

Drag Me Down Again

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The enduring cycle.

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Chapter 1: Once Upon A Life

Kyle sits on the porch of his home, watching the sunrise. The orange beams of sunlight pierce the white clouds that hover in the sky, shrouding the valley below. The grey and tan rocks of the Appalachian Mountains seem to glow as they are quickly illuminated by the rising sun; Kyle always enjoys the view. Cassandra exits their home, being careful not to wake their children, Trenton and Kathy. It has been several years since the lovers had paired with each other before their tribe; Kyle, not capable of recalling his own last name, simply adopted Cassandra's instead, something considered rather unique amongst the more traditional villagers.

He is now thirty years old, while Cassandra is twenty-eight. Their son, Trenton, named after Kyle's late father, is just about three and a half years old. Kathy, however, is a relatively recent addition to the family, at barely twelve months. Kathy was named after Cassandra's late mother. Cassandra sits beside her husband, her tail swishing gracefully as she smiles at him. He scoots closer and slides an arm around her back, feeling the soft fur of her arm in his hand, tenderly stroking her. They share a kiss before she rests her head on his shoulder. She looks to the horizon, admiring the view.

"Almost four years, and it never stops being so beautiful." She remarks.

"I know... How do you do it?" He quips.

She turns to look at him, a big grin on her face. She leans in, repaying his flattery with a few more kisses. The tribe has lived in this Appalachian valley for about forty-two months; they left southwest Michigan after a harsh winter, immediately following Kyle and Cassandra's union. Several villagers had frozen to death, including their chieftain, and much of their equipment was damaged beyond repair, such as the water pump and the tank, which had ruptured. David, the son of the chieftain, immediately took a democratic vote; the tribe decided almost unanimously to leave in the spring, and head south to find a home with a better yearly climate.

After spending six months moving from place to place, encountering many other tribes, some friendly and others hostile, they came upon a small and abandoned town in what was once northeastern Alabama. Though the town, Vahdalia, was almost completely intact, has access to multiple fresh water sources, a few salvageable farms, and natural barriers in the form of the mountains on the north and south, it had no living residents; it hadn't even been looted by scavengers. With few tribes nearby to contest them, the villagers quickly established themselves in their new home.

David, Drake, Kyle and Cassandra, and several other more important and skilled villagers were given first rights to pick homes. Cassandra picked a house that would provide them with enough space to expand, as she was heavily pregnant with Trenton when they finally settled into the valley. Daniel, the boy that Kyle, Cassandra, and Drake

had rescued from the noose of a raider, had lived with the couple and their son until his eighteenth birthday last year. He willingly moved out, and now lives on another block barely a half-mile away with his best friend Sam.

Except for a three-day hike to the west, to an exceptionally friendly farming and ranching community called Hutchison Post, the tribe has no neighbors to speak of. The excess in safety, water, and plentiful food has allowed them to prosper; many of the couples have multiple children. Kyle, having spent years collecting books on electronics and mechanics, had rigged several windmills, salvaged solar panels, and with the help of nearly a dozen volunteers, adapted an old waterwheel sawmill into a power generator. The entire village has basic electricity for storing food, cooking, lights and heat.

As the lovers snuggle with each other on the porch, enjoying the sunrise and the soft breeze of the spring air, they are quickly summoned by the sound of Kathy crying. Kyle quickly rushes to his feet to check on his daughter. Cassandra watches with a smile as he dashes into the house. She certainly chose a good man; hard working, protective, faithful, loving, and a very attentive husband and father. Her mother would have been quite fond of him. She runs her fingers through her dyed red hair, which now reaches to her mid-back, sweeping it behind her feline ears.

She stands and enters the home to check on her husband and daughter. As she walks through the living room, she sees a short tail swaying slowly as it sits close to the ground. Peeking inside the kitchen, she can see Trenton trying to stealthily raid the refrigerator of a glass jug of milk. The little Voeldahn boy stands on the bottom ledge, struggling to reach the milk jug near the rear of the top shelf. Cassandra walks up to the fridge, leaning over the door and startling her son. He slips from the ledge, plopping down on his butt.

“Are you okay?” She asks him.

“Uh-huh. Just want some milk.” He answers.

She can’t help but smile as she pulls her son up from the floor by his little hand, before retrieving the milk for him. She closes the fridge and pours it into a glass, lifting her son up by the armpits to place him in a chair.

“Now try not to spill it.” She warns.

“Okay.” He replies, swaying his little feet.

“There you are!” She smiles.

Kyle enters the kitchen with Kathy held carefully in his arms. She sleeps peacefully as he cradles his daughter, quietly pulling a chair with his foot. He takes a seat as he

holds Kathy close, her head just below his shoulder. She plops a furry thumb into her short, rounded snout, her tail swaying slowly as her father comforts her. Trenton and Kathy may be Voeldahn, but they are certainly Kyle's offspring.

Both children have dark blue eyes, pink noses, opaque claws and wheat colored hair on their heads. Their fur is much lighter than Cassandra's, being tawny, and cream colored, with a pinch of black. Their fur coloration is patterned almost verbatim after their mother; tawny fur covers their bodies, with cream fur on the balls of their feet, belly, chest, the front of their necks, and their bottom jaws. Their tails are tipped with a black spot that covers a few inches or so, with a single black stripe that moves from the tip and along the tail, against their spines, and reaching to the backs of their necks. Unlike Cassandra, or their uncle Drake, their fur isn't as thick, with a single, thin, soft and shiny coat.

"Hi, Daddy." Trenton says, waving wildly at Kyle.

"Hi, Trent. Try to be quiet; your sister is sleeping." Kyle whispers back.

"Okay!" Trenton exclaims loudly.

Kathy stirs and grumbles, as though she may begin crying at any moment. Kyle shushes her, bouncing her gently as he hums a pleasant, repetitive tune of three notes

into her little ear. She quickly calms down as Cassandra walks up, resting her hands on his shoulders. She gently squeezes and leans over, kissing his cheek. He turns his head and gives her a few pecks on the lips, to Trent's disgust. There is suddenly a knock at their front door.

"Hey, Cass." Drake calls out.

He enters their home without waiting for permission, something he does quite often, though neither Kyle nor Cassandra have ever complained. Cassandra immediately brings a finger to her lips, silently reprimanding her older brother with an intense glare. Drake holds up both hands apologetically, before entering the kitchen.

"Hi, uncle Drake!" Trent exclaims happily.

Kathy stirs as Drake waves to Trent. Cassandra takes Trent by the hand and leads him out of the kitchen, leaving Drake and Kyle alone with Kathy. Drake takes a seat parallel from Kyle.

"So, the convoy is almost ready to go. They'll be leaving this afternoon." Drake begins, whispering.

"That's good." Kyle replies quietly.

"I asked Nick to keep an eye out for some more medical manuals. It'd be good to start up a half-way decent clinic, and plus then maybe I can read up on why exactly children are always the same race as their mother. I've always wondered why that is." He continues.

"Considering how long it took for me to earn your trust, I thought you'd be glad Cassie and I can only have Voeldahn babies." Kyle softly chuckles.

"Well, I just can't help but be curious. Don't you ever think about it?" Drake poses.

"No. They have my eyes and hair, and that's all I care about." Kyle jokes.

"I'm serious, man."

"Honestly, I'd love them, even if they each had two heads. I *would* like to know how to keep Trent from digging through all of my tools, or scaling the kitchen counter, or how to get five minutes of uninterrupted peace." Kyle replies.

"It's so much fun making them, but then you have to raise them." Drake retorts.

"It's not so bad. At least I know that I'll be missed when I'm finally dead and gone, unlike some people..." Kyle smirks.

"Maybe someday, and then you can't make that horrible joke anymore." Drake grins.

"That will be a very sad day, indeed." Kyle sighs.

"Not for me." Drake murmurs.

With Kathy sound asleep, Kyle places her back into her crib, before joining his brother-in-law, wife and son in their living room. They maintain idle banter about village affairs; the state of the farms and ranches, the energy output and usage ratio, the training of the militia, and the recent construction projects, all while Kyle and Cassandra play with Trent, who devours their attention. The sun finally reaches down into the valley, engulfing the small town in its warm rays. Drake takes his leave; he has to check the weapons for the guards assigned to the convoy. As he exits the home, followed by Kyle, they are greeted by a familiar face.

“Hey, Kyle! What’s up Drake?” Danny waves.

“Hey buddy!” Kyle exclaims, walking up to Danny.

Kyle embraces the young man, all of nineteen years old, whom he had watched over for four years, and thought of as a son. He hugs his friend and mentor back. Danny, a Caucasian with chestnut hair and hazel eyes, stands eyes level with Kyle. Years of helping Kyle work on projects in the village, months walking the roads before they came upon Vahdalia, and all of the menial chores in the fields, since they had salvaged the farms, have toned his muscles and given him a well-built appearance. By human standards, and possibly the Voeldahn as well, he is quite handsome.

“Are you sure you are up to this?” Drake asks.

“I am. It’s time I do more than grease bearings, fix engines, and plow fields.” Danny grins.

“Yeah, because none of that stuff is important.” Kyle sarcastically remarks.

“You know what I mean.” Danny chuckles.

“Well, then you can help me check the weapons for the convoy!” Drake grins.

“Oh... Actually, I was about to see someone. Maybe the second time around?” Danny replies apologetically.

“What’s more interesting than playing with firearms and loading magazines with live rounds?!” Drake scoffs.

“Shooting firearms with live rounds?” Kyle poses.

“Okay... Besides that!” Drake retorts.

“I’ll see you guys later.” Danny says, chuckling as he darts off.

Danny is eager to visit his friend Vicky, a Voeldahn girl that he had become close to shortly after being brought back to the village as a refugee. He was nearly fifteen when he met the then sixteen-year-old girl, who took considerable pity on him and made it a point to help him adjust to life among her people. In many ways, it mirrored Cassandra’s behavior with Kyle, albeit far less playfully flirtatious. He approaches her house several blocks away, where she lives

alone. Her father had died the year before last of natural causes, one of the few to meet such an end in this world.

He stands at the door of the modest, single story home, taking a moment to breath and calm his nerves. He raps his knuckles on the front door.

“Just a minute!” Vicky calls out from within.

He waits patiently for what feels like quite a while, before Vicky slowly opens the front door.

“Oh... Hi!” Vicky greets him, almost nervously.

She steps outside, closing the front door behind her. The twenty-one-year-old Voeldahn girl stands a few inches shorter than Danny, looking up at him curiously with her icy blue eyes. Her solid white fur shines in the morning sunlight. Her long hair, dyed red and reaching to the bottom of her shoulder blades, is pulled up into a high ponytail, with her longer bangs resting alongside her face. She moves a few strands away from her long and triangular snout. Her large but round ears seem to twitch. She reaches an arm across her chest, brushing her ample bust as she grabs her own forearm with her furless hand. Her thick tail, like her feet and hands, are covered only in pink flesh; it sways slowly behind her.

“Hi, Vicky. I was wondering if you wanted to take a walk, or something...” He nervously asks her.

“Oh... Well... We’ll be walking for a few days, remember?” She replies, subtly rejecting his offer.

“Or something.” He reiterates. “... I just wanted to spend some time with you.”

Danny smiles warmly at her, though she seems to only faintly smile back.

“Maybe we could just sit and talk?” He suggests with a shrug.

“Now isn’t a good time.”

“Why not? Are you alright?” He asks with great concern.

“I’m fine! I just... I’m a little tired. I haven’t been sleeping very well.” She quickly explains.

“Oh...”

“I’m sorry. I should go back and lie down. I’ll see you later.” She adds.

“Okay... You get some rest.” Danny murmurs.

He turns and leaves, stopping to look back as he hears the door quickly open and close behind him. The curtains don't even shudder. He sighs and walks away, disappointed. He isn't sure why, but she seems so distant these last few weeks. Danny stops when he hears someone calling his name. He turns to see his best friend and roommate, Sam, standing across the street. The eighteen-year-old Voeldahn rushes up to him, his thick black, brown and white fur fluttering as he dashes nearer to greet him.

"Hey bro! I didn't know you were going to be in this part of town!" Sam exclaims with a labored breath, moving his shaggy black hair from his brown eyes.

"Yeah, I was just taking a walk." Danny quietly answers.

"You went to see her, didn't you..." Sam's voice becomes stern.

Danny merely shrugs his shoulders, digging his hands into his pants pockets.

"Bro, I told you that was a waste of time." He scolds Danny.

"I know..." Danny mutters.

"I'm telling you like it is because you're my best friend, and I don't want to see you hurt yourself like this... Vicky is not the one for you. She never was or will be. Now you know

I'm not gay or anything, but you are a handsome guy; you can find other girls if you wanted." Sam begins, resting a hand on Danny's shoulder. "Hell, my girlfriend has a friend who I have personally witnessed gazing at you like a hungry raider eyeing a rusty tin of SPAM." He chuckles.

Danny seems to blush, turning away as he laughs.

"Seriously man... Don't keep holding out for her. You've been chasing her for what... Two years now?"

"I know... It's just that she was the first one to be there for me. She introduced us, and kept the other kids from picking on me; we've been friends for so long." Danny replies.

"Exactly... *Friends*... You're in the zone, bro. That's all she has ever seen you as."

"Well, I'd like to hold out for hope." Danny sighs.

"Well, if hope finally gets too boring, I can call Grace instead." Sam laughs.

"Which one is she? The one with the blonde hair?"

"Yes, the blonde one, with the long ears and fluffy tail... You know it's not racist to point out factual details like that. When people don't know who 'Danny' is, I just tell them that he's the goofy looking furless teenager without a tail." Sam grins.

“Yeah, well, as a human, I feel awkward saying ‘that dog-looking guy’ or ‘that bunny girl’.”

“Racist...” Sam chuckles.

“Fuck you, man.” Danny laughs.

As the duo finally leave the corner near Vicky’s house, she breathes a sigh of relief, peeking out from around a curtain. She takes a step back, bumping into Alex’s chest. She quickly turns around and smiles at her secret boyfriend. He reaches out and rests a hand on her arm, caressing her softly with his thumb.

“I’m so sorry about Danny... He’s... Persistent.” She immediately apologizes.

“I get that. He’s been after you for years.” Alex begins.

“I know... I’m just not that attracted to humans, I guess.” She shrugs.

“Well, you really need to just flat-out explain your feelings; that you are not ever going to be with him, and that you have a boyfriend now. That is what I am, right?” Alex asks.

“Of course you are!” She exclaims, hugging him tightly.

“Okay, because sneaking around in your own house, where you live alone, kind of made me think otherwise.” He remarks.

“Look, it’s not what you think...” She murmurs.

“So, you aren’t leading him on? Because that’s what I think.” He replies.

“Just let me handle him in my own way, okay? He’s not your problem.” Vicky coos.

Before he can reply, she leans in, planting a firm kiss on his lips. She pushes him back onto the nearby couch as she pulls off her top, exposing her large breasts to him. He sits silently as she quickly drops her skirt, not wearing any panties underneath.

“Now, where were we?” She teasingly asks, straddling his legs.

Danny and Sam walk down the road past Autumn’s house, Sam’s girlfriend. On the porch, Autumn and her friend Grace sit, talking with each other. Grace immediately stands and waves to Danny, a big smile on her face as a breeze flutters her shoulder length, wavy blonde hair. Grace is one of the few Voeldahn who doesn’t dye it red. Her tall and pointy ears seem to perk in their direction as they pass by. Danny waves back and suddenly stops.

“Hi there!” Danny calls out.

