

The air was heavy at this altitude, or maybe it was just his age showing again. Finding a way to slow him down once more and waste his precious seconds just recovering from the dozens of steps. Wondering if she was actually up here or was this all for not, but she did have a fondness for that ancient one and his stories.

Having to stop and rest against the stone walls, he could hear voices from below. Just faint messages that didn't concern him at this point, what did catch his ear was a much older chuckle along with a giggle. Making the thin humanoid grumble before continuing, trying to make out the conversation above. "I can't say I quite understand, Elder. We're supposed to want this?"

"Indeed child. It is an important part of life to accept the ride."

"The ride of a carriage?" That familiar giggle, still fluttering his old heart.

"Do not think of it as an actual carriage, but something that symbolizes it." A deep inhale could be heard as he quietly approached the door. Detecting the scent of vapors through it that nearly made him grumble. Even after all these years, that fossil never quit that terrible habit. Let alone in front of her. "The wheels will always turn for us. We cannot stop it."

"You're not making any sense, Elder." Another giggle. "Most of your old tales do not, but this is possibly the strangest you've told me. There's no way everyone has a carriage that wanders up to people randomly."

"You're still thinking about this in a literal sense, youngling."

"Alright then, where does this wagon take us?" That made him cross, knocking on the door before the elder could answer. Coming in regardless of permission, and seeing her on the bed. A much larger, bulky, but grey one sitting on several pillows next to a Hookah. Taking an inhale from the hose and releasing the smoke from his nose where it would escape into the opened window. "Tuoni!" The little female nearly chirped and jumped off the bed. Aiming for the younger male's arms but he sadly was not quite young enough not to let out a groan.

"There you are. I've been looking over the entire castle for you." He smiled at the little one, giving that yellow mane a pet.

"Is it supper time yet?"

"It is, yes. For everyone, especially growing little girls." She smiled at that. "Best to eat it while it is warm."

"Can I use the elevator this time?"

"When don't you-" Tuoni half grumbled.

"Of course." The older one answered over the other, once again seeing her chirp before getting into the chamber in the center of the tower. Looking over the two males still in the room.

"Aren't you coming?"

"We'll get the next one. I'd... Like to talk to Elder Ryd for a little bit first." Slightly disappointed at the answer, the down didn't last too long as the machine started to safely descend her. Leaving the two males alone and increasing the tension in the room. Meeting the less-than-satisfied gaze with another inhale of that mouthpiece. "Must you do that in front of her?"

"It is good for her."

"Which is why you see so many other elders walking the streets everyday." The younger one grumbled, crossing his arms. "You know I want to keep her as healthy as possible."

"For all the wrong reasons, Tuoni." He rolled his eyes in response. "You cannot stop the wheels from turning."

"But you can make them turn faster for everyone else, and that's okay?"

"What you are trying to do is stop them entirely-"

"Who's to say that's a bad thing-!?" A frustrated breath from the younger one as he stopped himself. "I'm not going to get into this argument again. I am her legal Guardian-"

"And I am her Godfather. And if you call me senile again, I will throw you out of this tower." A tense breath of frustration as Tuoni took some time to think about his words.

"I just think that the better thing to do is to let her focus on her education and for you to stop filling her head with ghost stories."

"You're just stalling her. Occupying her time in hopes of stopping it-"

"Who doesn't want more time?" He snapped at the Elder, watching him shake his large head in disappointment. "If we can drastically delay the aging process, give our children decades or more to live-"

"You're looking at this as if growing old is a problem without any merits."

"Trust me, I've been feeling the **merits** of it every day for the last decade. We have a chance now to give everyone a better life- a better future...! And you keep filling all the younger one's heads with doubt

in our science!" Some silence as the elevator arrived. "As her guardian, I have say over you. I'm going to put my trust in our science, not your superstitions."

"It is not superstition, it is wisdom."

"The so-called 'Wisdom' of one person, vs the studies and efforts of hundreds. It isn't a difficult decision in what to put my faith into."

Come With Me To The Otherside Act 1 - Division Symbols

By Bartan Tirix

Chapter 1

The young one struggled against her binds. Those connecting her wrist and the much larger hands hold her upper arms, leading the Degu down a rather uncared for hallway. Passing several cell doors as the two giants carrying her stopped at the farthest one; a large stone room that was rather occupied by several. But before she could get a good look at any of them, the barred door slid open and she was tossed inside.

Landing with a thud in the center of the dirty floor, almost sliding on something she really didn't want to think about. Staining her baggy clothing; ones that seemed to be made for someone at least two sizes larger than the yellow rodent. "Feel free to have fun with this one, since you don't have much time left." A deep voice echoed within the large mask as the guard slammed the door shut, his heavy footsteps following the other of his species in a leave.

Within that moment, she felt eyes all over her. A dozen or so in the half-shadows as the only light source rocked, terrified of the heavy walk of the larger beasts. Still struggling with the roped binds as they cut into her wrists as one of the cellmates got up. Making the Degu whimper a little bit as she scrambled away, or attempted. Slipping in the foul puddles and what she hoped was mud in order to escape the navy furred one approaching her.

A hiss in denial as the smaller male took hold of her arm, pinning her faced down and keeping her still as they tested the binds. Knowing right then and there that the same hand would be after her belt next just above her thin tail. "Give me your knife." The dark blue one barely asked another, further making the yellow whine. Were they planning to carve into her? Starving and willing to resort in scraping what little flesh she had on her bones?

"No way! Get your own!"

"I'll give it back if you let me use it for a moment. If not, I'll take it." The one over her commanded sternly, getting a small growl in response as something was tossed and caught. The yellow one struggled a little bit more until that voice was directed to her. "Stay still." There was no use fighting it anyway, she was just wasting her energy. Finally submitting as several eyes watched over her, spotting a single red one in the darkness against the wall. Making eye contact for several moments, actually intimidating her without using a single word.

And then, relief from those binds. The ropes loosening and sliding off, finally letting go of the small female as her shoulders were self-tended to. Scampering out from the blue one as he examined the rope, concluding it was still in good condition. Though not without a stink-eye of sorts, the two sharing a glance before tossing the makeshift blade back to its owner; a cyan (Patagonian) Mara.

Her rescuer then looked at her with a slightly soft orange gaze. "Are you alright?" He barely asked, before getting a snort from across the room.

"None of us are alright for long." A slightly larger one growled. "As soon as daylight hits, we're all being stripped and sent into the deadzone."

"Not if my plan works." The navy one whispered sternly, turning to the female once again and changing his tone to something much more soft. "Are you hurt?"

"Just a few bruises and aches, nothing I'm not used to." She mumbled, still tending to her wrist 'burns'. "I... Gave them quite a struggle."

"Good. You probably just saved yourself from being raped then." Those yellow ears lowered in fear as the dark colored Marmot glanced around. Facing a single palm towards her in a sign of introduction. "Dissonant. Most people call me Disson." A faint nod when she understood, lifting up her own yellow paw to press against his.

"Vital." She said a bit quietly, trying to only let him hear it with no avail. Hearing another snort at such

a touching moment and get both of their attentions.

"You shouldn't get too close to each other, especially if you're going to get yourselves killed in a few hours." The statement made the navy one spade his ears, but ignored it otherwise.

"Okay, Vital." Disson whispered. "We're going to plan an escape soon. They'll be expecting it too, but we don't have much else of a choice." A worried look from the yellow one, her own blue eyes scanning around at the dozens of others. All definitely bigger than her, but nothing compared to the ogres down the halls. "A few of us know some Wung Fu, if we can get some weapons we might be able to make it"

"And what happens when we reach the deadzone? You can't hold your breath and sprint outside of it, even if it was nearby." Another grumbled.

"They have to get here somehow, right? They probably have masks to wear, or maybe some underground tunnel." The navy one said rather optimistically. "We'll figure it out, but if we don't try..."

"We're dead either way." Another grumbled, getting a series of disheartening agreements.

"How...?" The yellow one started, looking around at the cage while getting a noise in question from Disson. "How are you getting out of here, though? You're not going to be able to break that door down."

"I'm going to pick the lock." The Mara with the dagger earlier stated rather proudly, getting a puzzled look from her. Pulling out the blade in secret to reveal... What was basically a bone that was sharpened. Likely from the leftovers of a meal. She got up to take a closer look in the low light, but the scrawny light-blue male attempted to hide it in his baggy jacket. "I swear, if you ask to see it, I'm going to cut you-"

"The edge is too wide." A snarky noise in question from the overprotective one. Instantly causing her to move to the door and gaze down the hallway. Not seeing anything nor hearing any patrol, giving her time to slide an arm within the square bars and study the lock with her thin digits. Actually almost able to pick it herself, if only her claws were more durable and longer. "Your edge won't be able to turn it, it's too wide. However..." Vital took a step away to study around the door instead. Finding the hinges on the outside and studying them; specifically the pins. "No bottom..."

"What does that mean?" The navy one stood behind her.

"The... Warden, he always wears a helmet or something, right?"

"Warden?"

"The... Overseer of a prison. Think Leader of sorts."

"One of those really smooth helmets, yes." Disson answered her, almost ignoring the other chatter.

"What the hell does that have to do with anything-?"

"Why does he wear it?" She questioned them, getting a shrug from one.

"All big-brains are weird like that. What of it?" For the first time, a statement actually got the attention of the creature in the back. The single red eye glaring at the larger one who grumbled the statement, but he didn't move.

"It was padded..." Vital thought to herself, looking at the hinges again. "They're prone to migraines, his ears are sensitive-"

"Albretrakk, cub...!" One of them cursed at her. "Get on with it-!"

"The door didn't squeak when it opened." She nearly chirped at them. "They grease the hinges, probably under his orders." Puzzled looks all around. "Meaning, the pins would be able to slide out easier."

"But in order to do that, you'll need a flat edge of sorts." Disson followed, causing the two to look at the scrawny Mara with the knife and hiss at them.

"I warned ya, female or not-"

"She didn't ask." The navy one instantly replied with a strict tone, actually causing Vital's ears to lower a bit. "Do you want to get out of here or not?" A bit of a snarl as the cyan one exhaled, glaring at the two of them while slowly pulling out his treasure. Almost handing it over before pulling it back.

"I want it returned!" He hissed in a whisper, getting the two to nod in sync. Still being reluctant in giving her the makeshift weapon, but eventually doing so. Watching the yellow one get to work sliding it between the top of the hinge and the pin's head. Taking a few moments before the blade was far enough in to wedge it upwards, gesturing them to shake the door a little bit as the nail-like metal bit slid up. The prisoners finally hearing the empowering sound of the pin hitting the floor.

Vital started moving up to the middle one, only to find it completely lacking a pin to begin with. Beginning to climb the barred door, she felt some support from the navy Marmot; calling over another tall one to help root her other foot. "Best to get ready, this won't be easy." The rest of them started to get up, becoming hopeful of escape and a chance to survive. All except one.

With the final pin dropping onto the floor outside of the cell, the two helped Vital down from their shoulders. Giving the knife back to the cyan one and stepping back to give others more space to get inside the doorway; following Disson's motions. "If we keep pushing out, the lock should break or it'll bend enough for us to squeeze out, even if one at a time." He explained, and in a series of whispering chants, they all synchronized their strengths.

Until the doorway's bolt lock snapped and slid the entire thing out, almost wanting to cheer for their freedoms as they started down the dark hallway. The Cyan one and Disson heading towards the front while the female stayed behind, making sure everyone else left before she did. Getting the gesture of

the purple furred larger one; that helped support her during the final hinge.

Upon stepping out of the doorway, something stopped her. A gravitational pull of sorts, or at least it felt as such, causing Vital to look back into the cell's corner to meet with that single red eye again; not moving. Barely blinking. Just staring at her as the group set off to their freedom.

Before she could react though, a purple paw was set on her shoulder, causing the female Degu to look at the larger one with confusion. "He's a cripple." He stated bluntly, making those yellow ears fall a little. "He'll only slow us down." They sank further, along with her heart, as a commotion was heard down the hall. Beckoning them to make haste, and also make the tough decision to leave that one behind.

