the day’s work, and with the Purifier nowhere to be seen—he’d probably heard word of a mutant somewhere else on the Periphery. It was just the villagefolk in the fields. In the mid-spring months, ploughing was nearly done as others began sowing, weeding, and weeding even more as the first sprouts started to appear. Though, for most, it wasn’t an all-day affair. Many farmhands had a secondary profession to help ensure they’d be able to have enough to trade so they could live with more than just food and water, even if it was only little more. While some helped with shack repairs or maintaining the wood and stone fences around the farms, others fashioned clothes or shoes or tools in hopes that it would make the day easier. Boredom so often led to despair, so there was no time for boredom. Those who worked filled their spare time with drinking or gambling or both, or they had children to watch after. Those who didn’t horse around simply worked more. Laziness was theft of time, and few things were looked down upon more than thieves.

In the empty fields, Noa was full-ass yakkin’ away with Jack as they half-ass ploughed the dry soil. “Yeah, but have you seen the pomegranates blossomin’ on Jessa’s chest? Really comin’ in this year. I wouldn’t mind a bite.”

Jack gazed upon Jessa’s chest with his mind’s eye. “Yeah, I could go for a nice couple of pomegranates right about now. Long as they’re not *too* fuzzy.”

“That’s the best part,” Noa said, and he chuckled. “Speakin’ of a bite, do ya think it’s too early to take lunch?”

“As long as Harrison doesn’t catch us, it’s never too early to take lunch,” Jack said. “I got my hands on some nice meat and cheese.”

“You need it if you ever wanna be more than half my size,” Noa said, and he stuck his hoe into the dry soil with no intention of lifting it back up, “but I was thinking we get ourselves a nice little drink. Whaddya say? We deserve it.”

“Most definitely.” Jack swept a scrawny arm in front of himself, gesturing out and across the unfinished fields. They were days behind. “Look at all the good work we’ve done. My mama’d be so proud.”

Noa let out another chuckle. “To be fair, Harrison never thinks we’ve done enough, and I’ve done twice the work you have. Even if you don’t deserve a drink, I do!”

“Like you said—like you *always* say—I’m hardly half your size, so I think it’s only fair that I do hardly half of the work.” Jack stuck his own hoe into the soil, but it refused to stick, toppling over into the soil with a sad and dry *thud*.

“That’s about right.”

"The hoe or the work?"

"Both," Noa said, and they chuckled together. "How many more seasons are you gonna keep using that tired excuse?"

Jack gave an exaggerated shrug. "Beats me," he said, and they started walking toward that path that'd take them back into the village. "But you're right—I oughta cut the shit and start growin' already. Katherine ain't lettin' any short boys steal a kiss from her. Whaddya say? When we get done ploughin' the fields, you can just stick me right there in the dirt."

"Then you can get to ploughin' Katherine." Noa laughed. "If you're not careful, your sister'll end up taller than you."

"Ah, come on," Jack said, groaning through his words. "Can you not mention ploughin' and my sister in the same breath?"

"Hey, not too long before her pomegranates are growin' in too," Noa said, bracing himself, though he didn't need to.

Jack's fist glanced off of Noa's shoulder. "Ellie's little. Don't be twisted."

"See, this is why it's good you're so small," Noa said, hitting his friend on the shoulder.

Jack wobbled from the impact, but it didn't interrupt his looking around, making sure no one was coming nearby. "And don't you forget it! Without me, you'd either have to work double or get a bit straight." With that said, the smaller of the two picked the lock to the back door of the saloon. "Small things have their uses."

"Katherine might disagree," Noa said, and he kept his laughter low.

"Eat shit." Jack snuck into the back door of the saloon with an empty canteen in his hand. It was standard procedure: he pilfered booze by pouring out just enough from already-opened bottles into his canteen. The plan wasn't genius work, but no one had ever caught on. Sure, there had been close calls where Jack had to hide himself under shelves or behind barrels, but taking just enough to get a buzz without rousing a suspicion was a simple art. It was more likely for Gabe, the owner of the fine establishment, to suspect one of his lousy bartenders of overpouring or sneaking a little extra for themselves.

So, even though he had done this more times than he could likely count, sweat beaded on his forehead as he skulked around the back room.

Noa waited, sitting, resting his back against the saloon. He closed his eyes, and a smile almost touched his lips as a breeze rolled through the backstreet. For a moment, he dared to let his thoughts slip, but the sound of nearby hoofbeats brought him back to attention, standing with purpose. When no one peered around any corners, his shoulders and chest slouched, and he took a standing lean against the saloon. He wet his lips.

Hardly a couple of minutes later, Jack returned, sloshing the capped canteen.

"Now, that sounds like lunch," Noa said after licking his lips.

Jack tossed the canteen to his friend. "You can bet on it," he said, then he double-checked that he had re-locked the door.

There wasn't much of nature's shade to be found in Digsby and still not too much of it beyond the wood and stone fences. Now, Digsby was lucky enough to be growing a little orchard of pomegranate hedges, but they were a bit too short to provide too much good shade—for Noa—

and there were sure to be farmhands around in the middle of the day. So, Noa and Jack made their way to the outskirts of Digby, sipping as they went.

Weeks went by without much excitement. All of the ploughing was done with the stretches worked by Noa and Jack done last. Seeds had been sewn, pomegranates had been plucked, and the weather got a bit warmer.

Yet, a dark cloud seemed to hang over Jack's head.

"Who pissed in your grits?" Noa asked, ribbing his buddy.

"Ah, uh," and Jack stumbled over his words. "Katherine."

"Katherine?"

Jack sighed, looking down at the dirt. "Yeah, saw her sneaking a kiss with Alexander."

"Ah, yeah? That's a real shame." Noa took another mouthful of pomegranate.

"Y'all are being so quiet," Noa said. "What'd I do now?"

Dafne looked up from her stew as her complexion paled. "Oh no. Noa..."

The younger brother glared. "What?"

"It makes sense that Jack didn't tell you," Dafne said, her words almost a whisper.

"Tell me what?" Noa looked to his older brother. "What are you on ab—," but his voice caught in his throat as realization caught up to him.

"It's Ellie, Noa," Wald said. "She's sick."

"She'll be fine," Dafne said in her most reassuring voice.

Noa shrugged, and his face was a mask of unconcern. "Oh yeah, sure. If Jack didn't mention it, she'll probably be fine. Their family's pretty healthy. Hardy people."

His older sister blinked at him. "Right... Yes! Exactly. It's nothing to worry about."

"And," Noa said, "sick doesn't always mean the plague, Daf. What's she got? Just a fever?"

"Ah, yeah, just a fever," Dafne said. However, both Dafne and her their older brother had received word that Elizabeth had been put behind bars, which meant that word had been sent out for a Purifier.

Wald spoke up. "Even if it was plague—"

"If," Dafne said.

"—well, she could be just fine."

Noa nodded. "Yeah, I know," and then he returned to eating his stew.

When Jack was weeding the fields, Noa was helping some folks strip and replace some aluminum paneling on their shack. When Jack was pruning the pomegranate hedges, Noa was helping distribute food throughout Digsby. As bad luck would have it, over those couple of days, Noa only ever seemed to be working on Harrison's farm when Jack wasn't. Noa was good at making his own luck—for better or worse.

He sat alone in his room, sipping through the last of his reserves. *I mean, who does he think he is? Skippin' hard work like a bum*, Noa thought, fuming. *A good sweat would take him off whatever's on his mind botherin' him*. He allowed himself a gulp of the booze. *I always knew Jack was half a man, probably less than that*.

Never mind that Harrison had actually put aside his strictures to tell Jack to take some time off in the afternoons—an oddity, but true; Harrison knew Jack to be one of those sensitive types, and there was no use eking out what little half a man with half a spirit had. And never mind that Ellie had been behind bars for two days now, which meant her sickness was much more than a fever—it was much more than the red eyes and lesions too.

Now, Jack was alone.

Weak sobbing filled the air.

Jack slunk along the wall across from the bars before he stopped and peered in, straining his eyes in the darkness. “Ellie,” he whispered, a desperate hiss, “Ellie, it’s me, your brother.”

There were sniffles, some shuffling, and then a deformed shape appeared beyond the bars, just barely visible. “Oh, Jack,” said a voice that resembled Elizabeth’s. “Jack, please. I’m so scared. I don’t want to be stuck in here anymore.”

Jack looked right at what was supposed to be his sister and gulped, and, worse yet, he had to tilt his head back to even recognize her. There was her face hanging down above him, confined behind the bars, but those were definitely her green eyes.

Her voice was a whimper. “Jack, please... Please, can you get me out?” She stared down at her older brother. “I know you can get me out.”

“Ellie, I’m so sorry,” Jack said. “I-I don’t say it enough, but I love you. I still love you.”

“Jack,” she said, and her warped fingers wrapped around the iron bars. “Please, you can’t let me stay in here. I’m so scared, Jack.”

Her brother had winced at the sight of her. “Oh, Ellie... I can get you out, I can probably get you out, but what are you gonna do? Where are you gonna go? The Purifier’s gonna be here tomorrow and—”

Elizabeth began to weep again. “No... No... Please. You won’t let him kill me.”

“He’s...” Jack took a huge breath that shook his entire body. “He’s not gonna kill you, Ellie. He’s not gonna—”

“And you won’t let him make me go away?”

His mind flashed to the ‘V’ he had seen branded into the foreheads of mutants. “No, Ellie—oh, Ellie—you’re my sister. I’ll get you out, but what are you gonna do?” Jack looked around in the mixed light of the moon and stars. There were keys somewhere, but he just wanted to make sure that nobody was comin’. All that he needed was in his pocket. He pulled the tools out, hands trembling, and he looked ahead. His first step was reluctant, and guilt churned in his stomach for feeling fear over his own little sister. “Not a monster,” he muttered, and he snapped to, looking at Elizabeth’s face. “Not a hard lock, I said. I’ve seen worse.” Nervous laughter flew from his lips, and he occupied himself with opening the lock.

“Thank you, Jack. I knew you’d save me.”

Hardly a minute had gone by and there was a click. “Got it,” Jack said, and he took his time in looking back up at her.

She pushed gently. When it budged, she pushed it the rest of the way open. Still, Elizabeth started to sniffle and cry again. “I’m sorry, Jack.”

“For what?”

"You could get into an awful lot of trouble because of me."

"Nah," he said. "What proof do they—" but he was cut off by the crack of his own skull against the wall. Jack's body slumped to the ground.

Elizabeth yelped. "No!" She stared down at her own hands, frightened by these bestial urges trying to protect, the ones that knocked Jack out. She then looked around, hoping no one had heard. Then, finally, she brought her gaze back to her brother. She knelt down and caressed his face. "I didn't mean... Oh, no... Jack."

There was an almost imperceptible drip of blood from the back of his head.

Elizabeth skittered back. Not only could she hear it, but she could smell it, and her stomach growled. *I just... haven't eaten in a while*, she thought. Her hand had started reaching out to him, but she stopped herself, and, then, she ran.

Jack's body roused itself. His mind was drowning in sleep, and the world around him was still dark. "Ellie?" His question was a pitiful croak.

No one else was there.

He squeezed his eyes shut, but it only brought him awareness of his splitting headache. Then, trying to stand up brought him awareness of his dizziness. "Ellie?" The name had kind of just fallen from his lips. He got on his hands and knees, breathing, and retching came, but he left no vomit behind. He pulled himself up by the bars, closed the door, and locked it again. Jack retched, then crawled back toward the way that he had managed to get in until he could get himself walking again. Once he was on two legs, he made his way outside.

It was dark, but his body was telling him that the sun's glow would be there any minute, climbing over the horizon. So, it was too late to head back home. Digsby would be waking from its slumber in a short while.

So, Jack went to work.

"Oh, you're up early, Jack. Couldn't sleep? Or are ya here to make up for lost time?" The voice belonged to Zachary, another one of the farmhands. The chuckle also belonged to him. Zachary was the biggest fan of his own jokes.

But Jack just grabbed an empty pomegranate basket.

Zachary sighed. "Put the basket down. You're weeding today."

"Mmh."

"Anyway," the older farmhand said, shuffling around, "seems some coyotes got into one of the coops last night. Nasty, Harrison said. Bunch of good hens ripped to shreds."

Jacks ears perked, his face went hot, and his frail body shuddered. "Ya don't say..."

"Just watch yourself out there," Zachary said.

It didn't take long for them to find the deputy and see that Elizabeth was missing. Whatever they had blamed on coyotes was pinned on whatever monster might be out there.

"Yeah, he's lucky it wasn't his shootin' arm. It'll heal, though," one Digsby man said to another. "Said he was startled, pulled out his gun, and just ended up gettin' mauled."

"Well, shit, what are we lookin' for? A bear?" The other man looked down at a crude black powder rifle fixed with spare parts. "Who's huntin' who?"

"Just be glad it went after chickens first."

"Oh, I'll be glad, but, if it's goin' after chickens, you better watch yourself."

"Then, it's good it's not goin' after chickenshit else you'd be screwed."

The two Digsby men chuckled amongst themselves as they made their first round patrolling the pomegranate hedges.

"Do they know how it—er, she—got out?" asked the man with the rifle.

"Nope. Just a weird smear of blood on one of the walls, but the door was still locked."

"How does something the size of a bear squeeze between those bars?"

"It..." He had to think hard about that. "It doesn't."

"Well," said the man with the rifle, "the Purifier should be here soon. Maybe we can get off here soon for a game of dice. Give you a chance to win your money back."

"Oh, the Purifier's already here," said the other.

"Oh, well then. That settles who's huntin' who, and I think we're bait."

This Purifier was different from the last, but hardly so. They're fairly uniform, and they all wore the same uniform: that black duster. As his horse took him around the outskirts of Digsby, the Purifier scanned the land for movement. This thing hadn't left a trail, and, while vegetation was quite sparse, there were still enough places to lay low, even if this one was as big as a bear. It'd be a waste of time to check in every bramble and behind every boulder. There weren't enough villagefolk that they could properly spread out for a good search. If it had any humanity left, it might not want to risk comin' into contact and findin' itself at the end of a barrel, and that's exactly why they had to sacrifice a few more chickens and one of the sicklier goats for bait beyond the wood and stone fences. Now, of course, it meant less food for Digsby, but a preemptive strike was better than letting a monster pick off more of their livestock—or even the villagefolk—one by one. It had to eat, and, judging by the last report, there wasn't much else around Digsby, which made them its best source.

He sighed. It was always a mix, though. There wasn't a mutant he had ever feared goin' toe-to-toe with, but havin' to meet and talk to the folks that had spawned the mutant—*that had raised the child before*, he thought, correcting his mindset—was just the most dreadful thing. Some folks had their preferences, of course, but they all knew it didn't matter. Marking what was their child as a Vector, exiling it to the barrens, and pretending that things would work out was one option; but putting a bullet between its eyes—or some of its eyes, as the case may be—was just as valid an option, and most seemed to find it easier after facing the real of it. In fact, it was probably easier to make pretend about the latter. Many folks did it, and there was no shame in it. They would turn their heads upside down long enough that it's no longer their child—it's the monster that killed their child. There was grieving all the same, but some relished in the satisfaction at believing that whatever had killed the boy or girl they had raised was dead.

For the Purifier, he just wanted to see it dead. It wasn't bloodthirst, but it was more than a job, contrary to what many Periphery folk believed. The Purifiers were raised by the Republic, nurtured with the knowledge that the world could return to its former glory if all of humanity could be cleansed of this disease. Of course, only one in a dozen children would go through the change, and most of them would end up dead, but the few that lived were still too many. The

number of Purifiers rivalled the number of monsters at best, and there just weren't enough resources to take the fight to them. And the world needed people more than it didn't need monsters. It's why he protected them. It'd take all they had to rebuild—

"Hey!" came a voice from a way behind. "I think I saw something over here!"

So, the Purifier grabbed the reins of his horse, and they trotted over. "What'd you see?" the Purifier asked the man as he rode up beside him.

"Uh, well, not much," he said, and he averted the cold gaze of the Purifier, "but there was definitely movement in them there bushes." He pointed out to a patch of dry bushes.

They were nearby, but "You think something the size of a bear could hide there?" The Purifier scanned over the bushes and the surrounding area.

"Well, uh, no, I guess not."

"Sorry, I don't mean to be harsh," said the Purifier.

The man's eyes went all wide as his eyebrows twisted in confusion above them. "Sorry? You don't have to—well, *I'm* sorry."

"No, don't be," the Purifier said. "Just take more care."

"O-of course!" He turned around as if his clothes had gone all stiff, and he muttered, "Why, I didn't even know Purifiers could talk that much..."

But the Purifier's ear picked up the man's words, and he allowed himself half a chuckle.

"Oh, darling, what happened?" she asked her son.

Jack and his mother stood in the kitchen where she was inspecting a patch of blood-matted hair on the back of his head. "Ah, well, Zachary told me about what happened with the hens, but I didn't believe him a bit. When I poked my head in the coop, I was so surprised that I jumped and smacked my head on the—well, the chicken door, I guess."

His mother had already poured some alcohol on a thing rag by the time his explanation was through. "Oh dear! Well," and she pulled the corners of her lips up for a smile, "we're just going to have to make sure you're all better. Stand still."

"Just be... gentle. Ah!" He jerked his head away the rag. "Shit!"

"Jack!"

"Sorry, mama. That *stings*," he said.

"I-it's okay, darling." She sighed and took more care in cleaning his wound as her son took more care in bearing through the pain. "I just want to make sure you're alright. A mother is supposed to protect and take care of her..." Her voice fell away to weeping.

"Oh, mama," Jack said, and he turned around to embrace his mother. "Don't cry."

For a precious few moments, it was just them: a mother and her son wrapped in a comforting warmth that insulated them from a cold reality.

"Jack," she whispered.

"Yes, mama?"

"You're a big man to be taking care of your *mama*. Know that."

Wald returned home, stepping through the doorway, closing the door behind him, carrying the old revolver that belonged to his father before him. It was one of the few firearms in Digsby

that was in half-decent shape—Wald enjoyed maintaining it in his spare time—, though it still had nothing on the revolvers carried by the Purifiers.

Noa looked over his shoulder and said, “Nothin’?”

“I’m afraid so,” Wald said as he set the gun down, “but the Purifier’s stayin’ out there with a few—uh—lookouts, of course.” He took off his jacket, settling into being back home. “I offered to stay out there, but I was told the best thing for stoppin’ a bear was a musket.” He shrugged. “Anyhow, where’s your sister?”

“Daf’s in her room working on a new blanket.”

Wald chuckled. “Well, how come you’re not bein’ useful?”

Noa rolled his eyes and returned to the wooden fire-branded tiles before him. “How come you’re still botherin’ me? ‘Least I’m in and not drinkin’.”

“That just means you’re out,” Wald said. He cracked his knuckles as he yawned, then he walked over to the table where his younger brother was seated. He stared at Noa who was ignoring him and staring at the tiles, and Wald stifled a laugh. “So bored that you’re playin’ a thinkin’ game—Harmonies, huh? Next, you’ll be drinkin’ pine tea instead of booze.”

“Shut up, Wald,” but Noa never took his eyes off the tiles. He placed a tile—one branded with a delicate flower—onto the lattice of the painted game board. “You stink. Maybe take a wash once in a while.”

The older brother inhaled long and hard. “Ah, yeah. Smells like work. That’s gotta be me.”

A large hunched shape lumbered toward the dead goat. It sniffed around before tearing into the carcass with claw and fang alike, ripping flesh and guts, cracking bones like twigs, its jaws snapping with ravenous hunger.

Some dozen yards away, a man and a woman looked on, only seeing what they could with the lamps a way behind them and the moon overhead, but they heard everything: the sounds of a beast, the sounds of wet meat being shredded.

There was a horrified look on the woman’s face, masked by the darkness. “Mercy...”

A hard swallow came from the man as he lifted a musket in his trembling hands, bracing it against his shoulder, pointing the bayoneted end in the direction of the wavering shadows and the sound of *shlorp crunch shlorp*.

The woman’s voice came as a hiss. “Shoot, George, shoot.”

Hoofbeats came up behind them.

The monstrosity looked up to find the new and unfamiliar sounds and smells. Behind the gore and the lumpy unsightly flesh was an all-too-familiar face. Perhaps that face would’ve been unrecognizable now to most, but not to George and his wife.

“Oh, have mercy on my—” He had squeezed his eyes shut and squeezed the trigger, causing the flash of gunpowder and a thunderous *boom*.

And a shot redirected by guilt whizzed off into the night.

It stood there, hunched and stunned while old instincts fought the new.

One after the other, six more shots rang out and four found their purchase in its mass.

It reeled and gurgled out a scream.

“Run!” yelled the Purifier, and his horse charged by them.

George and his wife unfroze, they saw the longsword in the Purifier's hand as it glinted in the dim lamplight, George dropped the gun, and they bolted.

It had stumbled and fallen backward, writhing in agony.

The Purifier swooped his blade upward in an arc, delivering a decisive slash.

Except it had met air.

And the Purifier was sent hurtling off his horse.

His horse had been gored, its ribcage caved in, hot guts spilling out and wetting the dry soil upon which they were splayed.

There, upright and already charging at the Purifier on its feet and knuckles, was a mutant with four bloody holes in its barrel chest and a snarl on its face.

Hitting the ground already braced, the Purifier rolled and managed to get to his feet before immediately springing out of the way of a clawed arm that whiffed through the very spot where he had been half a moment before. With a calculated tumble and roll, he found his footing again away from and to the side of the monster. He had dropped the revolver in the initial fall—there was no time to reload—, so he gripped his longsword in two hands. His feet shifted. His arms twisted up to his right side. His sword craned in front of him, keeping the distance. His composure never wavered. His eyes never left his target. His body danced away from its wild strike, and it reared again. His arms twisted up to his left side. His sword craned in front of him. His eyes found an opening, so he poised to strike. His body swiveled around its claws. His sword met thick flesh. His feet shifted again, drawing a long cut with his blade. His body ended up to its side. His blade finished with a false edge cut. His sword stayed between them in a defensive stance, but the monster had stopped moving.

In fewer seconds than could be counted on one hand, it was over. The monster, bleeding and oozing pus, had collapsed in a heap.

A dozen or so Digsby villagefolk watched from the center of the village—even standing as close as the fields would be too personal—as the Purifier lit one pyre, then the next. It was a waste of good horsemeat, but contamination would be worse than starvation, even if only barely so. The Purifier spoke no words, but he gave his fallen partner a solemn nod.

No one watched from rooftops, drinking.

"Stop him!" a woman shrieked. It was Jack's mother, George's wife. She was clutching her skirts, making a clumsy run in the direction of the fires.

Jack had a head start and was much quicker as he sped up the path, sobbing.

The Purifier turned his horse around and moved into the child's way.

As Jack got close, within speaking distance of the Purifier but well out of earshot even for his own mother who gave him chase, he said, "It was me. I got her out. That was my blood on the wall. That was my blood."

The Purifier didn't move, but he didn't stop Jack either.

"Stop him! Jack, get back here!"

Jack had never stopped running, but he looked over his shoulders, finding the glint of the Purifier's eyes. "Don't tell them! Mercy, don't tell them!" As his head spun back around, he saw her one last time, he saw his sister in the flames. "Ellie, wait! I can't live without you!" With the

blade he pulled from his pocket, he opened his wrists, and he flung himself into the flames. A blood-curdling scream was drawn from his lips as his flesh caught fire.

"Stop him!" A blood-curdling cry came down the path. "Jack! Jack! No! Jack!" She attempted to weave around the horse, but the Purifier was already on his own two feet and had restrained her, stopping from moving much closer. She fought, kicking and screaming.

Her scream was lonely. Jack's pain had gone in seconds, and his spirit had left not long after, following his sister into the dark.

"What did you do? What did you do? Why didn't you stop him? Are you mad? What did you do? Jack! Jack!" She screamed, and she took in the sight of her two children melting before her, letting it shatter her heart, letting it rend her soul from her body, and a mother died, leaving behind an empty woman. "Why... didn't you...?"

"He was already dead," said the Purifier.

The next morning, two more graves were dug outside of the grieving village, and the two bodies that had been found hanging were laid to rest. There was an empty home in Digby. There was a dying wish kept by a Purifier. This time, Noa wasn't alone in drowning his thoughts in booze. Yet, all the booze in the Periphery, in the Republic, and across the barrens wouldn't be enough to fill all of Digsby's empty hearts.

Anger was boiling inside Noa. He thrashed about his room, knocking things about, throwing punches hard enough to break wood panels and dent aluminum sheets, bloodying his knuckles as primal rage poured exploded from his throat in yells. *What right? What right did you have to throw your life away like that, you lousy son of a bitch! Then, your parents...* Noa picked the bottle back up to take another long drink from it—his throat and tongue were so numb it was easy—as he pounded his empty fist against the wall. *You killed them!* "You stupid fucking son of a bitch! I hate your guts! I always knew you were a pussy!"

Yet, understandably, it'd be hard for most anyone to fathom. When others didn't have the choice to live, how could others possibly choose to die?

On the other end was the Purifier. He would know it's not the right question to ask—because they didn't simply choose to die. They were already dead.

Small folk like those in Digsby wouldn't heal. They never did. It was their own plague. While one warped men and women into monsters on the outside, theirs was a condition of the soul, an affliction of the spirit. Only the youngest were resistant, only those not yet born were immune, but all grew ever more susceptible with each passing moment, shedding their innocence one layer at a time until their shell finally cracked open.

Even the Purifiers, some of the most capable warriors, couldn't forever hold their own against an enemy they couldn't touch. Facing down threat after threat, Purifiers often died young enough that their shield of duty and purpose left them untouched by that soul-spirit plague. Still, it was no cure, which is why some turned to faith. It was for that very reason that gang that called themselves The Redeemers thrived out in the barrens. Its founder, an ex-Purifier who had perhaps lived too long, spouted the doctrine that all should seek purity in the eyes of Allah, that purity would lead to blissful Nirvana after life, and that impurity would lead to the icy Purgatory after death. Yet, even so, faith wasn't a cure—it seemed that, where duty and purpose was a

shield, the beliefs and the code held by the Redeemers was an armor. Yet, for as much as it was better protection, such delusions were their own kind of plague.

Is it better to choose one over the other? The Purifier wondered. *Perhaps I've lived too long.* With the local threat gone yet no horse to take him elsewhere, he was stuck in a grieving village for at least a little while longer.

Only a few weeks after, the Lucky Flame Festival began in Digsby. For a couple of days, only the mornings were spent working on the farms as the crops were given time to grow. The afternoon and evenings were filled with music, feasting, and celebration. There were contests to prove who had the best marksmanship, to see who could throw a boulder the farthest, to see who could drink the most hard pomegranate punch in a small amount of time, and to see who had the best luck, which was tested with all of wooden tiles, painted playing cards, and dice of all shapes and sizes and materials. Those who had put in work during the early spring showed off the best of their wares which had been kept in reserve for this day. Well-cobbled shoes, intricate jewelry, decorated vases, dolls and toys and games crafted with extra care, and beautifully-forged knives took prominent display as they made excellent gifts for a special someone when asking them to be your sweetheart at the Sunflower Dance the next day. Of course, a small basket of candies or cakes worked on its own or as a great pairing with another gift. For others, the greatest gift that year was that there wasn't a black duster in sight.

Noa had also vanished from sight by the time the sun was falling in the sky and evening festivities rolled around. Whenever his head started to hurt, he simply drank more.

He had come in third out of a dozen or so other competitors during one of the drinking contests, vomited a sickly purple-red mixture on the floor, then continued to drink to make up for it because they continued to cheer him on.

"Someone looks ready for some dice!" A man had put his burly arm around Noa's shoulders and squeezed. "Whaddya say?"

Of course, Noa had been delighted to agree. They were happy to see him drink, and now they were all happy to see him win a few rounds of Get Even. When he sat at the table, he had pulled out a small leather drawstring pouch containing a bunch of spent brass for a myriad of calibers alongside some paper and powder cartridges.

