

Perambulation

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An impromptu rite of passage.

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Chapter 1: Gripe

On a warm spring morning in the year twenty seventy-eight, a middle-aged Kyle prepares his gear. He has been offered an important assignment, along with his brother-in-law, Drake, and several other Vahdalia villagers. They are tasked with traveling to Leota, a city on the fringe of civilization, and just over two hundred miles to the North. For the past several years, a collective called 'Sijia' has been absorbing every village and city-state in its wake. Though the collective had started as a well-off town in what was once central Oregon, it has since become a bona-fide nation.

In the beginning, many groups clashed with the Sijians; they often used brute force to attain the inhabitant's cooperation in the territories they sought to annex. The fledgling country, complete with a rewritten constitution, is determined to bring civilization back to the wasteland, even if it means it has to come from the barrel of a gun. However, as word spread of the prosperity and quality of life brought by the Sijians, all but the most wild and independent wastelanders sought to join the nation willingly. Every camp, town and city that the Sijians have touched has reverted back to life as it was before 'The Ending'.

The residents of Vahdalia and Hutchison Post had learned of this fact from long distance traders, many of whom now

employ machines and devices that have lain dormant or in horrendous disrepair for decades. Sijia has already consumed all of what was once the western and central portions of the United States of America, and her agents move north, south and east, into what was once Canada, Mexico and eastern United States. Outposts have been constructed or commandeered to support their spread to the eastern half of the continent. David, the leader of the Vahdaliens, has put together a convoy to visit the outpost in Leota; everyone hopes that by year's end, they will be another town in the ledger of the growing nation.

"This is some serious bullshit." Trenton grumbles.

"Hey, watch your language!" Kyle snaps.

Kyle slips on his pack and holsters his Smith and Wesson 5904 pistol before turning back to his son. The sixteen-year-old Voeldahn glares at his father, his arms crossed and tail swaying as he stands in the doorway of his parent's bedroom.

"You know very well that this is a long journey, and we don't have cars or motorcycles like those merchants." Kyle continues.

"But it isn't fair! I know how to shoot a gun, and I know how to survive in the wilderness!"

“Camping in the nearby fields is not the same thing as surviving out in the bush. Trust me son, I’m not doing this because I want too. I’d rather stay home with you, your mother and sister; David asked me to do this, and I said yes because I believe it will give you a better way of life. It will give us all a better way of life.”

“But I can help!” Trenton gripes.

Kyle steps up to his son, placing his hands on Trenton’s shoulders.

“I know, but I don’t want to put you at risk. I love you, son. I want you to be here, safe, when I come home.” Kyle says softly.

The human embraces his Voeldahn son, holding him tightly. Trenton hugs his father, but inside he is hurt and ashamed. Doesn’t his father know that he is already a young man? Trenton isn’t scared of the wasteland, or anything the road might throw at him. All he wants is to prove to his dad that he isn’t a little boy anymore; it’s become his life’s pursuit to earn his father’s praise and respect. The father steps back from his son, ending the embrace.

“Stay here and guard your mother and sister. You’re the man of the house until I get back.” Kyle says as he pats Trenton on the back.

“Sure...” Trenton murmurs.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be back before you know it!” Kyle chirps.

Trenton steps back into the hallway as Kyle walks past him and into the living room. There on the couch is his wife, Cassandra, and their thirteen-year-old daughter, Kathy. Kathy jumps up from the couch and grabs onto her father tightly, her tail swishing through the air. Kyle slips and arm around her and rests a hand behind her head as she cries softly.

“Please be careful, dad.” She whimpers.

“You know I will.” He assures her.

Cassandra stands from the couch and steps up to her husband and daughter. She rests one hand on Kathy’s shoulder, and the other on Kyle’s back.

“So, leaving me to watch the brats?” Cassandra winks.

“Mom!” Kathy whines.

“Absolutely. Just think, Cassie... If we didn’t have these two awesome kids, you could come with me on yet another grand adventure.” He laughs.

Cassandra chuckles and scratches Kyle’s back gently with her claws. Kyle winks at his wife and leans in, planting a firm kiss on her lips. Cassandra’s tail swishes as she pulls him closer, her hand moving from Kathy’s shoulder to Kyle’s chest.

“Guys, there are children present!” Trenton laughs.

“You can leave the room.” Kyle retorts.

“Ha-ha...” Trenton mutters.

As the husband and wife share a prolonged goodbye, Drake knocks twice before quickly walking in. Cassandra’s brother stands just beyond the front door wearing a full pack, camouflage clothing, a visible bullet resistant vest, and holding a Bushmaster XM15E2S rifle with a one-hundred round C-mag inserted. His tail is wrapped in long green and brown cloths to blend in with his camouflage clothing.

“Well, someone’s prepared.” Cassandra comments.

“Prepare for the worst but hope for the best.” Drake retorts.

“That sounds a lot like sex.” Trenton remarks.

"It is, actually." Drake chuckles.

"Is that how you had Drake Junior?" Cassandra quips.

"Don't talk about my little gunman like that. You're lucky you're my sister." Drake grumbles.

"Sorry. It was just a joke." She murmurs.

"... Better late than never though, right?" Kyle laughs.

"I'm already showing him the basics. In nine years, when he's eighteen, he'll be a better shot than me. Gives me something to look forward too." Drake says proudly.

"Drake Junior being an excellent shot is the trophy; Restoring civilization as it was before the apocalypse is just a notch in the belt." Kyle chuckles.

"See? You understand." Drake grins.

"Men..." Cassandra smirks as she shakes her head.

As the two men leave the house to join the convoy, Kyle's family follow close behind to see them off. Trenton silently fumes as he imagines his father and uncle Drake marching to Leota without him. On foot, the journey will easily take two weeks there and back. The teenager is angry over all of the campfire stories he won't get to listen in on, and all of the chances that he won't have to prove himself. As he fist bumps his uncle and gives his father a final hug, he can't help but resent them for leaving him behind.

Later that night, Trenton lies in his bed and stares at the ceiling. He looks over to the faint glow of his desk lamp that sits on his nightstand. It was Kyle's efforts that brought electricity back to Vahdalia. Drake trained the militia that has kept them safe, and even wiped out several raider camps that tried to establish themselves nearby. What has he done? What will he get to do if the Sijians annex Vahdalia? He sits up in bed and looks to his closet door. Climbing out of bed, he walks softly towards the closet, moving slowly as his claws click on the hardwood floor.

He slides open the door and finds his small black pack, an M1936 style musette bag that his father had given him when he was a little boy. He's had many adventures with this pack; so many camping trips in the local fields used this pack to hold his supplies. It's time he and his trusty pack had a real adventure. He takes the empty pack and a pair of old shoes from the closet. Though a little large on his feet, the shoes are designed for Voeldahn digitigrade feet. He quietly moves back to his bed, setting down his pack and shoes near the footboard.

He takes a set of drab clothes from his dresser and sets them beside the shoes. He moves around his room, quietly gathering various tools he may need. A multitool, charged flashlight with spare batteries, an ultralight sleeping bag, empty stainless-steel water bottle and holster, a firestarter, and various other items. He creeps into the kitchen where he collects several jars of preserved fruit and vegetables, a paper bag of venison and beef jerky, and a small block of

cheese wrapped in wax paper. As he returns to his room to pack, the sun begins to creep over the horizon; he needs to hurry.

Trenton dresses in his chosen outfit, then slips on and ties his shoes. He puts on his belt, wearing his water bottle holster on his side. He takes his most important gear and places them in small pouches on his belt, while the sleeping bag, food, and other nonessentials he stuffs into his musette bag. He slips the pack onto his shoulders and adjusts the straps as yellow-orange sunlight beams in through his bedroom window. With all of the extra food and supplies, his pack is heavier than he remembers. He steps out into the hallway and stops dead in his tracks as a sleepy Kathy stands in front of him.

“Trent? What are you doing up so early?” She asks groggily, rubbing her eyes.

“I’m uh... Wait, what are *you* doing up?” He replies.

“Going to the bathroom... What’s with the pack?”

“Nothing. I’m going for a hike.” He says nonchalantly.

“Are you chasing after dad?!” She asks loudly in shock.

“Shh! ... Maybe.” He whispers.

“... Mom!” She yells.

Trenton pushes her aside and bolts for the front door.

“What’s wrong?!” Cassandra asks.

“Trent’s running off to catch dad!” Kathy exclaims.

Trenton can hear their dialog as he races down the steps, running toward the old bridge out of Vahdalia. He gasps for breath, mostly from the fear of potentially being caught. His shoes clomp on the ground as he sprints for the river. He hides behind a tree as two town guards patrol the bridge. He knows that the group his father left with had crossed that bridge, so he bides his time. He creeps closer, remaining hidden as they pace back and forth. When both of their backs are turned, he sneaks by them and begins to inch his way over the bridge.

With each step he grows closer to the other side, trying his best to stay low and near the wall. Step by quiet step, he moves toward the road that will lead him to his father. As he moves, he can hear footsteps approaching him from behind, stomping on the bridge.

“Hey, kid! Where do you think you’re going?! It’s not safe out there!” A guard yells as he runs toward Trenton.

Trenton stands to his feet and bolts, dashing as fast as he can into the wilds. Adrenaline courses through his veins as he distances himself from the two guards. They chase

him across the bridge and nearly one hundred meters down the cracked concrete road before stopping. They stand on the path, the tall grass reaching through the shattered road. They look nervously back to each other before returning to their post. Trenton gasps for breath as he tries to throw the guards off his trail. As he approaches a fork in the road he bears left.

Trenton's muscles burn as his legs grow weary. He stops and turns back, glancing over his shoulder. His fur is matted with sweat as he leans over, resting his hands on his knees for support. He hasn't heard the guard's footsteps behind him for some time, but he can't be certain that they aren't just around the corner. He pulls his shoulder length, wheat colored hair back from his cobalt blue eyes and turns back to the road. He starts jogging, pushing himself as hard as he can, but soon slows to a casual walk.

As Trenton walks, he imagines the look on his father's face when he sees that his son has managed to catch up to them. Will Kyle be proud of him for making the arduous march alone? Will that be enough to prove his worth to his father and uncle Drake? Will his father and uncle appreciate what he's been through to find them? He loses himself in his thoughts, stumbling occasionally as he marches down the road; patches of sun burnt concrete with large zigzagging patterns of tall grass, occasionally marked with an old guard rail or a junk car.

He is roused from his daydreams by a sudden thunderclap. He turns his eyes to the sky, gazing toward the dark gray clouds as they snake overhead. He takes off his pack and retrieves an old olive drab rain poncho, slipping it over his body before slinging his bag over his shoulders. He walks the road until the afternoon, desperately trying to catch up to his dad and the others, even as cool raindrops pelt him. Undaunted, he trudges through the storm as its power grows, the wind shaking the trees.

He stops beneath a large tree to rest, dry beneath the dense canopy. He drinks the last of his water as he eats the jerky and the small block of cheese. He sets his open bottle down on the ground, just beyond the umbrella of the tree. After a long rest he looks to his stainless-steel bottle, which cascades with fresh rain water. He screws the lip onto the bottle and holsters it. He walks back toward the road as the sun begins to set. He is surprised that his father's group had walked so far in only a day. He was sure that at his pace, he would be close to them by now.

His overzealous nature and desire to see his father push him to walk throughout the night. The storm ceaselessly bombards him, growing stronger as darkness falls. It is soon too dark to see the road at all. He looks down at his feet, no longer seeing the concrete; only patches of tall grass remain. He removes his flashlight from his pocket, illuminating the way before him. To his horror, he is no longer on the road at all! He spins around, surrounded entirely by primary forest. He walks toward a nearby tree

with sturdy branches and a thick canopy, hiding from the rain.

He sits for hours as he tries to wait out the rain. His muscles scream and his eyelids weigh heavy; he eventually succumbs to his exhaustion, sleeping against the tree with his head resting on the trunk. He slowly opens his eyes as the sunlight warms his tawny and cream fur. He yawns and stretches his muscles, his legs aching as he pulls himself to his feet with the aid of a low hanging tree branch. He walks back in the direction that he thinks he came from, trying to remain calm as he looks for the road. After nearly an hour, he doesn't see anything familiar or remotely resembling a road; he is utterly lost in the large forest of old growth trees.

“God damnit... Where am I?” Trenton thinks aloud.

As he walks deeper into the forest, the trees shield his view of the rising sun. He walks in a direction that he thinks is north. As the sun rises higher, he looks at it to maintain his bearings as he quickly realizes that he is going the wrong way; he might have been the entire time. Within minutes of the realization, he comes upon a ridge, at the base of which is a road. It is in much better condition than the previous, with visible lines still painted on it. He slides down the ridge and stands on the road. He looks to his left, and then his right before gazing up at the sun. The road moves east-west, not north-south.