Chapter 2

The group crept up to the closed door, trying to keep their pawsteps as quiet as possible. Meeting one of them who was looking through the keyhole, who gave them silent gestures. Three of them. One outside. Two on the left, one close on the right side. The last straight ahead in the other room.

The navy one nodded, motioning the cyan to take out the right with his bone dagger, while he and two others took out the left two. Then two follow behind for the last in the other room. They nodded in agreement as he motioned for the scrawny one to take the lead. Putting his large ear towards the door and listening quietly.

A single pawstep heading away was the trigger, opening the door and rolling inside in one fluid motion. Stabbing the sharp bone into the guard's heel before clamping his muzzle shut for the scream of agony. But he couldn't do anything to silence the shotgun blast that kicked off on reflex, knocking them both a little off with the recoil as Disson and another went directly after the other two. With his partner sliding across the table to knock the makeshift melee weapon out of the guard's hands before he could get a good grip on it.

The navy one parried the pistol aim upwards, taking out one of the lights with the shot. The 'CO' felt a

slam against his breastbone before a solid grip on his wrist. The arm being extended outwards as the other paw moved from his chest to under his snout, further stunning him and unable to tell where the next assault was going to be on his body. Around the back of the head and slamming it onto the table; finally disarming him of the weapon while knocking him out.

The small firearm slid faintly on the table, getting snatched up by another prisoner just before Disson could reach it. The dropped melee weapon was already taken by those in the frontlines, leaving the navy one and his current partner unarmed. "Catch!" The scrawny one got his attention, tossing Disson the shotgun from his target; currently bleeding out from a neckwound. Catching it and handing it over to his partner while gesturing his thanks.

More gunshots and eventually an alarm of sorts which was made short work of, making the navy one curse as they moved forwards. Each room became more and more chaotic, whereas none of the prisoners nor guards were wearing anything resembling a uniform. Making it difficult to tell who or what exactly was an enemy.

But a few were easily distinguished within the crowd: the large ogres. Mutated larger versions of themselves that were easily ten times the size of a single rodent. Towering over the others, but making them easy targets for firearms. Having their large clothing become easily tattered with bulletholes as they did their best to shrug off the wounds. Wildly swinging at the escapees that were assaulting it, trying to pin the beast down long enough for that perfect shot.

The cyan one raced past Disson, regardless of being called out by him. "Klay-!"

"I'll be careful, you softball!" The scrawny one hissed in reply, climbing over one of the guard's shoulders; distracting it long enough to get hit by another prisoner. Using the CO as a platform to jump off of; grabbing the hanging light and swinging across the room with it's long cord. Skipping over the crowd around the ogre and landing behind it softly before dodging it's wide step.

The cyan critter kept out of the beast's sights, needing to keep up with it's wilding spinning movements as it attempted to swing or grab at the others. Actually managing to catch one as it yelped for help, giving Klay the perfect window to stab that bone dagger into the ogre's hamstring; driving it into an unprotected area as it roared in pain.

It was forced to lean down; providing an opportunity for it to get swarmed by others and eventually get finished off with a firearm in the eye. Sadly, it wasn't carrying any weapons, and it did take out a few prisoners, but it was still a big victory.

Their group spread out deeper into the prison, branching off at every hallway; nabbing the keys off the guards. Freeing more to recruit to the takeover as the low amount of staff got overwhelmed. Vital trying to keep up with Disson and his partners, working together as if they were in some kind of warband. Guerilla tactics of hitting in vulnerable places, hiding back into the crowd that distracted the guards. The navy one calling out targets while doing his best to make sure everyone else was armed

before he was. They've done this before...

Through a larger pair of double doors, they finally spotted the night sky. Being greeted by a heavy gale of howling winds that made them take cover. Spotting a gondola station nearby; the wires leading off to a cliffside that seemed to have green grass where the carriages resided. Everything inbetween and surrounding the prison though... A complete wasteland. Full of blackness, and something reflecting the light of the moon down below. The only way out was...

Before anyone could think about what to do, the cyan one began to traverse the metal cables to the cars. If he could get across and get it working, they could escape the isle in the middle of a wasteland. But... Something felt off to Vital, like they were being watched. Observed from afar...

The scrawny one was only about 25% of the way across the cable before it suddenly jerked downwards, nearly making Klay fall off. A loud echo of the cable car on the other side impacting the ground from a small fall was heard, causing the yellow one to once again look up at the cliffside and barely spot a small green glisten in the distance. Something very small and reflective, but only for a moment... A Scope.

"Rifle!" She shouted above the crowd, but only a fraction too late as a few prisoners collapsed in pain. The echo of the shot finally reaching them and making the group panic, attempting to storm back inside for some cover. Then, the cable itself was suddenly cut with the Cyan one still on it; instantly causing him to grab hold as it fell. Swinging towards the cliffside he left and slamming into the rock.

But he somehow kept his grip, hearing Disson call to him; edge of the cliff and reaching down. The large purple one beside, nearly doing the same as the smaller ones shared a look. "Don't you Dare!" The navy Marmot hissed, denying any farewells to be shared as a heavy banging could be heard coming from the other side. Vibrations being felt in the cable itself occasionally slipping little by little.

Klay scrambled to climb the metal rope as another braved to hold the cable in place- only to be suddenly shot down. The sharp echo of a gunshot following, and finally making the yellow one retreat instinctively. Taking cover inside the door, attempting to look around to find something useful.

The cyan one was nearly within reach, but the gales were getting stronger and more frequent. Making the cable more and more difficult to climb- until his gripping failed and he rapidly began to descend! The critter abandoning it just in time to grab a small rock sticking out, but not quite gripping it enough!

The Cyan wrist was suddenly caught though, along with the grunt and curse of the purple furred one. Causing Klay to look up and spot Disson hanging above him in midair; the tightest grip imaginable on that light blue arm, and his leg being held onto by the purple. Hearing the larger one call for support, with no avail.

Cursing loudly, Vital scrambled out. Trying to keep low and slide beside the purple one, looking over the cliffside to see the situation. Suddenly witnessing the navy one twist; Barely avoiding a shot aiming for his head and actually nicking his ear a little! "I can't pull them up!" The larger one growled at the

weight against his shoulder, getting her to think for a quick moment.

"Swing them to me!" The yellow commanded, getting the larger male to nod and begin the motions, watching her get some distance. Letting the two midair attempt to move with the momentum as they grew closer and closer to Vital's extended arm. Barely avoiding a few shots that were getting more and more frequent! Even closer to her, ignoring all instincts that demanded her to run away from danger! Getting close enough to see Klay's eyes nearly within reach-!

Only for him to suddenly fall, the thunderous echo of the shot breaking her denial as he disappeared into the darkness below. Leaving her in a state of shock and not even noticing that Disson was pulled up, needing to be grabbed by him and the purple one and dragged back into cover as the shots stopped. Slowly snapping out of it when the navy one sat down beside her, still gripping something...

A Cyan Arm.

Chapter 2

That color... She looked familiar, didn't she?

Oh, don't start this whole thing again. Just this once, can't you ignore it? We have more pressing matters as it is.

The Marten grumbled quietly, his large ears flicking and scanning at the silence, trying to make out the footsteps within the dark hall. Hearing the door burst open from afar, a couple of shots fire, and struggles within the commotion as the prisoners began the assault without him. Getting the weasyl to nearly growl just thinking about it.

Typical. Always looking at the orange one as if he were useless. Taking hold of the cell's bars he was leaning against and pulling himself across them, dragging those near motionless legs along the filth. It took time, effort, and a lot of energy to move what felt like a single inch... In some ways he couldn't

blame them for leaving the cripple behind. But it was a mistake. All he needed was to get to the storage room.

Dragging himself through the cell's doors as a distant drop was heard. Heavy. Metal. Somewhat hollow. The cable car? Made sense, they probably lost control of the prison. These guards were hardly equipped, being stationed here was likely a punishment, and that bastard never seemed to care so much for the lives of peons and criminals. Letting the inmates make enemies with themselves basically took care of his problem; and it wouldn't take too long for them to start fighting for survival.

It means the orange one would have to get out of here before that happened. Though he wasn't considered plump, the Marten would be an easy target to tear apart for food. How does he always end up in these bleak situations...

In what felt like ages, he made it to the first guard room. Looking over the bodies that had stab wounds and gunshots through their clothing. Of course picked clean of any weaponry, keys, and nearly clothing at this point. Odds are if there's a storage somewhere in this prison, it was already raided. Doesn't mean that they were taken, but...

Don't lose hope. You've got more you can offer them if you give them a chance.

Giving them a chance is to leave yourself vulnerable... Again. You know what happens when you trust people.

You can get out of here if you work together! You've seen them, they're reasonable-

Reasonable to those who look innocent. You're far from that, and you don't need them.

Resting his orange head against the wooden floor and taking a moment to exhale loudly. Hearing the heavy movement of footsteps coming from the next few rooms... But also something else. A rapid heartbeat? Very faint, but close by. And... Whimpering? A deep breath from the Marten, and he could sense it... Fear. Coming from...

He looked about along the floor, being nearly eye-level to it. Spotting what honestly looked like a patch of wood just barely crooked from the rest. Crawling towards it and very gently trying to move it, discovering that the entire thing could slide up and out like a trapdoor. One leading to a ladder in the dark.

Another form of passage currently useless to him, making the weasel almost growl at it but begin starting to climb down. Only for that whimpering to stop, but it's not like he's been the most quiet attempting this. Staying completely still for nearly a minute as movement in the nearby darkness was heard. Those large ears scanning the area, detecting very faint breaths... The rapid heartbeat... And the fear.

Zeroing in on the location, the Marten swung himself on top of the timid target! Landing on it as the hidden guard yelped loudly and struggled with the orange one! Feeling a weapon of sorts come between them; long, solid, the glisten of a dull blade barely seen in the darkness.

Spear?

Glaive. Or at least is trying to be.

But being on top gave the prisoner the advantage of leverage; adding his deadweight to the pin in order to free up a hand! Using it to punch the CO's snout a few times, enough to loosen his grip on it where the Orange one disarmed him. Surprisingly tossing the weapon off into the darkness as he grabbed the horrified one by the head! Slamming it into the wooden floor to disorientate him before giving it a heavy grip!

Only to feel those orange hands begin... Draining him of something! Something deep within his head, as memories came up and began to disintegrate into nothing! Creating a form of vacuum in the center of his head as the guard attempted to cry out due to the pressure! Unable to get anything out besides a faint wheeze while his body went into shock! Unable to process the faint glow omitting from the sides of his head!

Stop!

Don't bother, you need this!

He has a family-!

HAD a family! You know they're no longer around, not in a world like-!

You can't say that for certain! You can still spare his life! He can become an ally-!

You mean a Liability! You know how this ends-!

The pressure was too great, causing the guard's head to suddenly cave into a bloody mess along the floor. Immediately causing the Marten to gasp and breath heavily over the corpse. Shaking his head to reject the memories that flooded into his own brain... Two little ones. Not his. A partner taking care of them... About to be taken away by soldiers... But offered himself instead.

Huh. They usually last longer than that. Oh well, what's done is done.

You're monsters. The both of you.

We're Survivors. This is what must be done. Not like he was going to get out of here alive anyway. You did him a favor; a near painless death.

He could've helped you escape. He may have known something.

Pointless. If he did, you would've seen it. He would've only slowed you down, but now you have your means to get out of here. Even if it's by force.

A moment to collect himself before scanning the room with that red eye. The very faint light from above barely glistened against something within a crate nearby. Dragging himself towards it and using his bloody paws to 'see'... He witnessed relief. Making sure the other one was there as well before taking the time to slide each leg into their own...

"What do we do now?" The large purple one questioned his leader, knowing quite well the griever he was feeling. Reaching over Vital to place a paw on his navy shoulder.

"...I don't know, Pharra." Disson mumbled, taking the heavy moment before a deep breath. Putting the severed hand away in his vest before getting up to think, watching the room as a few remained still and resting. Some were still on edge about who was aiming at them with the rifle outside. Others within the small prison still storming the rooms to find anything. "We'll have to scout our options. I can't imagine that the gondola was the only way out of here. They must've had a back-up, even if it was crossing the deadzone."