“What are you doing?” Sam asks him quietly.

“Maybe you’re right... Maybe I should listen to you for once?” Danny replies in a near whisper.

“Well you’ve already stopped. If you don’t walk up there and talk to her, you’ll look like a dickhead. Then Autumn will get mad because my friend is a dickhead, and I’ll have to kick your ass... You know... For Autumn’s sake.” Sam smirks.

“Harsh, uncalled for, and unnecessary.” Danny murmurs.

He walks up to the porch, leaning on the rail as he quickly strikes up a conversation with Autumn and Grace. As Danny’s eyes shift to Grace, her fluffy tail sways rapidly from side to side. Sam can’t help but laugh as he watches from the sidewalk. He soon joins them on the porch. He whisks his girlfriend away, leaving Danny to spend time alone with Grace. The boy moves around the rails and takes a seat on a bench on the porch. Grace sits beside him, nervously brushing her hair away from her eyes as she looks to him.

“So um... Are you nervous about this trip? Th-the one with the uh... The convoy.” She stammers.

“Not really. It’s a pretty safe route and I’ll be with friends. Why don’t you come?” Danny asks, smiling warmly.

“Oh no! I couldn’t do that. It was hard enough just getting here, and I’m not very useful.” She replies.

“Don’t talk about yourself like that.” He says sternly. “You’re more useful than some people I know.” He points a thumb at the house, hinting at Sam.

“Even so, I’ve never had to fight before and I heard about what happens to women who get caught out there defenseless.” Grace says solemnly.

“Yeah, but you won’t be defenseless... I’ll protect you.” He assures her.

She turns her emerald eyes up to him, grinning as he gently pats her leg. He slides closer to her as he rests an arm along the back of the bench, his hand hanging down by her arm. She turns her head to look at his hand before nervously leaning back. She can’t find any words to respond to him. They sit silently for a moment.

“That’s okay... Maybe the next time.”

“Okay...” She says softly.

They sit there in silence for a moment, looking at the street. A sudden gust of wind picks up; the cool breeze forces the girl to shudder. He looks to her and moves away, taking off his windbreaker jacket and draping it over her shoulders.

“Thank you.” She says softly.

“Anytime.”

He sits back against the bench, his arm along the backrest. She leans over, pressing her shoulder against his side. After a moment, she rests her head near his shoulder almost impulsively. He rests his hand firmly on her arm.

“So, does this mean you’d want to take a walk with me when I get back?” He asks.

“Uh-huh.” She nods slowly.

“Good. It might be nice to spend more time with you.”

“Really?!” She asks excitedly.

“Sure.”

She feels herself flush at the thought of being alone with him.

“Alright, lovers...” Sam exits the house. “It’s time we hit that old dusty trail.”

“So soon?” Danny sounds disappointed.

“Hey, you can always back out and look like a bitch, or you can get back to it when we come home.” Sam teases.

Danny looks to Grace for a moment, genuinely contemplating staying behind. She looks up at him, her smile fading before slowly nodding her head.

“I’ll be waiting for you when you get back.” She assures him.

Danny reluctantly climbs up from the bench. Grace takes off the windbreaker and returns it to him. He holds it in his hand as he follows Sam, walking away from the home and toward the convoy near the old bridge. He takes a moment to look back and wave at the bunny girl. She waves back as she watches him walking away from her, before entering the house with her friend Autumn.

Chapter 2: The Convoy

The two friends stop at their home, heading inside to collect their weapons and gear needed for the trip. Danny opens the nightstand drawer in his bedroom and retrieves two handguns, an old 5th generation Glock Model 23, and the antique H&R Model 732 revolver that Kyle had given him. After Kyle and the McKrakens took him in, Danny returned the revolver to Kyle. Once Danny turned eighteen and moved out to live with his best friend, Kyle gave it back to him for personal defense, as a housewarming gift. Sam

enters the room, holstering his own pistol, a Ruger P95 with a blued finish, the only one of its kind in the town.

“You really want to carry two guns?” Sam raises a brow.

“Why not?” Danny asks.

“We’ll be carrying everything... *Everything*... On our *bodies*... That might get heavy, all that lead and steel.” Sam explains.

“Well, a backup might be nice.” Danny suggests.

“Hah! A backup gun to a Glock? That’s like carrying two hammers in case one spontaneously combusts while you’re using it.”

“The old posters did say ‘Glock Perfection’.” Danny sighs, returning the revolver to the drawer.

“Don’t worry. It’ll be here when you get home.”

Danny collects his spare ammunition and magazines, placing them inside of his already packed M1936 style musette bag. He slips on his windbreaker before shouldering the small black pack. They reach the convoy as it prepares to leave. The leader of the convoy, Nicholas, kisses his wife Samantha goodbye. She is staying home to watch their three children. Danny suddenly decides it best to carry his spare magazines on his body. He sets his pack down by Sam’s feet. Kneeling beside it, he digs out the extra loaded magazines for his pistol.

Danny turns his head when he sees two figures approaching. Vicky and Alex walk up together, standing very close to each other; they walk hand in hand. Sam sees the couple and moves out of Danny's way. Now seeing Danny kneeling by his pack behind Sam, watching them intently, she suddenly pulls her hand away from Alex, who seems briefly frustrated. Suddenly her behavior makes sense. Sam was right, yet again. He slips the magazines into his windbreaker pockets, zipping them in before closing his pack and putting it back on. He adjusts his pack and sighs, briefly sulking.

As he watches the pair pass him, his thoughts return to Grace. He recalls the bunny girl's nervousness, and how pleased she always is to see him. She's acted that way for months, while Vicky was never like that in years. Danny decides not to waste any more time on her; she was never worth it to begin with. As soon as he returns home, things are going to be very different. He walks by Alex, who tries to casually greet him. Danny stands beside Sam, who looks over his shoulder at Alex, then back to Danny.

"Hey, I didn't know." Sam says quietly.

"It's fine... Fuck that bitch." Danny mutters.

"Wow." Sam raises his brow in surprise. "Someone grew hair on his nuts... Finally." He chuckles.

With all members present and the sun reaching its zenith, the convoy makes its way to Hutchison Post. Danny and Sam keep their distance from Alex and Vicky, walking near the front of the convoy with Nick. The couple don't show each other any affection, even though Danny had witnessed their previous display. After several hours of walking, the convoy stops for an extended rest. Many of the members haven't been this far from home or walked this long since they had settled in Vahdalia.

As Danny sits with Sam, taking a drink from his canteen, Vicky approaches them. She looks distraught. Sam turns to Danny, who doesn't seem to care, looking at the sky as he drinks from the olive colored G.I. water bottle.

"Well..." Sam stands up. He struggles to think of something clever to say. "Fuck it... I'll be back in a few."

He walks away from the two, leaving them alone.

"Hey Danny..." Vicky begins, sitting down beside him.

"What?" He asks coldly.

"Look, Danny... About before..." She says.

"What about it?"

"It wasn't what you think... See... It-"

"No, shut up." Danny snaps, quickly standing to his feet. "I'm not blind anymore, and I'm certainly not an idiot. If you liked someone else, you should have fucking told me. I could handle it. I already did. Thanks, by the way."

"I'm sorry..." She looks to the ground. "I didn't know how to tell you, and you've wanted me for a long time..."

"It's fine... Look, we've been friends pretty much since I got here. You were always there for me, and me for you. That's all we are, and that's all we'll ever be. You're still my friend. At this point, I really don't want anything more from you." He begins, sitting down beside her once more.

"Really?" She turns to him.

"Yeah... There's another girl anyway. Friendly, cute, and genuinely happy to see me." He quips.

"Oh... Who?" She inquires.

"Grace." Danny smiles. "She's a good person, and when we get back, I'll see if I like her. If I do, she'll get all of my romantic attention. You can have the leftover friendly attention." He chuckles. "Anyway, I'm going to find Sam. See you later."

He abruptly leaves Vicky behind. She sits alone as he walks away, inexplicably feeling both frustrated and somewhat jealous. She returns to Alex, who waits patiently for her just out of view.

**“Well, that went well. At least he got over you quick.”
He says with a smile. “I knew you should have just told him.”**

“Shut up...” She grumbles, walking by him.

**“What’s the matter? Isn’t that what you wanted?” Alex
raises a brow.**

“Yeah... I guess...”

**“It doesn’t seem like it... I mean, he’s already looking at
someone else, and she seems to like him.” He remarks.**

“Grace... Pfft. I’m way better than she is... Little bitch.”

“Are... Are you jealous?!” He asks in shock.

**“What?! No... .. I... I don’t know... I didn’t like him like
that, but I was kind of used to the attention. Maybe I liked
being noticed without having to reciprocate?” She explains.**

“Wow... That’s cold.”

“Fuck you.” She growls.

**The convoy soon returns to the road, walking the multi-
day journey to their nearest neighbor. Inevitably the sun
begins to creep behind the mountains. As it lowers, the light
grows dimmer and the convoy sets up a camp along the
road. Danny looks over the terrain, not comfortable with
Nicholas’ choice. The land is open on one side, with the
edges of the mountains on the other, and a dense forest on
the remaining sides. The forest is level, and provides
adequate room for a large force to move through it
undetected.**

“What’s wrong, bro? You still mad about her?” Sam asks.

“Huh? I just have a bad feeling about this spot...”

“You’ve been spending too much time with Drake. It’s made you paranoid.” Sam remarks.

“I’m not paranoid, just aware.”

“Right. Let’s go... Eat some food or something.” Sam says, patting him on the back.

The convoy sits around a singular large campfire that illuminates them entirely. The convoy has walked this road to Hutchison Post several times this year alone, and dozens of times in years past, all without incident. No one seems all too worried, except for Danny. They sit and eat together, swapping stories and entertaining each other; Nick plays an old acoustic guitar for a while. Once the darkness settles in, the travelers bed down for the night. Unable to shake his uneasiness, Danny stays up for several more hours, keeping watch.

After some time, Sam awakens during the middle of the night to stoke the fire. He sees Danny sleepily watching the camp. Not wanting him to go without, Sam quickly volunteers to keep watch for him. Danny reluctantly agrees and lies back, soon succumbing to his exhaustion. Once confident that Danny is sound asleep, Sam lies back down and

returns to sleep as well. He has no intention of keeping watch, as they have never had a problem before.

“Get ‘em all!” A gruff voice yells.

Danny is roused awake by the sound of screams and a gunshot. The sun barely peeks over the top of the mountains as several Voeldahn men grab at the travelers. Danny springs to his feet, bumping into a raider.

“Holy shit, a human! Check this out!” The raider yells.

He turns and grabs Danny’s shoulder, yanking him toward him. The raider shrieks in pain as Danny fires a forty-caliber hollow point slug into his gut, holding his Glock pistol close to his body. As the raider falls, Danny aims down at him, swiftly executing him with a single shot to the head. He unzips his windbreaker pockets as he scrambles away from the crowd. More gunfire erupts as he sees Sam shooting his nine-millimeter Ruger at several more raiders.

The raiders return fire as Danny runs toward Sam and Nicholas, who clutches an SKS rifle in his hands and fires from the hip. Vicky and Alex rush towards them, both unarmed. A hand grabs Danny’s shoulder, causing him to stumble. He catches himself and spins around, slamming the

baseplate of the magazine into the snout of a raider, before twisting his wrist and firing a single round into their skull.

“Over here!” Nick yells to the others.

The travelers bunch together as they fight off the raiders. Vicky and Alex join Sam and several others, while the raiders seem to drag off their captives, pulling them into the woods. Danny can only imagine what will become of them. He stumbles over several corpses, his feet slipping on pools of hot crimson liquid as he steps over the bodies. He stands beside Sam as he fires round after round. There are dozens of raiders, and perhaps more who lie unseen in the forest. They charge the group wildly, trying to claim them as prizes.

Suddenly, raiders appear from the woods behind them, flanking the small circle of fighters. A raider grabs Sam, who struggles to free himself, dropping his P95 pistol onto the ground. Danny reloads, before shooting a round into the raider’s side. The thug releases Sam and falls to the ground before Danny fires three more rounds into his chest without hesitation, to Vicky’s shock. His aggressiveness in battle intrigues her. He performs a tactical reload, swapping an empty magazine with a fresh one in a single fluid motion, and without dropping either.

There are far too many raiders, and he doesn't carry enough ammunition. Nick struggles to move back down the road, trying to clear a path as he fires his rifle at raiders who stand between them and the road back to Vahdalia. Sam, Danny, Vicky and Alex attempt to follow, but Alex is soon grabbed by a raider. The feline Voeldahn struggles with his captor. Vicky turns back but Sam grabs her wrist, pulling her away as they flee down the road. Several raiders chase after Nick, who drops his empty rifle and sprints toward home.

They leave an opening near the woods. Danny takes the lead, rushing into the forest. He turns and provides covering fire as Sam and Vicky enter the brush behind him. They rush into the forest for over two-hundred meters, stopping when they see a large tree. The base of this tree has exposed roots that run along the ground, like the ribs of a long dead and half-buried animal. The earth has been dug-out, leaving a large hole in the ground beneath the roots. It is clearly a den used by some large animal, perhaps a deer or black bear, and with enough space to hide the three.

"Quick. Get in." Danny whispers to them.

"No." Vicky cries.

"Get in the fucking hole!" He barks, startling her.

Sam and Vicky slip into the hole, between the exposed roots. Danny enters last, taking an assortment of sticks and the remaining dead leaves that lie at the base of the tree. He quickly arranges the sticks like a cage, then reaches between the sticks and pulls in the dry leaves. He does his best to quickly mask the opening of their little earthen cave. They settle in as raiders walk nearby. Vicky struggles to keep quiet, but manages to remain silent as they stand right in front of their spider hole.

“Man, April is going to flip her shit if we don’t get that human. They are worth an ass-load here.” A raider begins.

“Yeah, and they had a hot little mouse girl with ‘em too. Damn, I’d love to fuck that.” Another comments in turn.

“Too bad they killed some of ours. I’d like to cut one open for that.”

“Yeah, but that means less shares. There’s always a positive to losing men!” The second raider replies.

“You’re fucked up, man.” The first laughs.

“Who isn’t these days?”

The three now understand what is going on, and why the raiders didn’t want to kill them on sight. These raiders are actually slavers. They aren’t here for their clothes, food, weapons, or even cargo, but the convoy’s travelers themselves. A tear runs down Vicky’s snout and off the tip of her nose, knowing full well what will happen to her once

they are caught. The slavers look around for a moment, then keep on walking. Their footsteps grow distant.

"We'll be alright. Just stay calm." Danny whispers to her.

"Yeah. Nick got away. He'll get help." Sam adds.

Vicky begins to cry more loudly. Worried she will draw the slavers attention, Danny sets down his pistol and wraps his arms around her, comforting her. She rests her head against his shoulder and nuzzles him with her snout.

"I'm so sorry... For everything. I should have known better." Vicky whispers to him.

"Don't worry about it. We'll get out of here, Alex will be fine, and we'll all live happily ever after." Danny assures her.

Vicky smiles at Danny, slowly shaking her head.

"I know what's going to happen to me when they catch us. I'm not going to let some filthy slaver rape or impregnate me. I'm not going to be sold like cattle to be some thugs fuck-toy." Vicky quietly remarks.