“... Shit...” He mutters.

He sighs and scratches his head with his claws. With no better options and no idea where he is, he decides to follow the road east. Hopefully it will lead him to another road that will take him north and eventually back home to Vahdalia.

Chapter 2: Callow

Disoriented and lost, Trenton wanders along the old concrete path. He passes by the wreckage of an early model hover car, rusted and falling apart. Tapping his claws on the hood as he walks around the remains, he tilts his head back and takes a drink from his water bottle.

“Hey, kid.” A voice suddenly calls out.

“Jesus Christ!” Trenton exclaims.

Water runs down his chin and onto his shirt as he spins around, facing the unknown speaker. Sitting on the ground against the rusty car door is an adult human. The fair skinned man looks to be in his late twenties or early thirties. He looks to the feline Voeldahn boy with blue-green eyes

that sit on either side of his long and straight nose. His light brown hair is long and wavy, brushed back and reaching down to the middle of his chest. His thin lips are shrouded by a mustache and long goatee.

The man stands from the ground, stretching his back as he groans. He is of average height, about five feet and eight inches tall, wearing faded black cargo pants, a dark purple t-shirt, old brown hiking boots, and a black hooded cotton jacket with a grey denim vest over it. Around his waist is a black two-inch military web belt, adorned with several pouches, a canteen holder, and a military style fanny pack that stick out beneath his unzipped hooded jacket and vest; they are all black, to match his belt.

"I wondered when you were going to walk by." The man says.

"You... You were expecting me?" Trenton asks in surprise.

"Well, I was expecting *someone*. It is a road, after all." The man replies.

"So, who are you? Some kind of raider or something? Because I don't have anything worth stealing." Trenton remarks.

"Oh no! Nothing so dramatic. I'm Grey. I'm just a traveler... Kind of like a bard from the dungeons and dragons era, except I can't sing, I don't know any good jokes, and I don't make any money. Pleased to make your acquaintance." Grey smirks.

"I'm Trenton."

"Hmm... I should've guessed. You look like a Trent."

"Right... So, what *are* you doing here?" Trenton asks.

"I told you already. I've been waiting for someone. Took your sweet time, too." Grey complains.

"And how did you know I'd be here?" Trenton raises a brow.

"Superpowers." Grey chuckles.

"Don't play games." Trenton snaps.

"No games. We better get a move on if we're going to get there in time!" Grey chirps.

"Get where?!"

Grey walks up to the boy, patting him on the chest as he passes him. Trenton looks down apprehensively at his hand and steps back. He glares at the man as he walks down the road. Trenton looks back at the wreckage of the hover car, then back to Grey. Grey stands there, looking back over his shoulder. On the back of his vest is a large black patch that looks like an old flag hanging sideways, bearing several stars with grey and black horizontal bars. Grey raises his eyebrows and lifts a hand, motioning for Trenton to follow.

"Come on, Trent. We're burning daylight!" Grey waves to him.

Turning back, he glances behind him a final time before turning to Grey. Trenton realizes that Grey may be his best hope for finding his way back home. He mutters an obscenity under his breath before adjusting his pack and walking along the road just behind Grey. Trenton keeps some distance between himself and Grey, not sure what to make of the strange human. They walk along the road and come for a fork. Grey hangs a right, and seems to know exactly where he is going.

“So... Where are we going?” Trenton asks the man.

“A little town just up the road a piece. I’m told it’s called Coalton.” Grey answers.

“Is it nice?”

“That’s a good question! I have no idea. I’ve never been there before.” Grey replies.

“Then how do you know where you’re going?” Trenton raises a brow.

“Yeah... It’s a long story...” Grey sighs.

“I think we have the time.” Trenton chuckles.

“Fair enough... I was told how to get there, because someone there needs our help.” Grey begins.

“Who told you?” Trenton asks.

“Him.” Grey answers.

“Who?”

“Him.” Grey reiterates.

Trenton looks to him, still confused. Grey turns back, glancing at the Voeldahn. He tilts his eyes up toward the sky. Trenton raises an eyebrow.

“So... What... God said to go to some town and help a person? The God?” Trenton chuckles.

“Pretty much, yeah.” Grey nods.

“So, is like... You hear a voice in your head?” Trenton asks.

Grey turns back to the teenager, who looks as though he is trying his best not to laugh at him.

“Why does everyone look at me like that when I tell them?” Grey sighs.

“Because it sounds fucking crazy.” Trenton laughs.

“I guess it does, doesn’t it?” Grey smirks.

“That wasn’t a long story at all, by the way.” Trenton remarks.

“I know. Poor choice of words.” Grey says.

“So... How do you know it isn’t wrong?” Trenton wonders.

“Well, you showed up.” Grey replies.

“Coincidence. It’s a big road, after all. Eventually someone was bound to walk by. Even if this town, Coalton, is there, there are a lot of old towns around here with weird names.” Trenton explains rationally.

“Look Trent, I just do what I’m told, and right now we’re walking to some town.” Grey mutters.

“Whatever...”

They walk along the road for several hours in silence. Grey hums various tunes as he leads the way. Trenton takes a drink from his water bottle.

“So, does God say when we’re going to get there?” Trenton snickers as he holsters the bottle.

“A few more hours, and don’t be an ass hole. It’s unbecoming.” Grey answers.

As they walk down the road, Grey suddenly looks up to the sky. He sighs and takes off his hooded jacket and vest combo, briefly revealing a small Kydex holster on his left hip bearing a thin pistol with a silver slide. He drapes the vest jacket over his left arm, concealing the weapon once more. As they turn a corner in the road, they see three Voeldahn males sitting around near a burnt-out campfire.

They have obviously been staking out the location for some time. A Voeldahn with the appearance of a wolf with solid white fur rises to his feet.

“Well now... Look at what we have here...” He says with a sinister grin.

In clawed hand he holds a small pistol, a Glock 43 with a scuffed finish. His two cronies quickly stand, both to the right of the wolf Voeldahn. One man with gray fur, large round ears, and furless hands and tail holds a rusty crowbar. The third, armed with a tomahawk, has brown fur, short and pointy feline ears, and a short and rounded snout. Grey shifts his body, taking a slightly bladed stance; the side where his holster is mounted, the left, faces away from the raiders. The men look over the two travelers, their eyes focusing on Grey’s fanny pack and Trenton’s musette bag.

“Hand over the bags, or I’ll kill the both of you and take them.” White demands in a calm voice.

White holds the Glock pistol, the barrel pointed at the ground. Grey turns to Trenton and winks, before looking back at White.

“Alright!” Grey chirps.

White and his goons seem surprised. Trenton can't believe his ears. He doesn't want to turn over his favorite pack, his gear or his food to these ne'er-do-wells. He looks toward Grey; his hands pull open the ALICE clips that hold his pack to his belt. Trenton sees the pistol in White's hand. If only he were armed, he could prove himself by killing these raiders. Without a real weapon, he is left with little choice and takes off his pack. He sets his musette bag on the ground as Grey holds up his fanny pack.

"Good boys... Now toss them over and walk away." White grins.

Grey chucks his pack at White. It flies high up and near his face, startling him. As it hits his chest, he instinctively grabs for the little pack with both arms. Grey jerks his left arm, dropping his vest jacket to the ground. As his garment strikes the ground his hand is already on the handle of his sidearm. He draws the thin but full-sized pistol from the Kydex holster, aiming that Kahr CT9 at White. He quickly pulls the trigger. Bang, bang, bang, bang; four shots ring out in barely two seconds.

The first shot strikes White in the head, killing him instantly. As he falls, two shots strike his gray furred mouse comrade in the chest. Before the brown furred feline knows what's happened, the fourth round digs through his throat

and slams into his spine. He is dead before his head can bounce off the hard ground. Trenton's ears ring as he stares in shock. Grey spins his pistol on his finger, rotating it four times. He holsters the weapon and approaches the bodies, taking his fanny pack and clipping it back onto his belt at the small of his back.

"Holy shit..." Trenton mutters, rubbing one of his ringing ears. "That was amazing!"

He takes the Glock 43 from the ground beside White's twitching body, brushing it off before removing the magazine and gently pulling back the slide; the pistol is fully loaded. He checks White's corpse, finding several loose rounds in various pockets. Grey opens his fanny pack, slipping in the Glock 43 pistol and all but four of the rounds. Trenton walks up to the human as he draws his Kahr pistol, removing the magazine and replacing the four fired shots.

"So, I'm noticing you now have two guns." Trenton comments.

"Why yes, I do. Two guns, and only one holster. I'm going to assume you have a solution to that problem?" Grey smirks.

"Perhaps... .. C-can I have a gun?" Trenton nervously asks.

"Can I trust you, Trent?"

“I’ve been walking behind you this entire time with a knife.” Trenton chuckles.

Grey reinserts the magazine into his pistol. He holsters his Kahr as he glances up at the sky. He pulls out the Glock 43 from his fanny pack and closes it. He quickly walks up to Trenton, who takes a step back. Grey leans over and picks up his vest jacket, holding it by the collective collar as he swings it over his left shoulder. He holds out his right hand to Trenton. The teenager looks down at Grey’s hand, the tip of the pistol’s barrel visible from the side. Trenton holds out his hand and Grey sets the weapon on it.

“Thanks! ... How do I know it works?” Trenton asks, looking over the pistol.

“Hah! ... It works.” Grey replies.

“How do you know? Did God tell you that?” Trenton snickers.

“No. It’s a Glock! It’ll work.”

Grey continues walking, stepping over the twitching corpse of the brown furred feline Voeldahn. Trenton slips the Glock into his front pants pocket before picking up his pack. He quickly slings it over his shoulders before racing to catch up to Grey, who hums a tune as he walks casually down the road. After walking for little more than an hour,

they can see a town visible in the distance; palisade walls line the outer edge of Coalton.

“Is that it?” Trenton asks.

“I guess we’ll find out...” Grey sighs.

The human turns to the tawny and cream Voeldahn, a worried look on his face.

“Trent, I need you to do me a solid...” Grey begins.

“What’s up?”

“Do *not* use your gun, no matter what happens. If you do, you won’t make it out alive. Trust me, even if what I do seems really, *really* stupid.” Grey urges the boy.

“Yeah... Alright.” Trenton nods.

Grey looks exceptionally worried, even afraid as they walk towards the town. The closer Coalton becomes, the more the tension within him grows. They pass through a large gap between the palisade wall, left deliberately as an entrance. Trenton looks around at the bustling town. It’s not nearly as good looking as Vahdalia, with old buildings and cheap wooden walls. Citizens wander the streets, bartering with shopkeepers who stand at simple booths placed seemingly at random. A group of merchants stand beside a carriage pulled by two mules, loading cargo.

“You see those guys?” Grey points to the traveling merchants.

“Yeah.” Trent turns.

“I need you to talk to those guys about joining their convoy.”

“What... Just me?!” Trenton exclaims.

“Hell no. Tell them there’s two... No, three of us. Two are guns for hire.” Grey instructs.

“Three?” Trenton scratches his head.

“Don’t worry about it. Just go and talk to them.”

“Alright, whatever.” Trenton shrugs.

Trenton approaches the merchants and begins a dialog, politely introducing himself to the caravan. The merchant’s leader is a Voeldahn man in his mid or late twenties. His shiny fur is cream colored, with large round ears, a long and angular snout, and vibrant amber eyes. His hands and tail bear no fur, and neither do his feet; he wears old fashioned leather sandals and simple cotton clothes. Trenton isn’t sure if he looks like a pauper as a defensive tactic, or if this caravan is struggling to make a profit.

The man introduces himself as Rory. As Trenton and Rory speak, the merchant suddenly seems distracted by something. He leans past Trenton, who turns and looks over

his shoulder. To his surprise, Grey stands in the middle of the street, as if waiting for someone. Two men approach Grey wearing similar outfits of urban camouflage and bearing rifles. Trenton steps away from Rory and his convoy, approaching Grey. He reaches a hand into his front pants pocket, feeling the grip of his small handgun.

Grey steps away from Trenton, holding out one hand at his waist as he faintly motions for the teenager not to follow him. Trenton pulls his hand from his pocket, stepping back to Rory and his caravan. Rory audibly wonders what Grey did to incur the guard's wrath so soon. Having seen Grey kill three men in short order only a few hours earlier, Trenton watches rather excitedly.

"Hello, human." One guard begins.

"You need to come with us." The other says.

"Do I now?" Grey asks.

"Yeah. We work for Coalton's leader, April. She's going to want to see you." The first guard continues.

"How about you make this easy?" The second adds.

"Hmm... That's quite the choice I have." Grey says, slowly drawing his pistol. "Easy, or hard..."

The guards stop in their tracks, their hands resting on the pistol grips of their rifles that hang from slings in front of

their chests. Trenton smirks, ready for a show. Grey smiles at the two guards, his fingers flexing over the grip of his handgun.