"No one's ever survived such a thing-" The purple Capybara grumbled.

"Actually... They have." The female mentioned, getting the attention of the others. Taking a breath before looking at them. "I've met a couple who used to do so by putting... Something over their muzzles. Like a mask of sorts."

"Allowing them to breathe in an area with no air?" Another prisoner snorted at her.

"I-it's not that there's no air there, it's more that the air there is poisonous to us." She corrected. "They found a way to... Take air and keep it in a jar of sorts, giving them a temporary supply of it, but even then..."

"The air is just one of the dangers to that place." The navy one stated, pondering. "What did these things look like? These... Masks?"

"A helmet of sorts. One could fit over their entire heads, others just over their snouts. Each connected to a tank." The Degu explained, getting up herself. "If we can find one, I might be able to repair the gondola if I can get to the other side."

"Don't give us hope, cub..." An inmate nearly growled, making her frown and lower those ears. However, getting a paw on her shoulder from the navy one, then from the larger purple groundhog.

"Do you really think you can fix it?" Disson softly asked, getting a shy look from her. One bleeding of inconfidence.

"I've... Worked on one before. By the sounds of it, they just dislodged the cable. Getting it back up though..."

"Getting some out on the other side is a good start. However..." The Marmot pondered quietly. "One thing at a time. Let's see if we can find one of those masks."

"I might even be able to make one if you can find a tank, but..." She mumbled a bit sadly, getting the motion to continue. "There's no telling how long it would last. Could be to the edge of the deadzone..."

"Or it could be ten steps in." The same pessimistic prisoner grumbled. "And the lack of air is just one of your worries." She looked at him from across the room, then to the navy one for an explanation. Studying his expression and reading the reluctance in it.

"There's..." The marmot paused, knowing the statement would just worry her further. "People have been witnessing... Something moving within the Deadzone-"

"Undead-" Another stated with a snort, instantly getting interrupted by the larger purple one.

"No one knows for certain what they are." He then looked over Vital. "But there's more. Beasts. Ones that jump out of the black pools and ambush anyone brave enough to enter-"

"I'm pretty sure the word you're looking for is 'Stupid Enough', cappy." A glare from Pharra at the remark.

"We need to have faith. We can get out of here, but we can do it that much faster if we work together."

"He's right." Disson stood up. "Spread out and look for supplies and any form of alternate route out. Look for any mask and bring it to Vital, she will determine its worth." The room remained sitting until the large purple one stood up with the navy one. Scanning the area full of inmates; worn down and lacking morale. "We can do this if we work together. We can get out of here alive."

Chapter 3

"Are you sure about this?" The Marmot nearly whispered to the yellow one, standing with her at the top of a ladder. Watching her nod faintly in response as she adjusted the mask and the uncomfortable backpiece that held together the tank. Truth be told, she wasn't. Especially standing on the edge of what felt like the world; blackness and ruin down below. But up ahead, someone said they spotted another ladder.

"It's our only chance, right?" Vital attempted to sound confident, but it was severely weakened by a terror of the underworld before her. Getting the comforting pet from the navy one and the large purple a ways behind her.

"I can always try the other one if you want me to." A head shake halfway through Disson's sentence.

"You'll only drown if you attempt it. It's... Busted, and we don't have a way to seal it tight enough to make it." A sad look from those soft orange eyes. "There's no telling how much is in these tanks either."

"In terms of distance, I understand." Pharra mumbled, even though he clearly didn't. "Be careful out there, little bird."

"Just walk straight to the other side, if you can. Don't risk stepping in anything that looks like a puddle." A shaky nod as she took one last breath of the prison's air before strapping the mask on.

"Okay, turn the valve." She motioned behind her, feeling the navy one struggle with it until the Capy gave it a firm grip and nearly knocked her off balance. "O-other direction." The two males looked at each other then turned it quite easily, hearing the pressure inside hiss and a rush of... Strangely clean air was detected within the musty mask. Getting her to nod and turn around, looking at the two who protected her before needing to leave them behind. Taking the first few steps down the ladder before pausing and looking directly into the navy one's discs, still slightly shaken by the loss of a comrade earlier.

Yet, it still gave Vital some courage to continue down. Their forms turned into silhouettes as she descended, and eventually into nothing more than fuzzy shadows through the white smoke. Taking a deep breath and feeling the mask on her face fog up in result, the yellow one stopped looking above and focused on taking step after step. Stopping only when those ears flicked, picking up a distant sound or... Whail? A strange mix between a gasp of pain and a moan of torment... Soon reaching the bottom.

The world below the grass was completely painted in black, much of it staining whatever her body or clothing touched. Reminding her of a charcoal of sorts as she moved through what was almost a smokey fog. Faint, still being able to spot the light of the moon overhead. However, it was only barely enough for the yellow Degu to see the ground and reflect brightly off of the strange pools she was warned about. Viscous but slightly moving, like still being shaped by echoes of a movement that happened decades ago. Staying clear of them as she followed the direction Pharra pointed out.

Danger could be felt, surrounding the small mouse like a large blanket covered in needles. Making her matted fur attempt to puff out and scan every inch of her location, making it that much more difficult within the heavy air. Not only where the black pits were a threat, nearly slipping into one while a cloud passed by over her light, but the stories of creatures about... Hiding in the drowning pools.

And then, what the purple one told Vital earlier was itching at the back of her mind, still recalling the memory of relief when she spotted him. Bringing her the two sets of tanks and masks. "Are these what you were looking for?" Those present yellow ears flicked, as if the deadzone echoed his very voice from her thoughts. "Navier found them resting on a rack of sorts."

"So they were being used? That's kind of good news." The yellow one replied, her past self studying their condition on a large table. "Hopefully they still have enough air in them-" Vital then noticed the concern in the larger one's eyes. "...What is it?" Her present heart still raced at the thought, even when she replayed that question several times in her head. Step after step along the black... Asphalt? Like that of an old road?

"Vital..." He whispered to her, still sending a chill down her spine. "There was one missing... The first one." It was that moment her present self could feel eyes watching her. Shuffling to a stop and gazing around in the darkness; the faint grey fog camouflaging several objects that nearly looked like beasts. Still. Unmoving. But she could still feel their eyes...

Who took the other tank then? A CO? Possibly overhearing their plan? Were they going to warn the others and possibly set an ambush for her? Or were they still out here? Possibly got turned around and desperate for a way out? Were those eyes his, or did they belong to someone... Something else...?

As hard as she was trying to control her breaths, fear began to overwhelm her instincts. Kicking in those prey reactions and start trekking faster through the wasteland. Swearing that the noises were becoming more frequent, hiding just under the rapid thumping of her heartbeat in her ears. Everywhere the Degu looked, there was something in the smoke. Just out of sight... Following her.

Then the clank of something metal against the pavement, actually confirming it with those yellow ears as they perked and flicked towards the danger! Getting her to take off and move faster through the Deadzone! No longer sure that she was even going the correct direction, just following what she hoped to be a trail to the other side!

Only to spot a hole in the road just too late, stepping nearly an entire leg into it as it tripped her. Luckily feeling the bottom but prying that now heavy limb out took more effort than expected. The blackness within nearly snaring her as Vital continued down the path...

Only to meet up against the cliffside. Looking back and forth along it, not spotting the ladder that was once in the distance at the prison! Instead debris from the road, needing to take a guess of where she was... One led to safety, while the other would surely cause her to wander for too long and get caught by whatever was stalking her.

Taking a precious moment to weigh her options, instincts just screaming at her to take one while the logic was trying to think clearly. Thinking back to her path and making a decision based on that, just before her breaths started to get heavy.

The tank...! It was running out of air! Following the wall and watching her step, needing to go around a few large tunnels and spotting the mouth of a cave before-! The Ladder! Finally in sight, getting the mouse to cough in the mask as her air was getting lower and lower in quality. Struggling to breathe as she moved towards the ladder, wanting to just rip the device off her face and take a deep breath, but she overpowered those instincts! Whatever she did, she could Not take that mask off! No matter how close to drowning she was in stale breaths, if she did so, Vital was done for!

The Degu began climbing up the ladder, hoping that it would hold her desperate weight. Each step getting that much harder than the last, mixed with the low oxygen levels burning her lungs. Making everything within her vision fuzzy as she started to get some vertigo. Forcing herself to keep climbing, accidentally missing a step and sliding down two more. Her body struggling to follow commands as her head felt lighter and lighter, until...

Vital spotted the blue sky. Instantly ripping off the mask and sucking in a deep breath. One that was filled with smoke but at least some decent air. Taking a few steps up and finally getting over the smoke line where she could pant heavily while grasping at the metal ladder. Removing that light feeling in her brain and begin climbing again.

Taking a few moments to reach the top and roll onto the cool grass of safety, huffing and coughing out all the bad air from her lungs. Replacing it with something more fresh, even better than the prison's. Never noticing just how much the yellow mouse exerted her body until it started to rest, nearly burning internally from such a close encounter. But now she could rest. Take in the beauty of the night, the fresh air, and the distant aroma of someone's terrible cooking. Causing her stomach to growl loudly, nearly starving but she could scavenge some food out here somewhere.

...Until those ears could hear those steps again. This time metal against metal. It was still chasing her! Instantly rolling herself up and scouting her surroundings for possible places to hide! Finding several loading crates a little ways forwards and dashing towards them, occasionally slipping down the descents of the uneven ground as Vital came up to a metallic fence. One resting on a concrete base; both of which have seen much better days.

Squeezing through one of the many holes and nearly getting caught by the wired fence, she pried her clothing out of it and scrambled to the many tractor trailers. Desperately trying to find one that was opened, but they all seemed locked. Sighing in defeat, those ears flicked again with the sounds of those metal limbs, telling her to flee once again and try somewhere else.

Turning past the last trailer, she spotted a small group around a campfire. But more importantly, the peaceful clothing on one of the much larger creatures. Allies! Perhaps someone that could help her fend off the thing and help Disson! "Hey!" The yellow one called out to them, getting the five around the campfire to spring their heads up from a rude awakening. "I need help! Something's...!" She trailed off as the large ogre-like creature came into the light; now noticing that he was wearing the colors of a peaceful tribe, but they were tattered and bloodstained. Like they were salvaged, while none of the others were wearing anything remotely similar. Just... Scraps.

Bandits. Outlaws of the outskirts that lived off the land and others, even her at one point. Causing the yellow one to take a few steps back when they started to get up and get their weapons ready. "What was that?" One of the smaller ones asked.

"Sounded like she needed help with something." Another replied, almost cackling while pulling out a rusty blade.

"Oh, well then..." The pump of a makeshift firearm. "She's quite the lucky one, we're pretty good at... Helping others."

"So long as we also get to help ourselves." The fourth snickered, spotting the largest one slowly get up; at least 8 times the mass of one of the smaller ones. "Easy big guy."

"**Thirsty...**" It nearly bellowed, staring straight at Vital as she took another step back and tripped over a cement beam. Hitting her head a little and having difficulties making out what they were saying.

"I think you mean Hungry."

"Naw... He's definitely Thirsty for somethin'..." Another cackle as they started to move closer to the prone yellow degu, her eyes so focused on them that she barely noticed the mechanical footsteps nearly directly behind her. Whimpering while curling herself into a ball to protect herself as the Bandits suddenly stopped.... And so did the steps just over her head.

...Only to step over her nearly shaken body; making sure not to actually land one of those heavy paws onto the female's limbs and stop with one foot on that beam. The small orange creature standing

between her and the group. Taking something off his back and dropping it on the pavement nearby her.

An air tank. The one that was missing? Or was this a prisoner that followed her? Vital looked up at her 'stalker', her eyes resting on what appeared to be mechanical legs. Prosthetics. Ones that seemed to move up to his hips, and lacking any kind of crotch-wear. A dark green jacket of sorts, bandages, and gloves. One with something on them. Wires? Watching this orange one flex and strain a single hand open as sparks of electricity jumped between his digits and scattered into the air.