**“You won’t. Just calm down and we’ll get out of this.”
Danny says as he strokes her arm gently.**

She seems to fade into her own thoughts, staring at the ground for a moment. Danny and Sam try to peek between the tiny gaps in the leaves, which let in miniscule amounts of light. The slavers walk by again, but don’t notice their camouflaged hole. They head back to the road. Every crunching leaf beneath their feet makes Vicky tremble. She closes her eyes tightly. Danny gently shushes her as he tries to keep her calm. Her hand creeps up, resting on the handle of the Glock. She opens her eyes and turns to look at Danny for a moment.

“It should have been you.” She murmurs.

She suddenly brings the pistol to her head, pulling the trigger. Their ears ring as Vicky executes herself with a single shot to her right temple. High velocity blood splatter strikes Danny’s face. The boy’s ears ring as they lie there in shock and horror. Suddenly the leaves are ripped away, sticks falling over. They can’t hear any noise, only seeing the light come flooding into the hole. The slavers grab them by their shoulders and rip them from their hiding place.

As he is dragged away, he turns to see the wound on the side of Vicky’s head. Her body twitches as brain matter oozes from the exit wound, a divot in the earth where the

bullet came to a rest. He can't believe what she has done. A silent, third slaver collects the pistol and drags her corpse from the hole, rolling her over. Her eyes stare lifelessly at the sky, one of them a dark crimson due to broken blood vessels, a result of the trauma of the gunshot.

"Talk about fuckin' luck! If she hadn't killed herself, we *never* would have found that hole." The first raider exclaims.

"Yeah, that was some mountain man shit right there!" The second laughs.

"Too bad about the girl though. With tits and an ass like that, she'd have been *almost* as valuable as this human." The first remarks.

"Whatever. Win some, lose some." The third remarks.

"Ain't it the truth..."

Chapter 3: Going, Going, Gone

The raiders pull the young men rather violently through the brush of the forest, dragging them back to the old road. They lead them to a group of survivors. They kneel down on the ground, all held at gunpoint, having been captured by the slavers. Alex turns to Sam and Danny. He looks around for Vicky, but doesn't see her anywhere. Danny is forced to kneel beside Alex, while Sam knees beside Danny.

“Where’s Vicky? Are they doing something to her?!”
Alex asks the two in a rather demanding tone.

Danny silently shakes his head.

“Tell me, God damnit! Are they raping her in there?!”
Alex growls.

“I fuckin’ wish.” A slaver chuckles.

“Nah. That girl took the bitches way out with this little toy.” Another says, holding up the Glock.

Alex looks at the gun, still streaked with blood splatter. He turns back to Danny, his face stained with thin red lines. Alex can’t believe what he is hearing. He becomes enraged.

“Why didn’t you fucking stop her!” He screams at Danny.

“We didn’t know what she was going to do! He didn’t help her kill herself!” Sam quickly defends his best friend.

Alex begins to cry as the slavers chuckle. He struggles with his bindings. The slaver with Danny’s pistol begins wiping off the blood. He tosses down the old rag,

deliberately leaving it between Alex's knees. The upset young feline Voeldahn, looks up at the slaver who grins smugly at him. He growls and suddenly tries to charge the slaver. Startled, the slaver jumps back, tripping on a body. Alex lands atop him and bites a piece of flesh out of his cheek before being dragged back by the other slavers.

"That little shit! He took a chunk out of my face!" The slaver screams.

The raiders begin kicking, punching, and smashing Alex with feet, fists, pistols and rifles. He curls up into a ball as he is beaten severely by the slavers. Blood begins to seep from his various injuries as they spend a solid minute pulverizing Alex in the middle of the street. Everyone is suddenly startled by a gunshot. They turn and seem to cower in fear as a rather slender Voeldahn female approaches, holding a Micro-Uzi in her left hand.

"Oh shit..." A slaver murmurs.

"Would someone like to explain to me just what the **FUCK** is going on here?!" She demands.

They all lower their heads as though ashamed, staring at the ground as the girl approaches. She is a rather dainty figure, with a very slender frame, barely standing five feet and three inches tall, with a modest bust. Her fur is snow-

white, with thin black tiger stripes running through it, and long, straight black hair that is pulled up into pigtails. Her icy blue eyes look over the cowering slavers. She walks in shiny black Voeldahn boots, with flowing black pants that appear to be made of a soft, velvety material. A dark blue sweater is pulled over her body, and covered in a black leather biker vest that snaps at the front with four brass buttons.

Danny is rather surprised by their behavior; they are obviously terrified of this rather cute and innocent looking young Voeldahn woman.

“Anyone? I’m not talking to myself here...” She speaks casually.

“W-w-well. Y-you see... .. He did it!” A slaver points to another.

The slaver looks in shock at his ‘comrade’, a hand holding his injured face.

“Is that true? Was this your fault?” She asks in a rather sweet voice.

“He bit me, April!” The slaver replies.

“Hmph... So he did!” She chuckles.

She swiftly aims her machine pistol and fires a single round into the slaver's skull, killing him instantly. The others jump at the sight, looking at his body as it falls lifeless on the ground. April moves around his carcass and approaches Alex. She kneels down, looking at his rather extensive injuries. He has been severely beaten, and is bleeding out.

"Well that's a shame! I can't sell him like this! Oh well..." She calmly sighs.

She places the firearm to his head and pulls the trigger, executing Alex to everyone's shock. She then stands and looks toward the slaver who ousted the other, and executes him as well.

"*That* was for damaging my property..." She growls, looking at the others. "Next time, beat yourselves up, not my products! I'm sure you all do already..." She smirks.

"Yes, April!" The slavers shout in unison.

She waves a hand and the slavers begin to clean up the camp, dragging away the bodies and bringing their captives to their feet. Many of them are bound with strong ropes, their hands tied behind their backs, as Alex was. April turns and sees Danny, her eyes narrowing as she grins wide. The tips of her sharp canines are visible, protruding from beneath her upper lip as she smiles at the human.

“You found him... My little bear...” She coos.

“Yes, we did. They-”

She holds up a hand, silencing her minion. She steps up to Danny, her nose mere inches from his face. She looks him over, from top to bottom and then back up again.

“Where is that skanky little mouse he was with?” She asks.

“She uh... K-killed herself...” A slaver nervously answers.

“Really?!” She turns back to her minions.

“Yes, April.”

“What a shame.” She turns back to Danny. “Too many women do that these days. They see my little boys over here and think ‘oh no, I’m going to get raped!’ and then end it all.”

“Well, isn’t it true?” Danny asks her.

April raises a brow, as though surprised he would dare to speak to her. Her grin grows wider.

“Why, yes it is... Of course, if they knew how well some of these women are treated by their masters, they probably wouldn’t do it.” April replies.

“Excuse me?!” Danny laughs at her audacity.

“Women are valuable. Just because we’re a bunch of fucking degenerates doesn’t mean we don’t recognize that. Breeders are well looked after and guarded. One good breeder is worth as much as my whole gang.” April explains.

“Yeah, but then there’s that whole ‘being impregnated by strangers’ thing...” Sam remarks.

April glares at him, raising her weapon to his head.

“I don’t believe I was speaking to you...” She grumbles.

“Wait!” Danny exclaims, gaining her attention. “So why are you in charge? ... I mean... You’re an attractive woman and all...”

She lowers the weapon as her minions begin binding his arms at the wrists, pulling them hard behind his back.

“Thank you for noticing.” April smiles at Danny. “I may have been born with tits, but I’m more of a man than any of these ass holes. That’s why I’m in charge.”

“I see... So... What will happen to me?”

“Hmm... How selfish of you to ask.” She takes a step closer. “I like that...” She whispers.

Danny cringes as a minion pulls the ropes tight, chaffing his skin.

“Be gentle now. We don’t want to hurt this one.” She tells her minions. “Humans are not common here, and there are a lot of human fetishists around, including yours truly.” She winks at Danny. “Many would pay top dollar for you.” She strokes his cheek with her black claws.

“Lovely...” He mutters.

“Take this one back to my tent...” She orders.

The slavers grab the survivors, leading them down the road toward Hutchison Post. To Danny’s surprise, the slavers had set up a campsite barely a kilometer away, right atop the same road they were walking. Many of the survivors, including Sam, are lashed to poles. The poles are dug into the ground on the shoulder of the road, while they remain seated on the old, cracked concrete. As the slavers tie their precious cargo to the wooden shafts alongside the road, April and several other slavers lead Danny into a large but simple tent. April enters first, then the guards shove Danny inside.

He stumbles as he is heaved into the tent, his face brushing the fabric flap. The slavers don't enter with them. April steadies the human, resting her hands on his chest. Taking a small knife in her right hand, her Micro-Uzi still gripped firmly in her left, she cuts the ropes that bind his wrists. He grabs his wrists, rubbing them as he sees the red marks from the friction burns. He feels a gun barrel press against his back.

"What if I said I knew how to quickly take that from you?" He asks her.

"Then you'd certainly turn me on." She coos.

"And what if I didn't succeed?"

"Don't test me, little bear. I don't want to have to kill you, but I will... Without a second thought." She sternly answers.

She presses the barrel even harder into his back. He grits his teeth through the pain. She leads him to a strange device that looks like two benches in the shape of a large 'X'. Handcuffs dangle from the two upper arms of the device, which sits on what appears to be a customized mount that allows the object to pivot between a horizontal and vertical position. It sits diagonally as she pushes him toward it.

"What's this?" He can't help but ask.

“It’s my favorite toy! ... Cuff yourself in...” She growls.

“Are you serious?!”

She grips the back of his neck with her free hand, her sharp claws digging into his flesh.

“Very...”

“Alright, alright. Take it easy now, kitten.” He remarks.

He raises up his hands and climbs over the device, locking his right wrist into the handcuff, being careful not to tighten it excessively over his burn. She pushes him back, forcing him to lie against the device. Her tail sways as she gleefully locks his remaining wrist into the other handcuff, being equally careful not to hurt him. She removes a set of leg irons from behind the device, locking his legs in place as well, before turning a small wheel that causes his prison to pivot, lying him horizontally.

“Congratulations... I feel quite vulnerable now.” Danny remarks.

“Good. That’s just how I want it...” She grins.

She sets her Micro-Uzi down on a table as she approaches her prisoner. Pulling a pin, she unlocks a hinge

on the device and pushes the lower boards together, closing his legs. She reinserts the pin, locking the device in the shape of a large 'Y'. She throws a leg over him, straddling him as she sits over his groin. She rests her hands on his chest, her claws gently raking his shirt. Her tail sways as she looks at her victim like a choice cut of meat.

"Why do I get the feeling that you've done this before?" He asks.

"Perhaps I have? Or perhaps I haven't, and I'm finally living out a fantasy?" She poses.

"So, which one is it?" He raises an eyebrow.

"Take your pick... Would you like some water?" She asks.

"Yes, please." He nods.

She climbs off him and rotates the device into a vertical position. Reaching behind it, she retrieves a stainless-steel water bottle and unscrews the cap. She rather gently places the bottle to his lips, being careful not to spill a single drop. At first, she gives Danny time to breath, but soon she grows more forceful, literally pouring the water down his throat. He struggles to drink the water as quickly as she pours it into his mouth, guzzling until there is not a drop left.

"The fuck..." He coughs. "Are you trying to drown me?!"

“You looked thirsty.” She shrugs innocently.

She screws the cap back on the bottle and sets it aside, before pivoting the device once again, turning him horizontally onto his back. She climbs back atop him and sits over his groin. She slips her hands underneath his shirt, lifting it to reveal well-toned muscles.

“Ooh.” She coos, stroking his flesh with her claws. “Aren’t you a strong one...”

“Yeah... Too bad I can’t show you.” He chuckles, pulling on the handcuffs.

“Indeed...” She glares.

She leans over, resting her head near his shoulder as she feels his warm body in her hands. She nuzzles his neck with her snout, rubbing her nose against his flesh. She licks his neck, beginning at his collar bone and moving up toward his jaw. At first, he cringes, but soon softly groans. Suddenly, Danny begins to feel strange. His breathing quickens, his head thumping loudly with each flutter of his beating heart. His body grows warmer, as though he were forced into a giant oven.

She sits up, looking intently as he begins to change. She grins, bearing her teeth as she tears his shirt open. She claws at his flesh rather roughly, leaving a small trail of red

marks behind. Some of the marks begin to bleed as her hands reach down between her own legs, grabbing for his pants.

“What the...” He groans, blinking hard as the room begins to spin. “The fuck did you do to me?”

“You couldn’t taste it? The herbs in the water?” She tilts her head, unbuttoning his pants.

“What herbs? What are you talking about?!” He demands.

“I was told it was a natural aphrodisiac... I wasn’t sure if you’d get hard otherwise; I certainly can’t fuck a limp noodle.” April grins.

“Oh, shit...” He murmurs.

Danny struggles with his handcuffs, his body tingling as the drugs coarse through his veins. The pounding in his head grows louder, quickly blocking out virtually everything else around him. He feels April yanking down his pants and feeling his member with her warm hands. He hears her speaking but he can’t make out the words. He feels the blood rushing toward his loins, a burning sensation growing more powerful with every passing second. He suddenly feels something else; a soft, moist object strokes his phallus, before suddenly engulfing it. Smaller, sharp objects struggle to keep from scratching the skin of his organ.

After some time, he sees her climbing from atop him. She looks almost exhausted as she wipes the excess saliva from her lips. She gazes to him and speaks again, grinning wide at him. He wishes he could understand what she is saying, but now his vision begins to cloud, the air rippling as though from intense heat. She strips away her clothes. He begins to feel as though he is in a dream, and at any moment he is going to wake up, safe in his bed back home.

She speaks again, before the nude Voeldahn straddles him a final time. He feels her hand on his member and attempts to look down, but every motion of his head causes the room to spin endlessly. He closes his eyes, hoping it will make the horrible vertigo cease. After a moment, he opens his eyes. The room is now still. He feels her hand gripping his shaft. He slowly looks down, and witnesses as she presses his considerable member against her own loins. She pushes herself against him, inserting him into her body.

Her insides burn as she struggles to accept more of him. She grips his hips, her claws digging painfully into his flesh as she lowers herself atop him. She appears to be gasping or moaning, though he can't hear any sound besides the beating of his own heart. She takes him down to the base, sitting atop him as she trembles. Her eyes close tightly as she takes a moment to adjust. For a split second, he wishes that she would have simply asked him to sleep

with her, so then he could at least fully comprehend and enjoy the situation.

She begins to shift herself, moving back and forth with ever increasing speed. Soon, she bounces herself quickly atop his phallus, raking her claws against the flesh of his chest. Drool seeps around the corners of her mouth as she reaches out a hand, gripping his throat. She squeezes him and grins, looking like a lioness with her prey. She soon seems to cry out, her claws piercing his skin as he feels her loins tighten and convulse. She seems to pant as she leans over him, shivering as she sits still atop him.

Suddenly, a slaver enters the tent, only to bow his head apologetically. She turns, growls at him, reaches for her Micro-Uzi that sits on the nearby table, and fires several shots. She never rises from Danny's member. The gunfire sounds like faint tapping to his ears. The slaver darts off as she misses, her hand trembling from the intense pleasure. She drops the weapon back onto the table and turns to her prisoner, grinning and speaking to him as she leans over his chest, resting her head near his shoulder.

Soon, she begins moving again, but now the drugs seem to be wearing off. The thumping grows quieter, allowing him to comprehend the sounds of the world around him. The tingling slowly wanes; Danny begins to feel much more sensation in his body, and especially in his member. April fits quite snugly over him, and struggles to move herself

again. She groans softly as she bounces. Danny moans as well, feeling her as she rides him.