Each bet was five paper cartridges or five casings of common pistol calibers. Between Noa, five other men, including the one that had brought him in, and two women, there had been enough bartering power on the table to feed a grown man for a few days. It would exchange hands quickly. Each bet only lasted a single round, and each round was two often two rolls, though rolling a *get even* was an automatic win. Each player held three dice in their right hand and a spare casing in their left hand.

In the first round, two men had rolled *odds out* and immediately lost, and everyone else hardly edged ahead with bunk rolls. The remaining six players performed a little sleight of hand before sticking out their right fist. When all of the right fists were in the middle, they were turned over and out into open palms. Because there was no sense in not rerolling bunk rolls, everyone had the extra brass in their palms, signaling that they would pay it as an ante reroll two of their three dice. Having everyone show their hand at once was a rule used for quick and dirty games—it

meant that no one knew for sure who would reroll, so no one could base their choice on another's. The standard way meant going around the circle so each could decide if they were standing or rerolling; however, that meant, for fairness's sake, the game would be closed until everyone had started and ended the circle. Nevertheless, in that second round, there had been two more bunks, a pair two with six, a pair six with one, Noa's high six, and the winning trip three. The pot had gone to the winner and the reroll ante to Noa.

With a hot start, it hadn't taken long for Noa's pouch to be lightened. After a long back and forth, and a high of almost double what he had on him, he had walked away with hardly more than half his pouch. Of course, he had been too sloshed to care.

He had eaten his fill of sweets and meats, and he had gotten his hand on more drink. After, he had gone to throw boulders with some boys his age. When a few rounds had gone by and he had proven his strength, he went to fight in a tug of war with some others. That had spiraled more than Noa's head was spinning. Someone had made a remark about being glad that they were doing better in tug of war without Jack on their team. Things were blurry, and time had seemed to jump to two boys pulling Noa off of the boy who had made the remark.

"Bet you feel like a big man, huh?" said the boy on the ground, and he spat blood onto the dirt as he rolled over. "Take a joke, you prick."

And Noa had ended up back at home, and there he still was, lying on his bed and groaning while most of the rest of the Digsby villagefolk were gathered at that night's feast in the common house. He still nursed from a jar of booze that he had taken home with him—of course, it was only to keep him from coming down too fast. His head had seemed to split when Dafne gave him more than an earful on account of him being such an embarrassment to himself and his family. He hadn't been able to make it back home without her help, and she had made sure to remind him of how lucky he was to have her because there was no way that Wald would be willing to put up with him. She had reminded him of that every few steps of the way, and her voice just wouldn't get out of his head. His head was pounding.

There was more pounding at the door. Well, it was a light knocking, but any extra sound was like salt in the wound.

Noa did his best to drown it out with another sip from his bottle.

It came again. And again.

Noa heaved himself off of his bed and stumbled down the stairs and toward the door. He grabbed the handle and wrenched it open. "What?" he said, his words a cross between a growl and yet another groan. "Whaddya—?" His whole face twisted from angry annoyance into eye-squinting confusion. "Katherine?"

"Um, hi, Noa, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be a bother, um, so I hope I'm not being a bother or anything," she said at the ground, all without taking a breath.

"No, uh, you're fine, I suppose."

"Well, your sister said I could find you here—she said you weren't feelin' too well. Uh, well, and I was just lookin' for you at the feast and all." Katherine glanced up at him, then down at the ground again, then back up into Noa's amber eyes. "I suppose I just want to know if you, ya know, wanted to go to the Sunflower Dance with me," she said, and she thrust out a sunflower at him. "I know you was friends with Jack and all—"

Noa winced.

“—and I had always fancied him a bit, and I saw you hit Alexander after he made that awful joke about Jack, and I just felt all aflutter, and I wanted to thank you, and I didn’t have a gift, and all I had was this sunflower, and I didn’t know if someone had already asked you to the dance or if you had asked anyone, and I know I shouldn’t even be here, alone with a boy, and I know especially my daddy thinks you drink too much and don’t work enough—”

He remembered he still had his latest bottle in his hand, and its weight made it harder to feel insulted so much as scolded.

“—but I think you’re handsome and kinda—”

“Slow,” he said, “slow down. No one else has asked me and I wasn’t really plannin’ on goin’, but I suppose I got nothin’ better to do.”

“That’s wonderful!” she said, beaming at him.

Noa dug into the ground with one of his heels. “Yeah. Ah, well, if you don’t mind, I think I’m gonna lie back down because I’m sufferin’ from a bit of the overindulgence.”

Katherine’s smile got even warmer. “I understand. I have to get back to my family. Maybe I’ll come by again later with some bread and water for you.”

“That’d, uh, that’d be nice.”

While there weren’t many flowers out in there in the barrens around Digsby, the Sunflower Dance was a villagefolk-curated spectacle, decorated with lovingly-put-together arrangements from personal gardens. A bit of a misnomer, the Sunflower Dance was decorated with multi-colored fringed pinks, purple true love roses, early-blooming thyme, red-hot pokers, and prickly pear flowers. It was just about everything except sunflowers. Instead, the dance was named in honor of the sunflowers—they would start to bloom in the coming weeks, a beautiful sign that summer was upon them.

Knowing that Katherine, like all of the other unpartnered women, would be wearing some sort of dress or skirts adorned with their own flowers, real or sewn-in, Noa took it upon himself to bathe and wear some trousers that had seen less of the fields than others. Because he had figured Dafne already knew about Katherine on account of her asking his sister where he was, he had opened himself to her help and suggestions.

Dafne had made sure her younger brother was looking his finest, and she had arranged a small bouquet for him before he had even asked.

“Thanks, Daf,” Noa said. “Ya know, you’re not always a bad sister.”

“And I’d say the same about you,” she said, “if you had bothered to ask about who I’ll be dancing with today.”

Noa stared at her.

She waited.

And Noa sighed. “Alright, who’re you gonna be dancin’ with tonight?”

“Kirb,” she said. “It’s about time I get partnered up.”

“Kirby?” He craned his neck and cocked his head. “Ya mean, like, Harrison’s son?”

“Well, yeah,” said Dafne, blushing a bit.

“Are the rumors true? Does he really fuck chickens?”

She raised her hand for a slap, stopped herself, curled her fingers, and brought her fist back down by her side. "Noa," she said through gritted teeth. "I'm not sure I heard you right. That didn't sound like a question that a *brother* would ask his *sister* who just spent her own time and brass helping *him* get ready to kiss *some girl*."

He had taken half a step back. "Ah, you're right." Noa cleared his throat. "I was... uh... just wonderin', really though, why Kirby?"

"Well," and Dafne sighed, "I'm not getting younger and I've spent some of my prettiest years helping Wald keep our family safe, and we agreed some time ago that it was time for us to try to move forward, and, well, it's hard to find someone who'll partner with someone who might carry plague in their blood."

Tension ran through Noa's body. "But that's just it. You're old enough. You haven't gone through the change. Why does it matter if—?"

"Noa," Dafne said, "it's fine. That's just... how it is."

"That shouldn't be how it is, Daf! Is that gonna be how it is for me too? Am I gonna be haunted by them forever?" His tension turned to shuddering. "Mercy, is that what it is? Is that why Katherine's father doesn't like me? Not because I'm lazy and I drink too much, but because they know my family and think I'm some kind of... carrying some kind of curse?"

Dafne couldn't stifle her giggle. "I always forget you *feel* when you're sober."

"And I hate every moment of it," Noa said, spitting out his words. He stared back at his sister. "What're you waitin' for? You wanna see me cry? I ain't a bitch!"

"Noa," she said as she hugged him. "I've only seen you cry twice in your whole dang life, not even when you were a kid or when Jack died, and I never want to see it again. Not because it makes you a... 'b'-word. But because I don't want to see you hurt."

He finally managed to get away from her arms. "I'm not hurt, I'm *pissed*. And I was pissed when Jack died too! Because he didn't die. He threw away his life."

"Alright, Noa, that's enough."

"No!" Noa yelled, and he slammed his fist against the wall. "Because he was weak. Because he couldn't just get over it when his sister changed. His parents had nothing left, and now there's nothin' left of them. But look at me! I'm doin' just dandy. I'm *alive*. *We're* alive. Did you or me or Wald throw our lives away? Huh? No! And who in this piece of shit village is Wald dancin' with then? Who wants to lower themselves to partner with a cursed man?"

Dafne let out a tight-lipped chuckle. "Well, at least you care to know." She swallowed hard and went through a deep breath. "You might be glad to know she's not from this piece of 's' village. D'you remember when he traveled with that trader from Kimura for a while?"

"No..." It wasn't an answer to his sister's question.

"Well, he has a daughter—Moriko, I think he said—, and the trader like Wald so much that he wanted him to—"

"No. What? Why did he tell you? She's comin' to Digsby, right?"

"Well, no," she said, "and he only told me when I told him I'm to be dancing with Kirb. He said he's been waiting for you to turn seventeen and for me to settle down before he leaves. I suppose he figured I'd be settled by the time you turned seventeen." She shrugged. "He was right."

"What about me?"

"What about Katherine?" Dafne patted his back. "I can talk to her father for you and tell him that you'll clean up your act."

"I think he cares more about— And hold on! But what am I gonna do?"

"You'll clean up your act, Noa. I guess I should let you know early, but Wald and I were planning on leaving the shack to you. We can afford to."

Noa sat himself down and dropped his head into his hands. "It's so sudden."

"You're almost seventeen, Noa!"

"And it's not like I wanna marry Katherine or anything! She asked me!"

"Well, Katherine's a sweet girl, probably sweeter than what you deserve. I suppose I figured maybe you two had been flirting, though I know you said Jack had an eye—"

"This isn't— this isn't about Jack! This is about *me!*"

"You're acting so helpless."

"*You're acting so selfish!*"

"Don't be so hopeless, Noa. Mother and father would want all of us to be happy—"

"Well, all of us *aren't* happy!"

"—and they'd want you to start growing up. Father's lasting wish was that his youngest son would grow up to be a wise man."

"They just didn't want another dead—"

"*No, Noa!*" Dafne yelled. "Sure, it's like you said, you're *alive*. But you know as well as I do that they wanted *more* for all of us, even if they didn't always show it. And do you even remember how mother was in her last days? So devastated that her husband had been killed by the plague that lingered in his blood and so soon after she lost her second daughter. Oh, but mother lived, she was very much alive—for a while—, but it all ate at her mind, and she became a deranged and sad woman, and then we lost her too. So, are you satisfied with being proud that you're alive and not dead? Is being alive enough for you? Or are you rotting on the inside too?"

Noa's mouth moved but no words found their way out.

"That's what I thought. So, skip the dance and make your way through another bottle, but don't you *dare* to *ever* come to me and complain that your life feels... rotten." With another deep breath, Dafne lost some of her tension, her shoulders relaxing.

He turned his shame into anger, and he threw over the table. "You don't know me! You're just like Wald! You both get a kick out of looking down on me! Take your own shit out somewhere else! On *someone* else! Kirby will be lucky to have you," he said, his last words calm and dripping venom. And he stormed up the stairs without a care for the wear he was putting on them.

At the Sunflower Dance, Noa did his best to avoid his siblings. Wald was easy. He was off doing his own thing, probably tinkering with that revolver or striking up some kind of a deal somewhere. But Dafne was dancing around with Kirby, smiling and giggling as if she hadn't just dived into her nightmares.

"Really, are you alright, Noa?" Katherine asked. She looked stunning. Her father had more than enough brass and cartridges that he could afford luxury makeup, and a beautifully-curled hairdo with a small bow and a few ribbons woven in, and a lovely blue-dyed dress with flowers of all different sizes and colors—though, mainly purple and large—embroidered without a single

loose thread showing. Of course, it only accentuated Katherine's own beauty—her young but supple shape, unblemished skin, glossy brunette hair, and mossy green eyes.

Noa looked drab by comparison, but Noa still looked better than his usual self, all except for that scowl he still wore on his face. "That's the fourth time you've asked me that since we started dancin'. I told you I'm alright. Just the overindulgence. It's a bit bright."

Katherine grinned from ear to ear, drinking in every word of her handsome dance partner as if it were her own kind of booze. When she laughed, it sounded like any man lookin' at her would expect it to sound: as beautiful as she was. "Maybe we oughta get you a hat."

"Well," he said, having returned to scanning for his sister, "I have a straw hat at home."

"But maybe we oughta get you a nice hat—for the occasion," and her smile rang out in every single one of her words.

Noa huffed, and his eyes fell back to Katherine. "That's very kind of you, but aren't I supposed to be the one giving you gifts?"

"You did. You agreed to dance with me," she said, paused, and spoke again, "and the flowers were nice too."

Goosepimples spread across Noa's skin. His mind worked over how he could reply to one of the nicest things he had ever heard about himself.

"Come on," Katherine said, taking his hand in her smaller hand, leading him away from the fenced-off dancing area. "Let's get you a nice hat."

He knew it would take a dozen Katherines to even stand a chance beating him in an arm wrestle, but there she was, pulling him along effortlessly.

"Hello, Louise!" Katherine said to the woman behind the stand.

"Well, hello, Katherine!" Louise said, smiling back. "Surely you're not getting a hat and coverin' up that lovely hair of yours."

Noa's eyes were drawn in. Taking the time to really notice and look at his dance partner, Katherine really did have her long brunette hair curled up quite nice and fancy-like. Of course, it would also look nice down and wavy as it usually was, but, as she showed off her hair to Louise, he watched it spring and bounce, and even Noa wasn't too dense to realize how fitting that was for someone like Katherine.

"No, the hat is actually for Noa," she said. "The sun keeps getting in his eyes, and, well, I think it'd look great on him anyway!"

Louise chuckled like the kind older lady she was. "Anything to make sure he can keep taking in your beauty, or maybe it's *you* that's shining in his eyes!"

"Oh, please," Katherine said, waving her hand through the air. When her arm came back down, her hand found Noa's, and she interlaced their fingers.

"And you're right, dear. A nice hat could do him well," she said, and she sized him up. "Not as a gentleman perhaps, but rugged, like an honest man, or even a Purifier."

"Maybe we'll have to get him a black duster too," she said, and she turned up to Noa to find him staring down at her. Her mossy green eyes met his glossy amber gaze. "Well," she said, "which one d'you fancy?"

"Oh, dear," Louise said, "I don't even know if he's so much as glanced at the hats!"

Katherine giggled, and the hat-seller joined in.

For a moment, Noa was worried. Something was wrong with his ears. They were so hot, burning up as if they had stayed out too long in the sun. "Ah, w-well," he said, stammering and taking his first look over the hats. "Maybe that one?" He pointed.

Louise grabbed the cowboy hat and handed it to Noa. "Go ahead! Try it on!"

Noa put it on his head and struggled to look up at the brim of the hat. "Do you have... uh... a mirror I could borrow?"

"Of course," Louise said, and she passed him the hand mirror she had already grabbed for him. "It looks real good on you. You look like one of them Republican Rangers!"

Noa puffed out his chest. "Oh, do I?" He found himself smiling at his reflection, and he looked over at Katherine to find her lips in a twist of uncertainty. He emphasized his twang, imitating what he imagined a horse-ridin' lawman of the far-off Republic might sound like. "You don' like it, miss?"

Her lips pressed into a smile as he took off the hat. "There's no denyin' it looks good. But you're *not* a Purifier or a Ranger—a uniform doesn't suit you—you're your own man!" She looked over the hats, her eyes squinted in scrutiny, then she pointed and asked, "Louise, would you mind grabbin' that one back there?"

"Well, of course," Louise said, reaching for it, "but it's not my best work. I must admit I made it in a hurry."

"Then, that's perfect," Katherine said.

The hat was a natural-looking wool sombrero with a wide and somewhat bent brim that turned up more in some places than others. The discolored strip of hide around the rim holding the ends together showed signs of sloppy sewing. Still, it came to a nice domed point, even if it was a tad misshapen, and the rope and hide hat band had a simple design a sunburst with a dozen or so arrows on each side pointing toward it, even if it was uneven in some spots.

Noa donned the sombrero and watched Katherine's green eyes light back up. But, when he looked in the mirror, he said, "I look like an outlaw" with a small measure of disappointment.

"You, Noa, look like a dashing rogue," Katherine said, fixing the hide strap to go beneath his chin. She gave a quick smile to Louise. "See, I can appreciate fine work, but there's nothing wrong with something a little rough around the edges." She turned back to Louise. "It's as we said—rugged has its charm."

"Rugged has its charm," Louise agreed.

Noa had liked how he looked in the cowboy hat, but he liked how Katherine looked at him now even more. "Alright, then, how much for the sombrero?"

"Noa," Katherine said, eyeing him, and she rested her hand on the middle of his chest, "you let me take care of this one."

When the evening's feast came around, Wald was missing, Dafne sat with Kirby and Harrison and the rest of their family, and Katherine had of course brought Noa over to sit with her and her family: her father, her little brother, and her mother. As they sat and ate and talked and laughed together—well, it was mostly Katherine doing the talking and giggling—, her father seldom took his eyes away from the sombrero-wearing farmboy. Knowing that he was being watched, Noa was quieter than usual, though, even as he tried, he couldn't stop himself from occasionally

checking and meeting her father's gaze. There was a feeling in his gut, and that feeling told his lips that he was absolutely parched for some booze. There was plenty around, and Katherine even encouraged him to have a drink because it was a celebration, but he had lied and said that he was fine and that he had drunk enough the day before.

As the feast wound down, Katherine smiled and spoke to Noa in a low voice, "Will you jump over the Lucky Flame with me? I've had a lot of fun with you today, and I know it's somethin' that couples do when they're goin' steady, but I really see somethin' in you, Noa, and we don't have to jump to gettin' serious, but I wanna enjoy the rest of tonight with you."

"Alright," he said as if he had to be convinced. "Do I have to keep on wearin' this sombrero, though? It's gettin' a bit dark and... well, I like it and all, but I do feel a bit silly wearin' a hat when the sun's going down."

"Of course not," she said. "I wouldn't want you to feel silly!"

"Well, I'll get it home real quick-like—I wouldn't want to lose track of it—and how about I find come find you over by the fires after?"

Katherine smiled, gave him a peck on the cheek, said, "I'll be waiting," and skipped off.

There was a flash of heat in his cheeks, but the dread that set in was like a bucket of water on a candle flame. He swallowed.

"Noa, could I talk to you for a minute?" asked Katherine's father. "Come, sit down."

"Of course, sir," Noa said. His instinct was to go for the chair that he sat in before, giving him some distance, but her father's hand gestured insistently to where Katherine had been sitting: right next to him. So, Noa sat there. "Is something wrong, sir?"

"Well, why would you already think that's somethin's wrong?" There was a cruel smirk at his lips, and it was clear that Katherine's smile must have come from her mother. "And you know my name, Noa, so you can call me William—Mr. William, that is, to you."

"Yes, sir, uh, Mr. William." His hands fidgeted at his sides. "Well, no, I don't think there's anything wrong at all."

"Well, good. I must admit I'm a bit impressed to not smell a drop of liquor on you at all," he said, though Noa couldn't say the same for William. "There is one small problem, though, Noa, and it's that I think my Katherine is too good for you. Now, I won't let that get between us, not you and me, not me and Katherine. Because I think that's what she wants. Listen good. I would be surprised that she'd like a farmboy like you—*would* be. Now, let me tell you why I'm not too surprised. She's daddy's girl, through and through, but every girl her age likes to rebel and make her daddy mad, see if she can push my patience and get a rise outta me. D'you know why that is, Noa?"

"No, Mr. William, I don't."

"It's to test my authority. Kids test the authority of their parents to see if they're ready to become adults, and I suppose you wouldn't know that well, would you?"

Some of the hair on Noa's neck stood on end, and he opened his mouth.

"Trust me," Mr. William said, "you don't want to say a single word."

Noa slumped under the intensity of the older man's gaze.

"Now, like I said, I won't do a thing. I just wanna give you a choice, Noa. You can wait for her to get bored with you when she sees it's not gettin' to me, or you can do me a favor and get it

over with—break her heart and send her cryin' back to her daddy. The sooner her heart's back where it belongs, the easier I'll forgive you for dancing with her. Understand?"

"Yes, sir, uh, Mr. William."

"Well, good," William said, that smirk still returning. "I'm glad we cleared that up. There's no problem. You go run along and have some fun tonight." He stood from his chair, patted Noa on the back, and leaned into the farmboy's ear. "But not too much fun. Don't waste it all on one night or that'll make for a *miserable* summer. And take off that *ridiculous* hat." Then, he was off with his wife and his son.

Not wanting Katherine to have to wait, Noa sped home, tossed the sombrero into his room with a flick of his wrist, and took the shortest path to the edge of the village where the Lucky Flame fires would be—opposite of where they held the pyres. An abundance of lanterns were lit in an awkward oval around the lumber and villagefolk. Digby's tribe of goats and flock of sheep were there too—they'd also be jumping over a small fire before being led to their summer grazes. All of it was to ensure good luck, for animals and villagefolk alike, during the summer. While they lacked a formal religion, the villagefolk were still rather superstitious.

Katherine giggled at him. "Let me fix that for you," she said, and she tousled out his matted down black hair. "There you are—I know how much you don't wanna look silly."

"For as much as you talk, you sure listen good," Noa said.

She squinted her eyes at him. "Thank you." Then, she rubbed her arms with her hands. "It got a bit chilly out here."

"It's not ch—" but he shut his mouth as Katherine nestled herself under his arm. Then, he said, "Ah, yeah, I suppose it is a bit chilly."

"I gotcha," Noa said, pulling Katherine up onto the roof.

"My daddy's gonna be so mad if he figures out I snuck off with you." She giggled before lying back on the aluminum.

Noa chuffed. "Yeah, he might be."

"I know I'm not supposed to ask, and I know you're not supposed to tell, but what'd you wish for when you jumped over the fire?"

"Ah, well," Noa said with a shrug, "nothin'."

Katherine looked away from the stars to smile at him. "That's alright. You don't have to share if you don't want."

"Really, Kat," he said, then paused for half a moment, wondering when he started calling her that, "I didn't make a wish—I never make a wish."

"Well, how come?"

Noa chuckled. "It doesn't matter. What'd *you* wish for?"

"Well, it does matter, but, if you must know, I wished that every day could be like today. No one likes to talk about it, but the world is a terribly frightening place. And it'd be magical if we could just keep celebratin' like this."

"Don't you think that'd get boring after a while?"

"Well," Katherine said, "I mean, I suppose you could include Midsummer or Loaffest or Winternights. It doesn't always have to be the Lucky Flame."

Noa found himself chuckling again. “No, I mean, that’s all fine and dandy, but don’t you think, ya know, if we got to celebratin’ all the time, that the celebrations wouldn’t feel like... celebrations anymore? I mean, they’re special ‘cause they’re different, right?”

There it was again. That smile with her eyes just a bit squinted. “I think that’s the most words I’ve gotten out of you all of today. I knew you were hidin’ some stuff in there.”

This time, Noa really let out some laughter, and the aluminum trembled beneath him. “*This* is why I like to drink—it drowns all that nonsense out.”

“Well, maybe, don’t drown it out?” Katherine moved over and curled up against his body, laying her head on his chest. She felt small. She felt warm. “You can tell me,” she said. “How come you didn’t make a wish?”

Noa sighed. “Well,” he said, “I never know what to wish for, and this year—this *season*—has made that even trickier.”

“You mean... Jack?”

“And his sister,” he added, and he continued on. “And his mother. And his father. And my sister. And my mother. And my father.”

“Mercy...” was the only thing to escape her lips, but her mind went racing. *Mercy, of course, his sister. How could I be so blind?* Noa had been young when it had happened, and, though Katherine was only a bit younger than Noa, her parents had done their best to shelter her from the harshness of the barrens, so it had never crossed her mind that... *He lost his sister in the same way. Mercy.* She didn’t even know her name, and how could she ask now?

“I never know who to spend my wish on. How could I wish my sister back without my mother? How could I wish Jack back without his sister? So, that’s why I stopped wishin’. And, even when I did, it didn’t change anything anyway. But your wish was nice.”

“Well,” she said, “maybe you need a better wish.”

“Excuse me?”

“No, no, Noa, it’s so sweet and so kind. But you got to make my wish better. I only wished to make the Lucky Flame Festival last forever, which would be boring, and I could just wish for all of the festivals to go on and on forever!”

“I mean, I said celebrations going on forever wouldn’t—”

“That’s not the point,” she said, and she moved up on his chest to look at his eyes. “I just mean that you don’t have to wish for just one. Why can’t you say ‘I wish for all of the people I’ve lost to come back’?”

“Well, the point was that wishin’ didn’t—” but he cut himself off this time with laughter that bubbled up from inside. The aluminum trembled beneath him again and Katherine bounced on his chest. “Y-you know what?” But he started cracking up again, unfamiliar wetness forming in the corners of his eyes. “It’s so funny because—” and he was laughing again “—because i-it’s so stupid but it just makes—” and again “—so much sense!” Slowly, his laughter petered out, and the night air was filled with silence. He wasn’t exactly crying, but there were a few tears, and not all of them were from the laughter. “That was... nice.”

“I thought so too,” she said, smiling, and she pulled herself back up on his chest. Then, she kissed him. It wasn’t terrible on account of Noa never having kissed a girl, but Katherine had stolen a few kisses already, so she led him into it.

"That was... also nice," Noa said when he got the chance.

Katherine gave him another little kiss. "It was." More than anything else, she liked feeling his big hands on her waist and on her back. "Maybe we could go somewhere... well, somewhere where we can't be seen."

"I mean, it's pretty dark. And I don't want you gettin' back too late."

"You're right," she said, "but maybe you could take me inside for a drink. I'm a bit parched. Does your sister have any tea?"

"She might."

When they got down from the rooftop and Noa opened the door to his shack, he found his older brother reading at the table by bright lamplight, faced away from the door. He turned to Katherine and held his finger over his lips. "He always gets super absorbed in reading his... *manuals* or whatever."

Katherine nodded and took his hand.

"Reading another one of those boring books?" Noa asked as he snuck inside with Katherine in tow. *If he just stays facing—*

"Ah, Noa, you're home, there's something I wanted to talk to you about," he said, closed his book, and turned around. "Oh, I see you have company."

"Uh, well, right, you know Katherine. She wanted to come in for some tea."

"I do," Wald said. He turned to Katherine with a welcoming smile. "It's good to see you, Katherine. Help yourself to whatever you'd like and make yourself at home. I know it might not seem like much, but we make do."

Noa and Katherine glanced at each other before finally letting out the breath they had each been holding.

"Well," she said, "I know Noa said Dafne might have some tea, so we were just going to... Noa said we should go up to her room and check."

Wald didn't so much as bat an eyelash or raise an eyebrow, but he gave Noa a look that he hadn't seen before. It didn't say much, but that said a lot in itself. "We can talk later," he said and turned back to smiling at Katherine. "You two have your... tea. But be safe. Don't let the water get too hot. If the kettle boils over, it's a pain to deal with."

"Sure, right," Noa said, and then he led Katherine up the stairs as she giggled. "Well, Daf's room is right here if you want to take a look around for tea. That's my room right over there."

"I'll take a look," she said, the corners of her lips upturned into a sly smile.

As Noa waited, he heard her father's voice in his head. *'Every girl her age likes to rebel and make her daddy mad,'* William had told Noa. *'Wait for her to get bored with you. Have some fun. But not too much fun.'* He swallowed.

"Well, I didn't find any tea," she lied, "but"—her voice turned to a whisper—"I did find *this*." And she procured a bottle of hard pomegranate punch from behind her back.

"I don't know if that's the best idea, Kat," he said.

"Maybe not the *best* idea," she admitted with a shrug, "but it's not the worst. Come on. Just a couple of sips. My daddy won't know."

Noa felt like he was being pulled in two different directions. One won out quickly as he was being quite literally pulled in one of the directions. "Alright," he said as Katherine pulled them

into his room, "but just a couple of drinks." He set up a dim lamp in the middle of his floor. "We agreed you shouldn't be gettin' back too late."

"You're right," she admitted again, "but we haven't been gone for that long, and my daddy's probably havin' himself his fair share of drinks too." Her lips were pouted just enough.