"Your Food... Or Your Lives."

Chapter 4

A long silence as an eastern wind blew, before one of the smaller bandits started laughing. Causing the others to join in after a bit. "Are you trakking kidding me, kit!?" He cackled at the orange one, lowering the barrel of his shotgun. "One measly little cripple isn't even worth the ammo! Bo! Go play!" The large one looked at the smaller one and nodded, taking a few heavy steps towards the orange Marten. Easily distracted by the small sparks coming off of one hand that the ogre didn't even notice the motions of the other until the sounds of something heavy flying through the air, and the curses in surprise of the other bandits.

Bo barely reacted in time to half catch one of the trailers being hurled towards him, nearly putting him off balance as something ran up the other side; clawing through the metal walls to reach the top of the trailer where the weasel came into view! Slamming an electrical tiny fist directly into the ogre's snout to fully ensure the beast fell backwards: now pinned down with the heavy cargo carriage.

"What the hell just happened!?" One of them cried as another attacked the orange one with a blade, a downward slash aiming for the single red eye, then one at throat level. Each just an inch away from the damn skittish target, going in for a thrust against the ribs next and nearly getting that coat as the Marten sidestepped and moved much closer. Locking the bandit's weaponed limb with his own orange arm and grabbing the outlaw's chest with the lightning glove! Shocking the bandit to a stun; not conducting to the orange one as he shoved the bandit back.

However, the weasel once again locked on that wrist and twisted it, making the outlaw vulnerable to a kick directly against his back. The robotic leg rearing up and hitting the intended area with a much greater force, allowing everyone nearby to hear the sickening crack of boned disks shattering while

knocking the wind out of the bandit. Letting him drop to the ground.

Too much, perhaps?

You should try to control the power level of your legs. There's no need-

Not now.

"Not now." The orange one grumbled lowly, another bandit reading it as a malfunction of sorts and taking the attack of opportunity! Using his wooden club for an overhead strike that the orange one blocked with his arm; catching the impact with the back of his fist. Right where the shocking glove's mechanism rested, causing it to spark a little before dying out, and making the Marten growl.

Must you bring this up again? Now of all times?

Yes. There's no need to completely cripple them!

The orange one attempted to grab the weapon, but the outlaw slipped it away from his grasp. Stumbling back against the mechanical leg swing along the midsection, only being 'hit' by the airwave created by such a thing. The very clawed ends cut through the layered clothing as the two took a step back away from each other. The 'leader' of the bandit group taking aim in the orange one's blind spot-

Watch out!

Firearm, to your right!

A growl in question from the orange one just as he threw a hand gesture; causing the barrel to swing towards the other melee bandit instead just before firing and crying out in pain. "W-what the hell!?"

We've talked about this! You can't just say 'Watch Out' and expect him to know where the threat is!

"What are you doing!?" The bandit dropped his club to hold his wounds; scattered bits of metal now piercing through his clothing. "Aim it at him! Not me!"

'Watch Out' means 'Dodge'! It's just that simple!

"I-I-I did...! I swear I-!"

But dodge where? You know what happens when he dodges in the wrong-

Yeah, yeah-

A growl in frustration from the orange one as he reached for the club from afar and 'threw' it at the bandit leader; him witnessing it being levitated and hurled at him before he was able to defend. Knocking the outlaw backwards and onto his back while holding his now bleeding snout. Then witness his firearm get tossed away around where the ogre was pinned.

That single red eye focused on the bandit that was shot, whimpering as the mechanical steps started to move closer. Attempting to scramble away, but it just caused his wounds to hurt that much worse. Locking his limbs as the orange one stepped over him and grabbed the outlaw's head with both hands. Stealing the very breath from the downed bandit as those orange paws seemed to glow brighter and brighter with a faint light-

Until the wounded one's head imploded into a sickening mess, stopping the heart of the leader for a moment. Watching in near horror as the orange one took a deep breath of... A strange relief and satisfaction. The sounds of Bo attempting to get the large trailer off his chest eventually got the Marten's attention as those heavy mechanical steps started to move towards the downed ogre.

The large one snapped at him, not quite having enough reach to get the smaller critter as that gloved hand did a gesture behind and reached out; the club soon being flung towards that hand. Getting caught in mid-air before swinging it across Bo's snout, letting a few spurts of red fly out with the swing. Then a second. A third that left the large one delirious before those small orange paws grabbed the temples of his head.

What started out as a cry of pain soon degraded to an exasperating wheeze as the large body tensed up and strained. The whispering breath growing higher in pitch until it eventually caved in like the other, creating a gigantic mess over the pavement and staining the metal contraption that the orange one was using for legs.

Another long deep breath as the leader whimpered. "Y-you're... One of those... Freaks!" It didn't get the Marten's attention, as he looked over at the whimpering bandit with a broken back. Starting to do the same thing as the others while the leader began crawling towards the gun nearby. Hearing that fatal cave in, that deep breath and knew he would be next if he didn't get to that weapon!

What are you planning...?

What he usually plans.

But upon reaching for it, the outlaw's entire body suddenly became stiff! Hard, like it was encased into cement! Then being lifted into the air to a hover, dragged into the orange's view as the bandit whimpered. Trying to struggle against an invisible force as he... kept moving? Floating backwards?

You don't need to do this.

She is right, you still have a little bit more room in that metaphorical belly of yours...

He couldn't turn his head enough to see what was happening, but his view below turned from ground to a pool of black liquid. Hovering over a tarpit by nothing more than a simple gesture from that Freak-! "Stop!" The female called a ways behind the orange one, getting him to half look at Vital. Now holding that firearm and aiming it at the Marten. "Don't... Please-"

The weasel immediately dropped the leader into the thick liquid, leaving him to attempt to swim in something so vile and viscious. Taking no time at all for him to sink while hearing the yellow one cry in denial. Now getting the full attention of that red disc on her and begin walking towards the armed degu, hearing her whimper over the sounds of faint splashing. Watching her own blue eyes shift between the Marten and the weapon in her hands.

Only to actually drop it aside and get on her knees. "Please! Spare him!" Such a request actually stopped the orange one midstep and nearly lose balance. "He didn't know! He was just-!"

"Going to rape you." The Marten spoke heavily and bluntly towards her. "And you want him to live, knowing that." It was barely a question, studying her as the yellow one nodded faintly. Not even with a pause in terms of her response.

Don't look into her eyes-!

Listen to her-

No! You will never succeed if you keep making this same mistake again and again!

"I can be of use to you!" She pleaded. "But... No one else needs to die! Please!" That thick stare of red.

You've always trusted that color-

And it's always given you trouble! For ONCE just ignore it!

She can help you turn this around!

She'll be nothing but a thorn in your side, like always!

...With a deep breath and a long pause, the Marten turned about and lifted up a straining arm. Pulling up the bandit leader now completely soaked in black goo and tossing him onto the ground. Hearing the outlaw cough loudly several times, indicating that he was alive and giving Vital a breath of relief. Once he was able to see, and spot the pair of strangers looking in his direction, the bandit scrambled and took off.

Chapter 5

A low growl from the orange weasel as he moved towards their very small camp. Looking through the stockpile and finding an old can of sorts, not noticing her double take as he started to open it. "W-wait! Don't-!" Upon breaking the seal, a faint hiss came from the can and he started drinking out of it. Making her stare at him for a few moments until he was done, tossing the can away and continuing to see what they picked up. Not noticing her look at the can and observing it for herself.

Metal, but very thin. Writing on it, but nothing that looked familiar. Her gaze shifted between it and the weasel; currently setting up a frying pan while collecting a more rectangular can. Waving a paw at the wood underneath and instantly see it burst into flames before opening the can and sliding out the meat inside. Drinking the liquids before tossing that one too, paying no attention to her collecting that one too.

That is until the degu slowly came into his view, holding both of them and staring at the male. "...You know...?" A slow blink from that single red eye. "You know... What these are?"

"They're preserved food and drink." He stated bluntly.

"But they're... They're from the old world."

"And they're still good." A grumble from the orange one as he shifted the meat in the pan. "Hence the preserved part."

"But...?" She looked back at where he left the air tank, though unable to see through the deceased ogre. Nearly turning her stomach, but the smell of the food cooking reminded her of just how hungry the degu was. Though she had a lot of questions, the yellow one just sat down beside the fire. Sitting in silence as the two watched the food cooked.

What exactly did she mean by 'be of use to you'?

It better not be what I think it is.

I donno, she looks mature enough.

Don't you dare take advantage of her, Kuolon!

It would be just like old times...

A grumbling exhale from the orange one that instantly made the female lower her head and ears. Causing that red eye to double take very faintly and just stare at her for a moment before closing. Taking another breath before speaking up. "Ignore that." He mumbled, shifting the cooking meat. "It wasn't towards you."

"Oh..." She replied back faintly, rubbing an arm in awkward comfort.

Introduce yourself, you mohtar.

"...Kuolon." A double take from the yellow one as he reached for the now fried meat, dividing it into two and offering her the other half. Getting a worried look from those blue eyes. "An old name they called me once."

"But not your real one?" No response but her stomach growled at her, causing the yellow one to carefully reach for some of the canned meat. Waiting for Kuolon to suddenly take such kindness back, but none of his attention was on the yellow one. Causing the degu to take a bite into the... Rather bitter and somewhat foul meat, but it didn't taste rotten. Just unpleasant.

However, it hardly mattered to her stomach, so long as it wasn't empty. Reaching for more and more, trying to ignore the taste and not even noticing him go through another bag. Not until another one of those faint sudden hisses, nearly making her jump as he handed her another one of those cans. Watching her blue eyes study it with both caution and curiosity, lightly shifting between him and the ancient beverage. "...Take it." He nearly demanded, getting her to faintly nod and hold the artifact with both paws. Sniffing at the strange gasses that were coming out of the metal cylinder and strange fizz bouncing around inside. Hearing another hiss as he downed another half of one.

It must've been safe then. Taking a breath, a loud swallow and pouring the fluids onto her tongue. A bit of a sweet, but mostly sour taste overpowered the mouse's buds. Forcing that muzzle to scrunch up and half hiss at its strength. "Everyone reacts that way at first." A few coughs and snorts while the Marten seemed to be completely unphased by his drink. "You get used to it."

"Why would...!?" A few more coughs, but she tried it again. A bit slower this time, however unable to not make a face at the strange taste. "And you're sure that this is safe to drink?"

"It is." The orange male bluntly stated, looking over his can. "It's just a little bit on the old side." A mumble she couldn't quite make out.

"...Vital." A large ear flicked towards her. "That's... My name. What people called me when I was born."

"And that's what you want to be called?" He asked with a low rumble to his throat, meeting those blue discs; ones of misunderstanding and question. "Is that who you want to be?"

"It's... Who I've always been." She mumbled.

"The type of person who wants to save a bandit's life, even if they were about to ruin yours." Her gaze lowered to the old frying pan, as well as those large yellow ears. "And now you want to give yourself to a murderer, is that it?"

"...You saved me." She nearly whimpered, still not looking up at that red gaze. "It's all I have-"

"I didn't save you intentionally." He stated rather bluntly.

Don't be so cold towards her.

A sigh from the weasel as he tossed another stick into the small fire. "What I mean is, I was hungry."

"You... Could've just asked for food."

"Not that kind of hungry." A questionable gaze from her, as he gestured towards the large, near headless one. Once again making Vital feel almost sick. "You get used to the sight after a while."

"But... Why? Why would you do that...?"

"It's the most painless way of doing it, trust me." A deep breath from Kuol as he leaned back and looked to the starry sky. "In a world like this, you use every damn weapon you have to survive."

"Even if it means killing others-?"

"Even if it means killing those who threaten you." A sad look from her as that single red eye gazed into Vital's own pair. "You've been sheltered most of your life, haven't you?" Those yellow ears lowered again. "I'm seeing a beach." They perked again. "Village built nearby... A path going up the mountain and your home built along it." Her heart began to race a little, actually leaning back. "An island with a large dock... The waters are clear, but in the distance they're... Green. Been clogging up a lot of the motors moving through it... And it's getting closer."