After several minutes of repetitive motion, he notes a familiar stirring. He feels a mixed burning and tingling as the tension builds. April's body becomes even hotter as she comes closer to another climax. He grunts as she grips his throat, slamming down hard onto him.

"That's right. Let it out!" She growls.

After a few more moments of resisting, he feels himself give way. April cries out again as her body clamps down on his organ like a vice, responding to the powerful waves that flood out of him and into her. Jet after harsh jet cause her to collapse, lying over his chest. She does not remove him, but leaves him inside. She takes labored breathes as she slowly regains her composure.

"Now *that* was quite a score." She giggles innocently.

"You could have just asked me for it, you know." Danny says, in between gasping for breath.

"Really? And you would have done it?" She seems surprised.

Danny finds the strength to nod his head once.

“Wouldn’t you?” He chuckles.

She almost appears to blush through her fur, turning her head away from her captive as though embarrassed.

“Well, this was more fun anyway... Hey! We should play a new game!” She chirps.

Her lips curl into a sinister grin as she slowly climbs from atop him, removing his member from within her. She stumbles around the device, raking her claws along his body as she does. She approaches the table at the opposite end, retrieving a pack that lies beneath it. She digs through the pack and begins removing several small objects: two long and thin candles, a zippo lighter, a large sewing needle, and a small jar of salt.

“Oh, God...” He says under his breath.

The slavers sit outside, talking quietly amongst each other, nearly a dozen meters from her tent.

“She shot at you?” One asks in quiet shock.

“Hell yeah. I thought that human was attacking her, but I walked in on her fucking him. She tossed some slugs right at me. She wasn’t trying to miss either; her hand was trembling. I have never been so fucking scared in my life.”
The other replies.

“That human gets to fuck that hot piece of ass... Lucky bastard...” The first grumbles.

They are suddenly startled by a loud shout. Danny cries out in pain as April begins to playfully torture him with her tools.

“Maybe not...” The second says, turning toward the tent.

They listen, wondering what is going on inside the tent. Sam sits lashed to a pole, looking towards the tent as he can hear Danny groaning and occasionally yelling. He feels terribly for his friend, wishing that he could do something to stop it. As he sits helpless on the ground, he thinks back to Vicky. If only she hadn’t killed herself, they wouldn’t be suffering as they are. He can’t help but resent her for the predicament they are in.

Inside the tent, April had dripped hot candle wax onto his neck. She had already heated the sewing needle with her lighter and run it through one of his nipples, giving him

an impromptu piercing. She also couldn't help but carve a large 'A' into his chest with her claws, so that he wouldn't forget her when he is gone. She stands over him as she looks at his body, deciding what to do next. She takes a small bottle of untainted water and takes a drink. She looks over at Danny's bloody torso and sighs.

She isn't quite satisfied yet. She sets the bottle of water down and looks to the jar of salt. She is suddenly struck with an idea. She takes the bottle and a cloth and gently cleans the blood from his wounds, so that she may see the cuts more clearly. She takes the lighter, unused candle, and the jar of salt, before returning to his side. She lights the candle before sprinkling the salt over the gashes in his chest.

He screams and writhes as the granules make contact with his wounds, making it difficult for her to drip the candle wax over it, sealing them together. She smacks him hard across the face, gaining his attention.

"Be still, or this will only get worse." She says in an eerily gentle voice.

Her calm demeanor frightens him as she continues to dab the salt on his cuts. It's all he can do not to move or scream. She drips the wax over his salt encrusted wounds, an innocent smile spread across her face. She looks like a

child happily scribbling in a coloring book. Sweat beads on his forehead as he clenches his teeth, his fists balled tightly as they tremor. He hopes and prays that it will soon be over. After what seems like an eternity, she completes the 'A', sealing his wound with hot wax and setting her tools aside.

"That was fun!" She happily exclaims.

Danny groans in pain, his eyes closed tightly as his body trembles.

"What's wrong? Are you cold?" She asks.

"I thought you couldn't afford to hurt me..." He mutters.

"Oh... Well, I guess I could!" She shrugs. "Besides, that's nothing compared to what will probably happen to you if I sell you. Although, now that I think about it, I may want to keep you for myself..."

She leans against him, running her claws underneath his chin as she gazes at him.

"But then again, I already did that, didn't I?" She winks, resting a hand over her belly.

"You're sick." He grumbles.

“Aww...” She kisses his cheek. “You’re so sweet!” She says, gently tapping his nose with her fingertip.

“Yeah? Well if we trade places, I can show you just how sweet I can be.” He glares.

“That sounds like a fun game!” She winks. “But maybe some other time.”

Chapter 4: The Adequate Escape

As the day wears on, April does not continue her games; she leaves Danny be. When night rolls in, she sleeps on a cot in her tent. Originally near the far wall, she pulled the cot until it sat right next to him. He struggles to sleep, still chained to April’s horrendous device. Luckily for him, she had the compassion to cover him in a thick wool blanket, as the temperature still drops considerably at night. While awake he was suffering, and in his dreams, he receives no respite.

He runs from the slavers in his sleep, hiding from them in the darkness of the woods. Chains weigh down his arms and legs, making it difficult for him to move. He struggles to catch Vicky, who turns and kills herself in front of him. When he tries to reach her, she repeats the words that echo in his mind. ‘It should have been you.’ They reverberate in his brain, growing louder as he watches the maggots rapidly

feast upon her flesh. He turns around to see her alive and well, looking over a dead and rotting Alex. 'It should have been you.' She growls, causing his heart to break.

She grabs his throat, screaming at him. It jars him awake. He opens his eyes, staring at the ceiling of April's tent. He tries to wipe the sweat from his brow, only to realize that he is still chained to her device, and it is still night out. He turns his head to the side, letting the sweat run away from his eyes. He glances at a sleeping April. He takes a deep breath and sighs, unable to hold back his mental and emotional anguish. He quietly weeps, begging for forgiveness from an unseen entity. He opens his eyes as the tears stream over his nose. April's cold sapphires stare right through him. He wants to feel afraid, but can't; he's apathetic.

"What's the matter?" April asks, sitting up on her cot.

"The nightmares..." He sighs.

"Who did you fail?" She asks with genuine curiosity.

"Vicky... The 'skanky mouse girl'. The last thing she said to me before she killed herself with my gun was 'it should have been you'." He answers.

"Wow... What a bitch." April chuckles. "Try to go back to sleep, little bear."

"What about the nightmares?"

"I can't do anything about that, but take it from me... They get easier to deal with over time." She says softly.

She rests a hand on his chest, gently patting him. She leans in and kisses his cheek before lying back down and pulling the covers back over her body. He lies there, stunned by her brief compassion. He looks to the ceiling, staring at it as his mind races. A cold breeze rushes in through the tent flap, caressing his arms and making him shudder. He is unable to return to sleep, and lies awake throughout the remainder of the night.

It feels like an eternity before the sun pierces the flap of the tent, the rays warming his cold extremities. April stirs in her cot. She rises, the covers falling from her naked body. She stretches out her arms and yawns, her sharp teeth glinting in the beams of sunlight. She turns, surprised to see Danny already awake, staring blankly at the ceiling.

"Hey... Didn't you sleep?" She asks, looking concerned.

"Yeah... Like a fuckin' baby." He murmurs.

"Aww, that's sarcasm." She coos. "Well, I'm sorry... Uh... What's your name?"

"Do you really care?" He turns to look at her.

"Eh..." She wobbles her hand.

“Yeah, I figured. My name is Danny. Pleased to meet you.” He facetiously answers.

“Danny. Cute. Well Danny, you’ll sleep well tonight, I’m sure of it.” She assures him.

April dresses in her clothes from yesterday, before finally sliding Danny’s pants back up, zipping and buttoning them. Having torn his shirt, she can’t cover his chest, but doesn’t seem to care. She unlocks the leg irons, then retrieves her Micro-Uzi. She releases Danny’s wrists from the cuffs of her device. His body is rather weak, and he is unable to put up much of a fight. At her direction, he manages to sit up. She swiftly yanks his arms behind his back, handcuffing his wrists together with yet another pair.

With his torn shirt dangling open, she pulls him away from her contraption and marches him outside, the flap of the tent smacking him in the face. Several people gasp as he emerges. He winces as his eyes struggle to adjust to the bright morning light. He turns his head to see the Vahdalia villagers sitting along the road, lashed to poles. They had sat there all night. Sam looks over to Danny, a look of shock and horror on his face. Danny looks down, seeing the wax peeling off as his muscles flex. Each chunk of wax that breaks away reveals the raw, irritated flesh, and a large, scab encrusted ‘A’ gouged into his skin. Even the slavers are stunned.

April seems rather proud of her handiwork as she leads the human out of her tent and towards a certain group of slavers. These slavers are her most loyal and trusted associates; her inner circle, as it were. She motions to them, and they quickly approach. They drop absolutely everything, leaving their breakfasts, drinks and even weapons, to stand before the dainty Voeldahn. She shoves Danny into two slavers, who quickly grab him by the arms. She looks over at the other prisoners, walking toward them. She paces back and forth, as though trying to decide who will be next.

“None of these are very good!” She complains, stomping a foot childishly. “I wanted the mouse... Well, he’ll have to do!”

She returns to her inner circle, motioning for them to follow. They drag Danny by the arms as he struggles to keep up with their pace. She motions for a random slaver amongst her horde to approach. They very nervously slither over to her.

“Keep the camp posted here until we return from Ikard. If anything is out of place, I won’t play with you like I played with Danny here... It’ll hurt.” She glares.

“Yes, April!” He replies, standing at attention.

She motions for her inner circle to follow and begins walking. She brushes past the terrified slaver, who looks as though he might soil himself at any moment. The burly soldiers walk behind her, dragging Danny by the arms. He is unable to keep up with them, and soon they pull him along like an oversized ragdoll. Regardless, they do not slow their pace. They walk down the road for several hours, only to come across a trail. Danny notes the trail looking relatively new; it was not on their maps.

They march through the trail, never stopping once, even for a short break. The freshly cut trail lasts for several kilometers, before finally ending at a large clearing. The natural field has been settled, housing a shanty town reminiscent to the wild west. Tents line muddy paths, as do simple wooden buildings made from a mixture of cut logs, old boards, and scrap wood from old signs and debris. A sign at the edge of the town reads 'Ikard'. A man's corpse hangs from gallows as April and her gang mush on.

As they move through the town, Danny recognizes the terrain. This new town was built due south of the road between Hutchison Post and Vahdalia, just beyond the mountains. It must have been settled very recently. They march their captive to a particular building made almost entirely of cut logs and finished boards. April stands near the front of the building, which has several women standing around it, propositioning the nearby raiders for sex. Once a deal is struck, the women take their customers inside the building; this is some sort of nightmarish brothel.

“Gryn!” April calls out, cupping her hands to her short feline snout. “Get your bitch ass out here!”

“What the fuck do you want?!” A bellowing voice yells back.

A Voeldahn man barges out. His shaggy white fur shimmers in the sunlight. He glares at April, clearly not a fan of hers, but his expression changes as soon as he sees Danny standing behind her, just off to the side. The tall, white haired canine steps closer to the human, grinning cheek to cheek as he gazes at him with vibrant amber eyes. He seems to eye the human like he was an art piece.

“What do we have here?” He asks.

“Just a prize of mine, Gryn. A human. How often do you see them around here?” April begins.

“Indeed. Seems like someone already marked him though. That will lower the price.”

“Sorry about that. My proclivities couldn’t be denied for long.” She chuckles.

“I didn’t know that about you.” Gryn turns to her.

“So, do you want him?” She asks.

“My customers might not like that wound, even after it heals; human or not, they have certain standards.” He explains.

“Since when?” She laughs. “So, you don’t want him?”

“I didn’t say that... I have proclivities too...” Gryn turns back to Danny.

“I didn’t that about you.” April snickers.

He turns back to her and growls. Though Gryn stands nearly a foot taller than the little Voeldahn, April shows absolutely no fear. He turns back and eyes Danny for a moment, though his looks don’t appear lustful. It’s at that moment that both Danny and April realize what Gryn really has in mind for him. April’s expression changes, becoming almost concerned as Gryn cracks his knuckles. April seems to shake off her fears, her heart quickly hardening.

“So, are you buying or not?” She demands.

“Perhaps... What are you asking?” Gryn replies.

“Let’s talk inside...”

The two enter the brothel. Danny gulps nervously, looking between the two slavers who hold each of his arms. He sighs, preparing himself for the worst as he looks to the ground. The slavers turn to him, almost curiously.

“Aren’t you going to beg?” One finally asks.

“What the fuck good would that do?” Danny mutters.

After only a matter of minutes inside of the brothel, April and Gryn return outside. She stands before Danny and motions for her men to release him. They drop their arms and push him over to her. She catches Danny with both hands, steadying him. He looks over to Gryn, his nefarious gaze terrifying the poor human. He turns to April, his eyes glossing over as he looks to her.

“Look, I forgive you for everything you did. Just please... Don’t hand me over to that man... I’ll stay with you, by choice. Please...” He quietly pleads.

For a brief moment, April seems to regain a shred of empathy. Her eyes lock onto his, but no longer seem quite so cold. They water as she looks down at his wounds.

“Y-you’d... Really forgive me?” She asks.

“I already did.” He whispers.

“You *want* to stay with me?”

“Yeah... I do.” He answers.

Though he isn’t sure if she believes him, in that moment, Danny is completely sincere. He’d gladly sign his life to her, if it meant staying out of the hands of Gryn. She looks back up to him, her eyes glossy with tears. She glances over at

her slavers; one narrows his eyes, as though questioning her judgement. The fear of losing power turns her heart into stone. She closes her eyes tightly and clenches her teeth. She turns back to Danny, her eyes once again like ice. She slowly shakes her head.

"Please don't kill me like this. I'll stay with you forever, or you can just kill me quickly, right here." He quietly pleads.

"I'm sorry. I really hope he won't abuse you... I'll miss you, little bear." She whispers. "It's done boys!" She yells out.

She grabs Danny's arm and pushes him toward Gryn. He bumps into the soft fur of his master's chest. Gryn looks down at his new slave. Gryn's own minions exit the brothel carrying crates. Danny can't help but glance over, eager to know what his life is worth to April and her slavers. Gryn's minions carry two open crates, one with a dozen bottles of distilled alcohol, and another with a moderate cache of ammunition. Both are premium items, but Danny can't believe that they are worth anyone's life.

"Come here." Gryn demands.

He grabs Danny by the shoulder, his sharp claws digging into his flesh. Danny clenches his teeth hard in

order to keep from crying out. He turns back to April, looking at her a final time. She stares uncaringly at him, but Danny can't help but pity her. Perhaps it's his doleful expression, or how Gryn drags him into the brothel by the flesh of his shoulder, but to Danny, April looks as though she suddenly regrets the trade. The doors sway behind them as Gryn drags him deeper into the building. His fate is sealed.

Gryn drags the human into a back room, past several gawking patrons and prostitutes. A few of the girls' gasp, covering their mouths. He isn't sure if it's at the sight of his injuries, or because they know where Gryn is taking him. All he does understand is the looks of genuine shock and pity that he receives from the witnesses. Gryn shoves open a door and heaves Danny inside. He falls onto the floor, splitting his lip as he lands on the rough wood. His hands are still cuffed behind his back. It must have been a package deal. The thought briefly amuses him, causing him to chuckle.