"That's true..."

She sat down on his bed, and she gave him eyes. "We can make a game of it. You dice, right? We can play Get Even and whoever loses has to take a drink."

If Noa were wittier, he'd have said something like, "Two vices are better than one," but he settled for, "And what's the reroll ante?"

"A sip," she said, keeping her eyes on him, and that sly grin at the corners of her lips returned. "Win or lose, we're still drinkin', but it might be more fun to make it a game."

"Alright then," Noa said, and he pour six dice from a small felt drawstring pouch into one hand. "A few rounds."

Neither of them had kept track of the rounds after the first four or so—though, when it became clear that they were going to go through the bottle, Noa did at least make sure to lose more often than Katherine did. He didn't want her sick, nor did he want her puking up on his floor, and he needed more booze in his guts to keep them matched.

"Uh oh," Katherine said, giggling as she held up the bottle. "It's empty."

Still sitting on his bed, Noa leaned back against the wall, looking at the dimming lamp. "Well, shit, Kat. You whooped my ass," he lied. "You're either lucky or a cheater!"

"I'm definitely no cheat," she said. "I'd say I'm pretty lucky." She moved closer to Noa, her dress slipping a bit around her shoulders.

Noa chuckled. "Well, maybe we really *oughta* get some tea—"

Her lips on his definitely shut up him.

For a moment. Then, Noa said, "Kat, come on, you really—"

But Katherine was kissing him again as she brought her arms around him, moving her hands up to play with his shaggy hair. When she broke their kiss, she said, "I know, I know. But how often are we gonna get a chance like this? Just a little more?"

Now, as fuzzy as his mind was, Noa knew that there had been several 'just a little more's. Still, because his mind was so fuzzy, its vote counted for less in his decision-making. "Just a little more," he said, and he kissed her back while trying to figure out where *his* hands should go—he ended up keeping them on her waist.

It was the passionately awkward kissing of two youngin's in lust.

Katherine pulled back and took a deep breath. "I'm not feelin' too well," she lied, and she placed his hand on her breast.

Noa swallowed.

"My heart's beatin' so fast," she said, "and I'm just burnin' up."

"Do you—"

"D'you mind if I...?" and she pulled her dress over her head in one swift motion, revealing the light slip she was wearing beneath it. "That's better."

Noa stammered, glad that she couldn't see how red his cheeks were getting.

"It's alright," she said. "You don't have to be shy."

"I just..."

"I want you to look, Noa," she said, and she kissed him. When she moved away, she pulled one of his hands with her. "I want you to touch," she said, and she placed that hand of his back on her breast.

He could feel even more of her through just the thin slip. At that moment, something in his head finally kicked in. Noa was so turned on by her, and he had just been caught so off-guard with how forward Katherine had been with him. *Does she think she can just get the better of me?* If this was some game of hers, he wasn't going to let her win. With little effort, Noa pulled Katherine onto his lap, her back against his chest, and he cupped her breasts in his hands as he began to kiss along her neck.

Katherine let out a pleased sigh. *I win*, she thought as he played right into her hands—she was more than happy to be playing into his.

A tired Wald looked out from the dim kitchen as a hot disheveled mess stumbled a bit down the stairs. "Ah, Katherine, did you ever find that tea?"

She froze and her cheeks turned a deep pink. "Oh, I'm sorry, Noa said— I thought you'd—that you'd be in bed... uh... by now."

Wald raised an eyebrow at her and glanced up in the direction of Noa's room. "Hardly a chance of that." Then, he gave her a warm smile much like the one he had given her earlier that night. "Not to worry. I've been enjoying my reading, and I put on some tea when things seemed to calm down a bit upstairs. Where's Noa?"

"Well, I told him I should get—that I'd be alright gettin' home myself."

Noa's older brother sighed. "Not much of a gentleman to be letting his ladyfriend walk herself around in the dark. Well, that's alright. Why don't you sit down for a cup and I can walk you home." Before she could open her mouth, he added, "Really, it's no thing at all. Your father would be happy to see you escorted back to the festivities and ever more so by someone who isn't Noa. You've been a pleasant guest—of course, I expected no less. So, no need to worry he'll hear anything unsatisfactory from me."

She nodded and made her dizzy way toward the table.

When a cup of pine tea was ready, Wald brought it over to her. As he set it before her, he leaned in and hummed. "You don't want to go home smelling like... alcohol."

Redness returned to her cheeks.

"I'll bet it was your first time drinking. If you've spilled any on yourself or your dress, I can get you a pail, some soap, and some of my sister's perfume. It'd be a shame to see such a pretty dress stained by a little spill."

"Thank you," she whispered, then brought the tea to her lips.

The morning after, none the wiser that his older brother had escorted Katherine back to her father, Noa was back to working in the fields. His time was spent weeding, getting rid of pests, scaring off birds, and looking over his shoulder. On the nicer side, he got to watch several children faceplant into the dirt as they helped scare away any birds. Children too young couldn't work, but Digsby villagefolk agreed this was more fun than it was work. On the scarier side for Noa, he

was sure that Katherine or her father—or both of them, which seemed the most dreadful possibility—would show up when he wasn't looking. Between his worry and another morning suffering of the overindulgence and Jack's absence, his time spent out in the fields seemed to drag on as he got even less work done than usual.

Of course, in the past couple of weeks, Noa had also done his best to fit in with another group of boys. Though, he had been as awkward and stiff around them as they had been around him. Amongst each other, of course, the other boys were plenty friendly. Amongst themselves, they referred to Noa as Lazy.

"Hey, Noa, why don't you come sit and lunch with us today?" asked one of the boys.

Noa shrugged. "Alright."

They ate altogether in the shade of one of the farmhand shacks. The four boys that Noa sat with had claimed this one as their spot.

"Well, spill it," said another of the boys.

"Yeah, we saw you dancin' with Katherine yesterday—*everyone* did. She let you kiss her?"

Well, Noa thought, *it was more like she kissed me*. Knowing this was his chance to show them his stuff, he puffed out his chest and said, "Yeah, you bet your sorry asses she did." He paused, thinking of what to say. "Snuck off with her, sat her on my lap, and I laid it on her right then and there. She was all over me."

"I'll be," said one of the guys, and he laughed. "Who knew Katherine would be so hot for Lazy the Farmboy?"

Another piped up. "Nothing gets girls goin' like a hairy boulder that smells like booze."

"Bet it was a dare from one of her friends!"

Noa glared at them. "Oh yeah? Maybe you're right! Maybe it was just that silly little girly dare that got her to take off her dress."

The four other boys bounced looks around from one another.

Then, one of them guffawed. "She *what*!?"

All four of them started whooping.

"Shit, Noa, before today, we weren't entirely convinced you even liked girls."

"Yeah," another one said, his laughter like clucking. "You spent so much time with Jack. The two of ya was inseparable, and it was no secret that you snuck off together. Figured you two might as well be makin' it somewhere."

Noa tensed, but he kept his mouth shut.

"You're gonna make Lazy mad," one said, chuckling. "No need to insult the special thing they had. Everyone's gotta move on sometime, right, Lazy?"

"I'll tell you what," Noa said in a cool voice. "Maybe I oughta be the one assumin' 'cause *I'm* the one who was feelin' Kat up last night."

"Kat, huh?"

"Feelin' her up? Like, her tits?"

"Ah, whatever," said another. "So what? It's not like most of us haven't felt tits before. It's not like *I* haven't felt a good pair of tits before."

Another of the boys shot him a look. "Other than your mama?"

They all got a good chuckle out of that.

"I'm not talkin' 'bout your mama," Noa said. "Farmgirls are hardly any harder to kiss than the sheep you've prob'ly been gettin' with—they definitely stink the same."

The boy who had questioned Noa held up his hands. "Alright, ya got me." His chuckling became a bit more friendly. "You can shoot the shit, Lazy. Just don't come cryin' when Katty leaves you in the dust and I'm not willin' to share my prize sheep with you."

"Nah," Noa said. "I think I'd have better luck with the hens anyway."

"You'd be lucky to still be alive by then."

"Yeah, more likely you'll be *fed* to the hens if Ol' Willy gets his hands on ya."

"Heard you was talkin' shit about farmgirls."

Noa turned over his shoulder and rolled his eyes at her. "You heard nothin', Jessa." He finished taking off his gloves and picked up his lunch pail. Her bothering him was the last thing Noa needed before going home.

"Heard you was kissin' Katherine," Jessabel said.

He glanced around the farmhand shack and did his best to play it off with a shrug. "So what? People can say what they want."

"Heard it was more than just kissin'."

"Yeah? Who'd ya hear that from?"

Jessabel performed a good imitation of clucking laughter.

Noa tensed.

"So, it's true," she said. "Think you're too good for farmgirls just 'cause Katherine showed you her tits? And *farmgirls* are easy."

"Shut your mouth and go home," Noa said. "Day's over. I don't need your shit," and he went straight for the door.

Jessabel put her hand against the wall, stopping Noa from getting around her. She was nowhere near his size, but she was a farmgirl through and through. Jessabel had a good amount of muscle in her arms, larger breasts, and thick thighs that made Katherine a flimsy twig by comparison. "And here I thought I caught you eyein' me a time or two." She pulled her dark hair free from its short ponytail and shook it out.

"That's odd, isn't it?" Noa rolled his eyes as Jessabel. "'Cause I don't remember you askin' me to go with you to the dance."

She stared, wide-eyed, then she busted out in laughter. "*She* asked *you* to the dance? Oh, that's rich, Noa. Katherine must take to guys without any balls."

"That right?" Noa rolled his eyes at her. "What kinda guys do you take to? 'Cause I was figurin' you didn't take to guys at all."

Jessabel got in his face. "Aw, drop that kinda shit. You wanna be lame and spew dumb shit like them? Feelin' up girls with lotsa brass, bein' a brag with the boys, talkin' like a prick, makin' a real ass outta yourself."

Noa laughed right at her. "Like you talk any less shit."

"I like talkin' dirty."

"Then prove—" but Noa realized his face was nearly against hers.

"I won't tell," Jessabel said, moving ever so slightly closer.

Noa leaned in only to find himself stopped by her hand on his chest.

"But *you* might wanna tell her first." She pushed him back and grinned, a dimple appearing on one cheek. "I'll shut my mouth and go home. Day's over, right?"

"Right..."

"I'm definitely no prude," she said, stepping to his side and shoulder-checking him, "but I'm not so easy either."

Dafne looked ghastly. "What do you *mean* you might like Jessabel?"

"'Atta boy," Wald said. "No sense settlin' right away."

"Well, Katherine's great, right?" Noa sighed and hung his head back, looking at the patched ceiling of their shack. "But Mr. William told me to break his daughter's heart. He said, the sooner I did, the easier he could forgive me for goin' near his daughter."

"He *what*?" Dafne went from ghastly to disgusted.

"Somethin' about how girls like to rebel and test their authority, and that she was only kissin' a farmboy like me just to make her 'daddy' mad."

Wald chuckled.

Dafne, however, was fuming even more. "Don't throw away a good thing, Noa! And Wald told me was goin' on between you and Katherine—lot more than kissin'. You owe it to her to stick around, not to start pretendin' like she doesn't exist."

"Daf," Wald said, "they both got what they wanted. I think Noa and Katherine both had a good time, and William might not've been too wrong. You know those brassy girls."

"No, *you* know those brassy girls." Dafne stomped the floor with one of her feet. "Partnerin' with a trader's daughter."

Noa looked back to his older brother. "How'd you manage that anyway?"

Dafne glared at Wald, then gave her younger brother a twisted smile. "You wanna know how he managed that? He lied. He lied about mother and father and—"

"I did what I had to do!"

"What you *had* to do? You only think about yourself!"

Noa went back to hanging his head over the back of his chair, and he sighed. "Mercy, that makes a lot of sense."

"Anyway," Wald said, "this is about Jessabel, and, since *you* can't get away with a lie, there's no point in chasing after someone you can't have."

Dafne rolled her eyes. "Great, Wald. What a great lesson to teach your brother." Then, she looked over at Noa who was staring at the ceiling again. "It sounds like she likes you. It sure seemed that way when she was askin' me where you were. Mercy's sake, Noa, why don't you at least give it a bit more time?"

Wald butted back in. "He doesn't have more time. As he said, the sooner he cuts things off with Katherine the better, and why spurn Jessabel?"

"Either way," Dafne said, "you should at least talk to her and clear things up."

Noa sighed. "Whatever." He got up from the chair. "I'm headin' up, and I'm takin' another bottle of your punch, Daf, for this headache." And he stepped up the stairs.

"You better not," she shouted after him. "I haven't forgiven you for the first!"

But Noa did, and Dafne wasn't stopping him. He opened the bottle and took a swig, walked into his room, and shut the door behind him. Then, he took another long draw from the bottle and dropped onto his bed. It still smelled like her—it still smelled like *them*—, which didn't make it any easier to take his mind off of things. Of course, last night's excitement waged wrestled with the potential and the excitement of finally being close enough to kiss Jessabel. She hadn't smelled like perfume; she had just smelled like Jessabel.

The previous night's bottle lay empty on the floor surrounded by six dice.

Noa took another drink. How many times had he told Jack 'Now, that's my kinda woman' when he had seen Jessabel plough dirt or carry wood or butchering meat? Katherine hadn't crossed his mind often; though, his imagination had wandered from time to time when Jack made his comments about the girl. Noa wouldn't even have said yes to dancin' with Katherine if Jack were still— Well, Noa drowned that thought with another drink.

Soon enough, the bottle was as empty as Noa's will to stay awake.

In the morning, Noa woke with a start and found himself in a cold sweat, his eyes and skin itching a bit. He looked around as he scratched himself, relieved that he wasn't looking down the barrel of a revolver. It was strange, though, because it seemed that, just minutes ago, he was being cornered by a Purifier. "You're a monster of a different kind," the Purifier had said to him with a voice like death. His black duster had billowed into darkness that filled ever corner of Noa's vision, which had drawn him back to the barrel of the revolver, and time had seemed to slow as the Purifier squeezed the trigger.

Well, Dafne had often warned him that it wasn't wise to drink and dream. Especially if the drink had gone bad, and Noa's guts were twisted as if the pomegranate had been too sour for its own good. Surely, that would just make it wine, right? It hadn't made sense anyway. There hadn't been a Purifier in Digsby since Ellie— since weeks before the Lucky Flame Festival. Not that a Purifier would hunt someone down for wanting to kiss two girls at the same time. Was that what it was? Guilt over Katherine and Jessabel?

Noa shook his head, rubbed the rest of the sleep from his eyes, got up, and went through the rest of his morning routine: throwing on less dirty clothes, taking a leak, eating a bowl of grits— two bowls of grits that morning, hoping to put his guts at ease—, packing his lunch pail, and heading out the door before as the sun was just peaking over the horizon.

Fatigue crept over him and the sweat hardly slowed as he tended toward the section of the field he was to work on.

One of the other boys had chuckled at him that morning in the farmhand shack, saying, "Guess Lazy wasn't feelin' too hot 'cause we're stuck with Drunky today."

Noa hadn't said anything. His youngin' mind was still preoccupied with a decision he hadn't yet made—a choice that the other boys'd be happy to have. Noa knew the truth of it, and he felt guilt for pickin' at Jack when he said he was feelin' a bit sick from worry. Everyone had said it—in hushed voices, of course, but they said it: Jack was the sensitive type. Jack *had been* the sensitive type.

Weeding, pulling bugs from crops, shooing the occasional bird, burning things that shouldn't be growing and were too stubborn for their own good, maintaining irrigation, checking for good

color and growth—a farmhand shouldn't have too much time for thinking. Though, Noa and Jack had found time—no, *made* time—for chatter, so, as Noa relived his slower days thanks to his weary muscles, he had too much time for thinkin'. When he threw glances over his shoulder, he was watching for Jessabel, Katherine, and Mr. William. It seemed easiest to bend to the whims of whoever he came across first. That had been Jessabel, but she had been maintaining her distance with a taunting grin.

Noa heard her loud and clear. Katherine had come to him, and Jessabel was determined to be anything unlike that brassy girl. A part of him liked it, of course, that she would make him chase her and work for it.

When the time to lunch came around, he had done less of his work than he ever had before, and there'd be no escaping the harshness of Harrison coming down on him. *No*, thought Noa, looking over the plot he was responsible for, *I'm gonna get whipped for this*. In most villages along the Periphery, the Purifiers and Republican Rangers were the only authority outside of communal law, which was obviously in favor of the brassier families, and it'd be easy enough for Harrison to convince enough villagefolk that Noa's laziness had gone too far, deserving of corporal punishment. Most of him was convinced of the same mind—he had been stupid before, but that day's blunders could be costing families a small shortage of food after harvest and come winter. If it had been pomegranate gone bad, he could have explained some of it away, though he might've still gotten called out for being a drunk, but there was no way he'd end up being called out for being sensitive.

I'll make up for it, I will, he thought. *I just... gotta get it over with*. And, when the four boys called him over to the farmhand shack they ate in, Noa waved them off and made his way in a different direction. At first, he ambled, but his growing worry pushed him into a run. The next farmhand shack over wasn't far at all, but he felt the same as he had in his nightmare—like a righteous hunter was closing in on him. Before he stepped into the little shack, he slowed himself back to walk and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"That shit's exactly why I hate gals like her."

"You ain't kiddin'. My mama always said that us gals gotta stick together, but what's a brassy girl ever done for me other than look down her nose at me?"

Their conversation quieted, and Jessabel looked over her shoulder, away from the two other rough-and-tumble farmgals she had been chatting with. "Hey, Noa," she said to the young man stepping into their spot.

"Hey, Jessa..." Noa said.

It was clear as day to Jessabel that he either hadn't thought of what to say next or that he wasn't there for talkin'. *Alright*, she thought, and she gave each of her friends a look.

The other two girls got up and stepped toward the door.

Jessabel got up after them.

Each of the two girls gave Noa a glare before they stepped out of the farmhand shack.

And Jessabel folded her arms over her chest. "You still ain't shit and you look like a mess. Whaddya want?"

"You," he said.

Jessabel rolled her eyes. "You're all talk. And you ain't said much, so I'm gonna assume you mean even less."

Noa had stepped across the room to her and got in her face. "Maybe you should *stop* talkin' so much then."

"Is that right?" Jessabel smirked, taking half a step back.

He didn't even pursue her; he just grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back to him as if it wasn't even a thing. "Mhm" was all he said before he kissed her.

When she finally got away from his hands and his kissing, she glared at him through squinted eyes. "How'd she take it?"

"'Bout as well as a brassy daddy's girl would," Noa said. "Now, c'mere." He stepped into her, pushing her back against the wall as he kissed her. He worked his way along her jaw, down her neck, and as far down as her shirt would let him.

"Oh, Noa..." she said, moaning, playing it up a bit for him.

"Noa?"

"Noa!" Jessabel gave him her best shove.

He stumbled back. "What?"

Over his broad shoulders, Jessabel saw Katherine's face, and both of their faces were drawn into the same bewildered expression. Jessabel broke away as Noa turned around, then she looked back to the brassy girl's face, which twisted as her disbelief was confirmed. Brassy or not, in that moment, Jessabel simply saw another girl.

Katherine dropped the punch pail to the ground.

Just a few minutes prior, Katherine had asked a farmboy where she could find Noa, and he had pointed off in a direction that had led her to a farmhand shack where four other boys were sitting down to lunch.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said as they looked at her. "Is Noa not here?"

"Just missed him," one said.

"He was headin' that way," another said, pointing.

Then, another asked, "What's a girl like you doin' out here anyway?" He nodded his head toward her lunch pail. "Why're you eatin' out here?"

Katherine gave them all a warm smile. "Well, I was too busy to see him yesterday, so I thought I'd make it up to him by bringin' him somethin' to lunch on! Well, thanks!" She gave them another quick smile and turned in the direction that the one had pointed.

There he was hurrying off in the direction of another shack. It wasn't hard to see someone who towered as much as he did.

So, she lifted her skirts with her empty hand and made her way after him. It felt like she was chasing him down all over again, and the same feeling was fluttering in her tummy. That feeling had tickled her when she tracked him down to ask him to dance, that feeling had filled her when they were drunk and fooling around on his bed, and that feeling—alongside a good amount of pleasant surprise—had replaced her dread when her father hadn't seemed the slightest bit concerned about Noa. When Wald had escorted her back to the festival, he had told her not to worry herself too much, but Elizabeth's heart had sunk all the way too her tummy when she

found her father was still sober so late into the celebration. It should've meant that there'd be no way to convince him of anything, but their conversation had been even more mild than Wald could have ever prepared her for.

"You mean," she had said, "you don't mind?"

"Not at all!" her father had said. He had laughed too. "Are you disappointed?"

"No, no, of course not. I really... like Noa."

"As long as he works hard and doesn't get himself into trouble."

She had been giddy that night, and she was giddy again as she pranced across the fields to catch up to Noa, her one long braid bouncing along her back.

Two farmgirls walked out of the shack that Noa had just entered.

As she met up with them, she asked, "Is... Noa in there?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" one said.

"Can't let him go, huh?" said the other.

Katherine squinted at them back and forth, then she settled for rolling her eyes before stepping around the two farmgirls with a huff. She ignored their giggles, and she picked up her skirts in one hand again to hurry the rest of the way. When she peered in, she saw the man she had been following, but he had Jessabel against the wall, and his face was in her—

"Oh, Noa..." Jessabel said, moaning, her eyes closed.

Hearing his name like that switched her disbelief from wondering if that was really Noa to wondering *why* it was Noa—*how* it could be Noa. Just to make sure, she said, "Noa?"

Jessabel's eyes went from shut to wide in an instant. "Noa!" she shouted, and she did her best to shove him off of her.

He budged, but not much. "What?"

Katherine and Jessabel met eyes, their faces warped into the same bewildered expression.

Jessabel glanced at Noa as he turned around, but she looked back to Katherine just in time to see what face a girl might make when her heart was torn to pieces.

Katherine dropped the lunch pail to the ground.

In a moment, Noa's blood and mind were coursing. "Katherine?"

Katherine didn't bother to gather her skirts; she just ran.

Everything inside him was coursing, but Noa stood unmoving.

"Smooth," said Jessabel's cool voice from behind. It was quickly replaced with her yelling, "You sack of shit liar! You didn't tell her a thing, did you?"

"I was..." Noa, slow and stiff, turned to face Jessabel. "I was gonna..."

Jessabel nodded slowly, stopped, then nodded again. "Yeah, okay," she said, and she wound up a mean punch.

Noa was completely unprepared for the fist that collided with his gut. His body doubled over and he had to reach out to the wall beside him to keep himself from falling over. Half-digested grits and sour pomegranate had come up in his mouth. It was all he could do to swallow that back down.

She was quivering from the rage welling up inside her. "You better run. And, please, do not let me catch you." Every word had been delivered deliberately.

So, he ran. He ran after Katherine. As he started to sweat, his skin and his eyes started to really itch again. It was worse that time—a burning sensation lingered beneath the itching. His arms and legs moved as if they were in water. “Ka... Katherine!” Noa struggled to spit the words out in the midst of his ragged breathing. “Wait!” Everything was too hot. Noa had to stop. He bent over, his hands on his knees, as he tried to catch his breath, but that seemed to be escaping him too, and his midsection still ached from Jessabel’s punch.

The fields around him wavered and twisted.

Noa shook his head, but that only made the dizziness worse. He got down on his hands and knees—it was too late to catch up to her anyway. The mix of half-digested grits and too-sour pomegranate made its way back up, and, that time, it made its way out. Noa took one look at it before squeezing his eyes shut. “Mercy,” he said, his voice a gurgling growl.

Dafne sobbed into her pillow. All of her tears couldn’t wash away what she had seen, for that had already been etched into her mind. When she had visited her younger brother in lockup, she hadn’t believed it right away. That sickly pale man with small red patches all over his skin didn’t look like him, but he had the same clothes, the same shaggy black hair, and, when he looked at her, he had the same amber, even if they were bloodshot.

“Please,” he had croaked. “Don’t leave...”

As much as that ill man resembled Noa, he also resembled the older sister she had once had. Dafne sobbed harder, even as she laughed in her head, knowing that it was some kind of twisted humor that her own eyes were likely now as red as his were. And she would have to handle it on her own.

While one brother was behind bars, the other had left. Wald hadn’t bothered to say goodbye to his younger brother; he had simply packed everything that he needed and left. He was on his way to Kimura to be with Moriko, his partner-to-be.

“Please,” Wald had told his sister. “I have to leave.”

Dafne wanted to stay mad at him, but she understood. The longer Wald remained in Digsby with the gossip about his younger brother, the riskier his lie would become. It was easy to pretend he only had ever had one sister, it was easy to pretend that his father died from anything other than the lasting effects of the plague, but it would be hard to explain away why his younger brother was going through the change.

Katherine sobbed into her pillow. All of her tears couldn’t wash away what she had felt, for that had already been etched into her heart. She had seen him kissing Jessabel, and she had heard that he was showing signs of the plague, and, worse still, she hated the part of her that was glad that Noa was suffering. The idea that it was some kind of curse for the pain that Noa had caused her floated around her mind, and, while she knew it couldn’t be true, that dark part of her part wished it were so. Maybe he deserved to suffer and even die for breaking her heart, especially after that had shared that night together in his bed.

Worst of all, worse than all of the pain Noa had caused her, she worried about the pleasure they had shared, and if it meant that she deserved to die too. Katherine rolled onto her back, still holding the wet pillow on her face with one hand, but her other hand caressed her tummy. She

had made the mistake of not telling Wald everything, not being upfront with him, and she had sought to fix her mistake by talking to Dafne. Noa's sister had comforted her and told her that the chances of being pregnant were quite small, and she had sympathized with Katherine's worries that a monster might be growing inside her. Dafne had assured her that, even if Katherine was pregnant, children weren't born mutants. Katherine had asked if that was better or worse, but that had been a question that Dafne didn't—perhaps, couldn't—answer.

Katherine sobbed harder, swearing that she could feel something growing inside of her. *No. No. It's not real. It can't be real. It's not...* Her whole body shuddered as the nightmare wriggled around inside of her. Even if it wasn't real or couldn't be real, the terror and dread she felt were very much so. If she were pregnant, there'd be no way to explain it to her father—that she had let Noa... inside her, that Noa had gone around kissing Jessabel behind her back, and that Noa's blood was tainted enough that he went through the change. An image of her father's face, twisted in anger and disappointed, flashed in her mind. She had made Dafne promise to keep her secret, but Katherine knew she would have to tell her father or the guilt would continue eating at her, but she just didn't know how.

By the time the sun set, the red patches on Noa's skin had started to ooze. There were lesions all over his body, and Howard watched as Noa writhed on the stone floor, much too uncomfortable to stay still in any one position for long. Howard was Noa's only company during the day, but that was only because the greying man had drawn the short stick; it wasn't any kind of willing arrangement—Howard had hardly ever talked to the boy outside of the one time he had helped him patch up his shack. At night, the two of them were joined by Ben, an older farmhand who had been assigned to helping with night watch, which meant that Ben had drawn the second shortest stick. Howard gathered that Ben and Noa worked on different farms, which made sense. Ben and Noa couldn't be pals of any kind, else they wouldn't have even let Ben draw to help watch the cell.

Over the course of the following day, the Noa's lesions worsened and so did his pain. Howard's nose crumpled at the sight and the smell. The changing boy's pain was constant, and the stress of it turned him into a rabid animal. He ate his single meal of gruel without human decency, and the rest of his time was spent writhing, howling, or shaking the bars of his cell, demanding that he be let out. Of course, that was all *after* Noa had ripped off every piece of his clothing. Howard did his best to ignore Noa and hoped that he remembered to piss and shit in the hay corner, waiting for a Purifier to arrive. Until then, the burden was all his—*Well, and Ben's*, he supposed—, but no one else came to check on Noa. Howard couldn't blame most of Digsby for wanting nothing to do with a lazy drunk farmboy turned mutant, especially if the rumors were true about him breakin' the hearts of two girls in a single day. Howard couldn't hear very well anymore, but that didn't mean he didn't listen. And Noa's sister, that Dafne girl, was probably doin' all she could to keep Kirby from leaving her and walking away from both her and her family half-full of monsters.