Stop scaring her.

Why? It's quite entertaining.

"H-how...?" A murmur from the orange one but no response past that.

You're just saying that because you like toying with others.

Well, it is fun.

"You know where I live...?" A breath through the Marten's muzzle.

"...I recognize your clothing, though it is heavily soiled at this point." She looked at the light overalls on her, noticing just how right he was but didn't bother cleaning herself off. "My question is though, how does someone from there end up left for dead in a prison?"

"Prison...?" Her gaze looked at that red eye again, then down to the devices on his legs. "Y... You're that-?"

"Cripple?" The yellow one's ears lowered, instantly feeling guilty. "I won't hold it against you. He was right to leave me behind."

"I'm... Sorry-"

"No, you're not. And don't be." He said a bit coldly, placing another stick into the fire. "It was the right decision." Some silence between them before she spoke up.

"They came for me." An orange ear flicked. "I've always been good with technology... And you were right about the Goo-"

"-Waste." A look in question from the degu. "That's what's being dumped into the water. Something nearby is probably leaking it out. That's what is ruining your engines."

"...Yeah... I've been cleaning them out and fixing them up for a while now. Managed to actually tune up a few of them strong enough to move through it, but..."

"Your reputation grew around the other villages." Kuolon took another sip of his drink, making her attempt another as well and still get a strong reaction. "Until someone else heard about it. My guess is Linteriour."

"...You're close. It was his Ogre: Gorge. He sent several to our beaches, threatened to completely raid it and the entire shores of the mainland if I didn't accept his audience."

"And he wanted you to make tools of war, is that it?" A faint nod from her.

"...Weapons aren't that different from tools. I've always had a gift, they said, for just looking at whatever washed ashore and seeing it as something useful. I've made pulleys out of seaweed, sticks, old coconuts, and trees before- I'm sorry. You don't even know what that is-"

"I do." The soft response got a double take from her, even though he was still staring into the flames. "It's an easier way of lifting objects. I've seen them on larger docks and ships before." Vital faintly nodded and lowered her head. "How old were you?"

"...Still a cub." That time it got his attention. "No more than five years."

"...Gift indeed then." That red gaze returned to the dancing light. "That doesn't fully explain why you were thrown into The Drought." He motioned back towards the prison.

"...I refused to make them. He threatened to raid my villages, but..."

"Linter would've done so anyway. With the very weapons you made for him." She lowered her head in defeat. "And since you likely also refused to be part of his harem, you were thrown out. Possibly to be used as an example." A quivering breath from the yellow one as she attempted to stay strong.

Now you're making her cry.

It's nothing more than the blunt reality. If she's getting upset by that, she's been living in a fantasy.

You should help her.

Excuse yourself? She owes you for sparing her life and that bandit's! There's no reason to help her!

"I just... Want to go home... If it's even there anymore..." The yellow one whimpered.

Comfort her. Give her some hope.

Stop getting attached. You know how this plays out if you let them cling to you.

"...It'll be there." A sudden look from those slightly watery blue discs. "You're a nobody." Those yellow ears fell.

Well played on the 'Comfort' part.

"What I mean is; You're nothing to Linter. To fulfill on his threats or promises wouldn't even be worth his time. He's got a lot of enemies that require more attention, a village on the beach would mean nothing to him." A deep breath from him as he leaned his head back and closed that eye. "I've seen the place; No strategic advantage, hardly anything worthy of resources. He'd be spending more of his just to raiding the place out of spite than just leaving it alone. Besides, most of your folk aren't warriors or soldiers either."

...Better.

"You...? Really think...?" A shrug from the Marten.

"That's my guess anyway. And like the warren, Linter is a 'Big Brain'. He should know this stuff."

"Like you?" She asked, rather innocently, but it still got a bit of a glare from the red disc. "N-not to sound..." A whimper from the degu as he sighed through the orange muzzle and dropped it. Adjusting his legs, the mechanical devices ended up making a strange rearing noise, grabbing her attention and causing her to stare at the contraption within the fire's light.

It reminded her of an old leg-brace, connecting both the thigh and the shin together in two large sections. Mechanical discs alongside the joints to help them bend, doubling as armor by look. But towards the foot is where most of the metal seemed to be. Several rods surrounding the casing, ending in a mostly metal foot. Bladed toes and claws on both front and back of the caged 'shoe' his organic orange one barely rested in. Tightly encasing the end of the limb that... Honestly didn't look that damaged.

That gaze was felt once again on her, making those ears fall once she looked into that red disc. But

Vital tried to keep her composure, glancing at the prosthetic again. "Who made those?" A stare at her for a moment.

She's a tinkerer, you can't blame her for the interest.

That may be, but she's still young. Don't let her fiddle with it, unless you want to crawl your way around... Again.

The degu whimpered at the long quiet stare. "You're not touching them." He finally spoke, lowering those ears in disappointment as he started to take off the glove. "Not until you've at least proved yourself capable. If you can fix this, I'll consider your input on my legs." He tossed her the damaged apparel, remembering how it sparked violently near her face before the fight broke out. Now damaged and slightly bent out of shape, but something in it was cracked.

A look at Kuolon to see if he was certain, but all he did was just stare at her. Making the younger one feel like he was just waiting for the first excuse to possibly... 'feed' on her too. But with a deep breath, she cleared off a small spot within the fire's glow. Shifting some of the rods around and taking off the casing that held... Some ring. One that seemed to have a fracture in it. Disconnecting the power to it and carefully taking the ring out with the help of gravity was enough to cause it to break into pieces within her palm.

Looking at it with a face of disappointment, then hearing a sigh from the orange one; his attention once again back to the flames. Guilt overcame her, the one time she could prove herself actually worthy of keeping alive and... Wait. That firearm... Vital shot up and started heading towards where it was last set down, getting a strange look from the weasel.

Is she...?

Trying to escape?

She does know that you can grab her at any time, right?

Then you should let her go-

She's got the gun.

Why does she have the gun?

Annnnd she's bringing the gun to you.

Why is she bringing the gun to you? Exchange perhaps?

Don't let your guard down-

Don't listen to him, she won't hurt you.

All I'm saying is that you should be ready to defend yourself unless you want yet another disability.

"What are you doing." Kuolon barely asked, trying to look at her within his blindspot.

"Your... Battery, in the glove. It's a-"

"I know what it is-"

"It's a power ring of sorts-"

"And that's not what it's called-"

"Most weapons have them." She set the shotgun down and started studying it. Taking the makeshift firearm apart bit by bit; a thing barely held together through scraps of the old world and eventually reaching the power source within the center. Taking it out, though not without a small shock and a curse from the mouse. Placing it into the glove and securing it enough to become stable. Carefully picking the Marten's weapon up and handing it over to him. "I think it should work after I reconnect it."

A gaze from that red disc before he started equipping it back onto his original hand. Strapping it on and feeling her get a little closer, fiddling with the contraption that followed each digit and once again lightly shocking herself before the weapon hummed with life and she stepped away. Letting the orange one once again flex and stress his hand to cause the bolts of energy to crack loudly. Splitting the air around the glove momentarily, and then meet her gaze.

That smile always made you so happy.

It also costs you a lot of nights of pain.

"What do you think?" The degu asked, almost in a chirp.

"...Not bad. It was a simple battery change, and you did hurt yourself a little."

"I'm... Kinda used to the little shocks." She looked at her fingertips, several of them having a blackened area at the very ends. "I didn't see how it got damaged..."

Kuolon gazed back at where the skirmish happened, recalling the bandit with the club and the Marten blocking it with that hand. "One of them got lucky. Struck right where the battery was." A look back, and the mouse was already digging through the shotgun's parts. Finding a small plate and a few bits that she held between her teeth. Gesturing for his hand; the weapon still attached and watching him turn the thing off before lending it to the yellow one. Watching her work on attaching a much more armored casing around the battery, his heart fluttering at her touch and gentle hold.

You could still have this. Many moments like this... Not just with her, either.

All moments will eventually come to an end, and so will their lives. You tried playing nice before, and

what did it get you?

Hope.

Torment. How many more times are you willing to make that mistake?

You have ways to make people happy.

By also making yourself miserable in one form or another. You need to stop thinking about them and focus on yourself. On your needs, as well as theirs...

"There." Vital's vocals snapped the orange one out of his thoughts, feeling his hand once again freed. Turning the glove on and testing it, seeing the shocking bolts come out near flawlessly... Perhaps even a little better. "How is it?"

"...Acceptable." As dry as the answer was, it did make her smile. Soon feeling the gaze on his legs. "You're not touching those." Those yellow ears lowered.

"But I-"

"Not yet." They perked up a little bit, bringing back that smile as he adjusted himself. "Get some rest while it's still dark out."

"I-I can't." A noise in question from him. "...I'm on a rescue mission. And..." That red eye gazed back at her.

"And what?"

"I... I need your help."

Chapter 6

Why are you even considering this?

It's a good deed. And these people need help.

These people were put into the prison for a reason.

And so was he, let alone her. And for what?

Well, Kuolon has already done quite a list to deserve to be in there.

What about Vital? The only thing she's guilty of-

He shouldn't concern himself with her, this is all a stall. A waste of time.

The orange one grumbled loudly during the walk in the dark, making the yellow one lower her head. Walking beside him and watching the Marten tend to his forehead. Double taking at her guilty expression and taking a breath. "...That... Wasn't towards you."

"...Headaches?"

"You could say that." He grunted. "What exactly is it that you want me to do?"

"I'll have to see the state of the gondola, but I know the cable was cut." She looked at his body with lowered ears. "...You... Threw that large metal box at the Ogre back there?"

"The Semi-Trailer, yes." A look in question from her, puzzled by the term but he didn't respond to it. "Why?"

"That... Thing was massive. How could you even lift such a thing? Let alone without your body..." He gazed at one of his small gloved hands, still walking forwards with quite heavy steps.

I wouldn't reveal your secrets if I were you...

She's just curious. If you share, it's another tool she can use to save the others.

So she's going to just use you in the future. Perfect. That hasn't happened before.

"...It's difficult to explain. I just learned to do it eventually."

"But...?" That red eye gazed at her. "There's always a catch, isn't there? An engine can't run without fuel, a battery without a charge. Some kind of consumption-" The degu stopped in place staring at the orange as he took a few more steps and slightly looked away. "It's... Other people? ...That thing you were doing that caused their heads to...?"

"...Their intelligence, yes." He said a bit coldly. "And only if they're alive. If they're dead... It's already gone." A breath as he overlooked the large canyon of darkness; what held the Deadzone and the prison

on a single pillar of rock within it. "...Maybe it's something else, but it doesn't seem to work too much on animals. If so, then it's not quite enough for the required effort." Kuolon remained silent, feeling those near frightened eyes over him. Soon enough glancing back at the degu. "So take into consideration the toll of my help. It will come at the cost of lives."

He began walking again, not witnessing her looking back at where the campfire was. Feeling another weight attach to her chest as she carried on. The least she could do was trying to do some good with what had already been done. Quickening her pace to catch up with the weasel and his odd walk, unable to not hear something off about the machinery. Staying just a step behind and observing how they moved, but soon hearing him grumble a little bit. "S-sorry. I wasn't going to..."

But his sudden slow stop got her attention, barely seeing figures in the distant dark. "More...?" The yellow one whispered in question.

"They're Linter's. Three of them."

"How can you tell?" That time, she got a rather unimpressed look, making Vital lower those yellow ears. Watching him walk straight towards them, causing her to nearly reach for his arm but stop herself from actually grabbing it. "W-wait!" Still a whisper, though a tad louder than the degu meant to be.

"Do not say what I think you're going to suggest." Kuolon growled at her.

"They don't deserve to die just because they're working for him-!"

They deserve to die because they're in your way.

"They deserve to die if they stand in my way." A sad look from those blue discs and he slowed to another stop, taking a breath. "Look. You're innocent and unexposed. I get that. But the world out here isn't kind. If you leave people alive, they will only cause you problems further down the road. Especially *these* people." Her gaze fell, but all ears flicked towards the group. Picking out alerted voices, but not quite making out what they were saying. Then walking towards the two.