Gryn slams and locks the door as Danny sits up. He looks around the room, struggling to stand on his already weak legs. There is nothing in the room except an old spring bed frame with no mattress, a tiny wooden table that perfectly fits an unlit oil lamp, and a window with two iron bars where a glass pane should be. He moves to the window, looking outside. The window faces the west, as the building's entrance faces the north. He sees April and her gang leaving the town with their haul. She turns back,

spotting Danny's face in the window as he silently beckons to her. She quickly turns away, hiding her eyes from him.

Though he wasn't in love with April, and didn't even like her, his heart still breaks at the sight of her leaving him to rot. The pain inside of his chest makes him forget the pain outside of it, if only for a moment. The door suddenly unlocks and swings open behind him. Several pairs of feet walk in. Danny doesn't care to turn around. He rests his head on a bar and silently begs God to make his death swift and relatively painless.

Hands grab his shoulders and tear him from the window. A minion unlocks one of the handcuffs, before adding another to the recently freed wrist. They lead him to a chair that wasn't in the room before, sitting him down and quickly snapping the empty cuffs onto the legs of the rickety wooden furniture. Now locked into place, Gryn enters the room. In one hand he holds an old car battery, and in the other hand are several articles bunched together.

"Do you know why I bought you?" Gryn asks, setting down the battery and articles.

"Fuck you." Danny mutters, staring at the floor.

"Your insolence is music to my ears!" Gryn happily exclaims.

"Just shut up and get this over with..."

“Oh, I will... But it won’t be quick... Humans don’t deserve quick...” Gryn slowly shuts the door.

Gryn is true to his word, and sets out his tools. He begins with a simple beating, punching and slashing Danny with his claws. However, Gryn seems to admire April’s work, leaving his chest untouched. When he tires of beating the human, he clamps old jumper cables to his body, before attaching them to the car battery. Danny grits his teeth hard as his flesh singes from the current of the fully charged battery. Considering its age, Gryn must have recharged it recently, solely for this reason. In between electric shocks, he burns him with his cigar and several matches.

Gryn can’t help but taunt Danny as he sits back and watches his minions take over. Shocking, burning, beating and slashing the defenseless human. As he is being tortured, Gryn rambles on about his hatred for humans, a family trait that seems to possess all of his male relatives. He has never been mistreated by a human before, as Danny is the first Gryn had ever even seen, but regardless, he wants to slowly destroy him. As he finishes his rambling speech, he takes a bite out of Danny’s shoulder.

The blood runs down his chin as he pushes the human over in the old chair. He orders his men to unlock him and strap him to the bed. Gryn’s irrational hatred seems to possess him as he takes an old leather whip, lashing it across Danny’s unmarked back. He whips the human over

and over again. Even Gryn's own minions seem both horrified and disgusted. They look away as Gryn stripes his back. When his muscular arm grows tired, he simply switches to the other. Eventually Danny succumbs to the pain and slips into unconsciousness.

He awakens in the night to several of Gryn's prostitutes trying to bandage what is left of the flesh of his back. He looks down through the metal springs of the frame to see a considerable pool of blood beneath him. Perhaps Gryn had worried he was killing him too quickly? He lies there as the girls attend to his wounds. After finishing, they leave him alone, but Gryn soon returns. His minions unlock him, pulling Danny from the bed frame and sitting him back down in the chair. They cuff him back into the chair as Gryn lights the oil lamp, bringing it up to Danny's face. He takes hold of his bottom jaw and looks over Danny's teeth.

"Hmm... I've never pulled one of these before... Where are my pliers?" Gryn asks with a hideous grin.

"Uh... I don't know." A minion nervously answers.

"What the fuck do I even pay you for?" He growls.

"You know what... That's a damn good question! You never said we'd be ripping some poor guy to shreds for no reason. We're just fucking guards!" The minion yells angrily.

Gryn raises a brow and tilts his head, as though amused. He sets down the lamp and stands, glaring at the minion. He quickly takes aim with a shiny silver revolver and fires a single round, killing his rather insubordinate subordinate.

“Drag that piece of shit out of here, and find me my fucking pliers!” Gryn yells, storming out of the room.

The minions don't hesitate, quickly dragging off the twitching corpse and locking the door behind them. Danny looks around the room, where he has been left alone. He sees the oil lamp near his feet and shifts in the chair. He begins to formulate a plan. He shifts in the chair, back and forth, over and over. It begins to creak. Suddenly, the rear legs break and Danny falls back. With the legs broken, the other ends of his handcuffs are now empty. He grabs the oil lamp and heaves it at the wall by the door, causing it to erupt into a large ball of flame and starting a moderate fire.

As the fire spreads along the wall, smoke fills the room. It must be charring the other side, because he can hear muffled voices crying out, and the shuffling of feet. The minions rush toward the door, which Danny hides himself beside. Holding the two broken chair legs, Danny prepares himself, taking a deep breath as the rage builds within him. The door swings open, landing in the fire and causing it to rush through the crack near the hinges. The two minions rush inside, followed by Gryn.

Danny slams a chair leg into the back of one of the Minions head, instantly knocking him unconscious. The other minion spins around, but Danny throws a chair leg, striking him in the face and splitting his nose open. Gryn turns, roaring in anger at him. He grabs Danny's shoulders and shoves him against the wall. Danny slams the broken chair leg across his face, causing Gryn to loosen his grip. Danny then jams the sharp end of the broken leg into Gryn's neck, driving the wooden stake clear through it. Arterial spray shoots out of both wounds as he falls to the ground.

The minion with the bloody nose looks horrified. The fire rages, engulfing a large portion of the room as Danny rushes the man, tackling him and slamming him into the wall. The man drops his gun from the sheer force of the push. The adrenaline courses through Danny's veins even more powerfully than April's drugs did. He spins around, heaving the man into the flames, nearly throwing him. He screams and flails as he is set ablaze. Danny reaches down, taking the gun and a fallen set of keys. He unlocks his handcuffs, dropping them to the ground as he rushes past the flames and into the hall, quickly dashing through and out the front swinging doors.

By now, the fire is spreading throughout the interior of the brothel. No one seems to notice the bloodied, armed human running from the source of the flames. Danny can't explain it, and he isn't going to stop to ponder. He stands on

the porch, looking around the town. It's very dark, he can't make out where the trail is. He runs in the direction that he thinks it should be, quickly escaping Ikard. He takes a moment to look back at the brothel, which is now nearly totally engulfed in flames. The fire even seems to spread to other nearby buildings. He can't help but laugh at their plight.

"Burn, fuckers..." He mutters to himself.

Chapter 5: The Prodigal Adopted Son

The disoriented and injured man wanders the edge of the forest, looking for the trail. He paces back and forth, stumbling nearly a kilometer in each direction, but he can't find the path that brought him there. Darkness settles into the field; the only light is provided by the raging fire in the distance. Ikard burns brightly, but not enough to show him the way. No longer willing to wait until he can find the path to the main road, he simply marches into woods.

The wind flutters the tattered bandages on his back as he trips over rocks and fallen branches. The leafy canopy above him blocks his view of the stars, and occasionally even the moon, making it difficult to navigate. He weaves between trees, zig-zagging back and forth as he tries to

maintain a relatively straight line. The lack of sleep and his horrendous wounds are beginning to take a toll on his body and mind. He sees a beam of white moonlight piercing the canopy and illuminating the ground. He falls to his knees in the moonlight, prostrating himself on the cold grass.

“Please God... Whatever I did to deserve this, I’m sorry. I just want to go home.”

He weeps, his tears running down his nose and dripping onto the ground. The salty liquid shimmers in the moonlight as it pools on an old brown leaf that lies just beneath his face. He brings his knees toward his chest, lying on his hands and forearms to prevent his wounds from touching the ground and further contaminating them. Face down in a modified fetal position, he rests his forehead on the frigid earth as the cold spring air seems to envelope him with icy fingers. He trembles with every brisk gust. Though his body cries out in pain, and the wind drains the warmth from him, he is so exhausted that it doesn’t matter. He closes his eyes and slips into unconsciousness.

He opens them again to see that the sun has once again risen into the sky. He can’t be sure, but it appears to be nearly noon. He stands from the ground and looks around, unable to recall which direction he had traveled from. Nothing looks the same in the daylight as it did in the night. He stumbles around as he tries to regain his bearings, looking left and right, forward and back. He rests his hands

against the bark of a birch tree, setting his forehead against it. He grits his teeth in anger and slams his forehead against the trunk. Why is this so difficult?

He is suddenly startled by a very faint gunshot echoing through the forest. He turns to look, curious as to where it emanated from. He hears another, and then, without warning, a volley of fire echoes. It sounds like a war has just begun somewhere. He spins around as the sounds of the gunfire echo throughout the forest, bouncing off every tree and weaving around every boulder. During the night, he had wandered through the woods long enough to be unable to discern the location of Ikard, or the road. He can't even see the smoke from the fires anymore. Perhaps they'd been extinguished? The gunfire continues for several minutes as he tries to use it to navigate, but as quickly as it had begun, it ceases.

Left without a sense of direction, and in a forest that he doesn't fully recognize, Danny has little recourse but to pick a heading and walk. He stumbles through the woods as he attempts to move in a northerly direction. The sun seems to fly through the sky as he shambles through the brush like a zombie. He has no real sense of time as he moves ceaselessly toward his goal. His stomach cramps from hunger as he grows weary. He bumps into trees and trips over stones, but never stops moving. His head is pounding. He knows that he is suffering from dehydration.

He suddenly hears a familiar sound; water rushing in a nearby stream. He moves toward the beautiful sound as quickly as possible. He finds the stream that seems to flow from the northeast to the southwest. Dropping to his hands and knees near the water's edge, he cups the water in his hands and brings it to his lips. The cool clear liquid turns red in his cupped hands as it dampens the dried blood encrusted over his mouth.

He drinks the water in his palms, as though worried it is merely a figment of his imagination. Realizing that it is quite real, he slams his hands down into the earth and leans forward, guzzling the water directly from the babbling brook. He pauses only to take occasional breaths before continuing to hydrate himself. He can't help but cackle at this wonderful gift, the only respite he has had in days. He had never, in all of his life, been so pleased to see a humble stream.

The sun creeps behind the mountains as he sits by the flowing water. He mentally debates with himself as to whether he should follow the stream, or continue over it and along the imaginary trail he had made for himself. To his surprise, he had managed to maintain a vaguely northern direction, and eventually he would find either the road, or a cliff overlooking the road. In either case, he would be able to make his way home from there. As darkness falls, he decides to pass the stream and press onward.

He carefully crosses over the stream and marches along his fictitious trail, weaving left around one tree, then right around the other. He maintains his course as the sun rests behind the mountains and the moon awakens. He walks for hours, until the moon sits high in the sky. In the darkness, he nearly steps off the edge of a short cliff. The rocks tumble down the side of the steep ridge as he peers over the ledge. Nearly ten meters below sits the old, cracked concrete of the road. He can barely contain his elation as he quickly moves west along the ridge. He slowly descends to level ground as he inches ever closer to salvation.

He reaches the road and drops to his knees. He weeps joyfully as he leans forward and kisses the dusty stone with ragged lips. He reaches his hands for the sky and cries out to the moon, which seems to look down curiously at the miniscule creature. He stands to his feet, swaying uncontrollably as he struggles to steady himself on his weakened legs. His energy is quickly draining, and he knows he has little strength left. He isn't sure that he can manage the long walk back to Vahdalia.

As he shambles eastward along the road, stumbling and swaying, he suddenly remembers Kyle, and the story he had told him of his own journey. He recalls Kyle explaining how he too didn't have the strength to continue, but that his anger and desire for vengeance gifted him with a hidden energy that pushed him along. Up until this point, Danny had been wallowing in his own self-pity, begging God to release

him from his suffering, and wondering why he was chosen to bear such pain. Perhaps that was his failing?

Through sheer force of will, he crushes his melancholy thoughts underneath his mental boot. He recalls the slavers lack of compassion for his friends. He remembers April, and her sadistic torture; how callously she sold him for alcohol and ammunition, after drugging, raping and abusing him. She turned him over to a man that she seemed to know would enjoy torturing him to death. He feels a welling within him, a burning hatred that seems to take him over. Just as Kyle had described, it seems to flow throughout his whole body and shrouds him like steam.

He feels himself flushing with rage as his extremities burn. The anger makes him feel warm, even though the wind through the dark valley is quite cold. The hatred gives him purpose and resolve. He must return to Vahdalia and recover, otherwise he won't be able to find April and her minions, and make them pay for what they did. He feels a rush of energy; his legs strengthen as he marches steadily down the road toward home.

With every step he imagines what he would do to the dainty Voeldahn, once he catches her. Perhaps he would rape her on her own device? No, she would probably enjoy that. Would he sever her fingers and feed them to her? No, that's too simple, and she could choke to death before he is finished with her. Maybe he would carve a large 'D' into her

chest, belly or back, and seal it with salt and hot wax? Every imaginary punishment he deals to her brings a smile to his torn lips and makes him stronger.

He trudges along the road, fueled only by his rage. He walks for hours as the moon begins to wane, creeping ever closer to the tops of the mountains that lie behind him. In the distance he can see faint lights. He has arrived! After such a horrendous journey, he can see Vahdalia in the distance. His rage is pushed aside by a sudden euphoria, brought on by the sight of his beloved town that sits just over a kilometer away. He finds the strength to sprint toward his goal, quickly coming upon the village.

Several Voeldahn stand near the bridge, armed with rifles. The militia see the being dashing toward them and aim their weapons, while another peers through powerful binoculars. The man with the binoculars drops them, letting them dangle from the cord around the back of his neck. He reaches out with both hands, lowering the other guard's rifles, then cups his hands to his mouth and calls out.

"Danny!" Nicholas' voice shouts.

Tears stream down his face as he runs toward Nick, who stands with the other militia. Nick jogs toward him, reaching out for the young man, who promptly collapses in his arms. Nick struggles to hold Danny upright as his

companions rush up to them, slinging their rifles over their shoulders. They hold Danny up, throwing an arm over each of their shoulders, their tails swaying.

“Oh my God...” Nick mutters, looking over Danny’s injuries with a small flashlight. “Get him back to town right away! I’ll keep watch until you return!” He orders the soldiers.

They nod their heads and begin dragging Danny over the bridge and across the river, walking through the border of Vahdalia and into the town proper. His feet drag on the ground as Danny struggles to maintain consciousness, repeatedly fading in and out as they pull him toward a makeshift clinic. He can hear people gasping, and some call his name. He opens his eyes to see only the ground rushing by his numb legs, and vague Voeldahn shadows passing him as the two men bring him to a small, repurposed home.

Drake rushes toward Kyle and Cassandra’s home, quick to tell them of the news of Danny’s return. He rushes up the stairs and swings open the front door, rushing past little Trenton who sits on the ground, playing with a large toy police car. He enters the kitchen, but stops when he sees Cassandra straddling her husband’s pelvis as he sits in a kitchen chair. He raises a brow at the scene. In one hand she grips his chin, her claws resting gently against his flesh; in the other hand is a straight razor. A homemade shaving cream dots his smooth face.

Cassandra looks back at her brother, before returning to her work, running the razor carefully along Kyle's neck. Her tail swishes as she runs the blade over a final streak of shaving cream, before wiping the razor along a cloth that sits draped over her arm. She leans in and kisses her husband lovingly, getting a bit of shaving cream on the fur of her snout. He wipes it away with a cloth, smiling warmly at her. She climbs from atop him as he wipes away the remaining dots of white foam.

"What's up?" He asks Drake.

"What was that?" Drake immediately shoots back.

"Oh! Cassie likes me clean shaven, so she learned how to do it. I bet that looked pretty provocative didn't it?" Kyle chuckles.