“So... How big is the cage?” Grey asks the men.

“What?!” One exclaims.

“How do you...” The other mutters.

“Eh, it doesn’t matter anyway.” Grey shrugs.

Grey quickly spins the pistol, dropping it onto his trigger finger and twirling it around; the barrel points at his stomach as he presents the grip of his weapon to the guards. Trenton’s mouth hangs open in shock. He can’t believe his own eyes as he watches Grey surrender without a fight. The guards look to each other for a moment, then back to Grey.

“... And now you take my gun and escort me to the cage.” Grey chuckles.

The first guard nervously reaches out, taking the handgun from the human. He slips it into his waistband as Grey removes his web belt, handing it to the second guard. With their free hands, they each take a shoulder, leading Grey down the road and away from Trenton and the merchants. They turn a corner, heading toward a large warehouse.

Trenton watches from the side of the road, a considerable distance away. Against Rory's warnings, Trenton follows the guards. He peeks around the corner, watching as Grey is escorted into the warehouse. If ever there was a chance for him to prove himself, it's right now.

Chapter 3: Moral Malady

Grey walks through the large sliding doors of the warehouse, which looks suspiciously like an old airplane hangar. The interior has been renovated, with several rooms built inside and a long hallway running down the middle. The guards march Grey down the hallway, leading him past several rooms. Grey takes several deep breaths as he tries to remain calm. At the end of the hall, they open a locked door. Behind the locked door is the last third of the warehouse, unaltered. Beneath several old hanging lights glow yellow incandescent beams, illuminating several large cages in the center of the warehouse floor.

A Voeldahn woman stands up in a cage, placing her hands on the bars as Grey is led toward the door of the cell adjacent. The guards set down Grey's belt and pistol on a short wooden table near a support beam. Opening the door of the cage, they shove Grey inside of the cell, pulling the door closed behind him.

“Easy now!” Grey remarks as he stumbles into the cage.

He brushes himself off as he turns his head to look at the woman locked in the cell beside him. She looks him over, scanning him from head to toe. She is an attractive young woman who appears to be in her early or mid-twenties. Her ears are taller than a canine’s, but shorter than a rabbit’s, with pointy tips and a noticeable bell shape. Her face is elongated, with a blocky and broad snout with nostrils at the front and on either side. She wears old and tattered clothes that reveal considerable portions of her thin body, and the cleavage of her ample bust. She is covered in golden fur, with long and straight black hair, and a tail not dissimilar. Black fur reaches from her hooved feet and up to her ankles.

Grey smiles, waving politely at her. She smiles faintly back, though her expression is sullen. Grey opens his mouth to speak, but their attention is suddenly drawn by the loud slamming of the door to the cell room. The girl steps back from Grey’s cage, which touches her own. She looks toward the source of the sound, pure terror displayed in her emerald green eyes. Grey faces the door of his cage. Stepping up to the door, he rests his hands on the cold iron bars. His eyes follow a woman flanked by guards and followed by a young girl; they are all Voeldahn.

Her loosely fitting black pants flutter at her ankles as she steps through the room, her shiny black boots clicking on the ground as she walks. She stands before Grey's cell, barely a meter away. She is a dainty figure, barely five feet and three inches tall, with a slim frame and a modest bust. Her short, black denim vest is zipped closed at the front. Underneath her vest she wears an equally short, light blue sweater that bears her midriff. Her short and rounded snout, triangular ears and long, slender tail give her a distinctly feline appearance. Her shiny coat of soft, snow-white fur bears black tiger stripes.

Her hair is as black as Raven's feathers and reaches down to her breasts; it's pulled up into two pigtails just behind each ear. Her left ear bears a small golden band on the outer edge, roughly a half-inch wide. She grins sinisterly at him, revealing the tips of her pearly white canine teeth. Her icy blue eyes scan him even more slowly and methodically than the previous girl's. She brings a hand to her chin, gently scratching her bottom lip; her black claw caresses her pink flesh as she grins at the unarmed and imprisoned human, locked inside of her cage.

Grey looks back at the woman, her cold yet lustful stare unnerving him. He leans over, looking past the tigress. The child standing nervously behind her looks barely twelve years old; she is merely a smaller version of the woman standing before Grey's cell. She steps closer to Grey's cell, resting her hands on the bars. With a sharp jerk, she pushes the door open. To the surprise of Grey, the imprisoned girl

beside him, the child and the woman's guards, she steps inside of his cage. He steps back as she reaches out a hand. He looks down to her apprehensively as her black claws inch closer. She turns her hand over, gently stroking his cheek with the backs of her fingers.

"Do you like playing with Voeldahn girls?" She asks in a soft voice.

"Who doesn't?" Grey winks.

"Do you want to play with me?" She asks.

"I don't know. We just met, and my momma always said not to play with strange girls that lock men into cages." He grins.

"I'm April... Now we're not strangers anymore!" She chirps.

She purrs as she runs a hand down his cheek, over his neck and chest, and towards his groin.

"She warned me about this too." Grey remarks, taking a step back.

April leans in, pressing her chest against his. She throws a hand around his side and rather violently grabs his buttocks, squeezing it hard. Her snout rests near his neck as she purrs sensually; her breath tickles his neck.

“Okay, no means no!” He says.

She grabs his throat with her free hand, clenching him tightly; her black claws dig into his flesh.

“Not to me...” She growls.

“Then what does ‘yes’ mean?” He chuckles softly.

She rests her pink nose against his skin and kisses his throat, just above her hand. She suddenly licks him, dragging her tongue over his neck and up his cheek.

“Oh damn...” Grey mutters.

“You’re going to find out soon enough.” She coos.

“... Goodie...” He sighs, his eyes turned to the ceiling.

April looks over the human, her eyes narrowed as she scans his form. She scratches his throat with her claws as she pulls her hand away.

“What? You’re done trying to intimidate me already? How disappointing.” Grey smirks.

“Well, aren’t you insolent.” She giggles.

“Just as God made me.” He winks.

“Mmm... I’m going to *really* enjoy breaking you, little bear.” She says softly.

“... Like you broke the last one? Or perhaps the two before him?”

April’s smug grin fades as he speaks, her eyes widening in surprised.

“And then, of course, there’s Danny...” He continues.

April is flabbergasted. She steps back from the human, who smiles pleasantly at her.

“H-how do you kn-know about D-Danny?” She stammers.

“It’s not too late for you, you know. You can still be redeemed.” He says, stepping closer to her.

“What the fuck are you taking about?!” She demands.

“I know why you do what you do, why you target humans, and I know that’s not who you really are. He knows it too, and He’ll forgive you. You just have to let go. Let go of your burden, your pain...”

“What pain?” She sheepishly asks, looking him over.

Grey stands before the woman, at least four inches tall than her. He leans closer to her, his face sitting right beside hers with his lips near her ear. Her guards look between each other in surprise and confusion.

“You know what pain, and He knows too... It was never your fault; what he did to you was not something you brought on yourself. It was just the actions of a cruel and misguided man.” Grey says in a very soft and tender voice.

April audibly gulps, her eyes watering as she takes another step back, now standing in the doorway of the cage. Grey matches her steps, not allowing her to back away from him.

“I’m sorry for what he did to you. I truly am, but this is just as bad. You still have time to change, April. Save yourself.” He whispers to her.

She struggles to hold back her growing emotions, her bottom lip quivering as she clenches a fist tightly, her own claws digging into her palms.

“H-how do you know about that?” She asks, a tear running down her cheek.

“It doesn’t matter. There’s still time.” He whispers to her.

She sniffles and wipes her watery eyes with the back of her hand. She glances up to the friendly looking human, his faint smile enraging her beyond words. She growls, shoving him backward as hard as she can. He stumbles, falling backward and landing with a thud on the hard floor of his cell. He groans in pain as he sits up. April slams the door closed and snaps her fingers as she steps back. A guard approaches and inserts a key, turning and locking his cell. She opens her mouth as if to speak, pointing a finger at the man, but after a long pause she doesn’t utter a word. She turns and storms off, leaving her guards and the child behind.

Grey turns his head to the child, who slowly approaches the door of his cell. Her tail swishes as she tilts her head, her pigtails pulled down by gravity.

“I’ve never seen my mom get upset like that...” She begins.

“Tell her I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset her. I just had to say it.” Grey says to the girl.

“You didn’t act scared of her.”

“I wasn’t.”

“Really?!” She asks in surprise.

“Why would I be?”

“Because she’s going to hurt you... Bad... She might eventually kill you. I’d be scared of her... .. I *am* scared of her.” The girl mutters.

“You shouldn’t be scared, Augustine. She’s tough, but she would never kill you.” Grey tells her.

“H... How did you know my name?” She asks, stepping back from the cell.

“Lucky guess... You look like an Augustine.” He smiles.

“Right... Well, if she won’t hurt me, then why aren’t you scared? She’ll definitely hurt you.” She says.

“Because I know where I’m going when I die.” He sighs.

“... Into the ground?” Augustine raises a brow in confusion.

“Well yes, though I’d prefer to be burned. You might want to tell your mom that... Actually, I was talking about my soul.” He chuckles.

“Your what?”

“The spirit; energy inside of every living being. When we die, it keeps living. It cannot be destroyed.” Grey continues.

“And what happens to it when you die?” She asks.

“That all depends on the person, and the choices they made in life.” He remarks.

“That sounds made up to me.” She snickers.

Grey laughs softly as he looks at the pre-teen girl. Augustine's attention is quickly drawn by the sound of April yelling out her daughter's name from the hallway. She looks back at Grey for a moment before darting off, flanked by several guards. Left locked in his cell with only the two guards who originally detained him, and the Voeldahn woman in the cell beside him, Grey lies back onto the ground. He rests a hand over his face as he quietly weeps. The girl sits down on the ground near the bars touching his cell, watching him.

"I guess you really were scared..." The girl suddenly says.

"That's not what's bothering me..." Grey says with a sniffle. "She's just a child, and she's already being corrupted... I feel so badly for her."

She watches the man as he struggles to contain his emotions, sitting up and wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his black cotton jacket. He turns his glossy eyes to the girl, who smiles at him as though trying to assure him that everything will be alright.

"So... What brought you here?" She asks.

"Besides the guards?" He chuckles.

"Yeah." She says with a faint smile.

“Believe it or not, I’m here to help you. I’m Grey, by the way.”

“Well... Good work!” She sarcastically chirps. “I’m Ruth. Pleased to be meet you.” She reaches a hand into his cage.

“Likewise.” Grey gently shakes her hand. “Pleased to meet you, cellmate.”

Ruth chuckles, smiling at the polite and somewhat handsome human. She leans against the bars, resting a shoulder on them as she tries to become somewhat comfortable.

“So, what are you doing here?” Grey asks.

“April wants a pet...” Ruth sighs. “She wants a pony, and is going to breed me. Turns out hooved Voeldahn are at least as rare as humans, and that psycho wants a pure bloodline; she’s waiting for find another hooved Voeldahn man so he can get me pregnant...”

“Wow... That’s...” Grey’s at a loss for words.

“Yeah... She doesn’t want to breed me with another Voeldahn without hooves, because there might be mixing, and the baby will have clawed feet, or not grow as tall.” She continues.

Grey sits there, listening to her horrifying story. He wonders how long she has been sitting in that cage, waiting to be raped. He suddenly has a realization.

“Why doesn’t April just pair you with a human? It’ll be just like if you were bred with a hooved Voeldahn.” He thinks aloud.

“No thanks...” Ruth says, glaring at Grey.

“Oh, no! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it like that. I didn’t realize how that sounded until after I said it.” He quickly apologizes. “I was just want to try to understand her logic.”

“April doesn’t use logic, and even if she did, she’d never turn over one of her ‘little bears’ to breed me. Unfortunately for you, she keeps them all to herself...” Ruth replies.

“Oh joy...” Grey sarcastically remarks.

“Yeah... I’ve been here for two months, and I saw what was left of the last guy. He was already slowly dying by the time I was locked up in here, and he only lasted another week... A horrible, lingering week.” She sighs. “I’m not sure how long he was here before me, but regardless you have my sympathies.”

“That must have been hard for you to watch, being a trained doctor.” Grey quietly comments.

She sits up, moving away from the bars. She turns to face the human, a surprised look on her face.

“Wha... How did you know that?” She asks in shock.

“Oh... Uh... It’s a long story.” He says.

“I’m pretty sure that we have the time.” She chuckles.

“Alright then, allow me to rephrase... It’s a short but ridiculous story, and I don’t feel like further embarrassing myself.” Grey smiles.

“Fair enough, I guess... But one of these days, while we’re sitting locked in these cages, I want to hear about it.”

“Oh, you will...” He murmurs.