The third day of Noa's change, Howard snapped. As for all folk, time seemed to draw out longer than ever when a long task finally neared being done. Noa's pain had obviously gotten worse still, and he rattled the bars and screamed in his agony until he tired himself out. Howard

had waited for that, for Noa to tire himself out, before serving him his gruel, but the rabid young man had found it within himself to fly off the handle, burst into a tantrum that lasted only a few moments, and then he had grabbed the bowl of gruel from the floor, spilling it everywhere, and chucked it against the wall, splattering some against Howard's clothes. They weren't particularly nice, but Howard didn't particularly like having them messy either. So, Howard gathered a few rocks from outside and pelted the unruly animal. It didn't calm Noa down at all, but Howard had himself a good laugh. Of course, he had also given Noa more to throw around, so he was sure to keep out of sight after that.

When the Purifier had arrived late into the evening and checked on the mutant, he had noticed the rocks around the mutant's cell, and he scowled at the older greying man who was supposed to be watching the mutant, not taunting it or arming it.

"Well," Howard said with a huff, "I'm goin' home."

The Purifier nodded, and he returned to the cell as the mutant was howling in pain and reopening its lesions, scratching them against the wall for relief, no matter how brief. He stepped up to the bars—that moment of first contact was important in determining how far gone the mutant was. "Noa," he said, the name sharp off his tongue.

The rabid young man named Noa saw the Purifier standing there, and it forgot its pain as it cowered in a corner of its cell—not the one with hay that had been soiled, of course—, as far away from the Purifier as it could be.

It certainly wasn't the worst case he had ever seen—not even close. If a mutant mid-change was able to recognize the Purifier as a threat before the Purifier had established himself as one, it was a fairly good sign that some level of thinking above an animal's was going on in the mutant's head. While the presence of a Purifier might not always be comfortable, no human that knew of the Purifier duty to protect mankind saw them as a threat—a Purifier was only a threat to mutants and those who had never before heard of them, and the former category largely outnumbered the latter. So, even though a person going through the change reacted like an animal would, the warped mind of the human should usually have no reason to have Purifiers established as a threat in their memories as a human. That, of course, meant it was quite likely that Noa was aware of what it was becoming. A man changed into a mutant that retained any shred of sense knew that a Purifier was death.

That meant it was too soon to put it out of its misery. Odd too was that, other than the lesions, which were normal as far as the change went, the one in the cell showed no other signs of physical deformation. There was plenty of time yet for its body to warp even further into a monster, of course, and not all monsters developed mutations of the flesh. In his long service as a Purifier, which was to say his entire life, he had encountered a mutant whose blood dissolved what it touched, a mutant that let off a clear and odorless gas that could be ignited by flame, a mutant that merely moved with a grace that outmatched that of a Purifier, and another that had both the mind and the sense of smell of a hound. While those cases hadn't been freakishly deformed, there had been small visible oddities, even if they were easily missed, that set them apart from humankind—discolored boils, hairless skin, large bumps beneath the ears, bleeding gums, heavily sunken eyes, and the list went on.

Some of them had retained enough of a mind to be marked as a Vector. In his experience, many parents of a mutant preferred that: being able to mark what was their child as a Vector, exiling it to the barrens, and pretending that things would work out. That case also meant that everyone could say their goodbyes. Putting a bullet between its eyes was another valid option, and, for most folk, it was easier to make pretend about the latter, and, likewise, it was often easier to not say goodbye. In the case of death, those that had loved the child would turn their heads upside down long enough that it stopped looking like their loved one—it became the monster that had killed their loved one, which also wasn't hard to pretend, as a mutant broke parole or outright attacked settlements every once in a while. Noa might have enough of a mind to be exiled, and, as far as the Purifier could tell, no one would miss him. That was the best outcome for a Purifier: one less mutant, and it'd be easier to get away with killing it soon after because there'd be no grieving family or friends to deal with.

Still, it was too early to assume anything about that one. The Purifier and the Digsby man named Ben were in for a long night—the *worst* night. For the Purifier, it was nothing unusual to hear blood-curdling screams that lasted until the mutant's throat was raw, but, for small folk like Ben, watching the shape of a man scream like a living nightmare as it tore away at its own skin was— well, it was exactly that: a living nightmare.

Noa slowly recollected his mind. It was as if he was learning how to think and feel all over again. His first lucid thoughts were composed of single words. Itchy. Hungry. Tired. Pain. They were basic sensations that oriented Noa within his world. Slowly, the puzzle of the young man named Noa put itself together again. He formed more complex thoughts. *Where am I? What's goin' on? Katherine? Why am I so itchy?* Noa found that scratching his arms was painful, and he looked down at them, seeing the lesions and the scratches that he had created by raking his own nails across his body. *The change*, he remembered, which also explained why he was naked in a cell. Vague memories from his days during the change had been waiting for him to regain some kind of awareness, and they washed over him then like a flood, threatening to undo him once more with the white-hot pain of forging his split mind back into one piece. He tried to scream, but it came out as a painful broken rasp.

"You shouldn't be alive."

His whole body stiffened and the hair on the back of his neck stood straight, but he forced himself to look in the direction of the familiar voice. *Jack?*

No one was there.

Mercy, what's goin' on? Noa rubbed his eyes, and it stung a bit, but it didn't make anything clearer. *I'm just tired*, he thought. It was the truth, and, as if the thought made his body realize it too, Noa slumped over. He lay on his side. Noa blinked back tears.

"They'll definitely notice."

Noa was startled by the voice that had come from right behind him, but his head had whipped around to find a blank wall. Jack was nowhere to be seen. Of course, because Jack was dead. Noa faced forward again, shaking his head. *How?* As soon as he asked, it hit him: the voices were inside his head. The tears came again, and they won over his blinking, falling across his face as he lay on the floor. It hadn't warped his body—it had warped his mind.

The itching worsened as his scratches began scabbing over and as the lesions began shrinking into ugly scars. Wounds that would normally take days to heal were being undone in the dark hours in which he couldn't sleep as the voices and the whispers kept him up, the dawn hours as the sun rose on Digsby and light trickled into his cell, the light hours in which he would be farming—though, he had been as happy to have three bowls of gruel as he had been terrified of the Purifier, especially since the voice in his head told him, *Watch out*—, and the dusk hours in which he'd normally be supping with his siblings or, even more likely so, drinking. That life for Noa was long gone, and he knew it—he knew it well because he knew there was no other choice than to accept it and because the whispers kept reminding him so. Even in such a short time, Noa was already getting used to them, pushing them to the back of his mind where they settled into a quiet non-stop hissing that seemed to come from all different directions. It was annoying, but not as terrifying as the voices that spoke.

When the Purifier came in, he was carrying half-folded clothing in his hands. He raised an eyebrow at Noa. “Do you know who you are?”

“Noa,” he said, his voice a cracking rasp. Noa tapped his throat and shook his head.

The Purifier nodded to himself a bit, his expression unchanging, and he tossed the spare clothes to Noa before walking back out of the chamber.

Noa put on the clothes as fast as he could. He recognized them—the undergarments, the trousers, the belt, and the shirt—as his clothes, but it had taken him a few moments because they were clean and didn't stink of sweat. He chuffed to himself, imagining the Purifier taking the time to lovingly wash his clothes, but he figured it had been Dafne. As nice as it was to be clothed again and to see less of his ugly scars, being clothed only agitated Noa's itchiness, and he scratched at himself through the clothes.

When the Purifier returned, Noa was sitting on the floor fully clothed, and, if that was a good sign or if the Purifier even noticed, he made no show of it. The Purifier had six dice in one hand and two small pouches that *clinked* a bit in the other. “I was told that you know how to play Get Even. Is that right?”

“I love dice.”

Noa looked in the direction of the voice, and, of course, there was no one there. *Mercy, leave me alone!* So, he looked back to the Purifier and gave him a stiff nod before gathering up the three dice that the Purifier tossed into his cell. Whatever strange test the Purifier was giving him, Noa was more than happy to go along with it as long as it meant staying alive, even if the voices were going to ruin his chances. He couldn't give up the will to live. Noa had pushed the thoughts out of his mind—it was no use dwelling on them—, but he knew that he'd rather be exiled to the barrens than die without a fight.

The Purifier nodded at Noa again and tossed him one of the pouches.

Noa reached out to catch it, but his reflexes had been a bit too slow, and it sailed past his arm and landed behind him. So, the changed young man shook his head and sighed, turned toward the pouch, picked it up, sat close—but not too close—to the bars of his cell, and emptied the brass from the pouch onto the cool stone floor in a small pile. Noa knew he was still out of it. Between the constant itching, the constant whispers, and constantly having to deny despairing thoughts, he was overwhelmed.

The Purifier won every game except two, and those two losses had only been because the Purifier had thrown two bunk rolls in a single game and then thrown an instantly losing roll in the first round of another. Of course, from what Noa could see, the Purifier took no kind of satisfaction from any of his wins nor had he fretted over his losses.

Noa's mind was still too fuzzy for any kind of skill, and he was too overwhelmed to focus on anything for too long. It wasn't like him to be a sore loser, but losing round after round made him feel helpless, and his face twisted into a snarl. At the very least, it wasn't the snarl of his mid-change mutating self, merely the snarl of a man who might throw dice and beat at the ground after losing a pouch of brass at dice. Noa threw his three dice at the ground, sending them flying in different directions, and he pounded his fists against the cool stone, his mouth working in curses that came out as unclear rasps. Then, he stopped himself, realizing how childish he was acting, and his face reddened. That brass he 'lost' wasn't even his. There hadn't been any real stakes, but Noa was boiling on the inside at his losses. When he glanced up at the Purifier, he expected to be staring down the barrel of a gun or at the point of a blade.

The Purifier merely nodded a bit to himself, expression unchanging, in the same way that he had before. He looked about. All of Noa's dice had landed outside of his cell, so the Purifier picked them up without uttering a single word.

Somehow, the quiet was worse.

The Purifier left the chamber and returned after a few minutes with a jug of water in one hand and a serving bowl full of stew with half a loaf of bread sitting on top in the other hand.

As soon as Noa laid his eyes on the bowl, his guts groaned in hunger.

The Purifier opened a slot in the door to offer him the food and water.

Noa moved to grab them, but, just before he put his hands on the bowl and the jug, he hesitated and looked at the Purifier.

He gave Noa one short nod of his head.

So, Noa grabbed the offering, and, for the first time in some days, he smiled. The water was a bit dirty, the stew was cold and had fatty meat, and the bread was hard, but it was a sign that he was going to live. *Why waste all of this on a dead man?* So, he grabbed the wooden spoon from the bowl and devoured enough food for a family, washing it down with the jug of water.

The Purifier pulled the branding iron from his travel pack. He grabbed it by its nice leather handle and twisted his wrist around to inspect it. He nodded and put it back. Then, he grabbed a set of small-ringed chains of different lengths and four shackles from his travel pack, and he carried them with him as he walked back to the cell where Noa was waiting. While it might still be a mutant, calling a somewhat sane mutant by its name was easier. Even if it wasn't human, neither was a dog or a horse, but it was proper to call them by their names. Of course, a rabid animal had no use for a name and could be killed on sight. There was also no point in wasting food and water on a rabid animal. It was never bloodlust or torture—Purifiers, of course, were practical, spared no extra expense, and were swift in execution. For monsters, that was. The Purifier had evaluated Noa not to be a threat, however; so, subhuman or not, the Purifier treated him as a mutant, not as a monster—as an animal, not a rabid animal. That difference meant that Noa would be let out into the wild, not put down.

Noa looked up at the Purifier, still scratching his itchy skin through his clothes, and he let out a raspy, "Hmm?"

The Purifier held out the chains and shackles, showing them to Noa. "Stand at the bars with your back facing me. First, I shackle your wrists and ankles. Then, I tighten a chain around your belly. And then, I reattach the shackles to the belly chain. D'you understand?"

Noa stopped scratching itself and nodded. It sighed, then stood up slowly, and it walked up to the bars before turning around.

The full chain harness went on easily—Noa put up no resistance—, and the Purifier locked the shackles in place. He stepped back from the bars and said, "I'll open the door, I'll take you to gather your belongings before your exile, and you'll remain in chains until you're branded. My gun'll be pointed at your back the entire time. D'you understand?"

It nodded.

"They have a bit of give. You'll be able to walk around fine and grab what you need. You can't run, you can't fight, and, if you try either, I will shoot you. D'you understand?"

It nodded again.

The Purifier pulled out the key from a pocket with one hand and pulled his revolver from its holster with the other. As he pointed the revolver at Noa, he unlocked the cell.

Noa stayed still as the Purifier opened the door.

"C'mon." The Purifier heard it swallow.

Noa stepped out of the cell, each step clinking with the rattling of chains. It turned and looked back as if it were saying goodbye.

Before they left, the Purifier grabbed his travel pack. He would need the branding iron, and he wasn't planning on coming back. It was nice to not have to deal with grieving villagefolk.

"The same rules apply: you can't run, you can't fight, and, if you try either, I will shoot you," the Purified said, "D'you understand?"

Noa nodded. It was more words out of a Purifier in a single day than he had ever heard from them in his entire life.

"Are there any weapons in your room?"

He nodded, help up one finger, and rasped, "Small knife."

The Purifier nodded.

Noa figured that meant he could take it. Then, looked around his room, realizing it would be the last time he would ever see it. And, as he looked around, he noticed a nice wooden box sitting in the center of his bed next to a tarp-wrapped bedroll tied with rope—neither had been there before. The box was Dafne's personal Harmonies game set, and there was a note on top of it. It seemed odd that she'd leave him with what was really a toy and served him no use out in the barrens. Still, it was nice that she cared. Noa went over, set the note to the side, grabbed the box, turned partway toward the Purifier, and unlatched it for him to inspect the contents, which was a nice Harmonies game board covering the pieces beneath it.

The Purifier nodded, approving the game set.

Noa was more interested in the note. He knew time was slipping away from him, but the note was short. *Noa, please take this with you. Play it solitaire when you get bored. It will bring you comfort*

in the barrens. Father would want you to have it. This was his before it was mine. And now it is yours. With love, Dafne and Wald. There is salted pork, pistachios, and two skins of water for you in the kitchen. No booze. Noa rolled his eyes at the last part, but his attention was brought back to the beginning of the note. His brow furrowed a bit as he mouthed the words, "Father would want you to have it. This was his before it was mine. And now it is yours." He didn't have time to think about whatever they meant. Noa took the note to the Purifier and pointed at the second-to-last line about the rations and the water.

The Purifier nodded.

That would have to be good enough for Noa. He returned to looking around his room to figure out what he'd bring with him. There was his rucksack, so he grabbed that and opened every pouch of it in front of the Purifier—it was empty. He grabbed a pouch from under his bed that was bulging with the rest of his brass, a small metal box that contained flint and steel and charcloth to light a fire, his sheathed knife which he showed to the Purifier very slowly, a spare set of clothes that smelled of sweat, a poncho to keep him safe from walking around in bad weather, two handkerchiefs, a spare set of socks, a set of socks for his bare feet that he put on after waving them in front of the Purifier, and his boots, which were rather worn, but they were much better than nothing. He held them out in front of the Purifier too, shaking them out upside down. Then, he put them on. Everything else he threw into the rucksack. Then, he tied the tarp-wrapped bedroll to the top of his rucksack. There was one last thing that he had been ignoring, but he shrugged and grabbed the sombrero that Katherine had bought for him on the day of the Sunflower Dance. Survival was more important than the feelings he had around that hat, so he tied its leather strap to his rucksack as well. Plus, it was nice enough that he might be able to trade it if it came to that. He looked at the Purifier, shrugged, and then pointed down toward where the kitchen was on the first floor of his family's shack.

Again, the Purifier nodded. "Alright. Hurry up."

Noa was the one nodding that time, but he also squinted his eyes at the Purifier. *Hurry up? No sudden movements? Asshole.* And he made his way downstairs, carrying his rucksack in front of him, which almost tripped him as it proved both heavier and bulkier than he would've liked. Still, if it gave him a greater chance of survival, it would be worth it. Unless all of that stuff wore him out first. He shook his head and tried to ignore the whispers.

As the note had said, there was salted pork, pistachios, and two skins full of water left for him in the kitchen—and no booze.

Noa licked his lips. *Booze would be nice right about now.* He got to packing them into his rucksack, making it even heavier, but most of that added weight came from the water, and there was no way he would be leaving that behind. Hungry was fine, parched was not. Then, he took one last look around. There was nothing else worth taking.

"You'll be dead in a few days anyway."

Noa glared over his shoulder at the Purifier.

But the Purifier just arched an eyebrow.

And Noa shook his head as he realized it was the voices in his head. Remembering that they existed made his skin itch again, and he scratched at his sides through his clothes. It took him a few moments to realize that he couldn't put the rucksack on, so he held it awkwardly in front of

him, and holding it like that meant he could scratch himself. Noa sighed. Then, he turned back around to the Purifier and gave him a nod followed by a shrug.

“Let’s go.”

Noa stepped out of his home for the last time.

The Purifier closed the door behind them, then hopped onto his horse without ever taking his eyes off of Noa. He nodded his head toward the fields.

Noa started walking. The sun wasn’t yet halfway up the sky, and Noa’s gut sank knowing that he’d be walking through fields and by dozens of workers on his way out. He tried to keep his face forward, but he couldn’t help himself from looking. Every time he saw someone, they looked away clearly, no one was able to make it not obvious that they were just staring. In any other circumstances, that could have been a normal day. There was a nice dry heat, birds were chirping about, the sunflowers would be blooming soon, and it was horribly clear to Noa that all of that would be gone soon and he had taken so much of it for granted.

The Purifier dismounted his horse and looked around. No one had come to say goodbye to Noa after all, and the mutant wore a look of disappointment on its face. They were on the outskirts of Digsby where pyres were erected to reduce mutants to ash. “Wait,” he told Noa. In that case, only a small fire was needed. The Purifier had set up the wood for a small fire earlier, and he got the flames going with relative ease. As the wood burned, he retrieved the branding iron from his travel sack, grabbing it by its nice leather handle. The other end was in the shape of a ‘V’, and that end was the one that the Purifier placed into the fire. “You’ll want to be lying down, and you’ll want to bite down on something soft.”

Noa nodded, fear displacing the disappointment on its face. It set its rucksack down, pulled out one of its handkerchiefs, and bent over to clumsily stuff the rag in his mouth, restricted by the chains. It looked at the Purifier. Then, it dropped to its knees, to its hands and knees, and finally over and onto its back.

After a few minutes, the Purifier grabbed the branding iron, looking at the end that was glowing with heat. He stepped back over to Noa, which already had its eyes and jaw clenched tight in anticipation. “You are now a Vector,” the Purifier told him, and he pressed the burning iron ‘V’ to Noa’s forehead, making its flesh sizzle.

It opened its mouth in a raspy scream, but its eyes surely went blank.

Noa came to, the light of the day replacing the darkness of fainting. His forehead stung like the hand of a child who had touched a stove—and then held it there against all reason. Noa looked around, expecting it to be the evening, for hours to have passed, but the Purifier was only just stamping out the last of the flames.

The Purifier looked over as Noa clumsily made his way to standing. “Listen good.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, forgetting that his voice was mostly gone. Noa winced from the pain in his throat, then he looked back to the Purified and nodded.

“You have been exiled. You are now on parole. Entering the Republic or the Periphery is a violation of your parole, and you will be executed. D’you understand?”

Noa nodded.

“Alright. Turn around and I’ll remove those chains. I will follow you away from Digsby on horseback until you are far enough away. D’you understand?”

Noa nodded and turned around, and he let out a small sigh of relief as the chains and shackles were removed, making it much easier to scratch his itching skin. He waited a few moments before turning slowly back around.

The Purifier mounted his horse and nodded in the direction that would take Noa deeper into the barrens.

With the rucksack on his back, Noa walked across the bleak and mostly flat landscape, weaving in and out of red buttes that seemed much larger up close than they had from the village or the fields. He wasn’t in exile, he was an adventurer—that lie was much more pleasant, and it was fairly easy to maintain with the Purifier behind him and out of sight, and the whispers in his mind mostly distracted him from the sound of hoofbeats on dry dirt.

“Find me.”

In the same moment, Noa’s eyes went wide, his body shuddered, and his knees went weak and stopped supporting his weight. That voice belonged to his sister—but not Dafne. His guts churned like he had eaten old meat.

“Keep walking,” the Purifier said. “Now.”

Noa got back to his feet and kept moving forward. His body stopped its quavering, but his guts didn’t stop their churning. It had been years since he had last heard her voice, and her voice in his mind broke through the pattern of thoughts he had fallen into about her fate. In getting over his loss, Noa did as everyone else: he knew that she would die out in the barrens, but he believed that she would find a new life for herself. Taking the same steps that she had all of those years ago, it had dawned on him—dawned on some part of his mind, at least—that she really could be out there somewhere and that he could actually find her. That glimmer of hope was quickly crushed by grave honesty. Even more likely, she had perished out in the barrens and he would be— *No*, he thought. *Even if she— even if most people die, I can make it.*

At some point, Noa turned around and the Purifier and his horse were both gone. It was just Noa and his rucksack alone in the barrens. That seemed like the right time to pause on put on the sombrero to keep the midday sun off of him. The sun moved through the sky, and it seemed to do so slower than it ever had. Noa was sweating, and, between that and his clothes, it wasn’t making the itching any better.

“Watch out!”

Noa ducked and looked around, but, once again, no one was there. He was alone. He knew he was alone. So, he shook his head and he kept on. Eventually, the rucksack became too much to carry any farther, so he found himself a nice rock to sit on. He pulled some salted meat and a wineskin from the rucksack, and he had as little as he could convince himself to. He imagined it wouldn’t be terribly hard to find cacti in a pinch, but he worried about whether or not he’d be able to hunt—on account of his skill *and* on account of it being so empty in the barrens. Noa had seen a couple of lizards on his walk, but that had been it.

As the sun started setting on the other side of the sky, Noa climbed to a spot with a couple dozen pine trees that he could hide in and use to start a small fire. He got out his tarp and tied it to a few different trees to create a bit of a roof for himself. Then, he set out the bedroll under the

tarp. It didn't take long to do, so he gathered some drier branches in case he would need a fire for warmth or food. *What am I lookin' for anyway? Should I... settle here? Where do I go?* Those kinds of questions made it harder to keep pretending that he was on an adventure. He didn't have a goal other than to stay alive, and he definitely didn't have anywhere to go. As he pulled out the wineskin and some more salted meat, he thought about the stories that he had heard when he was a bit younger, tales that traders told children at festivals. *I suppose I shoulda paid more attention, huh?* Though, he remembered the gist of quite a few of them. There was supposed to be a kingdom on the other side of the Republic, and there were other settlements out in the barrens that weren't part of the Periphery. Some of them—and he still wasn't sure if he believed it; though, he had as a child—were supposed to be mutant settlements where normal humans were exiled to find another place to live. Those stories seemed convenient. It made for a great tale, but it was just the flipside of how human villages worked. That and it seemed like an easy lie to tell people who had lost a sibling or a parent or a friend to exile.

Noa dug around in his rucksack and pulled out Dafne's Harmonies game set. *At least I won't die bored,* he thought. *No. No, because I'm not gonna die.* He sighed and flipped the latch on the game box. Noa opened it and pulled out the game board, and his eyes went wide as he dropped the game board onto his bedroll. Most of the game pieces were missing. Though, in their place was his father's revolver in its holster, a good amount of ammunition, and some wire with and a scrap of a note tucked into the wire roll. *For noose traps,* it read. Noa pulled out the other note, which he had crumpled and thrown into his rucksack, and read over it again. *Father would want you to have it. This was his before it was mine. And now it is yours.* He took a deep breath. *It makes sense, I guess. Better than my knife,* he thought. While his thoughts didn't show it, the relaxation in his body painted the rest of the piece. Noa was armed. Like any sixteen-year-old boy, he looked over the gun, and he imagined him slinging that revolver in duels and against outlaws and against other mutants in exile that got in his way. In reality, of course, he hardly knew how to load it, and Wald had only let him fire it a few times. Though, it was certainly in fine care because of how much Wald tinkered with it. *Wald,* he thought. *Maybe he really did love me after all, huh?* A small smile touched Noa's lips.

Before it got too dark, Noa sparked a small fire of dry branches in a little pit that he had dug out with his bare hands. It didn't offer much warmth—he was enjoying the cooler air anyway—, but it did offer a little bit of light. Fear crept in on his mind and spread through the whispers that plagued him. It was safe in Digsby—relatively, at least—but there was no telling what might be prowling around the barrens, especially at night. Even if something didn't come try to eat him in his sleep, animals could get into his rucksack and steal his food. Of course, there were much greater worries beyond monsters. There was no Digsby, and there were definitely no Purifiers protecting him from mutants—*other* mutants. Noa rubbed his forehead, finding that it was still quite tender, but he could make out the 'V' shape seared into his skin.

"Monster."

Voices piping up in his head didn't make him any less afraid of the night. At the very least, his itching had lessened a bit. He didn't feel the overwhelming need to scratch himself. Noa pulled his rucksack close, lay on his back, and pulled the thin quilt over him. *Well, I survived the first day. That's pretty good, right?* He looked up at the stars through the branches as his situation really

settled into his mind and the small fire reduced itself to embers. *What was her first day like?* he wondered. Memories that he had been avoiding slowly trickled into his thoughts.

There she had been. Noa had already been as tall than his sister even though she had several years on him. Wald had been just old enough that no one worried that he would go through the change, she was just a couple years younger than him, then Dafne a few years younger than her, then Noa a couple of years younger than Dafne. Their parents, of course, had still been alive then as well. They had all been there to watch her be branded by a Purifier. But Noa hadn't been able to look at her before she left. He had wanted to remember his older sister as the beautiful lady she was—her paler skin, her kind dark eyes, and her long dark hair that framed her gentle face. She had seemed like she was always smiling. His sister had turned into something withered with gums that never stopped bleeding, no fingernails, and patchy hair that kept falling out. Her skin had turned such a sickly pale color and her veins stuck out from her skin that her pulse was visible. Worse still, her mind had been going too. She had become confused and forgetful and clumsy. That hadn't been who Noa wanted to remember. That wasn't who Noa wanted to remember as he lay under the quilt. Their parents had sent her with supplies too, but he remembered that she definitely wasn't able to carry as much as he could. *Did mom and pop... did they consider her a lost cause?* Noa swallowed as tears welled in his eyes, and he remembered Ellie, Jack's little sister, too.

Despair threatened to consume him as he thought about all those he had lost. But there was a spark within him too—a stubborn hard-headed spark that bloomed even amongst the dreadful whispers. That spark didn't say a single word to him, but he knew its truth: he had lost so much, so he had to live—he had to live *because* he had lost so much. Whatever wanted Noa dead was going to have to try much harder.

"So, do we have a deal?" the woman asked. She was short, and her wrinkled face betrayed her age as much as her voice did.

"Don't we always, Yaya?" Tendaji laughed. "I can make things happen."

"I know you can," she said. "I'm not sure I like the rest of your crew too much, but you're a nice boy. I'd pat ya on the head if I could reach."

It wasn't just because she was short; Tendaji was fairly tall, which was good for him because, if he were any shorter, he'd be shaped like a square. "Instead of patting my head, you can just give us half upfront." Tendaji laughed again.

"Oh, you know I was gonna do that anyway," Yaya said, and she smiled at him. "But keep it down." She made a few motions downward with her hand. "You speak low but your laughin's so damn loud. Now, take this"—she held out a small box—"and get the job done."

Tendaji grabbed the box from Yaya, and it had a nice heft in his hand. He met her eyes and gave her a shallow bow before leaving the shack through its curtained door. Tendaji blinked a few times, his eyes adjusting to the sunlight. *She's always got it so dark in there.*

"How'd it go?"