"A little." Drake admits, scratching the back of his neck.

"At first, it was hard to learn. We kept getting... Distracted..." Cassie giggles.

"Thanks sis. I really wanted to hear that... Anyway, I have some good news for a change!" Drake exclaims.

"Oh yeah?"

"Danny's back..." Drake grins.

An arm slips over the edge of the bed, dangling limp and rousing Danny from his slumber. He slowly opens his eyes, lying face down on a rather comfortable bed. A female Voeldahn attends to his wounds, changing the bandages on his back. She quickly and politely apologizes for waking him up, urging him to return to sleep. He needs to rest after his ordeal. He can hear the sound of feet shuffling loudly down the hall, quickly barging into the room to the woman's frustration. She urges them out of the room to let Danny sleep, but he holds out a hand.

"No... Let them stay..." He softly speaks.

The nurse sighs, returning to her work. She gingerly rubs an ointment on his back, before applying new bandages. He hears the gasp of a high pitched female voice. He turns his eyes to look, but can't turn his head to see the doorway without shifting his whole body. He curls a few fingers, leaving only his index and middle fingers extended. He slowly motions for whoever is in the room to approach. A figure moves in closer and kneels beside his bed. Grace smiles warmly at him, her eyes glossy with tears as she looks over the boy.

"I guess we aren't going for a walk anytime soon." She sweetly jests.

Danny chuckles, coughing for a brief moment. He smiles at her, so pleased to see a friendly and considerably attractive face.

"I missed you..." He whispers.

Grace smiles wide, elated by his words.

"Playing favorites?" Sam speaks up.

He walks around the nurse and stands just behind Grace. He is soon followed by Drake, then Kyle, who holds Kathy, and Cassandra, who holds Trenton. Danny looks at his friends, his heart growing warm. Tears build in his eyes, before running over the bridge of his nose. He sniffles, and Grace is quick to dab his eyes with a soft white cloth.

"It's so good to see all of you." Danny murmurs.

"We thought we had lost you out there." Cassandra begins.

"Yeah, after Nick got back, we prepared for the worst." Kyle adds.

"Those dumbass slavers followed him all the way across the bridge, but we were waiting for 'em!" Drake grins, cracking his knuckles. "Killed 'em to a man... After

Nick told us what had happened, we got the militia together and we went out to rescue all of you.”

“We?” Danny weakly asks.

“Kyle and Cass got a babysitter and came along. They led one team, while I led another. We marched through the night and got to the ambush. We heard their boasting and found the slavers a click down the road. After we killed ‘em all, we released Sam and the others, but you were long gone. They told us about this ‘April’ girl, and where they saw her taking you, with her little entourage. We spent the day walking the road to find you.” Drake explains.

“You did that for me?” Danny asks, looking to Kyle and Cassandra.

“Yeah. You’re like a son, Danny. We’ll always come for you.” Kyle replies, as Cassandra nods in agreement.

“We searched throughout the night and saw the smoke from that town, Ikard. We found them at dawn, still putting out the flames. We watched them through binoculars for a while, to see if you were there.” Cassandra explains.

“We never saw you though. You must have already escaped.” Kyle adds.

“I did... I started that fire...” Danny grins.

“Good work. It’s a good thing too, or we probably never would have known about those assholes. We attacked ‘em after we saw how lawless it was. Didn’t even warn ‘em! We destroyed the town and killed ‘em to a man. I even shot the women and children over five-years-old, just in case.” Drake says.

“We spared only the ones who would be too young to remember what happened. We brought them back for safe keeping.” Kyle finishes.

“Good... They had it coming.” Danny sighs.

“Alright, that’s enough. He needs to rest, and I still have to rebandage his chest. Please get out.” The nurse sternly demands.

“I’ll stay and help you.” Grace volunteers.

She reaches out a hand, taking Danny’s in hers. She rests another over his, cupping his hand between hers and gently stroking him. The nurse sighs and shakes her head in frustration. She sees how Grace comforts her patient and relents.

“Alright, fine. But the rest of you need to leave.” She barks.

“Don’t worry, Danny. I’m right here with you.” Grace smiles.

Chapter 6: Fall From Grace

Danny sits on his porch, looking at blades of grass that sway so gently in the summer breeze. It’s early afternoon,

and the townsfolk go about their day as they have all of the days previous. He feels a tinge of pain in the scars on his back, a result of nerve damage. He reaches a hand around and gently swipes at the scars, as though swatting away the faint pain itself. Several months have passed since his return, and though his body is healing, his mind and heart are scarred.

He's been rather quiet since his return and recovery. His family and friends, and even the townsfolk he isn't very familiar with, have all done a great deal to aid his recuperation. Sam is ever mindful of his best friend, being sure to never bring up his injuries or his experience, lest he cause him more anguish. Grace spends a considerable quantity of time with him, visiting daily. Her presence has been a godsend. Danny often stops by to see her as well, and though it has been a very slow process, they seem to be building the foundations of a true relationship together.

"Hi Danny." Grace greets him happily.

"Hi Grace." He looks up, smiling back at her,

She sits beside him on the porch, resting her head against his shoulder. Her tall ears brush his face as she leans against him. He slides an arm behind her back, holding her gently as he facetiously pretends to spit her fur from his mouth. She smiles, gently pushing him with her hand. He rests his head atop hers, giving her a gentle kiss.

She absorbs his attention like a sponge, and returns it two-fold. She wraps her arms around him, holding him tightly, mindful of his scars.

They spend the day together as they often do; they keep each other company as they go about their regular chores. Danny cuts wood while talking with Grace. Grace repairs clothing while Danny helps and entertains her. They both help harvest the fields, walking side by side. When their chores are completed, they walk the town's edge and sit at their favorite spot. It's the base of a large oak tree that sits about thirty meters from the side of the river, near the large waterwheel generator. As night falls, Danny walks her home and hugs her goodnight, sharing a kiss with her.

He walks alone to the house he shares with Sam, entering quietly and cooking a simple dinner alongside his friend. They sit at the table across from each other and talk about how their days had gone; they banter like an old married couple. Once the night is nearly finished, they return to their rooms, where Danny sits at the edge of the bed. Though his days are pleasant, especially when with Grace, the darkness in his soul emerges at night, eager to reclaim him once more.

As the spring turned to summer, he could no longer lie down comfortably while dressed. He removes his clothes before lying down to sleep, always stopping to look at the

large 'A' carved into his chest. It is an ever-present reminder of his ordeal. With a moderately sized mirror atop the dresser in his room, he turns, looking over his shoulder at the horrific scars on his back. The marks look like a geographical map of a mountain range, running nearly the entire length and width of his back. They can't even be called stripes, but are more like patches, or gouges.

Grace had seen the scars and didn't seem repulsed, but he doubts her sincerity. After all, if they horrify him, they must utterly disgust her; she is just too polite to say anything. A tinge of pain runs through them every so often, especially when he lies down against them. He once slept peacefully on his back, but now no longer. He has taken to sleeping on his side, or even his stomach, avoiding pressure on the scars of his back. When he finally falls asleep, he is tormented by horrible nightmares. The dreams vary each night, but nary a night occurs where he doesn't have one.

Sometimes he is handcuffed or chained to April's device, or Gryn's chair or bed frame, reliving his torture. April uses his body against his will, drugging him and carving his flesh with her claws. Every scream of pain pleases her, until her mouth has morphed into a demonic smile filled with scores of razor sharp fangs. Gryn is even worse, ripping at him with large claws, and feasting on his flesh and blood like some sort of vampire or werewolf. His eyes like glowing rubies as he shocks him with the car battery, burns him with fire, and flogs him mercilessly.

He'll awaken from the pain, drenched in sweat, his scars aching as though he had just suffered their torture again. During the nights when April and Gryn don't come for him, he is lost in the woods, afraid and looking for a way out. He cries like an injured toddler and calls to Grace, but she never comes to his aid. On other nights, Vicky scolds him for being a failure, before turning to dust, or he is down in that hole with a crying Vicky, who speaks to him before committing suicide with his Glock.

'It should have been you' runs through his mind every night, regardless of which nightmare chooses to visit him. Realizing her affection for Alex has brought Danny to only one conclusion: Vicky wanted *him* to be captured instead, and to hide in that hole with Alex. Perhaps she killed herself because she wanted to be with Alex, whom she presumed was already dead? Or perhaps she did it knowing that they would be captured, as some sort of perverse revenge? Regardless of her reasons, her words haunt him.

The only time that he had ever shared this thought with anyone else, it was Sam, who had a completely different perspective. Sam was with him in the hole, and reminded him about Vicky's behavior. How she clung to him, accepted his comfort, and even nuzzled him for a moment. Sam believes that she was finally realizing Danny's worth to her, and meant that 'it should have been you I was with, and not Alex'. Danny would have loved to believe that, but it doesn't

explain her suicide. They were so close to escape, and Danny is certain that she knew it.

As he sits at the edge of the bed, his mind races as he lets his sweat dry. He opens the drawer of the nightstand, removing the only firearm he still possesses, the H&R 732 revolver. Each night the pain in his heart grows worse, and he wonders if it will ever heal. He begged God for mercy when he was April's prisoner, but received none. He begged Him again when she sold him to Gryn, but still received none. He stumbled out of the woods and made it home to his family and friends, but his suffering has followed him. It lies underneath his bed, or in the depths of his closet, coming out when he sleeps to torment him, and no matter how hard he prays, it hasn't left him be.

He looks over the revolver, slowly pulling the pin forward and swinging open the cylinder. He examines the weapon's rounds, making sure they are still live. He closes the cylinder, contemplating the use of the pistol on himself. 'What was the purpose of all this?' he wonders. 'Will Grace really miss me, or will she just find a better, more worthy man to replace me?' 'Why couldn't I have just died on that noose all those years ago?' 'What's the point?'

He places the revolver to his temple as he sobs quietly, his heart splitting in two as he draws back the hammer. Tears stream down his cheeks and drip onto his bare legs as he slowly inches his finger into the trigger guard. The

skin of his fingertip gently brushes the metal of the trigger. He wants it to end, and would do anything for the pain to cease. He takes a deep breath as he prepares to squeeze, but as he feels the cold metal gently shifting, he lowers the weapon, unable to go through with it.

“I really am a failure...” He weeps, placing a hand over his face. “I can’t even kill myself...”

He carefully lowers the hammer and places the revolver back into his nightstand drawer, slowly closing it as he stares at the small table. He lies back down on his side, weeping into his old pillow. He wishes that he weren’t alone, curling up in a ball as he feels the stabbing pain in his chest. He would love to have Grace with him right now. In his current state he would even settle for April, if she were to walk through his bedroom door right now. Inevitably, the exhaustion drags him back to sleep. For once, no dreams wait for him when he returns; he sleeps peacefully.

As dawn arrives, Danny is awoken by a commotion outside. He climbs up from his bed and quickly gets dressed. He exits the home to see his friend Sam on the front porch, watching as travelers from Hutchison Post arrive. Something is different about this trade convoy. They speak with David, Drake and Kyle, clearly talking about something quite important. A crowd of villagers gather around, gasping and chattering amongst themselves.

His curiosity peaked, Danny steps off the porch and approaches the crowd. Grace suddenly appears from around a corner, quickly following behind. He greets her with a smile, and she takes his hand in hers. They approach the crowd and are able to discern some of their chatter. To Danny's horror, the convoy from Hutchison Post had stumbled across an escaped slave with a very frightening tale. As they were already so close to Vahdalia, they brought the victim there for treatment. The militia cart off the wounded slave to the same clinic where Danny had recovered.

Danny pushes his way through the crowd, pulling Grace behind him. They stand only a layer away from the traders, listening in on their story. The slave had escaped after being caught alone by a gang of ruthless thugs led by a small and dainty woman. She was pregnant, with a faint bump in her belly. The Voeldahn female had feline features, white fur and black stripes, long black hair pulled into pigtails, icy blue eyes, and answered to the name 'April'. The poor man was forced to work for them, doing chores and suffering regular abuse, while sleeping chained to an old shack on a ridge. The slave managed to escape during the night when the board he was chained too gave way, the nails having come loose.

Danny's mind races. He can't believe that April is alive, and pregnant. He wonders if it's his child she carries,

considering the time that's passed. He is not surprised that she is still hurting people, and now he wonders if this is why God had spared him in the first place. Perhaps he was spared, but left to suffer his torture so as to remind him of what horrors people like her could inflict on the world? Perhaps it is his mission to find and kill her?

Suddenly filled with a new resolve, Danny turns and pushes his way through the crowd. Drake and Kyle never notice his presence, or know of his plans, and he doesn't want them too. He swims through the pool of people, Grace struggling to keep up with him. He dashes for his house, running up the stairs and into his room. He takes the revolver from the drawer and collects his pack, which was returned to him after the militia killed the slaver horde. As he collects supplies for the trip, Grace enters the room. She knows all too well what he is planning, and the tears in her eyes reveal her feelings on the matter.

"Please don't go! Stay with me! Everything will be okay if you just stay with me!" Grace begs him.

"I'm sorry, but I feel like I have to do this." Danny replies.

"But you don't! You're safe here, but you won't be out there. Please don't leave me!" She cries.

"I'll be back."

"But you won't be the same! I love you as you are, and I don't want you to change." She pleads.

“Maybe I already have...” He mutters.

“Why is it so hard for you to let go and accept me?!”

Danny stops, feeling so unworthy of her, and he isn't wrong. He's done nothing to deserve Grace, and yet she stands by him. Tears well in his eyes as he wonders whether he should go at all.

“I don't know... It just is... I'm scarred and flawed.”

“That doesn't bother me.” Grace says softly, taking ahold of his hand.

“But it bothers me... I hate myself, and maybe if I do this, I won't anymore.” Danny replies, pulling his hand away.

“It won't ever make you feel better. Please just let it go!”

He slips on his pack and tucks the revolver into the waistband of his pants. Grace chases after him but stops at the porch as he walks away. He wants to look back, but he can't. He knows that if he does, he'll see her face and he won't be able to leave. A part of his brain screams at him to just surrender, to drop the burden that weighs so heavy on his heart, and to return to Grace. However, a much more angry voice growls at him to press onward. He doesn't need Grace; he only needs vengeance and blood.

Chapter 7: Failure

Danny marches toward the old bridge, quickly leaving Vahdalia in his quest to find April and her men. He doesn't stop to ask any questions of the visitors, or the escaped slave; he already has any idea of where they might have been staying. The story told by the Hutchison Post group describes an old, single-room shack that sits north of the road and along the ridge. He had been there before, and only hopes that April's gang hasn't already left. His muscles become tense as he crosses the bridge.

His thoughts jump back and forth without rhyme or reason. What will he say when he finally reaches them? Will he be capable of killing April and her men? Did he pack everything he needs? Is April really pregnant? Should he have stayed behind with Grace? Is he even going to find April and her gang at all? He feels himself developing a slight, nervous headache. The farther along the road he walks, the more tense he becomes. His scars begin to ache, which only serves to remind him of his mission.

His anger builds and his resolve strengthens. He marches west along the road until he comes to a small but familiar path. He knows that this path will lead him up the ridge and toward the shack. He takes a moment to look around for signs of the slave's escape, as he suddenly

doubts his story. Perhaps he is looking for an excuse to give up his search and go back to Grace? Danny himself doesn't even know why he does this. He carefully looks over the scene, scouring it for clues.