Trenton sneaks closer to the warehouse, creeping into the yard as quickly and quietly as he can. He hides, staying low and out of sight as two guards walk by, making their rounds. He watches the guards scouting the perimeter, counting their steps as they walk to the corner. Using simple math, he guesimates how long before they will return to the front door, which sits partially slid open. As the guard’s shadows disappear from view, he creeps toward the front door and slips through. He enters the warehouse and takes a moment to grab a small rusty pipe that’s lying on the ground.

He creeps into the hallway, hearing a few voices in different rooms as he passes the doors, peaking in through the windows. He can hear a woman’s voice and looks in through a window, watching her yelling at a nervous looking

pre-teen girl bearing a striking resemblance to the woman. He presses on, walking to the end of the hallway where he slowly opens the door. Inside, he can see the two guards who detained Grey, one standing near the door to the hallway, his back facing Trenton, while the other sits on a stool and watches the prisoners in their cages.

Trenton's hand grips the pipe tightly as he slowly stands behind the guard. As the guard begins to turn, Trenton acts. He strikes him hard on the back of the head, the pipe clanking as he bludgeons him. With only one swing, the guard falls unconscious. Trenton struggles to keep the guard from falling over, gently setting the armed man down on the floor as though he were sitting down to rest. He pulls the magazine from the man's rifle, sliding it across the floor and away from him. Having dispatched a sentry without being detected, he sneaks through the darkness, quietly approaching the second guard.

The guard sits back against the support beam, watching as Grey and another prisoner talk to each other. Holding the pipe high in the air, he catches the attention of Ruth, who makes sure not to turn her head and draw attention to him. Trenton strikes the guard as hard as he can, but only gains his attention. As the guard turns, Trenton panics and hits him two more times in the head and face, knocking him unconscious. He tries to grab the guard's rifle, but Grey suddenly stops him.

“Leave it. If we take it, we’ll be too easy to spot, and he doesn’t have much ammo anyway.” Grey explains.

“Whatever.” Trenton shrugs.

The teenager collects the keys from the guard before grabbing Grey’s pistol and belt from the short table. He unlocked the door and opens it, passing Grey his gear and keys. Grey opens the door to the cell beside him, releasing Ruth.

“You’re chariot awaits.” He says with a smirk.

“Aren’t knights supposed to wear white, or shining armor?” She asks.

“They were fresh out of knights. You’ll have to make do with some rugged wastelanders.”

“Good enough for me.” She smiles, stepping out of her cage.

Grey attaches his belt and holsters his pistol. They drag the guard lying near the stool into Grey’s cell, shutting the door and locking him in. Following Trenton’s lead, they return to the door to the hallway. The guard against the wall shifts, as though slowly coming too, but Grey stops Trenton from striking the man a second time. They slip through the hallway, staying as low as possible. They soon reach the sliding door, still partially open. Trenton holds them back for a moment, counting in his head. He had been

counting the outside sentry's steps in his head the entire time, and he is surprisingly accurate.

Only a few counts off, the two guards walk by the door as they circle the building's perimeter. Trenton peeks outside, watching them turn the corner. He motions for Grey and Ruth to follow. The three stealthily slip out of the building, into the empty courtyard, and down the road toward the town. Once they are out of sight of the warehouse, they walk more casually. They head back for the convoy that sits along the road that they had originally came from, trying not to draw suspicion. Finding the group of merchants, lead by Rory, they join the men.

"I didn't think I'd be seeing you again." Rory comments.

"A simple mistake. They grabbed the wrong human."

"Yeah, you all look alike." Rory snickers.

His attention is quickly drawn to the girl accompanying the two travelers, his eyes widening as he watches her walk past him. He hasn't seen such an attractive woman in a long time. So enamored is the man that he doesn't even notice her tattered clothes.

"Hello there, Miss. I'm Rory." He says, holding out a hand to her.

“Ruth...” She says, looking down apprehensively at him.

He plays it off, pulling back his hand as he turns back to the men of the caravan. Motioning for them to follow, he walks further into town as they make their way down the road. In a matter of moments, they are walking through another gap in the palisade wall, and leaving Coalton behind.

“Where are we going exactly?” Trenton asks Rory.

“East. There’s supposed to be a town not all that far from here; a day and a half at the most. After that, the road loops back North. That’s where we’re eventually headed.” Rory answers.

Trenton sighs in relief; he’ll be home soon enough, and this foolhardy adventure will be over with.

Chapter 4: Strife

As he begins to awaken, the guard leaning against the wall looks around the large room. His eyes grow wide as he sees the cages, one with a door ajar. He stands to his feet and takes a few steps forward, raising his rifle. He looks

down and mutters as he sees that the magazine is missing. He quickly replaces it with his spare and checks the cells. Inside is one of the guards, while both prisoners are missing. He dashes from the room, interrupting April as she lies down on a comfy couch.

"April, we have a problem!" He exclaims.

"What is it?" She grumbles.

"I think the prisoner's escaped. I uh, left to take a piss, and when I got back, I found Mac locked in a cell; the prisoners are gone." He explains.

"What the fuck?!" April yells, jumping up from the couch.

"I'm so-"

She holds up a hand to interrupt him, glaring at the floor in anger. She snaps her fingers, bringing her daughter Augustine and a few more guards to her. She pushes past her minion, storming through the hallway and return to the cell room. Flanked by her guards, she swings the door open. Mac sits up in a cell, holding onto his head as he groans. Swiftly approaching, April finds that the cages are empty, save for Mac. The barely conscious guard winces, blood running down the side of his head. April tips over the nearby table that once held Grey's gear belt and pistol. She lets out a furious scream, grabbing it by the legs and smashing it to pieces against the support beam.

“That motherfucker! My little bear escaped, and he stole my pony too!” She stomps a boot as she yells. “They can’t be far! Lock down the checkpoints right now, and form a search party!” She orders.

“Yes ma’am!” The guards shout in unison.

“What about him, mom?” Augustine sheepishly asks.

April turns to her daughter before glancing at Mac. She grins wide, bearing her teeth. She takes out a small revolver from her denim vest pocket, handing it butt-first to the young girl. Augustine hesitates to touch the light blue and black Charter Arms Undercover Lite. April grows impatient, quickly forcing it into the girl’s hands. She drags the frightened pre-teen by the shoulders, standing her before the cage. April stands behind her daughter and aims for her, her arms alongside Augustine’s as she points the little revolver at Mac. He leans forward, kneeling at the door and resting his hands on the bars, his eyes wide in fear.

“No mamma, please!” Augustine pleads.

“Make your mommy proud. Pull the trigger on that useless sack of shit.” April says in an eerily soft voice.

“Oh no... April! I’m sorry! They had help! Someone cold-cocked me! It wasn’t my fault!” Mac pleads.

April reaches a thumb forward and cocks the hammer for her daughter, the cylinder of the revolver spinning and locking in place as the trigger pulls back.

“Aim for the head, unless you *want* him to suffer, then aim for the gut.” April speaks into her daughter’s ear.

She gently tries to push her daughter’s arms lower but Augustine resists, keeping the weapon pointed at the man’s face.

“Oh God! Please God no! I’m sorry! I’ll catch them for you!” Mac begs.

Augustine’s eyes water, trembling at the sight of the helpless man, who had loyally served her and her mother for several years. April leans in closer, her snout brushing her daughter’s feline ear.

“Do it... .. Now!” She growls.

Startled, Augustine jumps and pulls the trigger, firing the gun. The round rips into the side of Mac’s face, tearing a small chunk out of his snout, the slug burying itself into his cheek. He cries out in pain and spits up blood and several

teeth, falling back onto the ground. He grips the gash on his face as blood spills onto the ground.

“Look at that! You hurt him good! You better keep going, baby.” April laughs.

Augustine panics and pulls the trigger several more times, firing wildly into the cage. The rounds strike Mac once in the chest, once in the neck, and two miss him entirely. He lies there, choking on his own blood for a moment, dying in agony.

“Damn. He suffered... Wasn’t that fun?!” April says rather casually.

Augustine begins to weep, lowering the gun. The guards stand there in horror; they dare not even look at each other.

“Let that be a lesson to you baby: When you have a clean kill, take it and don’t hesitate... Clean kills save on bullets; you might have needed those other four shots for someone else!” April chuckles.

She takes the smoking gun away from her daughter’s hands, waving to her guards. April watches as they lead

Augustine away. The girl hangs her head, crying softly to her mother's frustration.

"Wait!" April calls out. "I want her to come with us... This'll be a good lesson for her." She says as she reloads and pockets the revolver.

Leading Augustine back to her mother, they follow April outside to the scout team that is already assembling in the courtyard. As they leave, the guard sees his magazine lying on the floor across the room. He quickly collects it, looking back at his dead friend for a moment, before returning to the group outside. He's thankful that he didn't tell April the truth, or he'd probably be dead right now too. April's men line up in rows of three behind her, Augustine by her side and guarded by her second, Marcus. They march through Coalton, stopping when they reach the main road.

"Which way did you want to go, April?" Marcus asks.

She thinks for a moment, her pigtails swaying as she turns her head, looking side to side. She turns back to the guard who warned her of the escape. She quickly approaches the nervous man.

"Tell me... Didn't you and that worthless ass hole in my cage find my little bear?" She asks sweetly.

“Y-yes, April. W-we did.” He replies.

“Which way did they come from?” She narrows her eyes.

“Th-the west road.”

“Then they probably went east. There’s nothing to the west for miles, and they know it. Let’s go, boys!” She orders as she returns to the front of the line.

Trenton looks back repeatedly as the caravan walks east. He fully expects to see the Coalton guards at any moment, racing up behind them. Grey seems unworried, quietly humming a tune as he walks beside Ruth. Trenton falls back to Grey and leans closer.

“You don’t seem too worried.” Trenton says to the human.

“That’s because I’m not. They only just started following up; we’ve had about an hour’s head-start.” Grey replies.

“Really?” Ruth asks.

“Yup.” Grey answers.

“How do you know that?” Trenton asks.

Grey briefly turns his eyes up to the sky before looking back to Trenton.

“Right...” Trenton snickers. “So I guess we’re safe now, right?”

“Not at all, Trent. April and her goons are moving faster than we are, but when we find a good location, I’ll lead them away.” Grey says.

“... What?” Trenton asks, his brow raised in surprise.

“Why would you do that?! What if she catches you?!” Ruth asks in shock.

“There’s got to be a better way.” Trenton adds.

“Maybe, but it’s just what I’m supposed to do... I’ll be fine. No worries.” Grey assures them.

“You sound confident.” Ruth remarks.

“Not really. Games aren’t that much fun when you know who’s going to win beforehand.”

“What? ... Do you ever make sense?” Ruth asks him.

“Sometimes.” Grey smiles.

After walking for a while longer, they come across a fork in the road. Though the road is thin and overgrown, Grey stops and turns to his companions. He shakes Rory’s hand, entrusting him with Trenton’s and Ruth’s safety. He fist-bumps Trenton, who promptly takes the opportunity to try and talk him out of leaving.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay? We have a few guns, and I’ve seen you shoot. We can probably fight off April and her thugs.” Trenton smirks.

“That’s alright. As fun as that sounds, this is how it has to be for now. Don’t worry. You’ll get to use your new pistol soon enough. Just don’t leave it in that pocket, or you’ll never reach it in time.” Grey replies.

The human turns to Ruth and leans in, giving her a gently hug. Ruth holds onto him, silently lamenting the soon-to-be loss of one of her saviors. As they embrace, Rory eyes the pair, clenching his teeth. Grey tilts his head back, whispering into the ear of the horse girl who stands several inches taller than him.

“Watch out for Rory. Don’t ever assume that you’re safe around him, and don’t let him catch you alone.” He warns her.

Without answering, she lowers her head in a subtle nod. As he steps back, Grey suddenly apologizes and tears a very small piece of her tattered top, near the bottom. He uses it to mark the small path, and breaks a moderate branch of living wood from a nearby tree. Using the branch, Grey drags it behind him to make it look as though a large group had pushed through the tall grass. He soon vanishes into the brush, the sound of him trudging through the foliage growing ever more distant. Rory is quick to get the caravan

moving again. Both Ruth and Trenton look back at the path, silently hoping that the human will be alright with April hot on his trail.

April and her men march down the long road for nearly thirty minutes before coming to a fork. A smaller, old path to their left is filled with tall grass, pushed over as though it had been waded through by nearly a dozen people. On a nearby branch at roughly chest height is a torn piece of Ruth's old shirt. Marcus grabs the fabric, showing it to April. Her lips curl into a sinister grin as she examines it. She examines the path, giddy with excitement.

"Idiots should have stayed on the main road!" She laughs.

April drags Augustine by her wrist as she marches down the path, wading through the tall grass. April's grip is painfully tight, making Augustine wince and whimper. Her minions, led by Marcus, follow closely behind.