You're hurting her again...

Vital once again looked at the orange one, hearing him grumble almost frustrated. "...I'll... **Try**." He nearly hissed at her, making the degu almost smile brightly at such a change. "But I want you to hide. Last thing I need is for them to take you hostage." He gestured to a nearby dumpster. "If they try to open that, I'll hear them. You should be safe in there."

"...Okay. But be careful." Kuolon nearly grumbled at that as he started walking towards the grunts. Taking one last look at him before heading towards the massive armored container, opening the lid and climbing in. Not enjoying the smell specifically, but it wasn't nearly as bad as others before it. In fact... This actually just seemed to have a large amount of junk inside. But a flicking ear got her attention outside; peeking through a rusted hole to observe the encounter from a safe distance.

"This is a bad place to be wandering." One of them snickered at the Marten as his heavy steps came to a stop. Wielding a rusted clawhammer over his small shoulder and overlooking the orange one.

"This is Linteriour territory, wanderer." Another aggressively suggested, getting the third to flank the weasel with him. A small glance in his longer jacket revealed the hilt of a makeshift pistol. "There's a lot of... Dangers around."

"Unless tolls are paid, of course." The third snuckered, lightly playing with a small blade. Though finally looking down at the prosthetics, much of which was hidden within their shadows. "That's an interesting set of armor..."

"Then have a closer look." The orange one said coldly, hearing the device rear up as a quick warning before unleashing a very swift roundhouse to his ribs; the other two actually stepping back to avoid the attack. Though flinching at the crack of bone as that dagger was released from the henchman's grasp. Being caught by Kuol in mid-air and throwing it at the gunslinger before he could draw the concealed firearm.

However, it wasn't quite far enough to make the threatening end strike the muzzle, and settling with the hilt instead. Enough to stun and interrupt the grunt as the other came in with the clawhammer. Nearly making contact with the weasel's shoulder as he took a quick step backwards, but then getting close enough to stop the second attack with a forearm block before the weapon could gain momentum. Creating a small stalemate before the orange one parried it out of the way, then quickly placed the shocking glove on the henchman's snout.

Only for it to just omit a small jolt and immediately die. Causing the two to take a precious moment to look at it and Kuolon to grumble, punching the soldier to the ground instead. Then moving straight to the gunslinger as he was drawing the small pistol, parrying it off to the side and downwards, nicking his green jacket as it fired. However, hearing a metal ping and a loud yelp from the first henchman as his clawhammer took off; the bullet nearly hitting him but getting his weapon instead. Leaving him scrambling for its location.

Inside the shelter, the degu whimpered in disappointment. Her one chance to show the Marten that she's worth something and it barely even goes live. Putting him at a disadvantage. Then whimper when she spots the one with the broken ribs begin to get up, probably unknowingly to the orange one! Vital wanted to help, but she wasn't a fighter. The yellow one would just either get in the way, or worse... Become a hostage, like he suggested. But she had to do something...

As her eyes adjusted into the dark, she looked around. Spotting several objects in the dumpster that was abandoned long ago, likely for being a broken mess. What if...?

A twist on the arm and a slam on the shoulder bent the gunman downwards, but didn't disarm him.

Winding that mechanical leg up for a kick, but spotting him pick up something off the ground then attempt to stab the armored leg with it! Getting it inbetween some of the stilts, but not actually hitting his orange furred limb. Instead of going for the kick, Kuolon rolled over the henchman's back. Still holding onto his arm and forcing it to bend backwards; causing the gunslinger to then roll off of the weasel's back and slam into the ground head first. Finally dropping the firearm, but not without another shot into the distance.

A faint cry in pain from the one with the broken ribs as an object was thrown towards the weasel. Attempting to evade it, but was stalled by the mechanical legs just enough for the rock to connect on the side of that orange snout. Causing Kuolon to growl and recover, giving the soldier with the clawhammer time to grab the weapon and advance towards the Marten. Getting the orange one to sense the danger and roll forwards towards the henchman.

During the roll, he managed to grab the pistol as the weapon started to swing downwards; finding both of the machined limbs flanking the striking arm at about the halfway point during the summersault. Ending in a sort of arm bar at the cost of taking the hammerblow to his shoulder, but pinning Linter's grunt down to the ground with the powerful limbs. Then pointing the barrel of the pistol at him, taking a small moment to share a look with that red eye.

Don't do it!

He's a threat! Defend yourself!

You promised her!

A thick growl from the orange one as he locked the henchman's arm still and aimed the firearm at his grasping fist. Hearing him cry in denial as the trigger was pulled-! ...And only a thick click came out. Not empty, but... Jammed. An even louder grumble of frustration from Kuol at his terrible luck as one of his ears flicked. The farther grunt was once again getting a rock to throw.

That's Karma at its finest.

Of course it is, protecting a grunt that's probably done much more wicked things with that very hand. The nerve.

The orange one slammed the side of the pistol against the metal clawhammer, using his talents to make it look like that fixed the jamming before throwing the pistol towards the broken ribbed one. Making it spin like a frisbee in midair, waiting for the perfect angle to line up with the henchman's eye before pulling the trigger with those same talents-!

You can't kill them!

A near hiss as the midair weapon suddenly shifted and fired; causing a bullet to go straight into the grunt's kneecap! Making him release a very loud scream of pain and fall over.

You shouldn't disable them either!

Well, what do you expect him to do!? Discuss this over a cup of tea!?

"Shut Up!!" The weasel roared, punching the locked henchman hard in the face as the gunslinger got up. Another punch, more focused on the back of the glove to see if he could get it fixed again, but no luck. Prying the hammer out of his hand just in time to wield it crossways as the dagger came down; getting blocked by the tool's shaft as the tip of it nearly cut Kuolon's snout.

Another powering up hum from those prosthetics came as a warning, pushing the bladed weapon upwards and rolling backwards with two kicks aimed at the now armed gunslinger. Releasing the melee grunt from the pin and missing the evasive henchman, but the Marten was now back onto his feet. Both leaving a gap inbetween each other, waiting for the other to make a move. Ears flickering towards noises coming from the nearby dumpster, but they were also waiting for the other to glance over and get distracted.

Any bright ideas?

Was that supposed to be a pun?

Not specifically, but you are the so-claimed 'Good Half'.

Selfless. And maybe it's time to parlay?

Great idea.

Really-?

No! What exactly do you think is going to happen if he just lets them go?

And what do you think is going to happen when they eventually wake up?

A loud grumble from the orange one, getting a strange look from the gunslinger before the weasel threw the clawhammer at him! Aiming a little off so it was easy enough for the henchman to evade via side step. Grabbing the hurled weapon with his talents and forcing it to do a 180 turn; aiming straight at the grunt's back, the hand gesture clued the gunslinger in! Causing him to duck, which threw the orange one actually off-guard as the weapon flew over the target and out of reach. Leaving the Marten now weaponless.

...You deserve that.

She's right, that was a really dumb idea.

A snout toss from the orange one as that red eye glared at his opponents, ones who were actually stunned that the gunslinger's instinct worked in his favor. Though the two sharing a puzzled as to how

such a thing happened, and looking at the Marten with a bit more fear. Letting that single eye just stare at him; unthreatened, even if he was unarmed and at a disadvantage. "H-he's like... The boss...?"

That red eye narrowed in anger before the lid off the dumpster burst upwards. Grabbing the attention of both of them, and the soldier that had the clawhammer before. "Kuolon!" The yellow one shouted, instantly making him grumble as she wasn't supposed to make herself known. "Catch!"

Catch?

Is that a...?

A long object was tossed from the disposal bin, lobbing near perfectly towards the orange weasel as he caught it by the handle; a reinforced Baseball Bat. One that's definitely seen better days, being broken in two ages ago but fixed together by the degu while she was in hiding. Then added another metal slab at the upper end with the addition of several spikes along the face of the plate.

Haven't seen one of these in a while.

She was likely telling the truth about Linter.

If only she could've fixed your glove on the first try you wouldn't be in this mess.

Don't you hold that against her, Kuol.

Taking a moment to observe the bat in the moonlight, pointing the end of it towards the two henchmen briefly then going into a batter's position. Making the other two whimper a little as the gunslinger glanced back at Vital, making her nearly squeak and once again hide within the armored box.

Though that opportunity was not put to waste, once again throwing the melee weapon between the two grunts and making them separate. The bat suddenly stopped and began spinning in place while in midair, just as the Marten slid towards it and once more taking hold of the handle. Swinging widely in a near full circle, missing the gunslinger but feeling it crack the soldier in the side. The spikes drawing blood as he cried in pain, failing his grab attempt from behind.

The weasel then ripped it out, tearing more of the flesh while moving the long(er) weapon into a block position. The incoming 'icepick' strike of the dagger being halted by the wooden shaft, then forced backwards with the aid of the mechanical legs lightly pushing upwards. Leading the bat into a downward strike directly on top of the gunslinger's skull; not quite able to step back far enough and stunning him as the grunt was forced to rest on his knees.

But Kuolon ignored the attack of opportunity, instead swinging backwards at the soldier who was still trying to engage and striking him very hard into the side of the snout. Actually seeing bits of teeth and fangs fly out with a spurt of blood within the darkness, leaving the once clawhammer-wielding one down and out.

With the gunslinger still recovering, the Marten took that batting position again, lining up the shot-

Don't you kill him!

Not all of them need to be alive. Make a scene for them to remember.

Kuolon...! You promised her!

A long growl from the orange one as he rotated the weapon. Legs winding up and taking the swing; making the smoother, non-spiked end make contact with the coup de grace knockout. Cracking that snout hard enough to make the coat-wearing grunt backflip as he flew several feet into the distance.

...Well, he's not getting up.

But you can hear him breathing.

Suuuure. Feel proud of yourself that you forced the guy to eat through a tube for the next year. If he survives that long.

Better than dying.

Keep telling yourself that.

A heavy grumble from Kuolon as his ears flicked towards an incoming figure, getting him to become tense until he spotted the familiar yellow. "Are you okay?" Vital asked him, getting the Marten to nearly growl at her in response, rubbing his lightly bleeding snout as he began walking oddly towards the gondola. Causing her ears to fall as she looked over the three bodies, the far one still whimpering at the wounded knee.

Chapter 7

Say something to her.

Why? The Silence is Golden.

She thinks she did something wrong.

That's because, I donno, She *DID* do something wrong. Let her feel the guilt, then you won't have to restrain yourself again around her.

Don't break her. She's still innocent.

In this world, innocence is meant to be lost.

A loud grumble as Kuolon placed a paw over his eye in frustration. "Here, let me look at it." That red disc glared at the degu's approach to his side, causing her ears to fall as he exhaled.

"It wasn't about the pain."

"Still... My father was a doctor, I picked up a few things." Those red ears spaded, but he didn't refuse. Feeling those smaller paws guide his muzzle in the very late moonlight.

"...Didn't follow in his footsteps-? Ow!"

"I wasn't as gentle as he was. It's not that different from mechanics, but machines aren't squeamish."

"Only because you haven't heard them speak-" A growl at the pressure in a sore area, making her smile at his reaction. "It'll heal and be fine. It's not the first time I've been hit by a rock."

"It's not broken at least..." Those blue eyes fell to the glove on his hand, instantly getting those yellow ears to get weighed down. "I'm... Sorry." He studied her. "My one chance at proving my worth to you and I..."

Comfort her.

Please. She's a sliver away from leaving you alone. Just one little push and you'll be back to doing what you came here to do.

She needs support and forgiveness. If you don't, this'll weigh her down for the rest of her life. You don't want that.

Her happiness and mental stability are not your responsibility.

That doesn't mean you can't give her another chance. It likely wasn't her fault. If she had the proper equipment and tools...

She would still be a distraction to you. Not a help. Her battles... Their battles are not your own.

Kuolon just stared at her for what felt like ages, finally sighing through that sore muzzle and looking over the weapon she tossed him earlier. "...Did you make this?" She double took at the bat, nodding

afterwards.