The big man looked over to find a shadowy shape stepping out from the overhang of an adjacent shack and into the only slightly less dark darkness of night toward him. "Mercy, Xo. I thought I was about to get robbed."

Xochitl rolled her eyes. "Oh, c'mon. You wouldn't've let that happen."

"Not when we're only getting paid this much. Twenty-five now, twenty-five after." Tendaji tossed Xochitl the small box.

She looked both ways around the narrow streets nestled between crowded shacks, and then she opened the box, revealing the twenty-five rifle cartridges inside, and she brushed her fingertips across them. "At least they're almost all the same number." She closed the box again and tucked it under her brown jacket to keep it away from prying eyes. "We can resupply easy in Stoneway when—" She shot Tendaji a look and popped her jaw. "Hol' up a damn second. You said not when we're only gettin' paid this much? Seems you're forgettin' that's your idea."

Tendaji shrugged. "Keeps us in business."

"Oh, please," Xochitl said, and she started off, leading them between the shacks, swift in the moonlit darkness. "You know as well as I do Yaya'd pay us a better rate if you'd let her. Mercy, I bet she'd talk to any of us, really, but she only wants you 'cause you're so easy. The shit'd we even hire you for?"

His laugh sounded down the empty streets. "You didn't."

"Yeah," she said, and she smirked, "and that's the best decision we ever made. The worst was keepin' you around anyway."

"You're such an ass, Xo."

Noa woke before the sun rose, which his body was used to. It seemed that the whispers had woken up before him. They were already quite annoying. Noa did his best to ignore them as he rooted around in his rucksack for some pork and pistachios. About a day's worth of food was gone with his breakfasting and about two more remained, but he knew that could be stretched out quite a bit. His real limit was water. Noa didn't remember drinking that much, but there was the truth of it: one of the wineskin's was already halfway empty. Water wasn't something that he could stretch, and he wasn't keen on dyin' of thirst. Noa also pulled out the Harmonies game box, and he flipped up the latch, opened the book, and pulled out the game board. That revolver could make sure no one took his food and water. It wasn't a thought that he particularly liked, but that revolver could also make someone else's food and water his—if it ever came to that. So, Noa attached the holster to his belt, leaving the gun unloaded.

He scratched at his skin, and he found that the itchiness went away rather quickly. That let him have a sigh of relief. Then, he looked confused at nothing, and he took another swig from his wineskin before clearing his throat. It didn't hurt. "My name's Noa," he said. His voice was more than a rasp. Of course, it was still *raspy*, but— *At least I got my voice back*. There was one last thing to check, and he gently touched a finger to his forehead. The 'V' was still quite tender, but that seemed to be takin' care of itself as well.

As soon as the sun started its climb into the sky, Noa started packing. The bedroll went back into the tarp, the rope went back around that and he attached it to his rucksack as he had before, and he set it up against one of the trees before taking his morning leak against another. It proved to be a bit more difficult to get goin' in the barrens where anything could be lurking around. He had made it through the night just fine, of course, but, if his luck continued as it had been, it didn't seem like a crazy thought that somethin' might get him while his pants were down.

Alright. Let's get on, Noa thought. He stuck his arms through the straps of his rucksack, stuck his sombrero on top of his head, and he looked around and out at the barrens around him. If he could remember right, he thought he came over from by *that* rock. His lips tightened into a grim-lookin' frown and he sighed out his nose. It all looked the same. During his walk, he hadn't thought once to pay attention to the direction of the sun. At that point, his only goal was to get away from Digsby as not to be shot dead by the Purifier.

Well, he thought, *I definitely haven't climbed up to the top of these here rocks.* Noa shrugged the rucksack off and set it down back where it had been against the tree. He stared at it, not wanting to let it out of his sight, but, no matter how strong he was, it'd be awkward to climb up those rocks with somethin' so heavy on his back. When he turned back around, he felt around the flat rocky side of the hill. There weren't any better choices. From what he could see, all of it seemed rather flat around the side, and the rocks were likely fairly loose in all spots. Noa shook his head before heaving himself up onto the side of the hill, squeezing the rocks as tight as he could. With one hand, he reached up, and, with one leg, he took a step up.

"Don't look down," said a voice from below.

His brain took too long to catch up with his instinct, and Noa found himself at staring at nothing but ground. Of course, Noa wasn't a climber—there hadn't been much to climb in or around Digsby other than rooftops, and he had always figured those were fairly safe. Though he wasn't higher yet than any of those rooftops, Noa's stomach churned as he looked at the short fall he might make if his fingers gave out. He knew that, if he took it slow, that was bound to happen, so he pushed on, and his hands eventually reached the flat top of the hill. Noa stopped there for a few moments, letting himself catch his breath. Then, with another push from his feet, he had his upper body on the flat top of the hill, but it put his feet in an awkward spot where they couldn't push him up much more. Noa clawed his fingers against the dusty stone and wiggled the rest of his body up to the top of the hill. From there, it was as simple as standing up, but he felt dizzy as he looked around. From the top of the hill there, was so much to see. It was mostly empty, but there were a lot of barrens to see. Still, there was a lot more than that to see. There were buildings and a farm out there in the distance, and it seemed to be quite a bit bigger than the village he had come from—it looked to be a real town.

Noa sat down, partly to get rid of the dizziness from the view and partly to figure out the dizziness from his confusion. When he left Digsby, he had imagined that he'd be alone and wandering the barrens for quite some time, but there already seemed to be an end in sight for that part of his journey. Noa's heart was poundin' in his chest. Everything he had ever known made it seem like exile meant dyin' almost right away. Unless, of course, that town was part of the Periphery and Noa had gotten turned about somewhere. That seemed possible. If so, he knew it meant that the town out there would mean death. Noa reached up to touch the 'V' on his forehead, and that was the first time he realized it was mostly covered by his hat. Of course, the scars all over his body gave him away, but the tilted the sombrero down anyway—hiding his brand couldn't hurt.

In less than a full day, Noa had a goal. There was a town out there, and it had people, which meant that it had food and water, and Noa had brass and also that revolver, so that food and water could very much be his.

He climbed down from the hill until he felt he could jump the rest of the way. It dizzied him to look down at the ground, but it was better than losing his grip and falling. He grabbed his rucksack and got it on his back. It took a bit of time to get around the stony hill, but, when he did, the town was still there in the distance. It was a bit harder to see, but he had a direction and a way to keep himself alive for at least a while longer. As he headed toward the dark spot on the horizon, his mind found itself plenty of questions. Noa wondered what the people there might be like. Whether it was the Periphery of somethin' else, he had met a few folk that hadn't spent most of their lives in Digsby. Sure, some people left and travelled about, and there were a handful of folk who were in charge of retrieving brass and crops for the Republic and there was the occasional Purifier when things weren't right, but neither of those groups ever talked much, so, really, only a couple of traders ever shared stories of what went on outside of Digsby, and they only came from the nearest village, which was Kimura.

Adelayo sat at the wheel of the dune buggy, bouncing her leg impatiently. "C'mon," she said in a whining voice. "Where are they? Why's it always those two who get into trouble?"

He didn't say anything. He was just leaning against the side of the dune buggy—as if anyone actually thought he looked cool doing it.

"Peng!" she barked.

The man turned around. "What?" Peng asked.

Adelayo pulled on each of the braids that were hanging along the sides of her face—there was a third braid on the back of her head that was left out of the pulling. "Where... are... they? I just wanna go. Why's it always *us* that's waitin' on *them*?" As she tugged on her braids, she stuck out her tongue and rolled her eyes back.

"Your buggy, Ten talks, and Xo's the boss." He shrugged. "So, really," he said, and he chuckled at her and her face, "means I'm stuck here with you."

She groaned. "I still don't get why we couldn't just drive to get the stuff."

"Yes, you do."

"But I'm so bored!"

Peng chuckled and pulled on his brown jacket, adjusting it. "You're always bored. Tinkerin', kissin' Ten, or you're bored."

"I'd rather be tinkering," she said, and she gave a chuckle of her own. "C'mon. I could be working on something right now."

"With what?" Peng asked. "We dumped our scrap."

Adelayo rolled her eyes and her whole head at Peng. "I know. I'm not an idiot. I was there. I can see. I have two eyes. But, if they're gonna take so long, I figure I have some time to look around for parts."

"Tell you what," Peng said. "If you shut up, I'll stay with the buggy in Stoneway while you grab parts. In the—"

"Deal."

"—meantime, we got some wood. Why don't ya... whittle somethin'?"

Adelayo's eyes narrowed. "I don't *whittle* wood! I don't *anything* wood!"

Peng shrugged. "So much for that deal."

"That doesn't count!"

He shrugged.

"Come *on*. They're not even here yet and they're gonna have to load the stuff. Why can't I go out and look for some parts?"

Peng turned his face toward her and glared. "'Cause Xo said to stay here."

"I can't take you seriously with that stupid scruff on your face. Either get a nice razor—I can make you one—or just grow it out already."

He looked away. "Ah, c'mon. Doesn't look that bad."

"It looks like you—" Adelayo's head whipped around toward the sound of low and rumbling laughter, and she saw two familiar faces not too far away. "Finally!"

Noa had made it to the edge of the farmland, and he walked down the long path into the town. Even the paths were different. They were worn with much more use, but they were also wide enough that two carts could fit side-by-side without too much of a problem. His eyes wandered, finding it odd to see such a familiar sight in such an unfamiliar place with unfamiliar people. But, as he looked around, they were lookin' at him. Noa swallowed and hurried his pace. *Am I doin' somethin' wrong?* He had thrown on his poncho and tucked one side into his belt a bit before he got too close to hide the revolver holstered on his hip—and he had tied his pouch to the other side. *Maybe they just don't like strangers.* "Pardon," Noa said to a man on the path, "but could you tell me where I am? Am I still in the Periphery?"

That man narrowed his eyes. "Stoneway."

"Stoneway? I've never—"

"Yep," he said, his one word quite sharp, and he walked off. But not without muttering just one more word: "Freak."

Noa sighed. *At the very least, if I haven't heard of this Stoneway, it can't be part of the Periphery, right? I'm sure he woulda said worse or even threatened to have me killed... right?* It was somethin' of a pleasant time not being threatened. Noa let out another sigh and walked on. His first stop was at a stall just inside the town—the first one he saw—but it was awkward weaving through all of the people walking around, especially when they all made passing glances right at him. The town was quite a bit busier than Digsby been on a normal day. Either it was some kind of festival or every day was like a festival in that town.

"Just what Katherine wished for."

The voice had seemed to be right behind him, but he knew nobody knew about him or about Katherine. *Right?* He swallowed again, feeling nervous sweat drip down his forehead. "Pardon me," Noa said to the woman behind the stall. "I'm not from—"

"Around here?" she said, finishing his words for him. The vendor would have reminded him of his sister Dafne if her hair had been much darker. She was selling some kinds of fruits and vegetables that Noa had never seen before. "Plain to see," she said, and her eyes flickered down at his forearms for just a moment, seeing bare scarred skin. "Another mutant. Don't look so surprised. Of course you're not the first. Inn's down that way a bit," and she nodded her head to the side, then continued, "but the best you'll get is some hay, and that's if you're lucky. You look pretty normal for a mutant, though."

"Oh. Alright. Thanks, I guess," Noa said, his body a bit rigid as his heart pounded. "Are there... other mutants... here?"

"You gonna buy somethin'?" she said, and she rested a hand on her hip.

"I don't know what— I mean, yeah, sure. How much for... one of those?" Noa pointed to one of the pinkish red fruits.

The vendor shrugged. "How much're you willin' to pay?"

Noa stuttered wordlessly before finally saying, "Well, you take brass, right?"

"Mhm."

He thoughts about what he might pay for a pomegranate back in Digsby. "Just a brass?"

"Either you're tryin' to shortchange me or you have no idea what you're doin'. A good peach is at least three brass."

Noa missed the bluff and he said, "Right. Sorry. I'll take two." He reached for his pouch and he pulled out six spent pistol cartridges of different kinds, and he dropped them into her outstretched hand before grabbing two peaches. "So, uh, are there any other... mutants... here in this town?"

"No," she said after pocketing the brass. "Your kind doesn't exactly tend to stick 'round here for very long."

"Oh, where—"

"Now, shoo. You're gonna scare off my other customers."

"Sorry... about that," Noa said, and he stepped away from the stall. As he walked in the direction the vendor had nodded, he stayed just inside the fields. Going farther into town only meant crossing more people. There were already enough people where he was, and he noticed that most people gave him a bit of space as they walked by. As he came to another path that lead through farmland and out of the town, he saw inn farther into town, which is where he was trying to avoid, but the stranger sight was just on the inside of the path that came into town.

There was a cart made out of metal tubes. There were seats inside like it was a cage, and there were a bunch of crates piled up in the back.

As he stared, he made eye contact with the man and the woman sitting in its seats. There was something odd about the man in the brown jacket, but— *What am I doing?* He tore his eyes away and turned quickly to head down the path toward the inn.

Peng sighed as the boy turned away. "See him?"

"He doesn't even realize how much he sticks out. That fancy hat, that pack, and the way he's just carrying around those two peaches. He looks like a jackass." Adelayo chuckled.

"Probably got heat under the poncho too," Peng said.

"How long before he's dead or run outta town, ya think?"

Peng narrowed his eyes. "Too soon. Look who just turned the corner."

"Redeemer," Adelayo said under her breath.

"Oh well. Can't save 'em all."

The young woman cocked her three-braided head at Peng. "You're really just gonna sit there and wait for him to get shot full of holes?"

He shrugged. "Don't see you doin' anything."

"Peng."

"Alright, alright," he said, stretching his arms as he got up from the stiff seat. "Don't go anywhere. Just gonna pull him aside and tell him what's what."

"You know I'm not going anywhere. I got my scraps," she said, looking back down at the metal tube, small chunk of wood, spring, and nail that she was working with.

It wasn't hard for Peng to keep the boy in his sight. Between the boy's size and the sombrero on his head, it'd be harder not to see him. Peng's steps were quick, and it didn't take long for him to catch up to the Redeemer as he watched the boy disappear into the inn. As he strode ahead of the Redeemer, Peng grabbed some three small bangers that had been made to look like rocks from his pocket, and he squeezed one of the short fuses between his thumb and forefinger, which lit it, and he dropped it in the path of the Redeemer with sleight of hand. Then, the next one. And the next one.

Right after the third fell, the second one went off with a loud gunshot of a *crack* and a puff of dark smoke just before the Redeemer would have stepped on it.

The Redeemer recoiled and yelled out, "What in—"

But the next banger cut him off, followed by the third only a couple of moments after. The sound of three gunshots in the middle of a street caused a bit of a commotion. The first *crack* had caused a horse to rear and throw its rider off, a man to drop a basket of fruits, a woman to scream, and the second *crack* had really set the crowd off, sending them into a panic as some fled and others cowered in fear. The third *crack* had come from the first banger, which Peng had dropped so it would go off behind the Redeemer, and, as Peng had planned, the Redeemer's focus would surely follow.

Peng hadn't bothered to turn around, of course; he trusted his plans, even when he made them on the fly. As he sprinted through the door of the Brimming Cup, he put on his best panicked face—which still wasn't terribly spectacular—and shouted, "Someone's out there firin' shots! Watch yourself!"

The townsfolk in the room scurried about, taking the focus back off of Peng who, before he had yelled, might've been the one firing those shots comin' in to hold up the place. It wasn't common, but it wasn't too uncommon, though robbers usually went after saloons.

But of course it wasn't him. He was panicked townsfolk just like them with no idea of who was causing such a ruckus. Peng cast off the role and scanned the room—there. The boy was sitting alone at the end of a table, waiting to be served some watered-down booze or stew, which is exactly what the Redeemer wanted. Peng knew what they did. They followed fresh exiles to an inn, asked where the exile had gone to, which was either to be served a brew if it was early enough or out to the stable to sleep if it was late enough—Redeemers didn't cough up any brass for that kind of information; they didn't usually have to, and, if they did, that's when the gang threats came out. Then, the Redeemer would wait for the right moment to strike and make sure the world had one less impure soul in it. Peng wasn't too keen on letting them get that satisfaction, but that drive didn't tend to outweigh the mask of apathy that kept him safe—safe from the guilt of when he couldn't save those impure souls. But that's not what Peng was thinking—he wasn't just gonna grab those feelings by the horns and deal with them. Dealing with the present was much more manageable. Peng sat too close to the boy, and he grabbed the

boy by the arm to deal with him before he could move away. "You're being followed by a Redeemer," he said in a low voice. "I know the way out back."

The boy ripped his arm away. "The fuck're you talkin' about?"

"Quiet," Peng said. "Don't reach for your gun. Redeemer's like a Purifier; only, worse."

He took a few steps back and kept his hand near whatever gun he was carrying, but he at least complied with lowering his voice—to a hiss. "How can I trust you?"

Peng shrugged. "Ya can't, but I'm quicker on the draw and your gun's empty."

"What?" The boy blinked in confusion as his eyes found the knife.

Peng had glinted the light off of its dark blade to draw his attention. "Get up, turn 'round, don't make a scene."

The boy did.

"Walk toward the kitchen. Then keep walkin'."

And the boy did.

"Don't look stiff. I'm savin' your ass."

The boy didn't or couldn't do that.

Peng followed closely behind, and the knife was already back up his sleeve, which meant no one could even have the slightest chance of noticing anything out of the ordinary, but the boy didn't have to know that.

"What're you doing back here?" one of the serving girls asked.

Peng shoved the boy forward, turning any words that might've been forming in his mouth into a grunt. "Too much to drink. Look at him tryin' t'hold it in." Peng hadn't stopped walking and he slyly pushed on the back of the boy's knee, keeping him stumbling on his feet. "Wouldn't want him makin' a big mess 'front of the others, ya know?"

"Oh, uh," she paused before finishing with a confused, "thank you." Then, she turned away from them to carry beer to the folk who'd paid for it.

Then, as they stepped outside, Peng gave the boy one last shove from behind as he hooked his foot around one of the boy's ankles.

The boy toppled over like a tree that had been cut from its roots.

"Learn fast. Redeemers're worse than Purifiers—they ain't got mercy 'cause their god, Allah, don't give mercy to the impure. An extra lesson? In a crowded space, knife's better than a gun. Gut ya before you can draw. One more? No one's fallin' for an empty gun, me least of all."

The boy had sucked in enough air to recover from his flop, and he turned over on the ground to face Peng, leaning back on one arm, and adjusted his sombrero out of his face. "So, you're really not gonna kill me?"

"No." Peng got his first good look at the boy. It seemed he was a bit old for an exile, and Adelayo had been right about him lookin' fairly normal aside from the scars, and he was pretty big—a bit taller than Tendaji, but definitely not quite as wide. "Even if I was robbin' you, I wouldn't kill ya. That'd only draw attention."

"Mercy," the boy said. "Well, thank you, uh... Well, my name's Noa."

Peng shrugged. "Couldn't care less," he told Noa. "Keep walkin'. Anywhere you see one of them Redeemers—you'll know 'em by their all black and white dress, and most of 'em have their head shaved or hair short—anyway, if you see one of 'em, don't stop. Even if you don't see one,

make sure they don't see you. You got a hard road ahead of you." Peng looked at the boy for only a moment longer, then he walked away. Xochitl and Tendaji might've already come back with supplies and ammunition.

Noa scrambled to his feet and caught up with Peng. "Wait. Hold on. Please. Are there more people like you? I mean, that wanna *help* mutants? Which way do I go? And who are—"

Before the boy would've had much time to blink, Peng had thrown Noa back to the ground and onto his ass this time. "Do *not* follow me." Peng grabbed that stupid hat from his head while he was still stunned and flung it away. "I saved your ass, now leave me to me and mine."

Noa craned his neck and gulped down air as he pulled himself off the ground and off his sore ass. He hobbled to his feet and watched the man walk away. Noa was certain that had been the same man he had seen earlier in strange metal cart—he had the same brown jacket, the same scowl on his face, the same dark hair pulled back out of his face and into a ponytail, and he had the same scruffy half of a beard on his chin. Noa dusted himself off, and his mind was in a twist over whether he should be pissed or grateful. He supposed he was both. *Thanks for half-saving my ass*, Noa thought, and he shook his head, *but I don't know where to go*. To make things worse, his pouch of brass was still one night an inn and one beer lighter, which meant it was just about empty.

His hat lay some way away, and he sighed as he walked over to pick it up. Noa put it back on his head and retied the thin leather cord to fit back under his chin. He looked back around in the direction that the man had gone in to find that he was really gone. *In a crowded space, knife's better than a gun. No one's fallin' for an empty gun, me least of all*. Those words were still bouncing around in his head, and Noa figured at least that advice could do him some good, so he shrugged off the rucksack to grab his knife from one of its pouches. That knife wasn't anything to sneeze at, but it seemed to Noa like any knife would be better than no knife. He attached its sheath to his belt on the opposite side of the revolver.

"Watch out!"

Noa crouched right where he was and looked all around him, finding no one there. *Well, at least it's remindin' me to keep movin'*, he thought. One hand went to his side. There wasn't enough time to figure out how to load it in the middle of an alley when that Redeemer would be close behind. Noa took off in the other direction and tried to hide himself among the townsfolk the best he could, which was just a bit difficult because they were still giving him plenty of space to walk by. Noa looked at the ugly scars on his hands and wrists—the same scars that the lesions had left all over his body—, and he made fists so tight that his body trembled for a moment. He had never considered himself particularly handsome—just lucky to have some kisses with Katherine and Jessabel—, but, with those scars, he was nothing short of a freak, even if he didn't outright look like a monster. Retrieving the last of the brass from his pouch, he made his way toward another stall that was off to the side.

The vendor, a stocky man, seemed to be looking everywhere but at Noa.

Noa cleared his throat. "Look, I don't mean to be any trouble. I got six small brass left, and they're yours if you can tell me where the nearest village is."

The stocky man held out a chubby hand and said, "Brass first."

"That's," Noa said with a tight jaw, "fine." He unclenched the fist he had made to drop the brass into the vendor's hand.

"That way," he said, pocketing the brass with one hand and gesturing over his shoulder with his other hand, thumb pointed out. "Pick a direction. A handful of hours'll get ya to a few different places from here. Just don't go that way"—he nodded in a different direction—"unless you wanna end up dead. Not too much out there."

Noa forced a smile and said, "Thank you."

"He should've walked out right past me. He isn't sitting in here. His stuff isn't in the stables. Are you sure you don't know where he's gone?"

Rahman swallowed and shook his head. He had hoped answering the bastard the first time would've been enough, and he had other paying customers to tend to. "No. I'm afraid not. As I said, I must've missed him getting' up." It wasn't his first time dealing with a Redeemer and it certainly wouldn't be the last. Having a gang member in the inn was never a great look, and no one made their presence more obvious than Redeemers did. That one in particular was dressed in a black leather jacket, white gloves, white pants, and black shoes; and, of course, her head was shaved—for 'purity' or so one had told him some time ago. Rahman always had trouble tellin' if a Redeemer was a man or a woman 'til they got too close or started talkin', and, if they were talkin' to him, that meant they were definitely too close.

One of his serving girls came up beside him. "Is she talking about... the mutant?"

"You can address me," the Redeemer said. "Did you see him?"

"A man was pushin' him out the back," the serving girl said, "sayin' the boy had too much to drink. It seemed odd, but..." Her voice trailed off beneath the glare of the Redeemer.

"Sympathizer," the Redeemer said, spitting out the word like it was a curse. "Did you happen to see what the man looked like?"

The serving girl shook her head. "N-no, I'm sorry."

But the Redeemer had stopped listening and started moving when the serving girl had shook her head. The Redeemer turned the corner to the kitchen.

Rahman let out a small sigh of relief, but the tension returned in a flash when he heard the shriek of a serving girl. He looked around the corner to find one of his girls knocked to the floor, covered in beer and surrounded by shards of glass. Rahman looked up just in time to see the side door slam shut. He looked back to the girl. "Get yourself cleaned up."

"So, how'd it go?" Adelayo asked, looking over her shoulder.

Tendaji chuckled. "You caused quite a commotion with your tricks. Xo and I got caught up in the chaos. We saw the Redeemer—they're hard to miss, ya know?—, but we didn't have the slightest clue of what was going on."

Peng shrugged. "I told him to keep walkin' 'til he didn't see any of 'em." He didn't know what else he could've done for the boy—Noa was his name. Peng got himself as comfy as he could be in the back of the buggy, sharing it with Tendaji and a bunch of crates.

Adelayo and Tendaji both looked shocked, then they both said, "That's it?" They looked at each other and laughed.

"Of course that's it," Peng said. Those words were spoken straight from behind that mask of apathy he ignored. "Not crossin' a Redeemer. Buggy's nice, but it makes us easy to identify, and I don't want 'em comin' down on us."

"He could still get—"

"Alright, alright," Xo said, cutting Adelayo off. "That's enough. Let's get goin'."

"But—"

"You too," Xo said, turning around to face Tendaji. "Now, are we good? Got everythin' we'll be needin'?" She looked over to Peng. "You good?"

"Course I'm good," Peng said, and the look on his face surely said nothing but the same.

Xochitl turned back around and settled into her seat. "Alright, Ade, start 'er up."

"Well, hold on," Adelayo said, "let's put it to a quick vote!"

"Alright," Xochitl said. She turned to the seats behind her again. "All in favor of tracking this kid down and dropping him off in another village?"

Adelayo turned around and said, "Aye."

"Aye," Tendaji added.

Peng hardly raised an eyebrow at them.

"Ha!" Adelayo put on a big grin. "That makes it a tie."

"No," Xochitl said, "because Ten doesn't get a vote." She chuckled.

Peng joined in on Xochitl's chuckling. "C'mon. Ten gets half a vote."

"Fine," Xochitl said, faking the resignation in her voice.

Adelayo tugged at the braids at the sides of her head. "What? Half a vote doesn't change anything. And, hey, he should have a vote—a *full* vote. What? No, come on, this is horseshit." She looked to Tendaji, but he was also chuckling. "Why aren't you more upset?"

Tendaji shrugged. "I'm coping. I know I don't really get a say. Why, if I had a say, I know you and I'd do whatever we could to get him somewhere better."

Peng laughed at the big guy. "Lucky we didn't put *you* to a vote."

"Alright, alright," Xochitl said, cutting in. "Ade, we're not takin' some kid on as a customer, even if he could pay. It'd maybe be different if we were on our way back," she said, and she looked to Peng, "right, Peng? But we gotta get goin'."

Peng shrugged and nodded.

Adelayo sighed, turned around, and got the ignition going. "Then let's get the fuck out of here. Wouldn't wanna be late, right?" she said, rolling her eyes, and then she turned the buggy around and drove down the path they had come in on. Just to spite Xochitl and Peng just a little bit more, she took the longer way around Stoneway to get where they were going, and she was grumbling to herself the whole time.

Peng chuckled and shot Tendaji a look. "Gonna be your problem tonight."

"Shut your mouth, Peng," Adelayo said, but she was really focused on glancing at Stoneway a few more times just to see if she could see that sombrero and overstuffed rucksack. "Don't wanna hear it. You're easier to— There! That him?"

They all glanced over to confirm Adelayo's suspicion. Sure enough, she was right. There he was. The boy in the sombrero was bookin' it toward the edge of the town, though he didn't seem to have his rucksack on.

Xochitl glared at Adelayo. "Don't even think about—" But she winced at the sound of a gunshot coming from that same direction.

There was a Redeemer not too far behind him, though she was losing him, and, as they looked over, the Redeemer stopped chasing after the boy to get a steadier shot.

"Leave him! That's an order!" Xochitl shouted to the woman next to her.

"But—" There was another shot, and Adelayo watched the boy stumble and fall onto the ground. She gasped and forced herself to look away, tears welling in her eyes, and she gripped the wheel even tighter.

"Fine," Peng said. "I change my vote."

Xochitl about threw herself into the back seats with the force she turned around. "What?"

Peng nodded. "Ade, get him."

Adelayo had already turned the wheel, and she turned harder, swerving them around.