"Ow! Mom! You're hurting me!" Augustine complains.

"Shut the fuck up and be strong! Weakness is very unbecoming." April growls.

She yanks her daughter violently through the brush. The path soon morphs into a thin but viable road, with solid

pieces of asphalt beneath their feet; the tall grass is no longer present to reveal her prey's direction. April and her men follow the winding road through the hills, eventually approaching a ridge with a steep drop-off. Though the road turns past the ridge, it is abruptly cut off by a break, filled in with shrubbery and relatively young trees. It would be impossible for a convoy to move easily through it, and there are no signs that anyone has disturbed it; not a branch is broken.

"God damnit! That fucking son of a bitch! Where the hell did they go?!" April screams.

"I'm sorry, mom." Augustine quietly says.

April spins around, backhanding her daughter in anger. Augustine stumbles back and falls to the ground. April grabs Augustine by her shirt and pulls her up, her claws tearing into her daughter's garment and scratching her upper chest. She growls in anger at her daughter, unable to control her temper.

"One of my little bears escaped! That's unacceptable! When you're in charge, you can't ever brush off a failure with 'I'm sorry'!" April yells.

"Please no!" Augustine cries out in fear.

"Don't be such a scared little girl! You sure as shit didn't get that from me *or* your father..."

She shoves her daughter back down onto the ground, before turning away from her. April plants a foot on a rock, leaning over the ridge. She draws her Micro-Uzi from her custom stitched leather holster, flexing her fingers around the grip.

“I should have bred that pony bitch with my little bear right away. They’d be fucking right now and making me more ponies, instead of running away from me... Hell, it might have even been fun to watch.” She thinks aloud.

“They can’t be far, April. We can still fi-”

April spins and interrupts a loyal guard with a shot to the head, holding her Micro-Uzi tightly. The guard falls dead on the ground, her other minions backing away from the body slowly. Augustine sits on the ground, her hands pulled close to her chest as she softly weeps.

“Don’t *ever* interrupt me when I’m thinking.” April murmurs to the corpse.

“Mom, please! Let’s just go back. They’re gone, but we can find new ones.” Augustine pleads.

“Girl, you are lucky you’re my daughter...” April snarls.

“There’s more humans and ponies out there.” Augustine says.

“You have no idea how rare they are!” April snaps. “I don’t want to wait years for another pony. I want her and my little bear back, and when I catch them, I’ll breed them right away.”

“Mommy...” Augustine calls out.

April smacks Augustine hard across the face, her black claws scratching Augustine’s snout and causing her to bleed.

“Don’t ‘mommy’ me! Grow up... God, sometimes I wonder why you couldn’t be stronger; more like me or your father.” April mutters.

She walks past her daughter, who sits on the ground; one hand holds her bleeding snout, while the other is pressed tightly against her chest. April turns to address her men, who back away as she approaches them. Not one of them looks comfortable around her, even Marcus. She opens her mouth to speak, but is startled by a gunshot that rips through a sleeve of her sweater, grazing her arm. She spins around, her blue eyes wide as she looks at Augustine. April brings a hand to the cut on her arm, squeezing it tightly as the barrel of her little revolver smokes in the girl’s hands.

She looks down at her vest pocket, which sits flat against her slim frame. Somehow, Augustine had managed to swipe

the revolver from her without her noticing. She turns her eyes to her daughter, who cocks the hammer of the revolver, the cylinder rotating as a fresh round lines up with the barrel. As angry as April is, she can't help but smile at the sight of her own daughter pointing a gun at her.

"Well... You really *are* my daughter after all!" April chuckles.

"You're a monster." Augustine murmurs.

"And what does that make you, my child?"

"I don't know and I don't care, but we're going home now... If you don't come with me, then the second shot *will* kill you, and I'll go home without you."

April slips her Micro-Uzi into her custom stitched, black leather holster. She closes the flap over the weapon and raises her hands in the air, taking a step towards her daughter.

"I'm warning you, mom! I don't want to kill you, but I will if you don't stop right there and do what the fuck I tell you too!" Augustine barks.

April glances down at Augustine's hands. Her eyes narrow as she focuses on the revolver. The revolver is as steady as an elder tree on a windless day. Her finger sits

inside of the trigger guard, gently caressing the curved metal within. She looks into her daughter's eyes, seeing the rage within her; she is more like her mother than even April realized. Her daughter's icy blue eyes send a chill down her spine. April slowly steps away from Augustine, knowing full-well that her daughter would kill her without hesitation.

"I guess we're going home now..." April says, motioning to Marcus and the others.

"Good... And I'm keeping this gun!" Augustine adds.

"You should... You've earned it, baby." April grins, slowly lowering her hands.

"Damn right I did..."

"You actually made me proud today." April remarks.

"I... I did?" Augustine's face lights up.

April nods, motioning for her to come closer. Keeping the revolver close to her belly, the girl approaches her mother, who drapes an arm over her. Marcus applies a bandage to April's wound as she looks down at her daughter, a genuinely warm smile across her face. She runs her fingers through her daughter's pigtails. April doesn't even wince as Marcus tightens a cloth strip around the bandage, tying it in a bow.

"Alright..." April turns back to her men.

They look to her in silence, waiting for her orders.

“Well?! Augustine said it’s time to go home. Strip that carcass and let’s go!” She orders.

She turns her head back to her daughter, her hand gently rubbing Augustine’s arm as several minions swiftly strip the weapons, ammunition, and gear from the dead guard. As sweet as her mother is, Augustine is careful to never turn her weapon away from her. April’s pride only increases as her daughter keeps the revolver trained on her; this is the daughter she has always wanted. Marcus leads the others down the road and toward the grassy path, while the mother and daughter follow just behind him. The search is over; it’s time they returned to Coalton.

Chapter 5: Campfire

Trenton sits down alongside the road, the sun moving closer to the horizon as evening wanes. He takes a drink from his water bottle and looks to the sky. They had been walking for most of the day, and Grey still hasn’t returned. He can’t help but wonder if April and her gang have caught him and dragged him back to Coalton. He can’t help but feel

as though another opportunity to prove himself had slipped through his fingers. As he slips his bottle back into the holster on his belt, Ruth sits down beside him.

“Trent, right? Are you worried about your friend?” She asks the teenager.

“Yeah, a little.” Trenton replies.

“How long were you two traveling together, anyway?”

“Actually... We met this morning.” Trenton chuckles.

She raises her brow in surprise. Trenton looks to her and shrugs.

“I was under the impression that you two had known each other for a while... I mean, the way you came into April’s prison to break him out.”

“Yeah, you would think. I took off from my town yesterday morning, trying to follow my dad who left with a convoy to travel north. I took a wrong turn and got lost, then a storm made it worse. When I stumbled onto a road this morning, Grey was there, waiting for me.” Trenton begins.

“Waiting? Interesting...” She mutters.

“Yeah. He said that we had to walk to Coalton to help someone, and told me that I’d be able to get home if I tagged along.” He continues.

Trenton sighs as Rory approaches. He's only walked with him for a short time, but the boy can already tell that he isn't going to be very fond of the man. Rory is vulgar and crude, but not in an endearing way, as many of the guards of Vahdalia are. After resting for only a few minutes, the mouse Voeldahn ushers Trenton and Ruth to their feet. Eager to keep moving, Rory has been paranoid that they'll be caught by April and her thugs since Grey left to lead them away.

Resuming their journey, Rory motions for Ruth to walk beside him, at the front of the caravan. Ruth hesitates, but when Rory seems to glare at her, she complies. Trenton keeps his distance as Rory stares him down. He looks around at the other caravanners, who are noticeably afraid of Rory. He recalls Grey's words to him and slips his hand in his pocket, taking hold of his Glock 43. He removes the pistol very slowly from his pocket and slips it into the front waistband of his pants, tightening his belt to keep it in place and covering it with a shirt. As they march along the road, Rory tries to maintain a conversation with the nervous looking Ruth.

After hours of walking, the sun has long since sunk below the horizon. No longer willing to walk in darkness, the caravan makes camp for the remainder of the night. They set up along the road, building a moderate campfire and preparing their meals; some of the caravanners cook their

food inside of the can. Though Rory tries to keep Ruth close, she moves away from him, and the campfire. Desperate to be away from the unpleasant man, she walks near the edge of the camp. She spots Trenton sitting alone, eating a small meal and drinking from his water bottle. He looks deep in thought as he stares at the horizon.

“Do you mind if I sit here?” Ruth asks.

He turns to look at her as she stands tall beside him. He shifts his gaze back to the horizon.

“No.” He murmurs.

She sits down beside the teenager, sticking small fork into the open can of cooked SPAM. Looking back at the campfire, she can see Rory staring at her from the corner of her eye.

“Is he bothering you?” Trenton suddenly asks.

“You noticed him?”

“How could I not? He’s not exactly subtle.” Trenton chuckles.

“Yeah... I don’t really want to talk about him, if that’s okay with you.” Ruth murmurs.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.” Trenton says.

“It’s fine.”

Ruth eats her SPAM slowly, looking toward the horizon. She occasionally glances over to the campfire, then back to Trenton.

“Are you alright? You look like you have something on your mind.” Ruth breaks the silence.

“So, I can’t ask about what’s bothering you, but you can interrogate me. Nice...” Trenton smirks.

“You don’t have to answer me. I just need a reason to not go back over there.” Ruth admits.

“Just wondering how Grey is doing out there.”

“You think April captured him?” Ruth asks.

“No, but I spent a night out there alone, and it wasn’t that much fun.” Trenton replies.

“Yeah... So, what is it with Grey?” She seems to think aloud.

Trenton turns to look at her, a little smile on his face.

“I didn’t know you were into humans.” He comments.

“What?! No... I mean, he’s kind of cute, but... Forget it...”
She mutters.

“I was just playing. I can understand you being curious; he’s not a typical guy.”

“He’s not?” She raises a brow.

“You didn’t notice?” He chuckles.

“Well, he’s definitely not usual. He knew I had medical training, told me he was there to help me, and whatever he said to April really bothered her; I never saw her react like that when talking to one of her prisoners.”

“You’re a doctor? ... Huh... Maybe it is true.” He murmurs, scratching his cheek.

“What is?” She turns to the young man.

“Grey... He told me that he knew I was coming down that road; he seems to know a lot of things. He told me that he was getting his information from a voice inside of his head. He claimed it was God speaking to him.” Trenton chuckles.

“God?” Ruth raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah.”

“I wonder if he has some kind of mental illness... Multiple personality disorder, or a mild psychosis...” Ruth thinks aloud.

“I thought he was crazy, but if he was right about you being a doctor...”

“You can’t be serious.” Ruth scoffs.

"I mean-"

"God? As in *the* God?" She interrupts him.

"Hey, I just meant that he seems to know an awful lot. Me showing up on the road might have been a lucky guess, and so could knowing that you were in trouble. He said he had never been to Coalton before, but he knew where it was. Maybe he was lying about that, you know, for dramatic effect... But to know that you are a doctor? You had never met before today." He explains.

"So, you think God really talks to him?" She snickers.

"I didn't say that. Maybe it's some kind of mind power? I read about stuff like that in old books; extra sensory perception or whatever..."

"Mind powers?" Her lips curl around her snout, trying not to laugh.

"Mind powers, or the voice of God. Take your pick."

She shakes her head, disregarding both of Trenton's theories. She jumps as Rory suddenly interrupts, quickly dropping down beside her.

"Hey there, beautiful. You took off on me." He says as he slips an arm around her waist.

"I just wanted to be on my own for a bit." She replies.

"Why? I don't bite, unless you want me too." He coos.

Rory's hand slides up her side, gently caressing the edge of her breast. Ruth quickly pulls away.

"What's wrong, baby?" Rory asks her.

"It's getting cold over here. I'm going to sit by the fire." She replies.

"That's alright. I can keep you warm." He says with a twisted grin.

Rory's eyes glance over to Trenton, who becomes noticeably uncomfortable. Trenton's hand rests on his waistline, just over his concealed Glock pistol. Rory's stare silently urges the teenager to leave, but as he sees the worried look on Ruth's face, he stays firmly planted.

"Don't you have somewhere to be, kid?" Rory asks him.

"No... Don't you?" Trenton snaps back.

"Excuse me?" Rory chuckles.

Trenton narrows his eyes, staring down the crude caravanner. Ruth pulls away from Rory's grasp and stands tall, Trenton rising up with her.

“Hey, I was just playing.” Rory casually apologizes, holding up his hands.

“Right... We’re going to sit by the fire now. See you later.” Trenton replies.

Ruth walks toward the campfire, Trenton close behind. He keeps his hand tucked just underneath his shirt, his thumb caressing the backstrap of his pistol.

“Thank you.” Ruth whispers to the young man.

“No problem.” He whispers back.