"Y-yes. It was dark, but I could feel around for a few things and..."

"You made this in the dark?" He raised an eyebrow watching the yellow one nod, getting a little bit more cheerful at his near-compliment. Looking over the now supported break within the midsection. "Just reattached the...?"

"A-and added the spikes on the top." Another gaze over her.

Look at that smile. You're helping.

This is a mistake...

"Not bad. Brings back memories."

"Memories...?" Vital questioned, following his strange walk to the mechanical carriage.

"Yeah. I used to have a bat when I was a... Kit."

"Bat?" She looked over the weapon from afar, actually skipping in front of him to get a better look. Forcing him to stop as she observed it and then him. "You... Know what this is?"

"It's a Baseball Bat."

"A weapon of war?"

"It was a piece of equipment for a sport." Those blue discs lit up, ears perking. "You would stand quite a distance away while someone threw a ball at you. Your goal was to hit it as far as you could with this." She giggled, astonished at such an idea. "Though, it didn't have the spikes on it."

"And you... Played this game?" A glimpse of pain in his eyes as he hardened it. "When you were younger?"

"...A long time ago. Yes."

"I've never heard of it."

"That doesn't surprise me." The Marten mumbled, gesturing to move on and she moved to his other side. Taking hold of the bat and observing it like it was an ancient relic.

"But... You know it, yes? The rules? Could you bring it back?" No response from him, and the yellow degu dropped the subject. Trying to think back at how he was wielding it oddly before; swinging it from the side and upwards. Almost picturing someone tossing a ball and trying to hit it in the same style as Kuolon did.

"Hey." He called, already about twenty steps away. Getting her to snap out of the daydream and scamper back to him. Handing the weapon back, watching him take it and resting the wooden bat against his upper shoulder so naturally. Once again matching the speed of his awkward and noisy walk. "What exactly is it that you want me to do here?"

"I..." She paused, looking up ahead at the grounded cable car. "...I was there when they disabled it. It sounded like they cut the wire, but I don't believe they did..."

"So, they unlocked it?" A faint nod from the yellow one. "And I'm guessing it fell in the canyon..." He exhaled heavily, almost grumbling afterwards.

"Y-yes..."

You should help them.

Why bother? They're criminals.

Just like Kuolon?

You've seen the things he's done, they made the correct choice in attempting to divide him from society. Or at least that would be the case if there was much of a society left. In all honesty, that place is more of a concentration camp.

Meaning the people inside are wrongly accused-

Or they deserve to be left in there.

Like she does? You know what the right answer is, Kuol.

The right answer for her and them, perhaps, but it'll only bring You ruin. Keep going down that path and you'll regret it-

"Do..." A sudden sharp look at her that nearly made the Degu jump. "Do you think you could... Reach it with...?" The weasel looked over the canyon as they approached the lift, studying it in the low light as it started to shift towards day.

"...Hard to tell. The cable itself isn't that heavy, but I've never reached for something that distant before." Some light could be seen from the other side; a small flame of sorts upon the landing dock. Taking a closer look on what and how it needed to be attached; the rest of the cable being held in place by the grounded car, but the majority of the cable were still in the pulleys. "It looks like it can be reattached."

"Y-yes. And I might be able to operate it if we can get the rope back-" A sudden snarl from him made Vital yip and nearly cower, watching him reach for something on the other side of the canyon. Straining as if trying to push himself and... Actually seeing movement through the metal cable!

Heavy panting left him as he continued, releasing a sharp grunt with the motion of pulling back. The loose end of the cable... Actually moving towards them in the darkness, and hearing voices on the other side yelling for the ones within the prison. Grunts and growls left Kuolon as his nose started to bleed again, taking the hook from the airborne end and hooking it onto the parallel cable for now.

With the metal rope temporarily secure, the Martan leaned against the railing for rest. Still breathing heavily and holding his head, putting a frown on Vital as she carefully approached him. Setting a gentle paw on his green jacket and getting the attention of that red disc, but only for a moment. "It's... Harder with so much slack. Causes a lot of restraint."

"It's okay... We'll figure something out." She looked worryingly over the cable. "Maybe I can climb the rope and slide it over-"

"No." A double take at his rather demanding answer. "I just... Need some rest... And maybe a recharge."

"Recharge...?" At first thinking maybe he meant something to eat or drink, but then... Those yellow ears fell as she looked at the cable. What his power was fueled by. A glance back at the way they came...

(No.) She thought to herself, getting up and moving to the car. Climbing onto the top and testing the cable. "The hell are you doing!?"

"I can make it. I don't weigh that much, I should be able to get halfway to grab the hook!"

"Without a safety harness!? Don't be ridiculous-!"

"Nobody else has to die tonight!" She shouted assertively, actually aching the Marten's heart.

"Shouldn't that include you!?" Vital didn't answer him, just concentrated on supporting herself along the metal cable; much like the cyan one earlier that evening. Starting to traverse the rope as the orange one below glared at her angrily.

I have a bad feeling about this.

There's no way she's going to make it there and back. She could barely climb up that ladder before, girl hasn't been trained to keep her own weight suspended for that long.

"I'll be fine!"

"You'll be a pancake if you don't get down from there!" He growled, nearly following her as she slid under the cable until the edge. Snarling as he watched her, unable to follow.

Why do you care so much? If she falls, that's one less problem for you.

You may have enough power to catch her if she falls-

Not if she gets too far, and not without possible consequence. Haven't you suffered enough damage from the dumb actions of others?

Talk to her, you might be able to find another way to help them.

...Tell me something, what's her name?

The sudden question stumped both the other voice and Kuolon's, like a record scratch that left him dumbfounded and staring into space. Everytime Vital looked back to see if the orange one was still there, he was just staring at the degu in near silence. Making her whimper, thinking that the anger was directed at her- which the Marten had every right to be.

But with every grab and slide, she pulled herself closer to the hook. Trying to ignore her yellow arms and shoulders feeling the fatigue before the mouse even reached the halfway point. Pushing herself and making the cable wobble just a little bit more with her movements. "Don't go so fast! You don't want to dislodge the other side!" The orange one shouted from the other side.

Yet, those ears picked up some voices towards the prison, and soon felt some movement in the metal rope! Making her whimper as it... Got stiffer? More stable? Disson perhaps!? Telling the others to take hold of the cable and root it down so it didn't slip?

Vital could only hope, just about reaching the hook. Trying her best to keep her gaze away from the black abyss below her, knowing quite well if the Degu fell... It would be the end of her journey. If the fall itself didn't kill her, she would drown a horrible death in a tarpit.

Fear forced her to press on, already done with this whole 'height' business. Finally reaching the hook and taking hold of it just as a gust of wind interrupted her. A sharp piercing cold of the summer night in the high hills stung even her yellow pelt while swinging the cable enough to get the mouse to grasp it tightly. Forced to endure until the air was satisfied.

When the danger died down, she took a quick grasp of the chilled metal. Paining her paw as the yellow one attempted to slide it towards her, but it was difficult as she needed both of her paws to support herself. Opting out to grab it with her gentle jaws, and feeling the near frosted alloy stick to her tongue. The pain of cold passing through her fangs and warning her to let go of it!

But the mouse pushed on, doing her best to ignore it and slowly sliding backwards; what felt like moving uphill with the metal clamp and cable weighing her down. Demanding twice the effort of a body that was already requiring rest, feeling her muscles burn against the cold breeze and swearing ice was building up on patches of her fur. The glisten of crystals reflecting over her thin coat in the late moonlight.

Another strong gust passed through, forcing the mouse to tighten her hold and endure through it. Straining already sore muscles as the painful cold made the small one whimper. Lasting an unusually long time before she began to hear the voices shout from the prison, needing a moment for those ears

to come out of their defensive stance.

They were cheers... Shouts of encouragement for her to keep going. But of course also to be careful. Shifting her body out of it's self-inflicted freeze and taking another shuffle back towards where she came. Never before has Vital's legs and ankles hurt this much, from the cold of the cable and the burn of sliding against it.

Yet, she carried on. Taking it one grab at a time, until during one of her movements the gales picked up heavily! Slamming into her side and making her body swing slightly away from the rope! Barely grasping it with her lower claws, but it wasn't enough to keep her full weight suspended! Feeling a couple of them break off as they were snagged on the braids and causing her body to dangle helplessly against the wind!

It kept her there for what felt like hours before stopping and causing the yellow degu to swing! Attempting to get her legs back up onto the rope, but her arms were just not strong enough! Digit by digit, they gave into the strain and harshness of the cold, the hook falling out of her maw and back onto the cable! Until one final snag was left before falling-!

But only for a few seconds! Finding herself at least a story below the rope before something grabbed her body tightly! Enough to actually keep her from breathing, a near crushing force that hovered her in place, she could barely even shift her eyes to look around.

Only to be thrown in a large arc towards the mainland! Tossed effortlessly like a ragdoll as Vital attempted to shift her weight and spin her tail to correct her rotation towards the cliffside! Keeping an eye on that orange and green that stuck out of the bare rock, aiming for that extended arm-!

But the trajectory was a little short! Forcing the Marten to actually dive to the edge of the cliff and barely grab hold of her hand, in turn slamming her body hard into the rock wall! That paw gripping his so tightly she swore it was drawing blood, but her grip was still weakened! The degu's heart racing as the orange one cursed several times, the two attempting to pull her up but feeling several gives; his mechanical legs just sliding in the dirt! Her own unable to get a grip against the smooth wall!

Another slip as a warm liquid was felt dripping on her ears, followed by another gust of wind! Slowly prying thier grips apart while hearing Kuolon growl loudly! Looking up at that desperate red disc as they held on by claws, and time stopped for just a moment. "...Save Them-" The yellow one started to say before losing grip.

A roar in denial as within a blink of an eye the orange one's distance escalated greatly; being replaced by nothing more than air and rock. Closing her eyes to accept such a fate, and feeling the cold hard ground drastically sooner than she expected. Still enough to stun her and nearly knock the degu out before feeling a shower of warm liquid fall on her. Preventing the slumber.

It took several moments for her to gasp for breath and shake off the paralysis. Pain echoed like a warning sign as Vital shifted to her side and attempt to get up- only to feel her arm dangle off another

cliffside! Shocking her to roll a bit on the other side and feel the same thing! Keeping herself still for a moment and carefully rolling herself over on what... Looked like a large cut-out section of the cliffside being shifted out of the vertical wall.

A constant drip of something dark falling down onto her small space, leading those blue discs to look up and spotting the weasel breathing heavily. An arm of his still rooted into the cliffside. Taking a moment to spit a blotch of red off to the side; the degu watching it freefall down into the abyss below before hearing the orange one roar at her. "MOHTAR!!"

Those yellow ears immediately lowered, almost hearing his anger from the twenty foot gap between them and cowering from it. Taking another few breathers as he started to get up. "...I'll get you back up here, but I need..." Kuolon trailed off, spitting again and moving away. "Don't move."

...The mouse whimpered in defeat as the steady rears of his prosthetics got fainter and fainter. Knowing very well what he was going to do. Curling up into a near ball when the wind returned, crystalizing the dark red that now laminated her coat as more of it dripped down the side of the cliff. Eventually hearing the cries of fear and the very faint signs of struggle in the distance. Then... Silence.

Chapter 8

Her yellow and now red body didn't want to move. Just stay on the tiny small island that was created as a safe haven within a world of danger, and take shelter away from the occasional breeze. Barely noticing the sun begin to rise behind her and illuminate the dark lands.

...Maybe Kuol was right. In the month since she was forced to leave home, the degu hasn't seen a sliver of kindness in the world. And every time she attempted to show some, to spare somebody's life... She ended up putting others in danger. Others that showed at least some care for her well being.

What was Vital to do now? Even if she managed to free Disson and the others, what would be next for her? For them? Every part of her wanted to return home, but... What if there was no longer a home to return to? The weasel's theory made sense to her; there was nothing there for Linton to take or capture. But as soon as it was discovered that the yellow one returned... Would Linton-?