The Redeemer was reloading her gun, and she was still a short way from the boy, but the boy was trying to get back up to his feet.

Tendaji's seemed to be dancing in his head, and he quickly positioned himself so that he was halfway out of the buggy. "Drift!"

Adelayo pulled the emergency brake as she swerved the buggy even harder.

Tendaji leapt from the buggy, hit the ground hard, rolled, sprung back to his feet, and he ran in the direction of the boy while keeping his eyes on the Redeemer.

The Redeemer was also running in the same direction, aiming her pistol at Tendaji. "Don't touch him. That one's mine."

The boy with the sombrero on his head was crawling away from the Redeemer as quickly as he could manage, blood soaking the back of his poncho.

"Afraid not," Tendaji said, quick-drawing his hand-cannon, which was a custom oversized revolver that Adelayo had put together for him.

The Redeemer scowled. "I shot him. He's mine."

"He's not yours. That's *my* customer," Tendaji said. "Right, sombrero boy?"

"Your *customer*?" The Redeemer kept her small pistol trained on Tendaji. "How could this mutant be your customer?"

"He was just about to pay me," Tendaji said. "Right, sombrero boy?"

The boy in the sombrero stopped and ripped a pouch from his belt and offered it up with a weak arm and shaking hand.

Tendaji took a few steps forward, and, with his free hand, he grabbed the pouch. Though, it was mostly empty. "See?"

The Redeemer laughed, still keeping her gun pointed at Tendaji. "It doesn't matter where you take him." Her focus turned to the boy—not her eyes, not her gun, but just her focus. "You hear that? It doesn't matter where they take you. Allah watches over all."

"That's nice. Now, go," Tendaji said.

The Redeemer put her arms up in a showy gesture before putting her pistol away. "Don't think you can get one over on us either," she said to Tendaji. "If you try to take him for yourself, you'll find yourself in Purgatory—you and your crew. It's impure to steal from the worthy." Then, she smiled, and she walked away.

Tendaji put his hand-cannon back in its holster, happy that he didn't have to use it. "Come on," he said to the boy, reaching out a hand. "We'll get you patched up. Don't worry. It's a good sign that you can still move."

"My rucksack," the boy said as he took Tendaji's hand.

Tendaji threw the boy's arm over his shoulder, then looked around, but he couldn't see it anywhere. "I'm sorry. We don't have time. Be glad you're alive."

Noa's jaw clenched and he yelled into the rag he was chewing on. His right side went from fierce pain to fierce pain *and* feeling like it had been set on fire, and it was worse still that the man in the brown jacket told Noa that he had to do whatever could to avoid flexing any muscles in his midsection while the operation went on. It was the worst he had ever felt, worse than that big nail stickin' through his foot the time he'd stepped on one, worse than being butted by a goat right in the crotch, but still not as bad as what he had endured during the change, though that had been so bad he hardly remembered it. This time—the time he got shot in his side by a Redeemer—was going to be a time to remember.

"Bullet," the man in the brown jacket said, holding the small piece of metal in between the ends of his tweezers. It had taken more than a couple of tries because the woman riding shotgun had ordered the driver not to stop.

The big man that had grabbed him smiled at the man in the brown jacket. "Even two of those tiny things wouldn't have killed him."

"Maybe in the same spot," the man in the brown jacket said as he dropped the bullet in what looked like an upturned tin lid. "Bullet somewhere vital is still gonna put you down, even if it's small." He put his tweezers down and rummaged in his kit, and the kit clanged and clinked as the buggy hit a bump.

"Sorry!" the driver yelled.

"All good," said the man in the brown jacket. "Not gonna make the next bit particularly fun, though." He looked at Noa. "Close your eyes and bite down."

Noa followed orders, closing his eyes and grinding his teeth on the rag, and he growled as he felt something burning hot squeeze into his wound. His midsection quivered as he tried to pour out all of his pain through his face and not his body. It was like having the brand on his forehead all over again.

"Makes me wonder—"

But another bump caused Noa to yell into the rag, cutting the big man off, as the searing poke twisted and jostled around inside his side, and he could feel every bit of his body tighten under the pain. Then, there was relief. Most of the pain was still there, but the burning of his wound and the burning of whatever the man in the brown jacket had stuck inside his wound was gone. Noa sucked in a nice deep breath.

"Makes me wonder," the big man started again, "why she didn't just kill him. She had him right there. Do you think they're, I don't know, sacrificing them?"

"Anything's possible with those freaks," said the man in the brown jacket. He wiped his hands on a rag—not the one in Noa's mouth, of course. Then, he looked back down at the boy. "Don't get too comfortable. Gonna have to clean it again."

Noa had seen stars when the man had cleaned it the first time, but he nodded.

"Get ready." The man in the brown jacket opened the bottle of alcohol and poured a little bit onto the boy's seared wound.

Noa's relief was replaced by more burning, and, while it didn't hurt as much as before, something about it stung in a more tender way. "Mercy," he grumbled into the rag.

"Really," the big man said. "You're not concerned about them going after, well, a certain kind of target? You know the rumors about Mother Tempest."

"Can't get worried when I don't know much," the man in the brown jacket told him, and he closed the bottle of alcohol again. "Alright, kid, gonna dress it. Do your best to keep it clean. If you don't, this'll've been for nothin', and I'd be pissed at you wastin' my time like that."

Noa nodded and pulled the rag out of his mouth. He rubbed his jaw. That and his teeth were likely to be sore for a while too, though he was quite happy that he hadn't fainted in front of them. And he was also quite happy just to still be alive. *Mercy, how many times do I face death and get to walk away?* It was a mighty dreadful thought, replacing the fading burning with a chill that raised the hairs on his arms.

"Don't go gettin' cold," the man in the brown jacket told him. "Never a good sign."

"I'm fine," Noa said. "Fine enough."

"By the way," the big one said, "my name's Tendaji."

"I suppose I owe you my life or somethin'," Noa told Tendaji. "That's not to sound like sass, of course. I'm... very thankful. Well, I just don't really know how to put it into words."

"If you're so thankful," the man in the brown jacket said, "then do us all a favor and keep your mouth shut and your whole self hidden."

Noa gave the man a look. "Whaddya mean?"

"He means," the woman in shotgun said, "that we don't have time to drop you off before we start hittin' Purifier territory, and we got some business to take care of, so, if you don't wanna forfeit your life and piss Peng here off, you'll stay quiet and outta sight."

Noa looked to the man in the brown jacket. "Peng?"

"Hey!" The woman in shotgun brought Noa's attention back. "You got that? You take orders from me first and foremost, but you take orders from Peng and Ade too."

"Yes, uh, ma'am." Noa swallowed.

"Sir is just fine," the leader said.

Noa glanced at Peng and Tendaji, unsure if that was supposed to be some kind of joke or if she was being strictly serious. He got no indication from them.

"Xo's an ass," Tendaji warned Noa, "but she's quite fair."

Xochitl laughed. "Yep."

"Fair?" Noa's head cocked. "Wait, uh, Tendaji, why don't I have to take orders from you?"

The big guy shrugged. "I'm still new. A few years new, but new."

"You know what?" the leader piped up. "You take orders from Ten too. He saved your life."

That got a booming chuckle out of Tendaji. "See? Fair."

It didn't take much more for Noa to decide he liked Tendaji the most. The driver had hardly spoken a word, Peng didn't have a sense of humor, the leader's jokes were mean, but Tendaji seemed quite nice—it was a nice bonus that they were closest in size and, if his guess was right,

age too. "So," Noa said, mostly to Tendaji. "Ten is Tendaji. Are Peng, Xo, and Ade all short for somethin' else as well?"

"Big question for someone who's supposed to be keepin' his mouth shut," Peng said.

Tendaji seemed to ignore his friend. "Peng is just Peng. Xo is Xochitl, which, yes, is a bit of a mouthful. And Ade is Adelayo."

"What?" That was the driver. "Oh, sorry. I just..."

Noa raised an eyebrow in Tendaji's direction.

The big guy just needed.

"I just," Adelayo said, picking up her sentence, "focus a bunch when driving."

"And this is open barrens," Tendaji muttered.

Noa let out a chuckle.

"Watch it," Adelayo said, "or I'll make you drive, Ten."

"So," Noa said, drawing the word out, "when you guys say business... What exactly does that mean?"

Peng gave Noa a fiery glare. "Again, big question for someone who's supposed to be keepin' his fuckin' mouth shut. Enough that you know our names."

Noa looked to Tendaji.

But the big guy shrugged. "He's right. It's for the best that you only worry about yourself. I'm not one to promote being selfish, but I'm saying you shouldn't be nosy."

A bit of heat rushed to Noa's face. "Ah, sorry, Tendaji, sir, you're right."

The leader turned around from her seat to face Noa. "And just know that if you go blabbin' about this to anyone, we'll trace it back you, and it'll be much uglier than whatever you think those shitty gangster Redeemers coulda done."

Noa nodded as he tried to swallow, but it took a few tries. Their conversation had died when the leader had killed it with her words. Noa sat up as much as he could, which wasn't much due to the wound in his side, and he held his hat close. Noa looked out the side of the carriage. He thought about askin' how it worked, but a voice in his head—his own, thankfully—assured him that it wasn't the best idea. The barrens seemed to be flying by, probably faster than the few times he had been able to really ride a horse. In just two days, he had been exiled from his home in Digsby, forbidden to go back to the Periphery, figured he would spend the next several days starving and thirsty as he struggled to survive, but he had found Stoneway just on the other side of that hill, and it wasn't yet clear whether that had been for better or for worse. *If I hadn't met Peng's eyes, would I still be alive?* Of course, it made more sense that Noa wasn't special. He supposed that Peng would've stuck his neck out for any mutant. Even then, it meant that Noa had been in the right place at the right time. Yet, that still ended with him being shot in the side by a mutant-hating Redeemer, and that likely would've been it for him right there if the group hadn't the heart to save him—if Tendaji hadn't grabbed him.

Then, the thought hit Noa. He had lucked out twice. He had thrown two winning rolls in Get Even in a row. Yet, even if he were that lucky, Noa knew that there was no tellin' that anyone else would've been. There was no tellin' that a group like those four with a soft spot for helpin' out people in trouble would've been there for his sister. Noa turned even farther away, making sure not a single of them could see the tears welling in his eyes.

"It should've been you," his sister said.

Noa squeezed his eyes shut. *No. No. You're dead. She's dead.* But the whispers in his mind had found something else to taunt him about.

"She was so kind," Dafne told him.

"She was so beautiful," Wald said.

"Why couldn't it've been you?" his mother said, her voice full of tears.

"It should've been you, Noa!" his father yelled.

Noa opened his eyes and shook his head as his eyes went wide.

"Don't be afraid," his sister said.

Of course, Noa was—he was terrified.

His sister loomed over him, and she was somehow both who she was before the change and who she was after. Her skin oozed like mud, and her bones must've been made of clay. His sister's form warped as her old face grew out of her new face, which grew out of her old face, which grew out of her new face. While some of her hair fell out in patches, other bits grew on forever, filling Noa's vision with black. Her fingernails joined the blackness as they curled from her fingertips only to rip from their roots and keep on curling into her hair as new ones grew to only meet the same fate. When she smiled, her teeth fell out, her gums bled, and her whole face tore itself apart, exploding like a sausage casing that had been stuffed with too much meat. Her eyes bulged out of her head, turned into liquid, and slid down her cheeks. But her face had already changed again. His sister's whole body pulsed, throbbing like a heart.

Noa's mouth moved, but there was only his silence among the wet tearing of flesh, the sopping crunch of bone, and the throbbing of her blood, ready to burst from her veins.

"Shh," his sister hushed. It was cut short by the burbling of blood that spilled over from her gums as her lips dangled from her face. Then, for a moment, she was beautiful and young and whole again. His sister smiled. "It's okay," she said. "You can take my place..." Her flesh bubbled and she became a mass of boils, blood, fingernails, and rotting teeth, but a face stretched out from the monstrosity. Half of it was Jack's and half was Ellie's, morphed and twisted, flesh peeling away as if they were burning. "Because that's what brothers do, right?" Their jaw broke in two, and his sister's face was vomited forth, smiling, growing larger and larger, and she opened her mouth—slits opened along her cheeks as if she were a snake—as she got closer to her brother, threatening to devour him whole.

Noa screamed. "Uranya!"

"Mercy!" Tendaji yelled.

"Hit your fuckin' side or somethin'?" Peng sounded pissed.

Noa was on the carriage with them again, but his heart was pounding in his chest as if it were trying to escape out through his rib, and his whole body was shaking. He remembered to breath, gasping in breaths. Noa looked in front of him, watching the barrens fly by, and he forced himself to sit up to get the dizzy sight out of his face. "Shit!" Of course, moving his side like that reintroduced a lot of pain, but he needed to see Peng's face and Tendaji's face to know that they were actually there with him.

"Calm the fuck down back there!" Adelayo yelled.

Xochitl didn't say a thing.

"Well?" Peng said. "You alright or not?"

Noa settled his rapid breathing by sucking in a deep breath, then he exhaled as his whole body shuddered again. "Just... I'm..."

Tendaji looked over to Peng, his eyebrows raised in worry. "Is he in shock?"

"Nah," Peng said. "He's alright. You alright, kid?"

Noa gulped down another breath as he nodded, and he could feel the sweat dripping down from his hair onto his forehead.

Peng gave a small shrug. "See?"

Tendaji, however, didn't look too convinced himself. "Do you need water? I don't... uh..." He glanced to Peng and back to Noa. "I don't know if we can, uh, share water or not, but, if you cup your hands, I can give you some from my canteen."

Noa nodded, and he leaned back against the carriage as he held out his hands.

Tendaji grabbed his canteen, unscrewed the cap, and poured water into Noa's hands. "You did lose a bit of blood. Are you sure you're alright?"

Noa was too busy gulping down the water to answer.

"He's fine," Peng said.

Noa held out his hands for more water, and Tendaji gladly poured him some more.

"Any reason to stop in Kimura?" Adelayo asked the rest of her crew.

Peng shook his head.

Tendaji said, "You know I'm fine."

"Nope," Xochitl said.

Noa's ears perked up. His answer wouldn't have been any different even if he had been allowed to give one, but it was odd to know he would be so close to his brother without Wald having any idea. *He might as well think I'm dead.*

"She was so beautiful," Wald said, his voice humming in Noa's mind.

Uranya, Noa thought. He hadn't heard her name in a long time, even in his own head. There hadn't been a reason to speak it or think it in quite a long time. When she had changed and been exiled, his sister was dead, *Uranya* was dead. Maybe there was a very small chance that the mutant had somehow survived out in the barrens, but he knew the person that was his sister had died back then. Her mind had wasted away with the change. She hadn't been able to remember his name when she left, so there had been no point for Noa in remembering hers. *Uranya*, he thought. Their parents had named her after a world that was supposed to exist somewhere in the sky. It had made sense. Few people still believed in them, but it was hard for most to deny an angel when they saw *Uranya*.

Peng nudged Noa with his foot. "Don't forget to stay outta sight."

"Huh?" It took Noa a few moments to put Peng's words together.

"We're in Purifier territory," Peng said, and he tossed a tarp in Noa's direction.

"If you can see someone," Tendaji told Noa, "then they can see you. You probably don't have to stay under there the whole time, but, when we stop in the Republic, you should make sure you're out of sight."

Noa stammered as his eyes went wide. "We're... going to the Republic?"

Peng shot Tendaji a look.

"Oh, come on," Tendaji said. He gave a half-assed roll of his eyes. "That's hardly secret. It's not like Noa's going to keep his eyes closed the whole time."

"Yeah, yeah," muttered Peng.

"Have you ever been to the Republic?" Tendaji asked Noa.

"No," he said. "No, I've never left Digsby." As he said that, he realized he could see the village of Kimura as they were driving by. "Mercy, two places in one day."

Tendaji chuckled. "This must be quite odd for you then. I'm from the Republic, ya know."

Noa's eyes lit up like little flames of curiosity. "What?"

"Ten," Peng cut in, giving the big guy a glare.

"Hey," Tendaji said, shrugging back at Peng, "that's my story. I won't say a word about anyone else, but I think I'm allowed to share my own story."

Peng moved his eyes straight-ahead, but the glare never left his face.

"I'm actually a storyteller," Tendaji said. He scratched at his beard. "I'm a trader, really, or I was, but I always wanted to see more to have more stories to tell, which is why I ended up with these guys in the first place." He gave a warm smile in the direction of the driver before turning back to Noa. "Of course, I stayed for her."

"That's... That's wild!" The thought that Noa was right about Tendaji being his easy favorite of the group was only further nailed down. "You're tellin' me you got bored of the Republic and tradin'—I'm sure you made good money—and just up and left to go travel around a bit, and then you never went back? Because of a girl? That's its own story!"

Tendaji was grinning as he scratched his beard again. "Well, shucks. You're not wrong. While most people would rather hear other stories, I do think that one's my favorite."

"Can you...?" Noa looked around as if he were worried that he'd get in trouble just for asking a simple question. "Is it alright? If you tell me a story, that is. I mean, I've heard some okay stories from peddlers in Digsby, but we didn't have outside folk come by very often, and, ya know, most of those stories were for kids."

The big guy chuckled. "Well, it seems I'm now allowed to tell some of my more entertaining stories, which is fine, but I can tell you about the Republic."

"Sure," Noa said. "Anything."

Tendaji scratched at his beard again. "Well, the Republic was founded by Old Man Jude. He was a warlord after the world fell apart, and he and his gang had a buggy like this one—that's what," and he patted the metal carriage, "this is—and some nice guns; so, he and his gang had the power to settle down and start a town. That's Judeberg."

"He named it after himself?" Noa laughed. "He sounds like a prick."

"Well," Tendaji said, "you're not the first to think so. Anyway, his real secret was— Well, ya know how folks say 'mercy' a lot?"

Noa nodded his head.

Tendaji continued, "That comes from Mercy, a woman that he found in an ancient ruin. Of course, not many people still clung to the One God of the old world, but it was clear that Mercy was some kind of angel. That's what people said, at least. Well, they still say it. And there are two others like her—her sisters, Solace and Hope. Old Man Jude made his name alongside his gang, his new town, the villages that sided with him, and those three angels, and they crushed a huge

gang of mutant bikers that had been terrorizing the area. If that wasn't enough, he stopped another outbreak of the plague with the three angels, which led to him founding the Purifiers as well—to keep the plague under control. One thing led to another, and the Republic became so big that they had to decide on who controlled what. Old Man Jude, of course, made himself the leader, calling himself the President. He called on villages to elect Judges and Lawmakers and even some of the Purifiers that would be responsible for certain districts. Of course, there are also the Republic Rangers, which are like the Purifiers, but they're more in charge of protecting people from other people, not so much with the mutant stuff."

Noa's eyes were glossy as his mind tried to find a place for each of Tendaji's words in his memory. "I had no idea. Somethin' like that is really out there? And we're goin' there right now? How do you know all of this stuff?"

"Well, a lot of the people in the Republic know most of that stuff, even if their version of it is a bit watered down. Me?" Tendaji chuckled. "Well, I spent a lot of my time in the library."

"The... library?" Noa's brow furrowed.

"It's a place with lots of books. Being able to read and write is an art that continues to be lost, but it was something my parents made sure I could do," Tendaji told him.

"Sure," Noa said. "My brother read lots of manuals, but I always thought it was a bit odd. I can write a bit, and, I guess, read a little better than that, but I never had much use for it."

"Exactly," Tendaji said. "They don't want you to learn. At least, that's what I think."

Tendaji continued with his stories, and he moved to the smaller ones. There was one about an explorer who had found some kind of strange metal statue that came to life. Another story about the old world where Tendaji had to explain to Noa that people used to trade pieces of paper for goods and services instead of brass shells or cartridges. Tendaji even touched on the Kingdom of Heaven, which was another civilization on the other side of the barrens.

Noa was shocked to hear that the Kingdom was more accepting of mutants and that they tried to make new technologies instead of fixing up old ones. "There's really a place like?" the boy asked. "Why would anyone live in the Republic?"

"Well," Tendaji said, "it's not all great. They're quite strict and religious like the Redeemers, though, in many ways, not nearly as bad." He turned around to reach into his backpack, rummaging around for one of his books. "There you are," Tendaji said, pulling the leather-bound journal from the bag, and he turned around to face Noa as he flipped through the pages of thick paper. "Here," he said, and he held out the open journal for Noa. One side was full of his ramblings, which he assumed Noa wouldn't be able to read very well, and the other side had a depiction of a strange being with the caption 'Lord Baphomet' beneath it.

The boy grimaced. "Mercy, what is that?"

"That's their god," Tendaji told him. He held the journal between them so they could both look at the depiction of Lord Baphomet. It was clearly some kind of mutant. Tendaji's drawing of Lord Baphomet was of a creature that was half-human and half-goat with gigantic wings folded along its back while also being half-man and half-woman. It's face, which was presumably that of a goat, was covered by a wood hool that hung over its face like a mask, though a goat's beard, ears, and horns all stuck out from different sides of the mask.

"Their god's a mutant?" Noa's eyes were fixed on the page. "I don't get it. Why would they worship a mutant?"

Tendaji closed the journal to get Noa's attention back on him. "Well, it's a bit more complicated than that. Lord Baphomet isn't a mutant, but it represents itself a mutant, a sign of the way forward, a sign that humans can't return to the way they were before."

Noa chuckled and gave a slight shake of his head. "I don't get it. What's not to like? What are the things that make 'em so bad?"

"Alright," Adelayo said, "that's enough story time. We're about to... pass Sandunder. I'm assumin' everyone's... still good, so we're not stoppin' 'til... we get to Haven Village."

Tendaji shrunk back into his seat as his heart sank into his gut. He had let himself get a bit too riled up and excited, telling these stories to fresh ears. His mouth had just kind of been moving on its own, and he had ended up touching a little too close to Adelayo's history. Though, it didn't take too long for the silence to bother him more than the guilt in his gut. So, Tendaji brought his voice down. "After Sandunder, we'll be leaving the territory of the Periphery and we'll be crossing the borders of the Republic. Well, actually, it depends. Some consider the Periphery to be in the borders of the Republic ever since the treaty was put into place."

Peng nudged Tendaji with his foot. "Watch it. Story time's over."

Noa lay against the carriage—no, Tendaji had called it a buggy, which still seemed like an odd name to him—in a position that seemed to piss off his wound the least. In a short amount of time, he had gone from changed, to exiled, to sleeping in the middle of some trees, to getting shot by a Redeemer, to being saved by these people, to seeing some daytime nightmare of his sister, to listening to Tendaji's stories, and the part that had his mind in his twist as he lay there was that he had been on this buggy for such a short while, yet he had already gone from beyond the Periphery to the Republic.

"Don't let me die," Uranya said, pleading. "Please, don't let me die."

As much excitement as there was in his journey, the voices and the whispers in his head had settled on Uranya's voice as the best way to taunt him. Of course, it worked. It was like getting stabbed with a garden fork: one prong dug into him by using her voice, and her voice was its own tine, pricking at him by making him think of her name. Worse still, if her name crossed Noa's mind on its own, her voice would follow. In just two days, he had a bullet wound in his side and a reopened hole in his heart. Even being so haunted by his past, Noa told himself over and over again that it didn't matter, that he wasn't the sensitive type. Though, what he told himself and what he truly supposed were a bit different: whether he was being a bit sensitive or not, it seemed like his mind could be slowly rotting away much like Uranya's had.

"There it is," Tendaji said, looking at Noa, and he nodded toward the distance.

Noa pushed the worry to the back of his mind so he could enjoy the view. Peering around the side of the buggy, he saw a swath of villages cut across the horizon, and, behind them, there was a good-sized stone wall.

"Don't worry," Tendaji told him. "We're not going inside the walls, so you won't have to worry about them finding you as long as you stay hidden. We just have to drop off our cargo at a spot near the wall. Then, we'll load up cargo to take back, and we'll be off."

Peng had been watching Tendaji as he explained what was going on.

Noa figured he wasn't allowed to know any important details.

"Xo and I will be moving cargo," Tendaji further explained. "Peng and Ade stay with the buggy to... Well, you don't see many of these around, and they're quite handy, so it helps to make sure that no one comes trying to take it from us."

Noa chuckled. "Whaddya guys do when y'all have to stay in an inn?"

Tenadji chuckled right back. "Well, that doesn't happen much, but what would a man do with his horse while he was staying at an inn? You can put a horse in a stable, but that doesn't mean it won't be stolen, and thieving a horse is, of course, a heinous crime that most would punish by death. And a horse is much easier to get away with stealing. If not many people have buggies and my buggy goes missing—if even a part of it goes missing—and I see that part somewhere else, well, then I know that they might've meant to trade their kneecap for the part. What's the buggy worth? At least two kneecaps, right?"

"I suppose so," Noa said, grinning. "And I got a glance at your gun. It looks like the kind of gun that'd have no problem takin' a couple of kneecaps."

The big guy put on a grim face. "It wouldn't." Then, he brightened back up. "Peng mentioned something about you having a gun. Did you lose that too?"

"I still—" but Noa patted his hip and found nothing there.

"Don't worry," Peng said. "I got it. Took it off ya when I was takin' care of that wound. Still unloaded too. But at least you got that knife on your belt—if you can call it that." Peng reached to the side, moving around his things, and he grabbed Noa's revolver. He turned back to face Noa, and he held it out by the barrel. "Figured you lost your ammo, so I loaded it for you. Had some that fit just fine."

Noa reached out to grab the revolver.

But Peng pulled it back. "Maybe you've shot a gun before, but you don't strike me as the type who's ever shot, well, anythin'. You watch yourself. Misuse it and you can expect to find me puttin' a matchin' hole on your other side."

"Got it," Noa said, and he swallowed.

"Good." Peng held the revolver back out. "It's a nice piece too."

Noa grabbed the revolver. "Uh, thanks. It belonged to my father, then my brother, and my brother was obsessed with takin' care of it, so... Well, I guess I got lucky, really."

Peng chuffed. "Ya did. Don't recommend it unless you have to, but you could get a good price for that if you needed the brass. Though, seems like you might."

The pouch at Noa's hip was mostly empty. There was a small handful of small brass shells, maybe enough for another wineskin. Noa was back in his head, beating himself up over losing his rucksack when he was gettin' away from the Redeemer. All he had was his hat, his bloody clothes and poncho, his knife, that small handful of brass, and his loaded revolver. After all was said and done, living on that wasn't going to be easy, and there was a criminal seed germinatin' inside of him. *I'll do whatever it takes. I won't die.*

"Don't die, Noa," Uranya said. "Please, don't die."

But Noa just shook his head and he forced out a small chuckle. "I'll be fine. I won't be lettin' anyone else get the drop on me."

Peng pursed his lips, clearly not believing a word Noa had said.

"Let's hope they're not pissed we're a little late," Xochitl said.

"Time to go under the tarp," Tendaji told Noa. "Stay as still and as quiet as you can."

"Hey, Noa," Xochitl said.

Noa looked over his shoulder, finding Xochitl's face closer than he had expected.

"If you fuck this up, I will make you wear that 'V' on your forehead loud and proud, and I will either leave you to get killed or happily take part in it myself. Look me right in the eyes. If it had been completely up to me, I woulda let that Redeemer have her way with you. Much as it seems, I'm not all asshole. I wouldn't've liked it, but I will not hesitate to protect me and mine before I protect you and yours." Xochitl didn't sound angry—she sounded honest. She hadn't raised her voice or hissed at him. She had spoken, and she continued to speak. "So, let me rephrase a bit, if you fuck this up, I will make you *wish* that we hadn't saved your ass. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma— uh, sir." Noa nodded, but he found himself struggling to swallow again.

Xochitl gave him a smile. "Good. You learn." She glanced at Peng, then back to Noa. "Like Peng said, I don't want you to die—it'd be a waste of our effort."

"Alright, you can come out now," Peng told Noa. A part of him didn't want the boy to come out—he had liked Noa most in the time that he was quiet and hidden under the tarp. At the very least, he was sitting shotgun while Noa was in the back.