They sit together near the fire, Rory sitting with his crew across from them. After everyone finishes their dinner, Rory primes a rifle, volunteering first watch. Ruth turns her head away from the man and stares at the horizon. Trenton sees the worried expression on her face and scoots closer. He whispers to the young woman.

“Psst. Hey, Ruth.”

“Hmm?” She turns her head to him.

“I’m not that tired. I’ll watch over you.” The teenager volunteers.

Her lips curl up into a faint smile.

“Thank you.” She silently mouths.

As the caravan bed down for the night, Trenton positions his sleeping bag near Ruth, making sure that he can see her and the rest of the crew. He feigns sleep, regularly peeking through nearly closed eyelids and glancing over to Rory. He pokes and pinches his leg when he feels himself growing tired, making sure that he doesn’t fall asleep before the caravanner. Sometime during the night, he spies Rory watching Ruth in an exceptionally eerie fashion. He creeps closer to the sleeping woman, looking down at her. Not wanting to blow his cover, Trenton rolls over and grumbles, as though he may wake up.

Worried that he might be caught, Rory stands down. He returns to his seat and continues to watch over the caravan. Though he doesn’t try to approach Ruth again, he does regularly gaze at her as she sleeps. Trenton remains vigilant, keeping a close eye on the man. Eventually, Rory rouses one of his crew from their sleep. He shakes the man awake, trading places with the drowsy caravanner. They sit awake for a moment, as Rory tries to make sure that his cohort isn’t going to fall back asleep. Once he is satisfied, Rory lies down to rest. With the shifts changed, and Rory no longer a threat, Trenton allows himself to fall sleep.

The next morning, the caravan eat a quick breakfast before packing up their campsite and returning to the road. Rory glances over to Ruth several dozen times, but he never speaks to her or approaches her. They march down the road for hours, walking until the sun sits high in the sky. Using the hand width method, Trenton guestimates that it is noon. As they crest a hill, they can see a small town in the distance.

“Is that where we’re going?” Trenton asks a caravanner.

“Yeah. It’s just a small town called Springer.”

“Are there a lot of people there?” Trenton presses.

“Hah! I said ‘small’ didn’t I? We only have two people we deal with down there. Probably won’t be long at all.” The caravanner explains.

As they arrive at Springer, Trenton looks around. The caravanner was not lying. Springer is quite small, with under a dozen pre-Ending buildings; a small residential block consists of a shanty village of over a dozen shacks. As he scopes the town, he sees a very pretty Voeldahn girl around his age. The girl’s bushy tail sways, her triangular ears standing tall. She wears faded blue jeans with an equally faded purple tank top, which covers a considerable bust for a teenaged girl. She is quite thin, possibly even malnourished, but she still has a figure that’s pleasing to Trenton’s eyes.

Her dull coat of fur looks thick yet soft. White fur covers all visible parts of her body, with the exception of her ears and tail; her ears are covered in fur the color of milk chocolate, with a streak of identical brown fur running through the top of her tail. He can only guess that the milk chocolate colored stripe runs along her back as well. Her long hair is a light brown, like Cypress or Beech wood. It reaches to the middle of her back and appears naturally wavy. She turns her head, glancing around the town in a manner similar to Trenton. She spots the boy looking at her, her cobalt blue eyes freezing the boy solid. She scratches her pink nose and turns away from him.

Finally looking at more than just the girl, Trenton notices that she stands with a man who looks very similar to her; they must be related to each other. The man is speaking with another, a caravanner who leads a small group of very shady looking characters. The girl glances back to Trenton, who immediately has a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. He's seen the look on the girl's face before, when Rory imposed on Ruth, and again when he volunteered to keep watch. He can't help but feel that something terrible will happen to the girl if he doesn't do something.

Chapter 6: Divine Punishment

Rory leads their caravan into the town, heading for a large building with a makeshift sign that simply reads 'trade hub'. As they walk further into the town, Trenton remains rooted to the ground, his gaze fixated on the girl and her companions. Ruth walks by, tapping Trenton on the shoulder. He turns to her, looking up at the tall horse girl.

"What's wrong?" She asks him.

"Can you do me a favor?" He asks her.

"Sure."

"What do you see over there?" He discretely points to the girl.

Ruth turns her eyes to the girl, giving a brief glance.

"A cute girl and her what looks like her dad talking with a caravan... Aw, do you have a crush? Do you think she might be your type?" She teases him.

"Wha? No, damnit! Look closer..." Trenton growls.

She turns back, a little grin on her face. As she watches the other group for more than a few seconds, her eyes widen and her smile fades. The girl nervously glances at the dirt as the man who looks like her father pulls her closer. He speaks to the caravanners, a hand waving up and down near the girl as though he is presenting her to the men.

Ruth's mouth slowly hangs open as she watches their eyes scanning the teenaged girl's body. They grin so sinisterly, nearly salivating like she is a choice cut of meat. It's a dangerous look, one that Ruth has seen men give her on quite a few occasions.

"Oh no..." Ruth murmurs.

"You see it, right?" Trenton asks.

"How could I not?"

"We need to help her." He says.

"And do what?" Ruth shrugs.

"I don't know. Something!"

Ruth sighs, resting her hands on her hips. She coils her fingers as she looks back to the girl. The leader of the other caravan rests his hand on the shoulder of the girl's father, nodding as he speaks to him. Turning back, the leader motions to his men to follow him, leading them out of the town. The girl's father joins the caravan, but the girl hesitates to follow. He turns back and grabs her wrist, trying to pull her along. She begs him to reconsider, a horrified look on her face, but he yanks her violently toward him. She stumbles, slamming into his chest. He pulls her along behind him, following the caravan out of the town.

**“How long do you think before they do something to her?”
Trenton asks.**

“They’re traveling merchants; A quiet place alongside the road is all they need.” Ruth replies.

“Shit...”

Trenton races toward the trading hub, rushing inside of the building. Ruth follows close behind, her hooved feet clapping on the wooden floor. The building consists of a long hall lined with doors to several rooms, a dual staircase at the end of the hall and rising to the second floor.

Trenton races frantically down the hall, checking several rooms as he searches for Rory and his men. Each room is a store selling a particular type of wares. He doesn’t find Rory or his men as he checks a weapons merchant, electronics dealer, or tool shop. Finally, at the sixth door, he finds Rory and his men dealing with a clothes merchant; Rory is negotiating with the tailor.

“Hey, Rory, we need to talk!” Trenton exclaims.

**“I’m making a deal here kid. Fuck off for a few minutes.”
Rory says quietly to the teenager.**

Rory turns back to the merchant, bartering for a set of clothes. He trades uncut cloth from a large satchel for a set of unfinished pants and a nice blouse.

“We don’t have time for this.” Trenton growls.

“What did I just say?” Rory snaps.

“Someone needs help, Rory.” Ruth chimes in.

“I’m a little busy buying you a new set of clothes. We can do whatever after you’ve been fitted.” Rory remarks.

“Please, Rory... For me...” She coos.

She reaches out and rests a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently. She smiles down at Rory, who looks up to her and smiles back. He sighs and turns back to the tailor.

“I’m sorry, but we need to cut this short.” Rory begins.

The older woman’s bushy tail sways. She rubs the fur on her chin, her claws scratching the side of her snout as she looks over Ruth with narrowed eyes.

“Actually, I think I might have something that will fit her perfectly, and it’ll be comfortable!” The tailor exclaims.

“Oh! ... Well, we’ll take it!” Rory chirps.

Quickly making the trade, Rory offers Ruth the new set of clothes. Without even looking them over, she slips them into the satchel that once held the uncut cloth. She grabs him

by the wrist and leads him down the hall, Trenton and Rory's men close behind. They rush from the trading hub and return to the lone road that leads through the town. The other caravan is long gone. Taking the lead, Ruth and Trenton leave the town, following the road in the direction of the previous group. Rory and his men are visibly dissatisfied with their swift yet steady pace, but Rory is eager to garner Ruth's favor, making sure that none of his men complain.

It does not take long for the group to gain on the other caravan, which stopped only a few miles down the road. After walking for barely twenty minutes, a small camp enters their view; a single tent sits with several figures standing idly around it. As they draw near, Trenton can see the dainty girl being dragged into the tent by a much larger and older man. He sprints toward the camped group, quickly leaving Ruth and the others behind. He rests his hand over his pistol to keep it from slipping beyond his waistband and out of his reach. His shoes stomp on the cold and broken concrete of the dilapidated highway, drawing the others attention.

"Who the hell are you?!" A man yells out.

"Who cares? Maybe they can trade?" Another suggests.

"Right!" The first nods. "I don't suppose you could use some companionship. We have a young one, if the price is right."

“That wasn’t the deal!” The girl’s father remarks.

Trenton can hear the girl screaming from inside the tent, a grunting sound from the man who is assaulting her.

“Shut the fuck up! What do you care?” The first barks.

Ruth, Rory and the other men of Rory’s caravan soon join the lone teenager. Bolstered by their presence, Trenton slips his thumb underneath his shirt, resting it on the backstrap of his Glock.

“Let the girl go, you sick fucks.” Trenton demands.

The men look to each other and laugh, muffling the girl’s whimpering. The first man draws a rusty machete from a sheath on his belt, raising his hand high. Ruth cries out as Rory tries to draw a revolver from his waistband, but the front sight catches the old leather around his waist. Falling back, Trenton pulls the gun from his waist and pulls the trigger, firing a single shot. As if guided by a mysterious force, Trenton’s bullet flies through the short gap between the boy and his attacker, striking the machete wielding thug in the forehead. He falls to the ground like a sack of rocks as his companions all turn to look.

Without giving them time to recover, Trenton aims and fires at two other caravanners, killing one and wounding the other. The girl's father charges, but Rory fires, having freed his gun from his antiquated belt. Struck twice in the chest, he falls to the ground, coughing up blood. Ruth quickly helps Trenton to his feet. They look around at the dead and injured lying at their feet. After a moment of silence, a man without pants or underwear charges from the tent with a sawed-off shotgun but is swiftly shot dead by Rory and his men, before he can take a second step from the tent flap.

"We just wanted safe passage. She was all I had to bargain with..." The father chokes out.

Ruth is visibly horrified, while Rory merely stands at the father's side, glancing down at the injured man. He aims his revolver and pulls back the hammer with his thumb, cocking the firearm. Without hesitation, Rory executes the wounded man. His men follow suit, finishing off the few injured men who groan in pain on the ground. Trenton approaches the flap of the tent, gulping nervously. He hesitates to look inside, unsure if he was quick enough to prevent the girl from being violated by her rapist.

"Are you okay?" He calls out.

He doesn't receive an answer.

“I’m coming inside, alright? I’m not going to hurt you.”

He opens the tent flap and pokes his head inside. Looking around, he can see the girl lying in the fetal position on the ground. She shivers from the shock of her assault, her arms crossed over her chest and concealing her breasts from him. Her top is ripped and she bears a sizeable cut on her arm, made from the claws of the man as he tore the garment from her body. Her pants are ruffled but intact. Apparently, he was in the process of yanking them off her body when the shooting erupted; his grunts were from struggling with the teenaged girl.

She turns her head to him, looking him over apprehensively, her brow lowered. In his mind’s eye, he envisioned her much more appreciative, but he can’t blame her reaction. He slips his gun into his waistband and takes a knee as Ruth steps inside.

“I’m not here to hurt you. They’re all gone now. You’re safe.” Trenton says softly.

“Are you alright, sweetheart?” Ruth asks.

The girl looks between the two, then down to her own body. She tries to pull her torn shirt closed, but it’s ruined. Trenton quickly stands and exits the tent.

“I’ll find you something to wear!” He says, rushing outside.

He stops in his tracks as Rory and his men search the bodies of the dead, as well as their gear. One of Rory’s men leads the other caravan’s pack mule and cart toward their own.

“Looking for something?” Rory asks the boy.

“She needs a new shirt.” Trenton replies.

“At least we weren’t too late.” Rory says nonchalantly.

He takes a mauve t-shirt from a pack of clothes that belonged to the now-dead caravan, tossing it to Trenton. His calm demeanor disturbs the boy, though he can’t let Rory know it.

“While you’re in there, give these to Ruth.” Rory adds.

He tosses the boy Ruth’s new set of clothes from the satchel. Trenton gives a single head nod before stepping back into the tent. Inside, he sees Ruth sitting on the ground with her legs crossed before her. The girl leans over her and against her chest, Ruth’s arms wrapped around the girl. Trenton slowly approaches, but the girl tries to back away.

Ruth holds her tighter, gently shushing the girl and stroking her hair to keep her calm.

“Shh... It’s alright, baby. He’s a friend.” Ruth says softly.

“I’m glad you’re okay.” Trenton says to her with a smile.
“I’ll be outside if either of you need anything.”

“Alright, Trent.” Ruth replies.