He notices something out of the corner of his eye; a piece of metal glinting in the sunlight draws him near. He kneels down and picks up the object, looking over a broken chain link of moderate size. He drops the link and walks north toward the path where he discovers a rotted wooden board, broken at one end. Rusty nails protrude from the board. A rusty metal plate with a ring attached to it is bolted onto the board, and several metal chain links dangle from the ring. This must be what the poor slave was leashed too.

He grits his teeth in a silent rage, realizing that the slave's story must be true. April and her gang are still out there and abusing innocents. Someone needs to make them pay and it may as well be him. Following the trail, he trudges along as it slowly climbs up the ridge. After a brisk hike up the slope, he comes to a clearing near the old shack. He grows increasingly nervous as he kneels down beside a tree.

He draws his little thirty-two caliber revolver from his waistband, taking a moment to comfortably grip the weapon. His pack applies unwanted pressure to his back, increasing the pain that he feels in his scars. He slips off his

pack and sets it at the base of the tree before preparing to make his move. He takes several deep breaths, his body trembling slightly. He is anxious, nervous, afraid, and excited all at the same time.

Finally ready to act, he climbs the remaining meters to the top of the ridge. There sits the shack, alone in the field and looking like an abandoned and sickly animal. He holds up his sidearm as he walks carefully around the structure. He sees a faint plume of smoke rising from the other side of the shack. On the wall furthest from the smoke is a gap in the shack's wall, the place where the missing board once was. This is most definitely the correct location. He clutches the pistol tightly and raises it before him, moving quickly around the shack, ready for action.

As he swings around the corner of the shack, his finger begins to squeeze the trigger, but he stops in his tracks when he sees absolutely nothing. The camp is already abandoned. The smoke rises from a fire pit that seems to have burned itself out. Perhaps they left it there because they didn't care? Or perhaps they did it on purpose, so that anyone who would discover their camp wouldn't know exactly when they left? It makes little difference. He quickly examines the site for clues.

Searching the remnants of April's camp, he finds evidence of their presence. Marks are gouged into the soft earth from several crates, along with a strange impression.

He recognizes the shape as the base of the mount of April's favorite toy, the very same device she had locked him in before drugging, raping and torturing him. Further investigation uncovers even more irrefutable evidence in the form of a few strands of white and black fur that April had shed.

He holds the furs, glaring at them. His scars throb, and the strands burn his fingers like a powerful acid. He drops them to the ground and races back to his pack, quickly slipping it on. He knows that there is no other way to leave this clearing except the path. Although they could blaze a trail through the woods, it would be readily visible, and if they are still lugging around April's toy, it would be far too difficult.

He sprints down the trail towards the main road, nearly falling over several times as gravity weighs him down. He passes the rotted board, exits the trail, and looks side to side. They clearly didn't head east toward Vahdalia, or he would have passed them already. They must have traveled west, toward Hutchison Post. He slips the pistol back into his waistband and begins jogging, traveling west as quickly as his body can comfortably move. Sweat beads on his forehead as he rushes west down the old road, hoping to catch up to the gang of slavers.

As the sweat streams down the side of his face, he sees a figure walking toward him in the distance. Danny

stops in his tracks, as does the other figure on the road. Danny waves to the man and casually walks towards the Voeldahn, who is noticeably apprehensive. The Voeldahn takes a step to the side, his hand resting near his waist. Danny steps closer to the canine man, who gives him a wide berth.

“Pardon me, but I’m looking for someone.” Danny begins.

“On this road?” The Voeldahn raises a brow.

“Yes. A female Voeldahn with feline features, white fur and black stripes, with black hair. She was probably accompanied by several Voeldahn males.” Danny continues,

“Accompanied? Not following?” The man asks in surprise.

Danny looks over the Voeldahn, his eyes scanning the man. He notices his hand that rests near his waist; a very familiar pistol is tucked into his waistband. Danny narrows his eyes as he looks over the back half of a blued Ruger P95 pistol. He turns his eyes back up to the man.

“So, you haven’t seen her?” Danny presses.

“You’re the only person I have seen on this road, mister.” The man answers.

Danny wonders if this Voeldahn once belonged to April's gang. That certainly looks like Sam's pistol, and he does seem vaguely familiar. The Voeldahn takes a step back. Danny flexes the fingers of his strong hand.

"Have we met before?" He asks the Voeldahn.

"I don't think so..."

Danny grabs his revolver as the Voeldahn grabs his own pistol. They draw simultaneously, pointing their firearms at each other.

"I don't want any trouble, mister. I'm just traveling the road, like you." The Voeldahn begins.

Danny cocks the hammer of his revolver. The cylinder, visibly loaded with live rounds, rotates and locks as he prepares to fire.

"I don't know if you're loaded, but I know for damn sure that I am... If you don't hand that over right now, I'll pull this trigger and take it from you." Danny calmly speaks to the man.

"Alright... Easy now..." The Voeldahn replies.

He turns the pistol in his hands and reaches out, presenting it to Danny.

“Oh no. I don’t think so... Set it on the ground.” Danny orders.

The man sighs, setting the pistol onto the cracked concrete before taking a few steps back. Danny kneels, keeping his eyes and revolver trained on the man. He takes the pistol and holds it by the side. Resting his thumb behind the grip, he uses his fingers to pull the slide back. Holding the gun up to eye level, so as not to look away from the Voeldahn, he sees that the chamber is empty, as is the magazine; a gray plastic follower is plainly visible. He now understands why the man surrendered so easily.

“Gotta love revolvers, right? You can’t bluff like you can with a pistol.” Danny remarks.

He slips the P95 into his waistband. The man shrugs his shoulders, hands held up in the air in surrender.

“Now we’re going to have a little talk...” Danny continues.

He leads the Voeldahn off the road and into the woods, just to the side of the road. He takes a length of rope and carefully ties the man to the trunk of a moderately size tree. With the man now immobilized and sitting on the ground, Danny begins questioning the suspected slaver. The man denies all knowledge, claiming to be a simple traveler. When asked about the pistol, he claims to have owned it for years. He denies having ever traveled with a large group, knowing April, or having ever met Danny before.

With every question, Danny grows more and more angry. He is positive that he has seen this Voeldahn before, that he is in fact a slaver, and may have even helped pull Vicky's body from the hole. As the minutes pass, he realizes that he isn't going to learn what he wants from the slaver by simply asking nicely. He remembers April and Gryn, and suddenly has a thought. He looks around for tools to use, but all he has is a multitool on the side pouch of his pack. He takes the multitool from the pouch, opening it.

"Hey... W-what are you going to do with that?" The Voeldahn nervously asks.

"Maybe it was my technique? ... Or maybe I wasn't using the right tools? I guess we'll find out, whenever you stop lying to me..." Danny grins sinisterly.

"H-hey! I'm not lying!" The man cries out, his voice beginning to tremble.

Danny can hear his fear; he knows that he is on the right track. He wastes no time in learning what he can from the slaver. He crops his pointy ears, pulls out a few claws, and carves into his chest, leaving a large 'D' gouged into his flesh. The man cries out and groans in pain, but never confesses. Danny never expected a slaver to have this much strength, especially if they could leave each other so readily. Eventually, Danny realizes that he is wasting more time than he could possibly gain from the information gleaned from the slaver; he slashes open his throat. He leaves the man's corpse tied to the tree, allowing him to rot just off the road.

Returning to the road, Danny keeps moving west. He picks up his pace as he jogs along the shattered concrete. As he rushes down the road, he can see something that catches his eye. He stops and looks closer, noticing a faint plume of smoke rising from deep within the woods. The smoke quickly fades, but Danny focuses on the location, doing his best to remember it. He walks the road looking for a blazed trail or an old path and soon finds one. Several heavy footprints are clearly visible in the soft earth, along with a lighter, smaller, even dainty set of Voeldahn boots.

"April..." Danny grumbles.

He walks the thin path, carefully following the tracks in the earth as he moves deeper into the forest. Leaves and twigs crunch underneath his feet as he anxiously makes his

way toward the location of the smoke plume. His scars ache and the sweat runs down his cheek as he begins to hear faint voices in the distance. His stomach turns and he stops. He wonders if he should even continue with his vendetta, or just return home. He leans his head against a tree trunk, gritting his teeth. The dichotomy within his own heart pains him worse than the torture ever did.

A tear runs down his cheek, soon followed by another. They stream down his face as he rams his head against the tree trunk. He struggles to hold back his pain as his fingernails peel off the living bark. He can hear the voices clearly from where he stands. April giggles in the distance, laughing at a joke that one of her men had shared. She sounds quite happy, like any of the women living their lives back in Vahdalia. His mind jumps back to his rape and torture at her hands. Did that poor slave suffer the same?

“It’s a real shame about that slave.” A man’s voice says.

“Who cares. There’s plenty more out there. I do miss my little bear, though...” April says.

“Then why’d you sell him?” Another slaver chuckles.

Danny can’t stand it anymore. He pulls the revolver from his waistband, gripping it tightly in his hand. He drops his pack near the tree that bears his claw marks, before rushing down the remainder of the path. He steps out from

behind a large rock and takes aim at the nearest object he sees. He pulls the trigger, startling the entire camp as he fires a round into the back of a slaver's head. April briefly screams, while another slaver shouts a random obscenity. Smoke rises from the barrel of Danny's little revolver as he swings the weapon, pointing it at April.

"D-Danny?" April chokes out.

"Hey, April. You remembered my name! ... It's been a while." Danny replies.

His lips curl up into a sinister smile. April looks genuinely horrified. One of her men slowly raises the rifle that sits across his lap. Danny points the little revolver at him, cocking the hammer.

"Don't even fucking play that game with me, you son of a bitch." He growls at the slaver.

The slaver looks rather surprised, raising a brow at Danny. He rests the rifle across his lap and straightens his fingers. Danny sweeps the barrel over the other slavers, keeping them in check. He is quite outnumbered, with four remaining male slavers, and an unarmed April sitting before him; there is a slaver for each round in his revolver. He points the small thirty-two back at April, who rests her

palms on the felled log that she is sitting on, each arm against either side of her hips.

“You never did answer the question.” Danny begins.

“What?” April raises a brow in confusion.

“Why did you fucking sell me!” He growls.

April jumps, startled by his forceful projection. She gulps and her fingers coil, her claws digging into the old wood of the log beneath her.

“I... I...” She stammers.

“How are you still alive?” A slaver asks.

“Willpower.” Danny grumbles.

“Did you get out in that fire at Ikard?” Another asks.

“Who do you think started it?” Danny smirks.

The four male slavers look between each other, looking rather impressed by Danny’s handiwork.

“I told you, April, that I would have stayed. I told you that I wouldn’t have run away. I told you that I forgave you, but you still sold me to that psychopath.” Danny barks at her.

She sits in silence and looks away, like a child caught disobeying their parents. Her eyes look shamefully down at the ground. Danny scans the small campsite. The fire is quite tiny, kept low on purpose so as not to create much smoke. It is only by chance that he saw the plume of smoke when he did, at the moment that they first birthed the fire. His eyes continue to scan his surroundings. He can see her favorite toy is packed up into crates and piled just behind them, which her gang is carrying for her. April slowly stands, revealing a small bump in her belly. As she rises, her men grip their rifles tightly.

“Wait! Don’t shoot him! ... Lower your weapons.” April orders.

Her men obey, remaining seated and releasing their rifles.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you again, let alone you killing one of my men.” April says softly.

“Eh... Shit happens.” Danny shrugs.

Danny isn’t the same man that she had captured. His attitude towards the murder of her loyal minion surprises her; his aggressiveness and disregard for his life is intriguing.

"I suppose it does... So why did you track me down? ... Did you want to play daddy to your child?" April asks, her lips curling up into a faint and gentle grin.

"I doubt it's mine."

"That hurts my feelings. Just what kind of woman do you think I am?" April frowns.

"A sick and twisted one. Probably a real slut, too." Danny remarks.

"Hey! I have preferences, ass hole! This *is* your baby; I *never* sleep with any of my men." April growls.

"It's true." A random slaver says in a disappointed tone.

April turns to her minion, looking rather surprised. He looks back to her and shrugs his shoulders, silently apologizing for his natural inclinations.

"Right... My men are all Voeldahn, like me, and I only like humans. I'm sure you noticed that you're a human, and one of the few in this area..." April continues.

"Right. So how can I be sure it's mine?" Danny poses.

"Danny, you must not realize how rare humans are here... You are the only one I'd seen in nearly a year. I don't fuck my men to satisfy myself, and had been abstinent until we met; it's why I was so rough with you. Sorry about that, by the way."

She tilts her head down but turns her eyes up to him, batting her eyelids rather innocently.

“I already forgave you for that, remember? I meant it when I said it.” Danny adds.

“You did?” April asks in surprise.

“Yeah... But I haven’t forgiven you for this...”

Danny quickly removes his shirt and turns in a full circle, showing her the scars on his back. April can’t believe how horrible the wounds were. She gasps, bringing her hands to her snout and cupping them in front of her mouth and nose. The slaver’s eyes collectively grow wide.

“Shit!” One slaver remarks.

“Oh God... Danny... I’m... I didn’t think he would hurt you like that!” April apologizes in a soft voice.

“Don’t play stupid! You knew full well what would happen to me when you sold me to Gryn, and you did it anyway!” He yells angrily.

“I really hoped that he wouldn’t hurt you. You have to believe me!” April pleads.

“I don’t have to do anything for you! You didn’t for me... I would have stayed with you! I begged you to keep me! No

chains, no guards; I'd have been yours. Hell, I may have eventually helped you and your little gang, doing shit like this..."

Danny points the barrel of his revolver at the twitching corpse of her still warm minion.

"You don't know what it's like to run a gang like this. I couldn't show weakness, even though I wanted to keep you!" April explains.

"Bullshit! Anyone questions you, you blow their goddamn brains out, even if they are loyal, long standing soldiers who've been with you since day one! A real leader who wanted me would have kept me, and put a round in the skull of anyone who even dared raise an eyebrow! You just didn't fucking care enough, and we both know it." Danny growls.

April can't help but feel a stirring within her at his incredible display of dominance and rage.

"I'm sorry... Please forgive me..." April begs.

She steps toward him, her hands held out to him.

“We can make it work now. I promise. You can be my little bear again. No chains, and no guards. We’ll just chalk the dead guy up to shitty luck.” She coos.

Danny narrows his eyes and brings up the pistol, pointing it at her head. She stops in her tracks. Her men don’t raise their weapons, but flex their fingers in preparation.

“You already proved how little you care about me. I just want to know the real reason you didn’t keep me around. What was it?” Danny asks.

April’s eyes dart around as she seems to be thinking. Her mouth slowly opens and she takes a breath, but no words emerge from her lips. She looks back up to Danny, who waits patiently for her answer.

“Well?!” He grows impatient.

“Would you really kill me, knowing that I’m carrying your child? *Our* child? You’d be killing your unborn son or daughter with me.” April poses.

Danny’s eyes are blank; he is expressionless as he lowers the pistol, aiming it at her pregnant belly. He squeezes the trigger and the hammer falls. Click. April

jumps slightly, and the men look on. Danny holds up the pistol, looking at it with shock and horror. The round is a dud. April soon realizes that it wasn't a scare tactic with an empty chamber; Danny wants her dead. Truly startled by the attempt on her life, she now comprehends the gravity of his hatred for her. She has never been in more danger.

"Kill him!" She orders as she moves back.

Her men rise to their feet, bringing up their rifles as they cover their master's escape. Danny fires the last four good rounds he has, killing two more of her four remaining slavers, before taking cover behind a nearby fallen tree trunk. He dives into the soft earth as the two remaining men surround his position, firing upon him as he crawls for the nearest boulder. The two slavers shoot sporadically, keeping Danny's head down for several precious seconds. Soon, the shooting stops, and he hears their feet stomping through the forest.