"Fresh air," Noa said, and he let out a relieved sigh as he pulled the tarp away. "Mercy."

"Welcome to the Republic," Adelayo told him. "Don't get too cozy."

"What's it like inside?" Noa asked.

"Wouldn't know," Adelayo said, and she looked at Peng.

But Peng just rolled his eyes.

"He doesn't know either," Adelayo told Noa.

Peng's face twisted into a scowl. "That's none of his business."

Adelayo turned around and draped herself over the back of her seat to face Noa. "Don't listen to him. Peng's a grumpy old man."

Peng didn't so much as fold his arms. He knew Adelayo liked to pester him to try to get a rise out of him, but, as he did, Peng kept himself cool as the underside of a stone.

"Seems like it." Noa chuffed.

"To tell ya the truth," Adelayo said as she was fidgeting with her braids, "Peng's prob'ly just a little afraid of ya with you bein' a mutant and all."

Noa recoiled at her awful joke.

"I'm not afraid of... this *kid*," Peng said.

"Just like you're absolutely not a bit curious about what his mutation is, right?" Adelayo looked at Noa. "Sorry if that seemed a bit blunt. I've just, uh, spent a decent amount of time around mutants. Doesn't really bother me a bit. You're fairly normal-lookin', though, which I'm sure you realize, is a bit odd."

Peng wouldn't give either of them the satisfaction of admitting it, but he was indeed quite curious about Noa's mutations. He knew that people expected normal-lookin' mutants to be harmless, but, in his experience, that definitely wasn't always the case. "Was actually concerned

a bit that it was in your blood, but I didn't have time to ask questions," Peng said. "Seen mutant blood that'd eat right through another person's flesh."

Noa smirked. "So, you *do* share stories."

"Don't get high and mighty kid. A dozen words is hardly a story." And Peng maintained his cool demeanor, having turned around not a single time.

"If ya don't mind me askin'," Adelayo said, "do you... know what you're workin' with?"

The boy blinked, shook his head, and stuttered a bit. "Uh, no, not really. Just a bit ugly with all these scars, I guess. Don't really feel at all different otherwise. I've, uh..." He stared off for another moment. "I've definitely seen much worse."

Adelayo turned to back to Peng. "Well, doc, whaddya make of that?"

Peng side-eyed Adelayo. "Absolutely nothin'."

Tendaji pulled the small handcart, Xochitl and a couple of Oscar's crew stepping in stride with him. It was a bit different than trading on the books, and it came with its complications, but it also meant that Tendaji got to help those that he felt needed it.

"Lucky that you got such a big guy," one of the gangsters said. "I was worried that Tom and I'd be pullin' that thing, but he's got it by himself."

"Sure, let's go with lucky," Xochitl said. She had a smile on her face that said she was happy to be teasing Tendaji like she usually did.

"You's got a really nice setup," the other gangster—Tom, presumably—said. "'Tween the big lug and the big bug—" he paused to chuckle at his own joke "—I see why she sends you guys around. Bit late, but still much faster than horses."

"She probably only has to pay you for one day, huh?" The first gangster looked at Xochitl.

Xochitl narrowed her eyes. "The details aren't important."

Tendaji knew that was a bit of a sore spot for Xochitl. He had worked out good deals with Yaya, but Xochitl wasn't always of the same mind. With the buggy, they could get cargo to and from the Republic in a single day. Horses moved quite a bit slower, and they needed to stop for rest unless a crew had money to frequently replace horses. A whole day would have to be spent getting to the Republic and unloading cargo there, then a whole second day would have to be spent loading cargo to take back and getting back to Yaya. The buggy was a bit more expensive given the fuel costs, but Yaya knew that paying for their fuel was way less expensive than paying a crew for two days' work. Still, when Tendaji had joined the crew, Yaya hadn't wanted to pay for another body. That led to Tendaji saying that he wouldn't need to be paid. Xochitl had been furious, of course, because, for a trader, accepting something like that without haggling his own worth seemed downright stupid. Tendaji huffed to himself as he pulled the handcart through the narrow streets of Haven Village. It still got his goat that Xochitl didn't seem to understand that a larger team working for less meant that they'd be prioritized. If Yaya could pay for four bodies for the price of three, then that was all the better for her, and Tendaji knew that. Tendaji had also been the one to argue for a higher bonus for being able to do most jobs in half the time, so he had recouped some of his loss there, though Xochitl had been of the mind that they could've gotten that out of Yaya if they wanted too—but they hadn't. Sure, they had to take on a few more jobs to be making the same, but Tendaji also cut his bonus to put some extra back in Peng and

Xochitl's pouches. That hadn't changed Xochitl's mind, though, and a couple of years later, she was still more than happy to pick at him given the chance.

"You awake, Ten?" Xochitl was giving him quite the glare.

"Sorry, uh, I was doing some math," he lied, but that was his go-to excuse when his mind drifted since the rest of them weren't very number-minded—well, except for Adelayo, of course, but he never had to use that excuse with her.

"Well, genius," Xochitl said, biting at him with her words, "the house is over here."

"Right," Tendaji said. He pulled the cart around, taking it down the street that Xochitl and the gangsters had already started walking down. Oscar's gang had changed access routes—their last smuggling tunnel had been discovered by the Rangers. Of course, having a leader with some brains meant that they already had a backup tunnel constructed, and they were likely working on a new backup tunnel in the case that this one was found too. It was a race, Tendaji knew. As the Rangers got better at finding the tunnels, the gangs got better at hiding them; alternatively, gangs started bribing people to turn the other way or had the support of some seedy Judge or Lawmaker who also enjoyed finer things being available at better prices.

They stopped at a house that seemed not a bit different from any of the others around it, and that's because it wasn't. It wasn't abandoned. It was lived in. It was a home to a small family that found the risk of being associated with gang movement worth the brass they were paid.

As Tendaji moved the crates inside and carried them down into the basement one by one, one of the gangsters pulled out a hammer and hooked it under a nail on one of the floorboards, then started pulling more nails out until a few intact floorboards could be removed. Loose floorboards and trapdoors weren't too hard to find, but these gangsters went through the trouble of pulling nails and re-nailing the floorboards for every tunnel movement. Of course, they had the father pretend to do some carpentry work on the side. His personal setup covered for all of the hammering that went on as well as for any extra supplies that needed to be brought in to replace worn-out floorboards and bent-up nails.

In the tunnel below, there was another handcart, and Tendaji helped lower the crates into the cart using a makeshift pulley that wasn't unreasonable for a carpenter to have made in his spare time for one reason or another. Tendaji was aching by the time he got to grabbing the handles of the handcart, but he refused to give anyone a hint of it. "Let's go."

Noa had been lying around, listening to Peng and Adelayo chat—well, it was mostly Adelayo chattin' at Peng—while he himself was itchin' to see more of the Republic. There was no real drive to find himself in a bad spot, of course. There'd be no way to reliably hide his scars and his brand, and, even if he could, he knew that Peng and Xochitl would leave him behind without so much as a second thought. *Even if I get back to the barrens*, he thought, and not for the first time, *I've got no idea where I'll go*. Every time he looked at his arms and saw the scars that the lesions had left on his body, he hated himself a bit more.

"Is something wrong, Noa?" Uranya asked him. "Oh, poor thing, did you hurt yourself?"

He ached for a drink—anything to wash away his thoughts. His head ached for a drink. Noa wasn't sure how long it had been since he had himself a nice drink, and his last opportunity when he had ordered himself a brew at the inn had been taken from him.

"Come on," Adelayo said, whining at Peng. "Can't you just stay with him? And don't say he's got a gun 'cause you're the one who gave it to him."

"Fine," Peng said, his voice very near a growl.

"Yes!"

Noa turned around. "Hey, Adelayo. Uh, if you wouldn't mind, if you're gonna— Well, I got some brass left. Would you mind gettin' me booze? It can be shitty. I don't—"

Adelayo thrust out a hand at Noa. "As long as I get to get somethin' for myself," she told him with a chuckle. "I'm no servin' girl. I don't look like one, do I?"

"No, no," Noa said quickly, a bit of heat climbing to his face. "It's not like that. I just—"

"I'm messin' with ya," she said. "Come on. Gimme your pouch. I'll see what I can get."

Noa took a deep breath and untied the pouch from his belt. "Here," Noa said, holding it out. "I know not much is in there—"

It was Peng's turn to cut him off. "That's how you're spendin' your last brass? Must be a drunk." His eyes were narrowed and fixed on Noa.

He shrunk away and put his pouch down. "On second thought, I'm fine. But thanks anyway, Adelayo." He wasn't looking forward to being alone with Peng.

Time moved at a crawl without Adelayo around. Even if she and Peng hadn't been bringin' Noa into their conversations, it was much less cold than Peng's silence. Of course, Haven Village wasn't silent, and Noa made sure to keep himself outta sight if villagefolk were near. The buggy's open frame didn't provide much cover at all, so he kept his hat on, but he only disappeared under the tarp if he had to. The day's sun was beating down on Haven Village, and spending that time under a tarp was nothing close to ideal.

"So, Adelayo called you 'doc'. Is that a nickname or...? I mean, you obviously know how to patch people up and— Well, thank you for that, by the way." Noa rubbed his side, which was already feeling a bit better—of course, it still hurt, but not as much as it had.

"Don't mention it," Peng said.

Noa figured that was a clever way to say 'you're welcome' and 'shut up' in the same three words. He sighed, wishing that he at least had some playing cards to pass the time.

After way too long, Adelayo returned. "Here," she said to Noa, holding out a small bottle for him. "Some spiced ale. They got some nice stuff in the Republic."

"Oh, that's alright, you didn't have—"

"Take it," Adelayo said, cutting Noa off. "Cheers to you surviving in the barrens."

Noa nodded and grabbed the bottle. "Thank you." He didn't know what else to say, but, before he could open it, he found Peng glaring right at him. It was just his eyes. They were burning with tested fury, threatening to put two more holes in him with that stare. Whether Adelayo had meant to or not, Noa realized that he had just been handed a test.

"Got some for the crew too," Adelayo told Peng.

His eyes didn't move.

"Shouldn't be drinkin' on the job, of course, but there's no reason we shouldn't take some nice spiced ale with us," Adelayo said, and she put the other four bottles in the back where Noa was half-sitting and half-lying. "Got some parts too." She set down the clasped tin box she had carried off with her. "I figured the best stuff's inside the walls, but I looked around."

Peng nodded, still looking at Noa.

"You two get along alright? I'm sure he didn't say a word," Adelayo said to Noa.

"Just fine," Peng said.

Noa pulled away from the staring contest and smiled at Adelayo. "You might be surprised as I was. He said a few." He chuckled.

"S that right?" Adelayo laughed. "D'you mind?" She moved to sit in the back with Noa.

Noa shook his head.

"Gotta warn you I get a bit musty out in the heat." Adelayo laughed and she flipped open the latch on the tin box, and she pulled out a deck of playing cards. She looked up at Peng, and he was no longer paying attention, and then she held out the cards to Noa.

"Oh, no, no, it's fine," Noa said.

"Hey, I know I get bored, but I'm supposed to pay attention," she told him.

Peng looked back over his shoulder. "Mercy, Ade, will you stop coddlin' the kid?"

Adelayo dropped the deck of cards and put on a big grin as she pulled the braids on the sides of her head. She mocked Peng's serious voice and said, "Mercy, Peng, maybe when you stop bein' so *afraid* of the *kid*."

Noa shrunk into his seat even more, pulling the hat a bit more over his eyes.

"Ain't afraid of the kid," Peng said.

"Oh, fine," she said, "then you're afraid of what he could be."

Peng rubbed his temples. "Don't drag him into this."

"I won't drag *you* into this if that's what you want," Adelayo said, "but the kid has every right to know about himself."

Peng turned back around in his seat and remained looking ahead.

"What I... could be? Drag me into what?" Noa cleared his throat so his voice would stop breaking in such a meek way. "Whaddya mean?"

Adelayo took in and let out a deep breath. "Well, I've hinted at it before, but I'm sure you find it odd that you ain't got any visible mutations, right? It doesn't seem like you got any physical mutations either. No poison blood or quick healin' or whatever as far as anyone can tell, right? Yet, you went through the change and ya got those scars to prove it."

Noa looked dumbfounded. "I get what you're sayin', but I'm not sure I follow."

She tugged at one of her braids. "Well, we've run into a few mutants that have special latent mutations. That means they need to be, well, unlocked."

"And you're saying I could be one of those mutants?" Noa looked down at his scars.

"It's possible," Adelayo said, "and there might be a way to test you. I made a small little gadget that should be able to test for these latent mutations."

Noa shook his head. "How do you know all of this stuff?"

She sighed. "Well, ya know how I was gettin' a bit snippy when Ten was back here talkin' about the Kingdom?"

That time, Noa nodded his head.

"That's 'cause I don't like talkin' 'bout the Kingdom, and Ten knows that. See, I'm from the Kingdom of Heaven, and I got kicked out for messin' with tech from the old world. The"—she waved her hands around and rolled her eyes—"Society of Atonement thinks old tech is full of sin,

but, as I see it, if studyin' the old ways can help us with the new, I ain't gonna cut myself off, ya know? I'm an inventor who prides herself on usin' whatever I got available to me."

Noa again nodded, but slowly, as he looked at her.

Adelayo gave him a look. "A boy your age might think girls are only good for lookin' pretty, Noa," she said, and she slapped the floor of the buggy, "but I built this damned thing. It ain't just my buggy. I *made* her."

Noa went back to looking dumbfounded. "You... made this?"

"You bet," she said, "and I've made plenty of other gizmos in my spare time—including a test for latent mutations. Of course, I'm no doctor, so—"

"Peng helped you make it," Noa said.

Without turning around, Peng muttered, "None of your business."

Adelayo shrugged. "Well, I wasn't gonna say exactly that, but, since you guessed it, yeah."

"I don't get it," Noa said. "Why doesn't he want me to take the test?"

"Cause it doesn't matter," Peng said.

Adelayo was fidgeting with her braids. "He... Well, we've tried to help others in the past, and it hasn't always gone well, so it'd probably be easier to dump you somewhere and pretend like we never met you. It woulda been easier to leave you for dead. But we didn't. And you wanna know somethin' funny?" Her stare could've put holes in Peng's head. "We took a vote, and he changed his vote so we'd come and save you."

Noa also looked at the back of Peng's head, but his eyes were soft with renewed appreciation for the man in the brown jacket. "What?"

"Pity," Peng said. "It was pity. You were helpless. I tried to help you get away from the Redeemer, but you couldn't even manage that. Don't thank me. Like Ade said, I'm a doc. Would any self-respectin' doc turn away from a sick and helpless whelp of a baby?"

Just like that, Noa's look of appreciation was gone.

"Don't listen to him," Adelayo said. "I guess Xo's been rubbin' off on him lately 'cause she's usually the asshole." She chuckled and gave Noa a silly look. "Maybe that's why doesn't talk that much—his mouth's just a big asshole."

Noa got a good laugh out of her joke. He mocked Peng's voice and said, "Ade, don't tell him about my secret asshole mouth. That's none of his business."

Her face lit up with a big grin. "There you go! You're a good kid, Noa. Now, let's see if we can get you to pass that test." She grabbed her tin that she used for scraps and parts, and she pulled out a small glass ball that sat on a wide metal tip. "This is—"

"A lightbulb," Noa said. "I'm not dumb. I've seen one of—"

"It's a *special* lightbulb," she said, giving him a bit of a glare. "I figured out a way to modify them to light up when they're being held by someone with a latent mutation." Adelayo held it out for Noa. "I've already messed with this one, but don't be disappointed if it doesn't light up right away. There's a special way to do it, and I can't say for sure that it works just 'cause I tinkered with it a bit. I might have to make some adjustments."

"Alright," Noa said, and he grabbed the bulb between two fingers. Even though he hadn't expected anything, a frown still crossed his lips when nothing happened right away. "So, what am I supposed to do with it?"

"Well, you know what radiation is, right?" Adelayo gave him a teasing wink. "Ya know, 'cause you're so smart 'n all."

A bit of heat found its way to Noa's ears. "Well, no. Not exactly."

"Radiation is a deadly light or heat, and it could cause mutations just like the plague—in fact, it mutated the plague itself. It was created by the atomic power of the Ancients, which, in the Kingdom of Heaven, is considered one of the Three Great Satans. It was used as a weapon, sure, but it was also used to create electricity." Adelayo grinned at Noa.

However, Noa just looked even more confused. He was baffled by her explanation as much as he was by her transformation from a stuttering driver into an inventor and scientist—Noa couldn't imagine anyone knew more than she did. "But what does that have—"

"If radiation and plague could cause your mutation, then it doesn't seem to crazy that your mutation could cause radiation and plague, and you already know that it can cause plague—you can spread it or give it to your children. Of course, not much of that atomic power still remains, so it's not as easy to... cause. Think about it. Some mutants grow to be twice their size, but where does all of that come from? You, Noa, might be able to harness a weird form of radiation with your mutation, and that would mean you should be able to power this lightbulb."

Noa gave a slight shake of his head. "I'm still a little lost."

Adelayo looked at Peng as if she were studying him. She tugged on her braids for a few moments, then she turned back to Noa. "Okay, you're a pretty big guy. Well, you you have to eat food to grow. Your body turns that food into muscles. Isn't that right, Peng?" When it was clear she wouldn't get an answer, she continued on. "So, imagine that the plague is your body, and it feeds on its radiation to make its mutation—the muscle—grow. That's how some of those crazy mutations can come seemin'ly from thin air. But you're fairly normal-lookin', which means your plague hasn't fed on all of its radiation—" she glanced at Peng again "—or, well, it could mean that you might not have had a lot of radiation. But, if you *do*, then maybe you can find a way to bring it out." She was still fidgeting with her braids. "Does that make sense?"

"That's... better," Noa said.

The young woman muttered to herself for a couple of moments as she twisted her braids in her fingers, then her face lit back up. "Ya know what? I'll just explain it *my* way. It's like a battery, and that battery powers your mutation, but you haven't mutated much, so there might still be some juice in that battery, and, if you try hard enough, you might be able to control it."

Noa gave her a slow nod that quickened. "Alright, alright. That... makes sense. But I'm still a bit confused on how I'm supposed to use it."

"Peng knows that part a bit better," she said. "Because he *is* a doctor after all, so he knows the body part of it better than I do." Adelayo looked at Peng again. "I don't think we're gettin' anything out of him, though. Just... hold the lightbulb, close your eyes, and try to relax."

"Alright," Noa said, and he got himself a bit more comfortable before closing his eyes.

Adelayo lowered her voice and said, "Focus on your breathing—take slow, deep breaths—and focus on the feeling of the lightbulb held between your fingertips."

"Alright," he said again, and he made sure his breaths were slow and deep.

"Keep your breaths steady, keep focusing on the lightbulb, and, now, imagine that battery inside your gut as you breathe. Imagine that it's letting off a warm white light."

"Mhm."

"Feel that for a little bit."

What Noa felt was silly. "You're not messin' with me, right?"

"No, Noa, focus."

"Alright."

"Now, move that light, move that heat," she said, "and push it from your gut up to your chest, to your shoulder, into your arm, down your arm, into your hand, and into your fingers."

Noa was sure he could feel something. It was nice, and the dull aching pain in his side from his wound eased. Then, there was a rush, the hairs on his arm bristled, and—

"Look at me, Noa."

His eyes flew open and his sister was standing before him again.

She wasn't the horrific creature with warped flesh and covered in blood. She looked like the beautiful young girl she had once been, but she didn't seem to be wearing any clothes, yet she didn't seem to be naked either, though Noa couldn't really tell because she was also much too bright to look at, though he couldn't look away either. She was glowing.

Noa tried to shield his eyes from her with his hand, but he couldn't move. As she floated closer to him, his eyes hurt more from the light she was giving off, and his skin was starting to burn from the immense heat that came with it. It was like he was staring at the sun at noon on a summer's day, baking in its heat. But she wasn't the sun. She wasn't a fire. Somehow, Noa thought that the heat and the light were bleak. It felt wrong. Her light was sickly and pale.

"Do you think I'm pretty?" She kept getting closer to him.

His body wouldn't move, his mouth wouldn't move, his eyes were fixed on her. He could see spots filling his vision as if he had stared into the sun for too long. He could feel his skin burning tenderly as if he had spent much too long out in the sun. But she wasn't the sun. He saw her light, he felt her heat, but she was cold.

She began to cry. "Are you afraid of me?" Her flesh started to melt away, revealing her sickly pale white bones, and, as the skin over her forehead melted away, it revealed a 'V' burned into her skull. Her bony finger reached up to caress Noa's cheek. "Do you hate me?" Her hand reached around his throat and she started to squeeze. "You should've died."

Noa was going to.

"Deep breaths!" Adelayo had grabbed Noa by the shoulders and started shaking him.

His eyes fluttered as he dropped the lightbulb, and his sister's skull was replaced by Adelayo's face. He drew in a ragged breath and his whole body shuddered.

"You were spazzin' out," Adelayo said. "You okay? We don't have to keep—"

"Did it work?" Noa's voice was hardly more than a wheeze. "The light?"

"No, nothing." Adelayo shook her head and held Noa firm by the shoulders. "Hey, but what about you? Are you okay? You looked like—"

"Like you did earlier," Peng said. His face peered over his seat. "When you were lyin' down and you spazzed out—when you shouted."

Adelayo looked at Peng. "When I told y'all to calm the fuck down?" She struggled to keep a straight face, chuffing a bit.

Noa sighed and sank back into his seat. "They *were* the same. I suppose I owe at least one of

you some secrets of my own." He let out a halfhearted chuckle. "Maybe you'll know more about it anyway. Ever since I went through the change, I've been hearing whispers and voices in my head. Sometimes, I know them. Sometimes, I don't. Granted, I haven't been livin' with 'em for that long, but... Well, anyway, I've been seein' things. That makes it sound like a lot. Well, it might be a lot. That's my point. I don't know. But I saw her... My sister. I had a sister who went through the change, and it shouldn't have happened to me too, but... Well, I'm worried. Her mind started goin' too. I mean, she had changes—*real* changes—, but her mind went too."

There was silence.

Then, Peng broke it. "Anya or somethin'? Didn't know if it was a name or—"

"Yeah," Noa said. "Uranya." He forced a smile upon his lips. "Though, I guess her name's not really any of your business, huh?"

Peng returned the same half of a smile. "Fair."

"Well, I'm sorry to hear about your sister," Adelayo told Noa, and she put a hand on his shoulder. "You're right, though. The change can warp minds. It's worse in some than in others, but, if you ask me—and it might be too soon to tell, sure—, your mind seems to be workin' fine for the most part. I think you—"

"I just hate seeing her," Noa said, his words having just leapt from his lips. "The worst part is that I felt like the test was goin' well. I guess I'm a bit desperate to make *somehin'* of a bad situation, but... Mercy, I dunno."

"You feel like it's gettin' in your way," Adelayo said.

Noa nodded. "Yeah."

"Do you... want to try again?" Adelayo asked him.

"I do," Noa said, nodding again.

"Don't push yourself," Peng told him. "May not have the mutation for it anyway. Sometimes, it's just better to let those things be."

Noa shook his head and he swallowed. "No. I want to try again."

Adelayo moved her hand to his arm and she gave him a gentle squeeze. "You really don't have to. No one'll be—"

"I *do*," Noa said, his voice firm. Then, he sighed. "Just one more time."

She nodded. "Alright, Noa. Maybe it'd help to think of what you'd say to her if you saw her again. I don't know if you'll see her again, of course, but..."

"Try asking her for help," Peng said. "Don't see her as somethin' that's in the way. Even if it looks like her, what you're seein' is a part of you."

Adelayo turned to Peng and smirked. She opened her mouth to speak, paused, and then she said, "Thank you, Peng. That's a good idea."

Noa wrung his hands. "I'm not sure— Well, look, I hate seemin' so dim 'cause I'm so confused about this stuff, but how'm I supposed to ask my sister for help? Especially if what's her is really me. Am I askin' myself for help?"

"Depends on how you wanna look at it," Peng told him. "A lot to juggle. Breathin', focusin' on the lightbulb, movin' the light 'n heat, and askin' her or yourself for help. No shame if you can't do it. Prob'ly better that way anyway. I know you think you wanna make somethin' more outta what you got, but a simpler life's... usually better."

"I wanna know." Noa took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Just one more time."

Adelayo picked up the cracked lightbulb that Noa had dropped earlier. "I'll grab a different one. Might be good anyway—coulda just been a bad bulb." She put the cracked lightbulb back in her tin box and pulled out another one, but that one was a bit smaller. "Here," she said, and she held out the small lightbulb for Noa.

"Thanks." Noa grabbed the lightbulb with one hand and placed it between two of his fingers on his other hand. "I'll, uh... try." He looked at Adelayo. "Can you guide me again?"

"Of course," she said, putting on a smile. "Go ahead 'n close your eyes."

Noa nodded and closed his eyes.

"Just like you did before," Adelayo said, "focus on your breathing. Take slow breaths, deep breaths. Count them. And focus on the feeling of the lightbulb between your fingers."

As before, Noa's breathing was slow and deep, and he split his thoughts between counting his breaths and feeling the metal base of the lightbulb. When his mind wanted to drift, he pulled himself back to the numbers and squeezed the lightbulb between his fingers.

"And imagine that battery inside your gut again. It's giving off a warm white light. It's like you swallowed a piece of the sun. Now," Adelayo told him, "feel that for a bit."

His mind wanted to keep going back to Uranya. Her glow, her heat, his sickly and pale sister that haunted his mind. But he kept counting and breathing.

Adelayo's voice remained firm, but it became even softer as she spoke to Noa. "Move that heat and that light up from your gut. Push them up into your chest, then into your shoulder, then into the top of your arm, then slowly down your arm, into your hand, and really feel it as you guide it into and *through* your fingertips."

"And," Peng said, his own words soft and slow, "ask for help."

Noa hadn't been startled by Peng's voice, but he paused to hear it before he continued breathing. *Please*, part of him thought as another did its best to keep count, *help me. I can feel something. I just need help.* And Noa could tell that the same thing was happening as the pain in his side that seemed to be trying to distract him slowly dimmed. As he tried to push that feeling through his body, he knew what to expect, and the hairs on his arm bristled, and— Well, he opened his eyes before she could say a single word.

Uranya wasn't there.

There was just empty black space that stretched on forever.

"Uranya?" Noa's quiet voice disappeared into the black. *I can speak. I can move. It's different this time. I just need help.* He looked around slowly. *I'm in con—*

"Are you okay?" She was behind him.

Noa froze as he saw his sister in the corner of his eye. He was stiff, and it felt like there was a heavy weight on his chest. Then, there was the feeling of icy cold fingers resting on his bare shoulders, but he could only see a sliver of sickly pale out of the corner of his eye. He couldn't remember where he was or why he was there. It was so dark. If he could just move his head a little bit more, he would be able to see her. With everything he had, he strained his neck just to see a little bit more. He had to face her.

Uranya's face, however, wasn't wholly her own. Her hair was gone, and there was a fierce look in her eyes, and it was clear that Uranya was the Redeemer. "You're a monster."

Noa's entire body panged with agony as something stuck into his side. It was like the bullet, it was like when Peng had sealed his wound, yet it was completely different—it was all wrong. All of the warmth in his body was being drawn away, pulled toward his wound, and the warmth was replaced by pain—bitter, cold pain like the burn of winter's harsh freezing winds. The wound in his side felt like it was growing, like cracks spreading through ice.

Redeemer Uranya just gave him a frosty burning stare.

Nothing had changed. Noa was dying again.

Then, Adelayo was shaking him again. "Deep breaths, Noa. Deep breaths. You're okay."

He sucked in air and his entire body cringed from the very real pain in his side. Noa felt like the wound had reopened. "It hurts! Mercy, it hurts like—"

Adelayo put her hand over his mouth and hissed a hush at him. "Shut it, Noa. I'm sorry it hurts, but do *not* draw attention to us and especially not to you."

Peng got out of his seat and out of the buggy, and he stepped into the back of the buggy where Noa was. "Gonna check the wound. Mighta reopened it."