He presents the mauve shirt to the girl, setting it gently on the grass of the tent floor. He shows Ruth her own clothes before setting them down in a separate pile. He turns around and leaves the tent, sitting down just beside the flap. He leans over his own lap, his hands trembling from the adrenaline rush. His stomach churns as his body absorbs the chemical. He turns his head and dry heaves, trying not to vomit as his body returns to a state of normalcy. He turns his head and watches the other caravanners as they strip the bodies of their belongings and undamaged clothes, before piling them just off the road and out of sight.

He stares at the girl’s father’s corpse, slowly shaking his head. He can’t believe that a father would ever do such a thing to his own daughter; Kyle would never allow such a thing to happen to Kathy. Trenton runs his clawed fingers through his hair, stroking the edges of his feline ears. Thankfully, the tremors and gagging are temporary, and soon he feels better. He listens as Ruth talks casually with

the girl, who reveals her name to be Bethany. Ruth speaks to the girl, remaining positive and supportive, and assures her that nothing that occurred today was her fault. As they speak, Trenton takes out his Glock, examining the weapon. He removes the magazine to discover it empty, though one round remains in the chamber.

“Nice shooting, kid.” A voice says.

Trenton looks up to see one of Rory’s men. The black bushy tail of the canine Voeldahn sways as the brown eyed man glances down at the boy. He reaches up and brushes the long bangs of his black hair from his face and snout, sweeping it back and over his tall ears.

“Thanks...” Trenton mutters.

“I’m Stan, by the way.” The man adds.

“Trenton...”

“You’re empty, Trent.” Stan points at the magazine.

“I don’t suppose you have any extra rounds?”

“Nine millimeter, right?”

“Yeah.” Trenton nods.

“As a matter of fact...” Stan smirks.

Stan squats down, taking a knee near the boy. Reaching into a vest pocket, he pulls out a small plastic bag containing a score of tarnish ammunition. He hands the bag to Trenton, who quickly opens the bag and reloads his magazine, reinserting it into his pistol.

“Thanks, Stan.”

“No problem, Trent. None of us thought much of you at first, but you’ve got some layers on you, you know?”

“Not really.” Trenton chuckles.

“You’re tougher than you look.” Stan elaborates.

He rises to his feet and leaves the boy by the tent, returning to the others as they finish packing the opposing caravan’s belongings with their own. They make a temporary camp as Ruth and Beth talk inside of the tent. Beth soon warms up to Ruth, who tries to convince her to join their caravan instead. Beth thanks her for her and her friends rescue and agrees to follow them. After a quiet moment, the two females leave the tent, having already changed into their new clothes.

“Hey.” Trenton says with a smile.

Ruth looks down at the boy who sits on the ground. She extends a hand to him and helps him to his feet.

“Hey, Trent.” She says back.

“Are you going to be okay?” He asks Beth.

“Yeah... I’ll be fine Trent.” She quietly replies.

“Good.” He says.

He turns to join the others, who wait for them on the road.

“Trent!” Beth calls out.

“Yeah?” He turns back to her.

“Thanks for what you did. If it wasn’t for you, I... Thank you.” She says, lowering her head.

“Your welcome.”

She turns her head up to look at Trenton, who smiles warmly at her. Her lips curl around her snout into a faint grin as the two teens gaze at each other.

“Well, we’d better get going.” Ruth says, breaking the silence.

They approach the group but Beth seems visibly nervous being around the adult men. Ruth stays near the back of the

convoy, walking near Stan. Trenton stays near the front, walking beside Rory at the caravanner's insistence.

"You did good today, kid." Rory compliments him.

"Thanks."

"Good shooting too. I didn't know you had it in you." Rory adds.

"I appreciate you backing me up." Trenton says.

"That's what caravanner's do, kid." Rory pats the boy on the back.

"That didn't seem to surprise you back there."

"The truth is, that's not the first time I saw shit like that. It usually doesn't end in bloodshed, unless the girl is young." Rory crudely jokes, jabbing Trenton in the side with his elbow.

Trenton feigns a light chuckle, but inside he cringes.

Chapter 7: A Port In The Storm

Several hours after rescuing Beth, the caravan follows the road as it wraps north. Without waiting for the sun to set, they stop to make camp for the night during late evening.

Though Trenton and Ruth haven't known him for long, Rory seems unusually compassionate. Knowing his usual personality, Trenton can't help but feel uneasy, watching the mouse man as closely as he can without drawing attention to himself. They sit down to dinner, where Rory uses the rations belonging to the dead men, passing out old tins of fish, chicken and beans.

Trenton sits near Stan and several other caravanners, eating his food. To his surprise, Beth suddenly appears, sitting down beside him. She has only now left Ruth's side, having stayed near the horse Voeldahn ever since she had entered the tent to speak with her.

"Hey Trent." She says with a little smile.

"Hi!" He chirps.

With a little grin on his face, Stan rises to his feet. When his companions don't join him, he gives them a gentle kick, motioning for them to follow. Stan is very clearly influential among the men, as they obey him as often as they do Rory. The caravanners leave the teenagers alone to eat their meals together. Walking along their campsite to give them privacy, Stan's expression changes when he sees Rory, quickly growing concerned. The caravan's leader sits with a frustrated looking Ruth, trying to whisper to her. Whatever he is saying is upsetting the woman. She pushes him away and rises to her feet, walking to the other end of the camp

where the teenagers are eating together. Rory jumps to his feet.

“Where are you going?!” He calls out to her. “I was just playing!”

Ruth ignores him. Rory’s expression grows even more frustrated, even angry.

“I said stop!” He yells to Ruth.

A few of Rory’s men turn to Ruth as she passes, as though ordered to detain her, but Stan quickly stops them. They look to him as he shakes his head ‘no’. She walks toward the rear of the camp, where she interrupts the pleasant dinner the teenagers are sharing.

“Fucking useless...” Rory grumbles as he passes his men.

Ruth sits on the ground in front of Trenton and Beth as Rory storms up to her. Beth looks understandably concerned and shifts, sliding back so that Trenton is between her and Rory.

“What the fuck is your problem?!” Rory growls.

"I'm not your whore." Ruth grumbles.

"I was kidding!" He exclaims.

"No, you weren't."

"... Do you know why I even did half of the stupid shit I did? I let you tag along when you, your brat and that human looked like escapees. I helped you get away from that sociopath, April. I bought you new clothes. I even canceled a business deal because Trent thought that girl needed our help!" He explains.

"She did!" She snaps.

"The point is that I did it because I wanted you to know that I care about you. I want your favor."

"You want more than that." She retorts.

"Well... That comes with the territory." He smirks.

"Fuck you."

"Don't be a bitch!" Rory growls.

"Just leave me alone!" She pleads.

"This is my caravan. I don't have to do shit for you. I did enough already, and you haven't even touched my cock!" Rory yells.

He takes a step towards her and reaches out a hand; Ruth scrambles to her feet, backing away.

“Hey!” Trenton yells.

Rory turns to see the teenager who’s drawn his pistol. He snickers and turns back to Ruth. Beth and Ruth both jump as a gunshot pierces the air, echoing through the surrounding forest. Rory turns back to Trenton who points the smoking barrel of his fully loaded pistol.

“See the slide isn’t locked back? I’ve got more for you if you don’t hand over your gun and back down.” Trenton smirks.

“You fucking brat!” Rory yells.

“I’m not going to ask you again...” Trenton growls.

“Someone shoot this kid!” Rory orders.

Trenton looks over at the others, some of whom draw their weapons. Stan holds up his hands, stopping the men.

“Well?!” Rory asks impatiently.

“We don’t turn on our own. Give me your gun and finish eating.” Stan chimes in.

“Are you serious? I’m the boss here!” Rory screams angrily.

“And I’m your second. Until you’ve calmed down, I’m relieving you of your position.” Stan calmly states.

“Un-fucking-believable.” Rory mutters.

With Stan backing Trenton and the other caravanners listening to him, Rory stands down. He slowly draws his revolver and hands it to Stan.

“I guess we’ll finish this later.” Rory remarks, glaring at Trenton.

As Rory walks away, Trenton lowers his pistol, sliding it back into his front waistband. Beth reaches out and rests her hands on his shoulders, giving him a comforting squeeze. Ruth approaches the two, resting her hand on Trenton’s upper arm.

“I’m sorry if he scared you.” Trenton says to Beth.

“Thanks, Trent. You’re a real hero.” Ruth smiles.

“No worries. You’re like my road mom.” Trenton chuckles.

“I’ll keep the first watch tonight.” Stan chimes in.

“Alright. Wake me for the second shift.” Trenton replies.

“Sure thing.”

Stan turns and takes a few steps forward, as Trenton and Beth sit back down. He pauses, turning back to look at the teenagers.

“Hey... Nice job kid. You’ve got some polished brass balls.” Stan laughs.

The night creeps in, drenching the land in shadow. Stan sits with his side facing the fire. He is careful to keep Rory in his sights and the fire strong. After several uneventful hours he wakes up Trenton to take his place. Rory doesn’t awaken or disturb them, and the two women sleep peacefully throughout the night. Early the next morning the caravan break down their campsite, packing the wagons and stowing the tents. Flies buzz around the corpses that lie only a short distance away.

“Alright, let’s go.” Rory grumbles.

“Rory!” Stan calls out.

He turns to his second, looking at the canine Voeldahn. Stan reaches out and presents Rory’s revolver to him, grip facing toward Rory as Stan grips the handgun by the barrel. No one speaks, silently looking between each other. Rory sighs and cracks a faint smile, taking his revolver and slipping it into his front waistband. With a simple hand motion, he turns and walks along the road. Breathing a sigh of relief, the others relax and quickly follow along. They

march along the broken concrete, the carts shift and sway, metal objects clanking together.

As the convoy travels along the old road, Trenton notes the severe damage of the trees. Years earlier there had been a severe storm, possibly the edge of a hurricane. Debris was thrown miles, and old artifacts from the time before 'The Ending' were strewn throughout Vahdalia. He was much younger at the time and hadn't paid much attention to it before; the debris was quickly used or removed. Away from the towns, the aftermath is much more noticeable. After walking for several hours, they stop to rest. They have covered about ten miles. Trenton sits alone and looks down the road ahead, taking a swig from his water bottle.

"Are you alright?" Ruth asks him.

He turns his head, looking at the horse woman as she sits down beside him.

"I'm fine. Just thinking." He murmurs, looking back at the road.

"About what?"

"About how much longer we will be on this road before we get back home." He says.

“We?” She raises a brow.

“Yeah. You need a place to stay right? I’m pretty sure your cage in Coalton isn’t vacant anymore.” He laughs.

“Probably not... What about Beth?”

“She’s welcome, too. The people in my town are good people. You’ll both be safe there, especially after Sijia annexes us.” Trenton explains.

“I hope so...” Ruth mutters apprehensively.

After a short rest, Rory and his men push onward. After failing to deal with the previous town, a direct result of Ruth and Trenton rushing them, they are eager to trade with Trenton’s people. The road winds, turning several times. Hills continuously block their view. After a time, a sound echoes from down the road, bouncing off of the rocky earth. In the distance they hear a voice singing aloud. The voice is somewhat distorted, making it hard to tell who is speaking, presumably to themselves. Turning another corner, they stop when they see a small fishing trawler resting along the road, washed up during the storm years earlier.

The voice is much clearer now. Ruth and Trenton both grin, while the others simply watch the two distant figures apprehensively. Grey stands at the helm of the old boat, manning the wheel and pretending to steer. He loudly sings the ‘Drunken Sailor’ song, while another man stands just beside and behind him. Ruth and Trenton quickly approach, and Beth is not willing to stay behind with Rory and his

henchmen. Rory and his caravan continue to walk along the road, while the trio race to the boat. Grey stands at the helm, singing away, a Cobray CM-11 rifle slung across his back.

His companion taps his shoulder with the back of his hand, gaining Grey's attention. He turns to his comrade, then in the direction the man is pointing. He smiles and waves, stepping away from the helm and resting a hand on the edge of the boat. He quickly vaults over the rail and lands gracefully on the ground beside the old wrecked boat.

"Hi guys! I was wondering how long we'd be waiting!" Grey happily calls out.

They stop running and walk up to the strange pale human. Trenton is quick to shake Grey's hand, while Ruth outright hugs the man who is several inches shorter than her. Beth looks at Grey apprehensively, her eyes scanning the man as she stands just behind Trenton.

"I'm glad to see that you weren't too late, Trent." Grey begins, looking to Beth. "And you took my advice! Front waistband, right?"

"How did you know that?" Trenton asks.

"We covered this, remember?" Grey laughs.

Rory and his caravan stop just behind the reuniting companions, his eyes wide with surprise. He was certain the human was dead.

“How the hell did you know where we were going?” Rory asks.

“Woman’s intuition... I borrowed it from April.” Grey jokes.