After hiding for a moment, he emerges from between the rock and shattered log to see that April and her two remaining men are gone. Not only are they gone, but they managed to take the weapons of their three fallen comrades, leaving Danny with absolutely nothing to fight them with, besides his bare hands. Undaunted by his brush with death, Danny begins to reload. He opens the cylinder and saves the spent shell casings, but his pockets are

empty. He dashes over to his pack and begins to dig for more rounds.

“The fuck?! Where’s my ammo!” He yells in anger.

His hands dig violently through the pack. He soon grabs the base of the pack and tips it upside down, dumping out all of its contents onto the grass. He doesn’t have any spare ammunition in his pack. He must have somehow forgotten to grab his plastic baggie of rounds. He grumbles, raging incoherently to himself as he shoves his possessions back into his pack. Left with little choice, he is forced to return home to collect more ammo, which in his haste he neglected to pack.

Chapter 8: Finality

Danny puts on his shirt, slings his pack and returns to the road, walking down the thin path. He races back to Vahdalia as fast as he can. After what seems like an eternity, he comes upon the old bridge. He passes the waving guards, ignoring their polite greeting entirely. He can’t be sure that they aren’t waiting for his return so that they can stop him from leaving again. He walks around the inner parameter of the town, keeping an eye out for Grace.

He returns to his home without being seen by anyone of consequence, and slips in through the back door.

He very quietly enters his house, creeping down the hallway. He enters his room and removes his pack, setting it atop his bed. He slowly opens several drawers, digging through them for his baggie of ammunition. He finds it in the bottom drawer of his nightstand. He doesn't recall ever leaving his ammunition there. Did someone try to hide it from him? If they were, why not just take it out of the house entirely? He grabs the baggie and sets it on his lap as he sits atop his bed. He opens the baggie and swings out the cylinder of his H&R revolver, quickly loading a fresh six rounds.

"Hey..." Sam's voice calls out.

Danny swings out the crane of the revolver, locking the cylinder in place. He turns his head up to his friend, who stands in the doorway of his bedroom.

"Are you back now?" Sam asks.

Danny stands and slips the revolver into his front pants pocket, placing the baggie of ammunition into the adjacent pocket.

"I guess that was a stupid question..." Sam continues.

Danny reaches for his pack as Sam enters the room. Sam grabs the other strap, pulling the pack away from Danny. Danny sighs in frustration and glares at his best friend.

"Are you really going to keep doing this?"

"Your goddamned right." Danny barks.

"What the hell for?"

"Because I have too!" Danny growls.

"No, you don't! You only think that you do. This is totally unnecessary. You're just putting yourself at risk by going out there." Sam begins.

"What about her? Am I supposed to just let her get away?!"

"She's not going too. People like her always get what's coming to them. It might not be you who does it, but someone will. Live by the gun, die by the gun. You know?" Sam poses.

"Well, maybe I won't ever be satisfied if it isn't me who gives her what she deserves." Danny murmurs.

"Then you aren't ever going to be able to live a normal, happy life."

Danny turns to Sam, looking at his friend for a moment. He suddenly remembers the pistol he took from the slaver on the road. He retrieves the weapon and presents it to Sam.

"I got it back for you."

Sam looks down at the pistol, his brow lowering.

"Where did you find that?" Sam asks.

"I took it from a slaver on the road. He said he wasn't, but I knew better. I'm positive he was there when we were captured. He must have kept your gun as some sick souvenir." Danny explains.

Sam looks up to Danny as he slowly reaches out, taking the pistol. He looks the weapon over for a moment, removing the magazine and pulling back the slide. He tips the pistol over and looks at the serial number.

"How do you know it's really mine?" Sam asks.

"I've only ever seen one of those out of the thousands of guns that we've accumulated and run across." Danny answers.

They stand in silence for a moment. Danny pats Sam on the shoulder and chuckles.

“You’re welcome, bro... I’ll be back as soon as I take care of this, and then I’ll get on with my ‘normal’ life.” He assures Sam.

Danny leaves his pack behind and exits the room. He walks down the hall and disappears out of the back door. Sam returns to his own room, holding the pistol tightly in his hand. He opens the drawer of his nightstand, slipping the pistol inside. He sighs as he looks into the drawer. Two nearly identical Ruger P95 pistols with a blued finish sit side by side. Sam didn’t have the heart to tell him that after Drake and the militia slaughtered April’s slaver horde, he found his pistol lying on the road; he’s had it since the day he returned home to Vahdalia.

Realizing that Danny must have killed an innocent man, or at the very least, a man who had nothing to do with April and her slaver gang, Sam quickly leaves the house. He races through the home and exits through the front door. He runs down the street, his tail bobbing and the breeze fluttering his long fur. He turns a corner and runs down the street before dashing up the stairs of the home of the McKraken’s. He barges in without knocking, something that only Drake has done.

A startled Drake sits on the couch with his niece, quickly drawing his sidearm. Kathy turns to look, biting on her own fingers. Kyle and Cass quickly emerge from the kitchen, Trenton held in Cassandra's arms. Sam holds up his hands before leaning over, gasping for breath as he rests his hands on his knees. Drake holsters his sidearm and sets Kathy aside. Rising from the couch, he walks up to Sam.

"Sam, what's going on?" Cass asks.

"Are you alright?" Drake asks.

Sam shakes his head, his breathing labored from the quick sprint.

"What happened?" Kyle asks.

"It's Danny... He came back..." Sam says as he struggles to control his breathing.

"Is he alright?!" Cass asks.

"No... He left again. He came back to find his ammo." Sam continues.

"Find it?" Drake raises a brow.

"I took it from his pack and slipped it in a random drawer in his room." Sam answers.

“Why didn’t you just keep it? Maybe hide it outside of the house?” Kyle wonders aloud.

Sam shrugs his shoulders.

“He came back to get his ammo, but I caught him. I tried to talk him out of leaving, but he wouldn’t listen. He is so angry, you can almost feel it coming off of him. He gave me back my pistol, then left.” Sam explains.

“Give it back? You never lost it...” Drake remarks.

“I know...” Sam nods. “He killed some random guy, thinking he was a slaver, and took it from him.”

“Oh no...” Kyle murmurs.

“I’ll stop him.” Drake growls, turning back to his family.

“No...” Cass shakes her head.

“This is something that we need to do. We spent the last few years watching over him; he’s our responsibility and we’ll deal with him.” Kyle chimes in, draping an arm over his wife.

“Are you sure you want to do that? You have children to think about.” Drake says.

Kyle and Cass look to each other for a moment. She leans in for a kiss; Kyle meets her halfway. After a passionate kiss, Kyle looks down at Trenton, who is

amusingly disgusted by his parent's affection for each other. He smiles and pats his son on the head.

"That's why we're doing it." Kyle finally answers.

"I don't get it." Drake admits.

"I wouldn't expect you too. Not yet, anyway." Kyle remarks.

"We raised Danny after his parents died. He's like a son to us. We'll deal with him." Cass adds.

"Alright... I'll watch the kids for you, but don't get yourselves killed, or I'll kill you." Drake grins, chuckling faintly.

"Noted." Cass says, passing Trenton over to Drake.

Danny races back toward the path where he had found April and her gang. He returns to the trail that leads up to her camp, his clothes drenched with sweat. He enters the camp and searches it for clues. The three slaver bodies are growing cold, and the tiny fire has long since died out. April and her men have yet to return for her toy, as there are only three sets of tracks that lead away from the camp. Danny walks the new trail, struggling to follow it as it winds through the woods and the sun begins to set.

The trail weaves through the forest for over a kilometer before it finally exits onto a very familiar patch of broken

concrete. Long strands of grass emerge from the cracks, swaying in the gentle breeze. This is the main road between Vahdalia and Hutchison Post. He grumbles, muttering obscenities to himself as he continues his arduous march to the west. After nearly an hour of cycling between jogging and swift walking, his muscles grow weary and cry out in pain. Even his rage cannot sustain him, and he is forced to stop for a moment.

He sits on a patch of unbroken concrete, resting his back along an old post that once supported a guard rail. He closes his eyes for a moment, but when he opens them, it is suddenly darker. Had he just taken a brief nap? Danny is furious with himself. He has no time to rest, not while April and her remaining goons gain distance. They already have a considerable lead. He cannot allow them to escape. He scrambles to his feet and begins to run along the road. As he runs, he sees another small plume of smoke in the distance.

He pulls the revolver from his front pocket and grips it tightly in his hand. As he approaches the source of the smoke, he stops when he sees a small campsite sitting in the center of the road. A Voeldahn man cooks food over the fire, sitting quietly and alone. The man has unique features: Brown fur, a long but rounded snout, short and rounded ears, and a long tail covered in short fur. It is quite thick at the base, but gradually tapers toward the tip. The man is dressed in a strange, all black outfit with a thin white collar.

He is clearly much older than Danny, easily in his late forties or early fifties.

He cannot fathom that this man has been camping here and hasn't seen April and her two minions. He slips the pistol into the back pocket of his pants before approaching the campsite. The man turns his head, looking to Danny. He waves politely, but he looks somewhat apprehensive. Danny stands at the edge of the camp and waves back to the man.

"Hello there, sir. I was hoping you could help me." Danny begins.

"What can I do for you?" The man asks.

"I'm looking for a woman accompanied by two men. They were traveling this way, and I have to find them." Danny says.

"For what reason?"

"Well, I-"

"Do you think it'll make the pain go away?" The man interrupts.

"What?!" Danny exclaims, narrowing his eyes.

"It won't, you know. If you go back home now though..." The man continues.

"Who are you?" Danny asks in an eerie monotone.

"Just a man..."

Danny draws the revolver from his back pocket, cocking the hammer as he points it at the man. The man seems unphased, focusing on his food.

“Where is she?”

“I honestly don’t know.” The man answers.

“I doubt that. You seem to know more than enough... Where is she?” Danny reiterates.

The man shrugs his shoulders.

“I don’t have time for games, old man. I’m not going to ask you a fourth time.”

The man looks over to Danny, his face expressionless and his dark eyes are blank. Danny tilts his head and raises his eyebrows, silently demanding an answer a final time.

“If you give into to your hate, that’s all you’ll ever be able to feel. Just le-”

Birds fly from their perches, startled by the sudden crack of a gunshot. The man slumps back, a bullet hole in

his head as smoke rises from Danny's handgun. He sighs and opens the revolver, stepping over the man's corpse as he replaces the spent round with a fresh one, taking it from the baggie in his front pants pocket. He isn't going to make the same mistake as before; he's keeping his weapon fully loaded at all times, and keeping his spare ammunition close at hand.

He walks for several minutes before he comes to another relatively recent path that leads into the forest. Was this where April and her men had gone? Do they have a campsite just within the woods? He doesn't hear any voices, nor does he see any smoke or a faint glow from a fire. They could very easily be concealing their position, and be just beyond the brush. He now regrets not taking his pack, which had a dim, but useable flashlight in it. His fingers flex as he adjusts his grip on the handle of his revolver. He takes a deep breath as he prepares to enter the forest, eager to follow the trail.

He suddenly recalls the man; for as much as he seemed to know about Danny, perhaps he was telling the truth when he claimed to not be aware of April's location? He could have walked past this small path and never even noticed it, camping long after April and her minions had passed. Danny can't help but chuckle at the thought. As he prepares to step into the dark trail, he is suddenly stopped by a very familiar voice.

“Danny!” Kyle calls out.

Danny turns his head, looking over his shoulder at Kyle, who stands alone in the middle of the road. Danny walks away from the mouth of the trail, stepping into the middle of the road opposite Kyle. He looks around, but doesn’t see Cassandra anywhere.

“So... Where’s your shadow?” Danny asks.

“What?”

“Or is that the other way around. I can never tell with you two.” Danny continues.

“Are you talking about my wife?” Kyle asks.

“Who the fuck else would I be talking about!” Danny yells.

“Danny... I’m here to take you home.” Kyle says softly.

“After what I did?!” Danny laughs.

“What did you do?” Kyle raises an eyebrow.

“You just walked by another one!” Danny exclaims.

“Another what?! Danny, you aren’t making any sense.”

Danny lowers his head, laughing as he brings a hand to his face. He rubs the bridge of his nose with his trigger finger and thumb, gently shaking his head.

“Don’t play stupid with me, you ass hole. You saw the body walking up here. Are you here to give me a lecture too?”

“Danny, I didn’t see any body walking up here. Just an old, burnt out camp. I’m not here to lecture you either. I just want to bring you back home, where you belong.” Kyle replies.

“I don’t belong anywhere!” Danny screams.

Kyle takes a step towards the young man, who promptly aims his gun at him. Kyle raises his hands up high, his fingers pointing straight at the stars. He looks shocked and horrified as the boy he had raised for the last few years aims at him with the very revolver that Kyle had given him.

“Please lower the gun. I’m not your enemy. I’m not here to hurt you. You don’t need to do this. I just want to take you home.” Kyle reiterates.

“Fuck you and your fucking home!” Danny screams, his voice trembling.

Tears begin to stream down Danny’s face as he cries. Kyle slowly lowers his arms as he takes another step forward.

“We can help you, man. There’s still time. Please...”
Kyle begs him.

“It’s all your fault...” Danny begins.

He lowers the revolver as he stumbles backward.

“I don’t understand.” Kyle says.

“It’s all your fault that this happened. You shouldn’t have saved me from that noose.” Danny continues.

“I saved your life. I gave you a chance. We all did. I looked after you like you were my son, or my little brother!”
Kyle exclaims.

“And what did your generosity give me? I suffered the loss of my entire family. I lived with a bunch of Voeldahn who spent the first year acting like they didn’t want me around. I spent more time loving a girl who didn’t care about me at all, who blamed me for everything before she *killed herself* in front of me! I was captured, raped, tortured, sold like a piece of meat, tortured again, and no one came to save me! Not you, not God, not anyone! I SAVED MYSELF!”
Danny roars.

He sobs as he leans forward, bracing himself on his knees as if a heavy weight were strapped to his shoulders.

“Danny...”

“Where were you?! You and your precious fucking family! I hate you! ... I hate you...” Danny sniffles.

Kyle slowly approaches the young man, trying to comfort him. When he is within arms-reach, Danny stands firm and steps back, aiming the revolver at Kyle’s head. Kyle lifts his hands up high, his fingers straight as he stares down the barrel of the thirty-two. He sees the lead rounds in the four visible chambers. They swirl as Danny draws the hammer back, cocking the gun.

“Danny, please. Even if this really is all my fault, what about my wife any my kids? Do they deserve to suffer your pain so that you can have revenge?” Kyle poses.

“... Fuck ‘em.” Danny growls.

Kyle finally realizes that he can’t bring Danny back. Danny’s finger slips into the trigger guard and caresses the curved metal bar. Kyle closes his fingers, making a fist. A gunshot rings out and Danny falls back. He drops lifeless on the ground, a large chunk of his skull missing from the high-powered rifle round. Kyle lowers his arms and kneels down over the young man’s body, his eyes welling with tears. Cassandra stands from the ground, a distance away with a scoped bolt action rifle in her hands. She walks up to her husband, placing a hand on his shoulder and giving him a comforting squeeze. He rests his hand over hers, stroking her fur softly with his thumb.

“I’m so sorry Danny.” Kyle begins.

“So am I. Sorry we failed you.” Cassandra finishes.