He settled down and nodded his head, and, when Adelayo moved her hand away, he was sucking air through his teeth, clenching his jaw through the pain.

Peng rolled Noa onto his unwounded side and lifted his shirt, then Peng peeled back the dressing over his wound. It seemed to have torn from too much movement, and it was bleeding again. "Not lookin' great," Peng told them, and he sighed. "Good thing is you already know the drill. Gonna have to seal it back up."

Imagining it made him want to vomit, but Noa nodded his head.

"Hold on." Peng reached into the very back of the buggy to pull out his medical kit. He set it down and rifled through its contents. When he had what he needed, he prepared a new dressing for the wound and set it to the side. "Alright," he said, and he pulled up a part of Noa's poncho toward his mouth, "close your eyes and bite down."

Noa balled up the end of his poncho and stuffed it in his mouth and bit down as he squeezed his eyes shut. He knew what was coming, he knew what to expect, and the knowing somehow made it worse. Searing heat entered his wound, and it was worse than he remembered, and the chilly pain from his nightmare still lingered. Noa wanted to scream out, but he let out a muffled yell into his poncho.

"That's it," Peng said. Before he dressed the wound again, Peng gave it a good look. "Still not lookin' great. Gonna need more than what I can do right now."

Noa spat out his poncho

"Gonna hurt for a while too." Peng shrugged. "Just gonna have to brave it." He went ahead and put clean dressings on the wound, stuffing a little bit more into it. "There ya go."

"Thanks," Noa said, and he rolled onto his belly to avoid putting pressure on his back. "It's my fault," he told Peng. "I shoulda listened—shouldn't've been fuckin' around."

"Prob'ly not," he said.

"It's okay," Adelayo chimed in. "You wanted to know."

"It didn't work, did it?" Noa asked.

"Nope," Peng said. He returned his medical kit to the very back of the buggy and got himself settled back into the front, where he had been taking watch before.

"I'm sorry," Adelayo said, her voice soft. She grabbed the spiced ale Noa had set aside. "Here, you should really have a drink. It'll help with the pain."

Noa's eyes flicked up toward Peng's seat then back down. "Nah, I'll be fine," he said, but he licked his lips. Of course, it sounded wonderful, but Peng mocking him for being a drunk was a fresher wound than the one in his side. "But thanks."

She gave him half a smile as she nodded. "Of course." Then, she cleared her throat. "Well, I oughta be keepin' watch too. You want me to get the tarp for ya?"

"Sure," Noa said.

And Adelayo threw the top over him, covering everything but his head. "I'll, uh, let ya know if anyone's comin' by so you can cover yourself all the way. Stay outta sight, but, ya know, uh, be careful with that wound." She gave one of her braids a tug before crawling over and back into the driver's seat of the buggy.

Noa knew he shouldn't have expected anything, but he had. He knew Adelayo had gotten her hopes up too, and he blamed himself for ruining those as well as his own. More than anything else, he figured that Peng was just annoyed at having to take care of the wound again. It still felt hot, and the pain was more furious than it had been before. *Maybe if...* Noa closed his eyes, and he started to count out his slow and deep breaths. He had dropped the lightbulb, but just the exercise of it helped ease his pain before, and that seemed like a better alternative to drinking when he'd be shamed for it. Noa imagined the battery in his gut, he imagined that it was giving off a soft and warm glow, and the pain dimmed again. The idea that he'd have to do that for however long it took for Peng or someone to look at the wound wasn't exactly thrilling, but Noa decided for himself that only being in a little bit of pain was much better than being in a lot of pain, and he noticed that the whispers were rather quiet too.

Tendaji pulled the handcart through the smuggling tunnel. It wasn't terribly heavy, but it was a pain to have to pull it while hunching down the whole time so his head didn't hit the top of the tunnel. Between not wanting to stay hunched over for long and also wanting to get back to Yaya to get paid so he could afford himself a nice meal, he was stepping quickly. Even the passing thought of food got his guts growling again.

"I swear your gut actually sounds like it's *angry*," one of the gangsters told him, and he chuckled. "Whaddya eat when you're that big anyway? A whole horse?"

He responded with a chuckle, though it was rather absent-minded. There was little room in his head for jokes as he told himself over and over again that the job was almost done, and that he'd be out of there soon. Of course, he was plenty glad that the transaction didn't come with any snares or snags. Tendaji and Yaya were good at making sure things would be smooth; and, if there was one thing Xochitl was good at, even more than being an asshole, Tendaji knew that it was being an asshole in a way that made people shut up and move along with things. Xochitl had the time to tease him, but she didn't have the time to waste on making small talk with gangsters. If anything, Tendaji knew—he was self-aware enough to—that small talk was his go-to, but Xochitl never had qualms with harshly shutting him up.

"I'll let him roast you first," Xochitl said to the gangster, "if we're down here long enough that he starts bitchin' and moanin' about it."

"I wouldn't bitch and moan," Tendaji said, giving her a glare.

"See?" Xochitl said. "You'd think it's all this heavy work, but he really works up a sweat by yappin' his mouth so much."

Another one of the gangsters looked a bit confused. "The big guy's hardly said a thing."

"And you can thank me for that." Xochitl's lips became a smug smile. "I accept bonuses, even from thugs like you."

The two gangsters kept quiet for a while, and, even when they started chatting again, they kept it low and amongst themselves.

Tendaji reached the other end of the tunnel first and climbed up the ladder, and he knocked on the wood above. In the while they had moved cargo and made sure all was good, the pretend carpenter had nailed the floorboards back in place, ensuring that no one would find any loose odds or ends. He waited as the nails were pulled loose and the boards were removed, and then he finished climbing up the ladder to get the makeshift pulley over to the hole.

"Alright," Xochitl said, and she eyed both of the gangsters. "Go ahead and load it up. That's a man's job, right?"

They didn't protest a bit.

Crate by crate, Tendaji pulled the cargo up, and, when it was all there before him, he brought it upstairs to load it onto the same handcart he had emptied earlier in the day.

The two gangsters remained in the tunnel as the pretend carpenter nailed the boards back into place over the entrance.

"Ya know," Xochitl said as she helped him with one of the crates, "at least you got that goin' for ya. You ain't a disgusting pig like them. Of course, you're disgusting in other ways—you and Ade make me wanna vomit—, but I'd rather see that than hear how those fuckin' thugs talk about women. I hear it so much, and it still gets me."

Tendaji let out a booming chuckle. "Small talk *and* a compliment?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Don't ruin it."

"Alright, alright." Tendaji heaved the crate onto the handcart. "I get it, though. We've talked about this. It grosses me out to imagine them looking at Ade the same way some of them look at you. I mean, it grosses me out enough seeing them look at you that way. One of these days, you ought to use more than words and just throw one of them to the ground." Tendaji chuckled and he gave her a nod. "You might be one-third my size, but you've easily got two-thirds the muscle under there somewhere, and that's more than I could say for them."

"Problem is," she said, "they'd like it."

Tendaji chuckled. "I guess you can't win, huh?". Then, he heaved another crate onto the handcart. There was just one more left.

"And that's why I don't play," she said, and she helped him with the last crate.

"Fair enough." Tendaji took a deep breath and exhaled as he picked up the cart. Only a few steps in, his guts started rumbling again. "Mercy, I'm starving."

"I don't think you've starved a day in your life, big boy." Xochitl walked beside him. "Every time I see inside those walls, I think about how stupid you musta been to give up that cozy little life, especially as a trader."

"A trader's son, really," Tendaji said, "and it's not all great."

Xochitl rolled her eyes.

"Just because it's worse outside the walls doesn't mean that everything is great inside them," he said. "People starve in there too."

She rolled her eyes again.

Tendaji knew it was because he was right. The food in the crates on the handcart didn't come from a surplus. It came from a personal hoard of some fat cat inside the walls, and it would've been best for it to go back to the people there, but Yaya had every right to pay for it as well. The villagefolk worked hard to produce quality ethanol, and that could go a long way for those who could afford to be using it inside the wall, and, of course, it also meant that Adelayo never had to worry about refueling the buggy herself as long as they took jobs from Yaya.

It was quiet when Tendaji and Xochitl got back to the buggy. Peng came to help load the cargo into the buggy as Xochitl went to claim her seat in shotgun.

Tendaji dropped off the handcart behind the buggy, took a few large steps to the driver's seat, and he smiled at Adelayo. "Did you miss me?"

"Mhm." That was it from Adelayo.

"I missed you too," Tendaji said. He wasn't an idiot. Something was wrong, but he knew he'd have better luck getting that out of Peng of all people than out of Adelayo herself. He leaned in and gave her a kiss on the forehead. "After I move the crates, you'll have to tell me all about what you were working on."

She nodded and gave him half of a smile. "Yeah."

Tendaji cleared his throat and stepped back to the back of the buggy. "Well, I'd say we made pretty good time," Tendaji said, giving Peng a smile. "We'll have time for a good meal." They heaved the first of four crates into the back of the buggy.

"Mhm." That was it from Peng.

"Did everything go well? Obviously, there isn't a Purifier breathing down our necks, so that's good," Tendaji said, "but I'm surprised that not even Ade was chattering."

"Guess you're better for talkin'." Peng didn't so much as blink as they heaved the second crate into the back of the buggy.

Tendaji chuckled. "Sure, but Ade always gets so bored and restless." He whispered, which really sounded like the average person speaking in a low voice. "Come on, Peng. Did you piss her off? Or Noa? She seems a bit out of it. Well, she *is* out of it."

"Eh." Peng gave a little shrug. "She's fine, I'm fine, kid's fine."

Tendaji pushed the third crate the rest of the way in. "She's not fine."

As Peng helped him with the last crate, he gave him a glare. "Why's that my problem?"

Tendaji sighed and rolled his eyes, then they heaved the last of the crates into the back of the buggy. "It's not. Sorry for bothering you. I'll go run the handcart back."

"Yep," and Peng went to take his seat.

Adelayo felt stupid. She was driving across the barrens, so she really didn't have the space in her head to feel stupid, but she felt stupid. And she hated driving. But she was better than Tendaji, and both Peng and Xochitl hadn't been willing to learn. She drummed her fingers along the outside of the steering wheel. Adelayo usually wasn't very good with people—that was Tendaji's

thing and she was fine to let him have it—, but, when she did have a feeling about someone deep in her gut, she knew that she could trust it. Her instinct had been that there was something special about Noa, and she felt stupid that she was wrong. And she also felt guilty that she felt she was wrong because Noa seemed plenty special—he was a good kid—, but she had assumed that instinct meant that he’d show potential for something more with his mutation. It made a lot of sense, of course. Noa was fairly normal-lookin’, and it wouldn’t have been the first time she tested the potential in a fairly normal-lookin’ mutant. Of course, it’s not like it happened terribly often either, but her it was the first time her test had been wrong.

“Eyes up,” Xochitl said.

Adelayo gave Xochitl a nod and a smile, but, really, that had only made her feel even more stupid. Even if Xochitl hadn’t exactly said as much, it felt like she was in trouble and like she couldn’t do one of the two things she was actually supposed to be good at. That feeling was why she left the Kingdom of Heaven—well, that and the Society of Atonement wanted her to be tried for heresy on account of her tinkering with the technology of the Ancients. It didn’t help that she also very curious about atomic power, which was one of the forsaken trinity, one of the Three Great Satans. Anyway, Adelayo had spent so much of her early life trying to be a good tinkerer to make her parents proud. She wanted to be renowned by her local parish. She wanted to invent something so amazing that they’d make her a saint like so many of the inventors that she looked up to. That didn’t happen, however. Saint Adelayo was nothing more than a dream. Adelayo shook her head as if that would shake off her thoughts. “We don’t need... to stop, do we?”

“I’m good,” Xochitl said. “Hey, Peng. Any reason to stop?”

“Nah,” he said.

Noa was both surprised and a little bit disappointed that Tendaji hadn’t tried to start up a conversation with him as they made their way to wherever it was that they were going. Of course, he hadn’t given himself a lot of time to think about that. Every time he lost track, Noa started counting again—he hadn’t made it anywhere past thirty. It was awfully boring to be counting and breathing for so long, and he would’ve much rather been playing cards or chatting with Tendaji or finally sipping on that spiced ale, but his want to do those things paled in comparison to his want to not feel the intense pain of his wound that crept back in when his focus drifted. And, when the pain crept back in, so did the whispers. Even though it had only been two days, his head felt a little empty without them. He didn’t miss them—it just felt wrong.

At one point, Tendaji broke the silence. “So, where are we taking him?”

“As much as I hate to say it,” Xochitl said, “the shortest route doesn’t give us time to drop the kid off unless we leave him back in Stoneway again, which...” She sighed. “We don’t have time to stop, so we’ll figure it out later.”

“We’re taking him to see—” Tendaji stuttered “—to, uh, to Kijiji?”

“Don’t have much of a choice,” Xochitl said, and she sighed again.

There was a pause, then Tendaji said, “Maybe he’ll be fine there.”

With most of his mind focused elsewhere, Noa was only able to half-listen, and even half-listening meant more pain crept back than he would’ve liked.

“Where are you going?” Uranya asked.

Noa squeezed his eyes shut and slowly took in a deep breath, starting his count from one all over again. He imagined there was a battery in his gut. It gave of a warm light. They passed Kimura again, but Noa was too deep in his breathing in counting to spare more than a few thoughts for his brother. They passed Stoneway again, and the worry that the Redeemer would be waiting for him again lurked in his mind, and he dwelled on the wound that he had been given for nothing more than a few moments—bringing his attention to the pain obviously only made it worse. It seemed like so much had happened, but less than half a day had passed. His growling belly told him that it was time to lunch—though, he was much hungrier than he usually was when that time came around. But Noa pushed the hunger and the pain back—just counting and breathing, just feeling the light and the warmth in his gut. Eventually, wherever that Kijiji place was, they were near. The journey had been even less eventful for Noa—no chatting, no seeing his sister, no nothin’—, but it had seemed to go by much faster with his mind focused on a few things and a few things only.

“Hey, kid,” Xochitl said. “If anyone tries to talk to you, you say hired us to move you across the barrens. Otherwise, keep your mouth shut.”

Noa’s focus broke as he gave his full attention to one of the scariest people he had ever met, and he told her, “Yes, sir. Keep my mouth shut. Got it. You don’t have to—” He winced, expecting the pain in his side to return with a vengeance, but it didn’t—it hadn’t. There was a dim pain in his side, but it was no longer the excruciating burn.

“Are you okay, Noa?” Tendaji wore his concern on his face.

“Yeah,” Noa told him. He stretched out and pulled the tarp away. “Yeah, I’m actually fine, really fine. I feel pretty great. Not great, great. But... Yeah.”

“Could be a bad sign,” Peng said. “Can you feel it at all?”

Noa looked to Peng and nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m just surprised. I just... Well, I dunno. It just feels a lot better. It still hurts a bit, but, well, I’m obviously not howlin’ in pain.”

“Lie on your side. I’ll check again,” Peng said.

“That’s gotta wait,” Xochitl said. “You and Ten gotta get those crates in there stat.”

Noa was already lying on his unwounded side.

Peng held up his hands. “Just a quick look. I won’t mess with it.” He looked to Tendaji.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Tendaji said, and he scrambled out of the buggy. “I can just grab the cart while you’re checking him out. You just do what a doctor does.”

Xochitl looked over her shoulder at Noa. “And you’ll stay here ‘til we say otherwise.”

“Yes, uh, sir.” Noa swallowed, and he jerked as he felt Peng lifting his shirt and peeling back the bandages on his side. “Mercy, warn me.”

Peng didn’t bother paying Noa any mind.

Noa watched Peng as the man’s brow furrowed. “What is it?”

Peng ignored him, turning to Adelayo. “Check this out.”

Adelayo got out of her seat and crawled into the back of buggy as she said, “What’s up?” Her eyes made their way to Noa’s wound, then they grew wide. “Oh, sin.”

“What *is* it?” Noa’s face was going a bit pale from the worry.

“Wound’s closed and clean,” Peng said, and confusion only twisted his face more as he stared at the healing hole in Noa’s side. “Looks like I already had a go at it.”

Noa gave the best shrug he could considering he was still on his side. "I mean, that's a good thing, right? You got me all worried like I'm gonna die."

"Maybe you're quick-healin' after all," Peng said.

"No." Adelayo shook her head. "No. Why now?" She looked at Noa. "You were awfully quiet back there the whole drive. Were you nappin'? Didn't hear any snorin'."

"Well, no," Noa said. "I was just doin' the thing you guys said—just breathin' and countin' and thinkin' about the battery and stuff, ya know? I mean, I know it might seem silly, but it was helpin' keep the pain down when I was doin' it before, so, well, I dunno, I kept doin' it."

Adelayo blinked as if she had been slapped across the face. "And you've been imaginin' in your gut, right?"

"Right," Noa said.

"Which does happen to be about where ya got shot, right?" She glanced down at the wound then back at Noa. "I mean, I know it's your side and your back, but it goes pretty deep."

"Well, right," Noa said, and he nodded a bit. "I don't get it."

"Mercy." Peng finally looked up at Noa, and their eyes met. "Even if you couldn't put the energy in your finger, you mighta just kept it right there, next to your wound."

"Are you sayin' that I did that?" Noa felt sick.

"Wait," Xochitl said, butting in, "did you two test him?"

Noa shook his head. "This can't be real."

Peng patted the bandages back in place, and he looked at Xochitl. "Let's get those crates taken care of, then we can have a nice little sitdown."

Tendaji was pulling his sixth handcart of the day, and, while it was full of the crates from the back of the buggy, it felt as light as if it had been empty. *Mercy, Ade was right.* It kept going through his mind. Noa's mutation had potential. When he had returned to the buggy with the handcart in tow, it had been rather quiet again, but they hadn't been so tight-lipped. Noa had become the quietest of the bunch, and he looked like he was ready to vomit.

Xochitl was quiet as they walked to Yaya, but it didn't seem to Tendaji to be her usual quiet. She hadn't even spared a few words to make fun of him in some way or another.

It wasn't a long walk to Yaya's storehouse, and Tendaji set the handcart down inside the storehouse. When he looked up, Yaya was waiting for them.

"There's my Tendaji." Yaya had a smirk on her face as she walked over to inspect the contents of the crates. "Good boy. There's plenty to get us by." Then, she looked at Xochitl. "Another quick job by your crew. I'm impressed as ever, Xochitl." She pulled a small pouch from her belt. "As always, here's the other half of the payment." Yaya held it out.

Xochitl gave a little bow and said, "Thank you, Yaya." She reached out to grab the pouch.

But Yaya snatched it back. "After you give me the boy, of course."

"What?" Tendaji's face turned to shock.

"What boy, he means," Xochitl said.

"Come now, don't either of you treat me like a fool." Yaya sighed as she curled her fingers around the pouch. "I know about the mutant."

Tendaji swallowed. "Yaya, he's just a customer, a passenger."

"I know about the bounty," Yaya said.

Tendaji shook his head. "The bounty?"

"Oh, you don't know? He was really your passenger. That's alright." Yaya shrugged. "Bring the boy to me. He's causing a spot of trouble for me at the moment. Those Redeemers traced your buggy back to me, and, to not invite any problems on this small village, I told them that I would make sure we handed him over. I actually thought you might've heard about the bounty on your own, but that's my Tendaji—such a soft heart." She eyed the big man. "I hope you haven't grown too attached, though it doesn't matter. You *will* bring me the boy. I want to get those Redeemers off my back. I'm old. I can't push them back like I used to."

"We could take care of—"

Xochitl cut Tendaji off. "Of course, Yaya. We'll bring him to you. He's got nothing. I'll just tell him you're willin' look at hirin' him for some work."

"Xo—"

And Yaya cut Tendaji off too. "I knew that I could count on you to see reason, Xochitl."

Xochitl looked at Tendaji. "You follow my orders. Remember that."

"So, where's the best place to go?" Noa asked, breaking the long silence.

Peng's mind seemed to be elsewhere.

Adelayo shrugged. "Kijiji is fine, but the *where* doesn't really matter so much as the *who*, ya know. You can't let the Redeemers get their hands on you."

"I know," Noa said, "but you said... Well, there are others like me, right? Where are they? Is there someone who can teach me?"

"Good question." Adelayo looked to Peng. "Is there?"

"Hmm?" Peng looked over his shoulder. He had seemed to antsy to stay still in his seat, so he was standing and leaning against the buggy.

"Someone who can teach him," Adelayo said.

Peng kept it short. "No."

Noa turned to Peng too. "I know it sounds stupid, but, when I was a kid, I used to hear stories about towns just for mutants. It seems like you guys travel around a lot and, well, you've dealt with mutants before. So, I mean, I know it's stupid, but are there places like that?"

"They're back," Adelayo said, nodding toward Xochitl and Tendaji.

Peng walked over to meet the two of them halfway.

Noa turned to Adelayo. "Well, have *you*? Heard of anything like that, I mean."

"Oh, I've definitely *heard* of stuff like that," Adelayo said. "Who hasn't? I mean, there are—or were, at least—mutant gangs out there. It definitely doesn't sound too crazy to me."

"But where did all those other mutants end up? The ones like me, where did they go?" Noa swallowed. "I mean, uh, they're not all dead, right?"

Adelayo chuckled. "No, they can't all be dead, I'm sure. But where they went? I'd tell you if I could. I ain't gonna make it sound sweeter than it is. It's gonna be a rough and tumble life, but look at us—we're a bunch of misfits and we make do."

"But what about people like me?" Noa tapped the skin around the 'V' on his forehead. "Are there other mutants living out in the barrens? Living in places like Kijiji even?"

"There might be a couple," Adelayo told him. "I don't exactly go outta my way to look for 'em, but I've seen exiles out here. Like I said, ya just gotta be careful about the Redeemers. You'll either stay on the run or you'll have to make yourself useful enough that people won't just turn you over when they come snoopin' around. Try hard enough and you might be able to make that little trick ya did with your healin' somethin' good. There's never enough food, never enough water, and there's definitely never enough doctors. We're lucky we have Peng." Her lips turned into a small warm smile. "And you're lucky that our luck got to rub off on you."

Noa cleared his throat. "Well, what about the Kingdom of Heaven? I, uh, don't mean to bring up any bad blood, and I know you said it's not all good there, but, if it's any better than wanderin' the barrens 'til I get lucky or... Well, I guess I'd rather, ya know, do that."

"If you don't mind being told how to live or think or feel or believe, if you don't mind never bein' able to ask any questions," Adelayo said, her nose crinkled in disgust, "if you don't mind always wearing a hood over your face, then it might be fine enough."

"A hood over my face?" Noa asked.

Adelayo rolled her eyes; though, not at him. "Remember the drawin' of Baphomet that Ten showed you? How it had that hood over its face? That'd be you. Sure, mutants are accepted, I guess, but that doesn't mean anyone wants to look at ya."

"Still sounds better than gettin' shot." Noa shrugged. "Right?"

She raised her eyebrows at him. "It might for you. And it might not. But, as you get older, you might feel... differently." Adelayo shook her head. "And it's not easy to get there. It's a long way away, even on a horse, and, just 'cause you're a mutant doesn't mean they'd just accept an outsider like you. I mean, I'm not sayin' they wouldn't—I don't know—, but they might not."

Noa let the unimportant details pass him by. He was willing to do whatever it took not to end up dead, and he figured that, even if he had to wear a hood, there might be someone there that could teach him how to use his... gift. "How long is a long way away?"

"Far enough that you're gonna have to find work," Adelayo told him. "You'll need a horse, enough supplies, and a guide."

Noa put on a sly grin. "Or you guys."

Adelayo laughed, but it died out quickly. "What makes you think I'd be willin' to go back there and what makes you think you could afford it?"

"Well," Noa said, "what if I could?"

Peng, Tendaji, and Xochitl were walking back over to the buggy.

"If you got the brass or the goods and if we ever meet again, we'll talk." Adelayo's word sounded good. "I wish you luck, Noa, I really do. You seem like a good kid."

"I might have some good news," Xochitl said. "The boss said she'd meet the kid to see if he's cut out for doin' some errands or workin' the farm."

Noa just blinked at her. "What?"

Adelayo pulled on her braids. "What?"

Peng gave Noa a look. "Surprised as you are. 'Course, it doesn't mean you got a job. Better be on your best behavior, kid."

"Yeah," Tendaji said, "good luck."

Noa laughed. "How come you don't look as excited?"

"Well..." Tendaji sighed. "You're just so young."

And Noa laughed again. He felt like he had just bolted awake from a dreadful dream. "Could be worse! I'd rather be workin' than starvin'. I'll show the boss I got what it takes. Back in Digsby, I worked plenty on a farm, and I can do some errands just fine! I was always doin' odd work here and there—helping folk with their roofs or whatever." Of course, while he had done those things, he had been a lazy bum, but he figured there was no harm in dressin' his past up a bit—it wasn't like they'd be askin' Harrison his thoughts. This was the closest thing Noa had to returning to some shadow of his old life. In just a couple of days, so much of the pain could already be undone, and the loss of his rucksack wouldn't have to nag at him any longer.

"That's the spirit," Xochitl told him. "Look at you. I'll take you to the boss."

Tendaji sat in the very back of the buggy. He was alone. Guilty sweat stained his pits. At the very least, he wasn't hungry anymore. Watching Xochitl lie to their faces had tied his guts in knots. It was wrong. It was wrong, but Xochitl had made it clear on the walk back to the buggy that it wasn't Tendaji's place to step in and that it wasn't Tendaji's place to judge. Tendaji hadn't needed the reminder that he was hardly half a member of the crew at best. To make things worse, Yaya had made herself quite clear too. It was an uphill battle trying to get anything he wanted out of Xochitl; and, while he was used to bargaining with Yaya for this or that, there was absolutely zero room to negotiate with Yaya when she drew a line.

"I know you said you wanted some time to think," Adelayo said, and she stepped around to the back of the buggy, "but are you really that worried about the kid?" She caressed his cheek and gave him her best smile. "He'll be okay." She leaned in to try to kiss him on the forehead, but he didn't move to meet her. "Worst case scenario, he'll just be back to roamin' and tryin' to avoid any Redeemers. That can't be worse than meetin' with Yaya."

A shiver ran through Tendaji's body like a spark through a fuse about to detonate a rather loud banger. There was no way to tell Adelayo what was on his mind without incurring the wrath of Xochitl, and Tendaji knew that Xochitl didn't make empty threats. If he spoke without Xochitl's permission, she swore that she'd make sure he was no longer associated in any way with her crew, and she had made it clear, if it meant sending Adelayo away too, that she'd do it. Tendaji hadn't the guts to speak up for himself, and, even if he had, Tendaji could only admit that both Yaya and Xochitl were right—Tendaji had gotten too attached to a nice kid he'd just met, and he needed to remember where his priorities lay. Tendaji figured he'd get over it—eventually.

"Hey," Adelayo said, her voice soft. "I need you to talk to me. Somethin'. You're freakin' me out a bit. I haven't seen you this bothered in a while. I can't focus on tinkerin'." Her eyes were a wordless plea of their own, but she still said, "Please, Ten. You're my eleven."

Every time she said that, Tendaji melted a bit. They had fallen for each other rather quick, but Tendaji had been worried since day one that he'd still be second to tinkering. It didn't bother him that much, and he loved her for who she was, which obviously included her tinkering, but Tendaji hadn't stuck around with the crew for anything else—Adelayo was his tinkering. As good as he was at being the son of a merchant and as much as he loved a good story, he enjoyed nothing more than simply being around her. Tendaji swallowed. "You know I'm loyal to you above all else, but I would never risk what you have for you. That's not fair."

"If that was supposed to make me feel better, Ten, it didn't." Adelayo's lips turned into a worried frown. "You know somethin' that I don't. That's clear. Is it about the kid? Or Yaya? Did Xochitl shut you up?"

As much as he tried to stamp out that fuse running to his mouth, Tendaji said, "If someone you cared about was in danger, would you do something? Even if it meant going against Xo? Even if it meant leaving the crew?"

50,133 words