Her ear suddenly perked, picking out the steady sounds of mechanical legs returning. Not wanting to move from her spot, still feeling just how angry he was at a distance. He had every right to be, as her eyes drifted to the drying blood barely seen at a distance. Still not quite understanding what happened... Kuolon caught her with that magical power, yes, but did he do this rock thing too? And if that power comes at a cost...?

Another howl of the wind caused her to brace and endure the once again gold pains against her bare arms. Soon dying down but keeping her stiff for a few moments before getting grabbed hard like in midair! Like a giant vice gripping against her body as she was quickly flown up to the cliffside and thrown into the grass. Causing her to roll over a few times and slide in the cold wet, releasing a small sob as a glare was felt over her.

The mouse didn't get up, but she did slowly look over to meet that single red eye... And now red muzzle stain. Dried and cakey, lightly scrunched up as if ready to snarl again at any moment. Worried that maybe the Marten would take out his anger on Vital, but instead shifted his gaze back to the hook; still attached to the main cable. Sliding it up, around the large metal pulleys, and connecting it with the main one. Then lifting the car up, locking everything into place as the carriage suspended once again into the air.

The orange one took a few breaths, heated ones that nearly seemed to fog in the cold morning air as he turned towards a nearby old bench that's seen better days. "Get it running." He demanded coldly of her, hearing the degu whimper and nod. Getting up, but trying to make herself look small as she moved around to the controls. Pressing a couple of levelers and buttons, getting power through it before the gondola began to move around the pivot point and then towards the prison. Crossing the massive gap inbetween them as once again cheers could be heard from afar.

They still made Vital smile, even through all the guilt and tension. Watching the car continue down the cable's length and just hoping it stays intact on the way through. Though definitely showing its age, the entire system seemed to be moving along just fine. Studying it from her side for several moments in silence... But the degu needed to say something. "...I'm sorry." No response. For a bit longer Vital left it quiet, her gaze moving along to where they came... And where Linter's henchmen were last seen. "...Are any of them-?"

"Alive?" He snorted, his voice still thick with anger. Making the yellow ears fall as Kuolon took a heated breath. "...One was missing. Likely escaped while we were gone."

"...And the other two are..." She suddenly felt very cold, even before a small wind blew between them. Only for the large machine to stop, grabbing both of their attentions as it came to life again only for a moment. Spotting the gondola all the way at the bottom as the prisoners gathered on it. "It's okay... They just stopped it on the other side. Looks like you fixed it-" The Marten suddenly got up and started walking away. "W-wait!"

Again, no response. Causing Vital to jump the small railing and catch up with his awkward walk.

"Please! I'm sorry!" She apologized again. "I know it was a stupid idea, but you already did so much-!" The orange one sharply turned around and made her yelp.

"You think that's what I'm livid about!?" Kuolon roared. "Your damn stunt back there!? It's your life, mouse! I don't care about who or what you risk it for! But the moment you attempted to shrug that responsibility onto me was going too far!"

"R-responsibility-?"

"**Save! Them!**" He quoted the degu thickly, with such frustration he was inches away from biting her. Taking a deep breath to lightly calm down before looking away from her saddened gaze. "A word of advice: There is no place for Mercy on this planet, mouse. It gets you nowhere and gives you nothing but a quick death." The yellow one's ears drooped as far as they could, watching him take the bat she made and drop it on the ground in front of her. "Take it. You'll need it more than I will. When the time comes... I can only hope you decide to use it on them, before they use it on you."

Without another word or moment to spare, Kuolon walked away. Leaving the mouse to fall to her knees and look over the weapon. A thing that she repaired with her own hands, to help someone... Hurt someone else. The blood on it was partly due to her own actions, which caused an invisible weight to be hung on her shoulders.

She stared at it for what felt like hours, not even realizing the cable car returning and someone calling her name until they were ten steps behind the mouse. Looking back with guilty tears in her eyes, making out the navy Marmot who looked at her, the bat, and the blood on it. "What happened." Disson demanded, a bit softly.

"That's rough, Vital." The navy one coaxed her, sitting down in the grass beside her. Watching the mouse hold onto the bat on her lap as a few dozen prisoners gathered around the returning gondola. Getting the attention of Disson, while his hand remained on her shoulder. "Are you sure it was him though? That cripple in the cell?" She nodded, and the Marmot wouldn't have completely believed it if it wasn't for the small scratches and tracks in the old asphalt. "Mechanical legs... I've never even heard of such a thing."

"Neither have I. I didn't get a good look at them either..." She trailed off, getting a rub on her back by the male.

"In any case, you're alive and well. Count your blessings for now." The navy one smiled sadly at the degu before looking up at a large purple one approaching. "What's the situation, Pharra?" Vital suddenly looked up, her face lighting up a little and spotting the violet furred one smile back at her before returning attention to Disson.

"That was the last ride. Everyone we could find on that deathtrap is now here." A breath of relief from the Marmot as the large Capybara once again looked over the yellow one. "Thank you, little bird. I would like to give you a hug, if that's alright."

"Just go easy on her, big guy." The navy one smiled, hearing the female chuckle and set aside the baseball bat. Getting gently taken by those large paws as she was getting up and carefully embraced by what was considered a giant to her. Getting another round of applause and cheers from the survivors of the prison, celebrating not only her but their freedom from what felt like certain death.

It made her smile sadly. It felt good to be celebrated by those who she helped, but... Did Vital really do that much? The degu couldn't help but attempt to look in the direction that the orange one went, knowing he should be the one receiving these cheers... Along with her own. "What's our next move, sir?" Pharra asked, still holding onto the small female.

"We'll see what's left of the camp. Find what we can salvage and scout round." The Marmot got up and made himself viewable towards the crowd. "My people! You have just survived your death sentence, one that Linterious commanded with his iron fist!" A series of cheers. "For decades, this land has been under his shadow! But I say no more! No one should have to spend their entire lives under such darkness!" A roar in confirmation. "No one should be put to death just for disagreeing with him! So I will continue to fight back!"

As inspiring as he was, this didn't seem like the same Disson that Vital met before. Actually finding herself gripping the Capybara back tightly as the navy one continued. "I grew up under his suppression, much like many of you have! I've decided that the world is better off without such rulers like Linter, and have recently decided to challenge him! To create a better future for us all, a dream that could use your assistance. But only under one condition: if you have loved ones still alive; be it your family or significant... Return to them. Keep them safe, and be ready to create the new world when the time comes."

A sad look from the degu as she looked up at Pharra, the larger purple one's hardened look said it all. "For those of you who want vengeance, or just to take part in changing our future, you are free to join us! Those of you who depart... I wish you safe travels, and thank you for not giving up on us." One last series of cheers and chants as the Marmot returned to the Capy and motioned to lower the female down safely. "Thank you, Vital."

"I-I... Really didn't do that much-"

"Nonsense. You risked your life for strangers." Disson smiled at her, spotting a couple passing by and giving them a brofist as if to say 'Goodbye'. "I'd ask you to join our cause, we could really use someone of your knowledge." That made her heart sink, and the navy one spotted it. "But... I can imagine you have someone to return to." A faint nod from her, letting him get slightly distracted again by another group of people deciding to return home. Giving them a wave. "How far is it?"

A sudden double take from the yellow one. "W-what?"

"How far is your home." It was another soft command that stalled Vital, actually looking out in the distance around and realizing... She had no idea where she was. "In the mountains? Or?"

"...By the ocean. I lived in a small island village out by..." She watched as his orange eyes scanned the horizon. Without another word, the large purple one picked him up, getting a bit of a surprised yelp as Pharra held him on his arm.

"Linter's watchtower is over there." The Capy stated, getting a nod and pointing in another direction. "It always seemed to face the abandoned watchtower out in the middle of the ocean."

"One of the oceans." Disson's statement struck a little bit of fear in her heart. "Vital. What color were the rocks in your village."

"Rocks...?" She actually had to stop and think for a moment, trying to describe them.

"Were they red?" The purple one asked, getting a head shake from her. "Then it was likely the watchtower's waters."

"Which is that direction, away from our camp." Another descent in her chest was felt. "Pharra. Can you lead the others back to our base?"

"I can, sir. Especially if you're doing what I'm thinking you're going to do."

"She shouldn't travel alone." The navy one began to climb down off the giant rodent, meeting the degu's surprised and saddened look. "I'll take you home, as thanks for saving everyone here."

"B-but..."

"Don't worry about it. I've always been good at directions-"

"You've always been terrible at navigations, sir." A grumble in defeat from Disson as the large one carefully lifted Vital in the same way. Letting her get some balance before pointing in the direction of the wreckage of an old satellite dish. "Do you see that watchtower in the distance? It will point you towards the ocean. Follow it, Little bird, and from there... I hope you can find your way home."

It was a scary thought, being so far away from home that she could no longer see it. But the tower stood out within the vista, unsettling but acting like a guiding light of sorts. Giving her direction at least within the long trip home, carefully following the instructions to climb down off the purple one and give him one last hug. "Thank you."

"Good luck." Pharra smiled back, looking over his leader and giving him a salute. "May your wheels keep turning."

"May yours as well, my war brother." The navy one saluted back before reaching for the mouse's weapon; one that was left on the grass. And handing her the gripping end of it. "We best see if we can find some shelter and get some rest first. It's been a long night, you must be exhausted."

"I'll... I'll be fine, Disson. But let's find something just in case." With one final nod in farewells, they moved on while the purple one informed those who were joining the cause. Parting ways and walking a path around the massive black canyon, the mouse taking a moment to look over the prison from afar as the sun's rays hit it. Escaping what could only be considered one deathtrap surrounded by another.

A touch on her shoulder by the Marmot, causing them to lock eyes for a moment and Vital felt it. His soft orange gaze nearly bleeding confidence and conviction. She felt safe around him. Guarded. Much like...

The yellow one suddenly stumbled upon stepping down; her foot landing perfectly into a strange depression. The two of them following the tracks with their eyes... The same tracks as the Marten beforehand. Heading in the same direction as they were.

The weasel dug through the pile of scrap outside the abandoned home. Finding some old remains and prying it apart within the shade of the forest. Prying out another dead looking ring-battery and exhaling loudly.

That looked like it could've been fixed up by a certain someone, iiiiif you didn't throw a tantrum at her.

Oh please, it was the best decision he could've made. Now he only needs to look out for himself, which is 100x easier.

Not in all situations-

"Yes. Yes it is." Kuolon grumbled loudly.

See? He agrees with me.

...How's your head?

"It's fine."

But you're not fine. I wonder why that could be...?

What does he mean by that?

"Nothing." The orange one sighed, finding another drinking can... With a hole in it. Its precious liquids long gone. "...I can't feel the end of my tail."

How far?

"...The last third."

...I see.

And you want him to go find that youngling?

Fighting together is always easier than fighting alone.

Not when you're stuck pup-sitting or being dragged into situations that only lead to more disabilities. Especially when they don't want you to use every weapon at your disposal.

Kuol shouldn't have to consume everyone he meets. Especially when they can be persuaded-

"Look. We've tried it your way before. Not everyone will parlay, and some people just want to watch the world burn."

And you're one of them?

A frustrated sigh from the orange one as he pulled out a couple of other parts from the pile. Spotting a working ring and slapping together a makeshift pistol that's seen better days.

Well, that's going to win a crafting award.

"Shut up." The Marten growled, moving along through the thin forest and up through a clearing. One that led to a steep cliff that was just far enough down to be considered a threat. Spotting the watchtower in the far distance and gazing at some... Old ruins that have been fenced off for what looked like decades.

Are you really going through with this again?

"It's the only thing that makes sense anymore." That red disc closed as the daylight began to remove most of the shade. Taking the eyepatch from his other eye, lifting it up... And sliding it over his 'good' one. Letting the now freed one get used to the light while the other rested within the dark. "It's the only thing left to try-"

A sharp double take within the shadows of a nearby line of trees, swearing he spotted a lantern of sorts... One being held by something large. Bulky. Elderly. Grey. And Familiar. Before the illusion disappeared. Within a faint wind, his ears picked up the whispers. Ones that made the orange one furious.

"You Cannot Stop The Wheels From Turning..."