The other man still stands in the boat, looking down at the others. Grey turns and motions to him, and he climbs rather carefully out. His companion is also a human, a rare sight in this area. The dark-skinned man is slightly taller than Grey, standing at least five and ten inches tall, though he is still shorter than Ruth. He is noticeably older than Grey, with subtle wrinkles beside his eyes. His dark brown eyes look weary, as though he has spent his entire life on the road. His black hair is dreadlocked, the thick bundles of hair easily reaching to the bottom of his shoulder blades. His beard is full and thick, but also kept neat.

Rory turns to the human, his hand resting over the grip of his old Smith & Wesson Model 19 revolver. The dark-skinned human glances at Rory and follows suit, placing his hand over a holstered Taurus Model 66-7 that’s strapped to his right hip. The revolver’s blued finish glistens, as though it were made only a few years ago; it is in much better shape than Rory’s. Across from the firearm is a Cold Steel

machete modeled after a Cutlass sword, the sheath badly weathered, but the blade within is still quite serviceable.

“Who’s your new friend?” Trenton asks.

“Who? This guy?” Grey turns to the other human. “He’s Darren. I picked him up just down the road.”

“Did God tell you to help him too?” Ruth giggles.

“God?” Beth raises an eyebrow.

“Whatever... Are you ready to keep going?” Grey smirks.

“You’re coming with us?!” Rory asks in surprise.

“Of course I am!” Grey exclaims.

“Says who?” Rory snickers.

“You.”

“But I didn’t say anything!”

“You didn’t have too. We’re two of a kind; I knew what you were thinking.” Grey says as he points a finger at his own temple.

Grey smiles, patting Rory on the shoulder before walking away from the others. He doesn’t even wait for Rory to respond. Rory glances down at his shoulder, his hand moving away from his sidearm and hanging alongside his leg. Darren, Ruth, Trenton and Beth follow close behind as Grey takes the lead.

“Right...” Rory mutters through clenched teeth.

Rory motions to his men, quickly getting his caravan moving again. He narrows his eyes, scanning the pale-skinned human who walks just ahead of him. He glances over to Ruth, who stands very close to the man. She looks at Grey with an interesting expression; she’s never looked at him that way. She turns her head back to Rory, flashing him a warm smile. Though he doesn’t say it, Rory is certain that there is something between Grey and Ruth. This is a serious problem for him, and one that he may have to remedy in the near future.

As the caravan continues their journey north toward Vahdalia, Trenton attempts to converse with Darren. He politely asks the human several questions, but the dark-skinned and dreadlocked man is exceptionally quiet. Every question is answered only with grunts, or subtle motions with his head and shoulders. Attempting to create a rapport with the human, he described his first encounter with Grey. When Trenton asks Darren how he met Grey, he merely glances to the boy and exhales. His continual silence is almost eerie, though he doesn’t look hostile, or even unfriendly.

“Don’t take it personally, Trent. Darren isn’t much of a talker.” Grey says to Trenton.

**“Really? I never would have guessed.” Trenton chuckles.
“So what’s his story?”**

“He is just a good man who could use a break.” Grey cryptically replies.

Darren’s lips curl into a faint smile, his gaze fixated on the ground a meter before him. Without the patience to press any further, Trenton abandons his inquiry. They march along the road for over an hour, staying in two separate groups. Trenton, Ruth, Beth and Darren walk with Grey, who is several meters ahead of Rory and his men. Stan looks toward his boss, who glares at the group ahead of them; his eyes burn a hole through the back of Grey’s head. The expression is twisted into silent rage, troubling Stan. Rory’s fingers clench into a fist before opening again, his hand slowly moving across his stomach and toward his pistol.

“We should stop to rest the animals!” Stan suddenly calls out.

Grey and the others stop, turning back to caravan behind them. Rory yanks his hand from his weapon and turns to Stan, his anger building. He wants to contradict Stan’s statement, but the other caravanners and Ruth look quite pleased for another chance to relax, if even for a moment. They stop the wagon and small cart near each other, letting the three mules rest. Rory’s men sit and sip from their canteens, some of them eating light meals of dried meat and

fruit, or small tins of food. Grey and his friends sit together, doing exactly the same. Rory himself sits beside the commandeered cart from the massacred caravan, glaring at Grey and the others.

"It's good to see you again, man." Trenton says.

"You too, Trent." Grey replies.

"I feel a lot safer with you and your friend around." Ruth adds.

"Rory giving you trouble?" Grey sighs.

"You knew he would. It almost turned ugly, until Trenton stepped up for me and one of Rory's own men backed him up." Ruth explains.

"Making waves, eh?" Grey chuckles, glancing at Trenton.

Trenton shrugs his shoulders, a smug grin on his face.

"Rory is frightening." Beth murmurs.

"Well, don't worry about him. Trenton, Darren and I will watch your backs. You girls will be safe." Grey smiles.

"Damn right!" Trenton confidently adds.

Rory stands to his feet, walking just between the two groups. He clears his throat, gaining most of their attention.

“Alright everyone. We have a few hours of daylight left, so we better keep moving.” Rory declares.

“Right. We have business just down the road anyway.” Grey mutters.

The others rise to their feet and putting away their canteens and food. Grey stretches his arms, casually reaching a hand out to Ruth. Rory clenches a fist as the human helps the horse Voeldahn to her feet. He reaches out a hand and takes hold of the reigns of the lone mule, grumbling to himself as he leads the pack animal along the road.

Chapter 8: Shades Of Grey

The caravan travels along the road, slowly plodding along until late in the evening. Rory keeps his distance, glaring at Grey with wild eyes. All of his men can see the seething hatred and jealousy that radiates off of him. As they walk, they round a corner, passing a large hill that obstructs their view of the road ahead. Before them stands three figures, waiting for the travelers several meters ahead. Two armed males and an unarmed but attractive female stand in their way, all of them Voeldahn. Everyone stops in their tracks,

except for Grey, who casually approaches the three Voeldahn standing before him.

One of the three is a feline Voeldahn with dark brown fur marked with black speckles, and short black hair. In his hands he holds an AK pattern rifle, the wood faded and the stamped metal receiver bearing moderate rust and pitting. The cat man takes a step forward, using his thumb to slide the safety latch into the 'off' position. The other man also takes a step forward, slightly behind and to the side of his comrade. He is also feline in appearance, with cream colored fur lined with golden stripes. His wheat colored hair is long and shaggy, partially covering his eyes. His thumb cocks the hammer of the old Colt 1911 style pistol in his right hand.

"You can stop walking now." The brown furred man says.

"You're right. I'm close enough." Grey politely agrees.

"Well?" The cream cat asks.

"Well what?" Grey asks.

"This is the part where you ask us what we want so we'll spare your lives." Brown jokes.

"Maybe he doesn't get it?" The woman asks.

She also takes a step forward, resting her hand on her hip, which juts out slightly. Grey can't help but look over the

slender hourglass figure of the attractive woman, his eyes scanning her body as slowly as he can without drawing attention to himself. Her modest bust is easily seen through her form-fitting maroon t-shirt, which stops just above her pants and reveals her midriff. Her noticeable and firm buttocks shows through her faded jeans; they were once black, but are now a light gray. She wears a worn leather belt that also matches her brown Voeldahn boots, which stop at her ankles.

She is canine in appearance, with a long and angular snout, thick fur, and a bushy tail. Though fully dressed, her shirt reveals the top of her cleavage. Cream colored fur covers her chest, belly, the underside and tip of her tail, the outer edges of her ears, and the tips of her fingers until the first knuckle. Rust red fur covers the remainder of her body, her coat gleaming even in the dimming sunlight. Her fur covers her pink flesh, which is only visible on her nose and her inner ears, both of which are wider and taller than her companions. Each ear is pierced with a silver band on the outer edge and near the base.

Her full, black hair reaches just beyond her shoulders, with bangs that drape across one side of her face, partially covering one of her sterling silver colored eyes. She stands roughly five feet and six inches tall, only a few inches shorter than Grey. Her bushy tail sways gently from side to side as she looks over the pale-skinned human with a faint smile. She reaches up a hand, pulling her hair gently away from her face with her charcoal black claws. Her

companions look over to her as she seems rather taken by Grey's appearance. After a moment, Brown clears his throat.

"Huh? What?" She turns her head to him.

"We're robbing them, remember?" Brown chuckles.

"Right." She nods.

"So just give us the usual. Guns, knives, food, water, and both of your women." Brown says to Grey.

"The fuck?!" Trenton exclaims.

He takes a step forward, his hand resting just underneath his shirt and on the back of his Glock pistol. Brown aims his rifles at the boy, while Darren unbuttons the retention strap of his holster and Rory pulls his revolver from his waistband. Cream aims at Rory as the men face-off.

"Someone is going to drop their gun on the ground, and it isn't going to be me." Brown growls angrily.

"If you think I'm handing over Ruth to you, you are insane." Rory retorts.

"You can't have Beth either!" Trenton snaps.

"Real fucking cute, but I don't like the words 'no' and 'stop'. Just make this easy. I don't feel like killing you." Brown smirks.

Grey takes another step forward, walking directly toward the female raider. Brown turns his rifle to Grey, cocking his head to the side as his finger slips into the trigger guard. Grey raises his hands to waist level, his fingers outstretched and palms vertical.

“Don’t take another step!” Brown yells to him.

“Are you happy working for this ass hole?” Grey asks her.

“Not particularly.” She smirks.

“The fuck?!” Brown snaps.

He turns his head to her, his brow curving sharply downward in anger. She turns her head to him, shrugging her shoulders.

“Alright then!” Grey chirps.

In an instant, the human draws his Kahr CT9 from his holster, firing three rounds in under two seconds. The woman jumps back as two rounds strike Brown twice in the chest, killing him instantly with a shot to the heart. The third shot strikes her cream-colored companion in the head, also killing him instantly. They fall to the ground like a sack full of rocks, their guns clanking on the battered concrete beneath their feet. Trenton, Darren, Rory and his crew all

point their weapons at the lone woman, who looks horrified as she stares down the barrel of nearly ten firearms.

“No!” Grey shouts.

He spins around, looking back at his comrades. He holds his pistol in the air, flattening the palm of his free hand.

“Don’t shoot her!” He demands.

Darren and Trenton both put their weapons away. Following their lead, Stan and the other caravanners put away their firearms as well; Rory is the last to put away his gun.

“Does someone have a crush?” Trenton teases Grey.

Grey turns back to the woman, holstering his gun. He chuckles softly as he looks her over.

“Something like that.” He mutters.

The woman’s expression softens and her hand returns to her hip as she glances over the human.

“Impressive.” She says softly.

“So, you’ll tag along then?” Grey asks.

“No.”

“Do we really have to do this the hard way?” Grey smirks.

“What would that say about me if I just surrendered like some weak little bitch?” She chuckles.

“It would say that you are pretty damn smart.”

“You might as well shoot me before I beat and then claw you to death, in that order.” She grins sinisterly.

Darren suddenly draws his weapon again, pointing his revolver at the woman.

“That’s not going to happen.” He growls.

“No, it’s not.” Grey adds.

He motions to Darren to put down his gun, then reaches for his pistol belt.

“I’m not going to shoot you. You’re supposed to live, but you do need to come with me.” Grey continues.

“That’s not going to happen. I’m not going to be your whore.” She growls.

“Hah! That’s not what I’m going to do with you. You’re not a bad girl, you just need guidance.” He laughs. “Now are you going to be good, or do I have to make you play nice?”

“Tame me, if you can.” She coos.

Reaching behind her back, the sound of Velcro tearing is heard. From a pouch at the small of her back she removes an extendable baton. With a flick of her wrist, she extends the old baton, locking it into place.

“Alright.” He sighs.

He stands before his adversary, his hand reaching for a pouch on his belt that sits in front of his holster and designed for a multitool or flashlight. Opening the pouch, he withdraws a strange metallic object with his left hand. Holding the object in his hand, he lowers his arm to his side, bending it at the elbow so his arm aims upward, at a slight angle.

“If that’s the way you want it.”

He opens his fingers, allowing gravity to extend the weapon. It is comprised of nine metal segments; sturdy

steel rods, each about three inches long. Each rod is held to the other with three chain links made of high tensile steel. The rod in his hand is much thicker than the others and wrapped in black electrical tape to serve as a handle. On the opposite end of the weapon is a rod of equal proportions, the unlinked end filed into a tapered point, forming a large dart or bolt. He slowly sways his arm side to side, clanking the metal whip and dragging the dart across the broken concrete.

“What’s your name anyway?”

With his free hand he unclips and removes his belt, setting it gently on the ground. He pulls at the strap of his Cobray CM-11 rifle, placing it on the ground beside his belt.

“Why do you care?” She murmurs.

“Well damn. What kind of bastard did you take me for?”
He laughs.

He sidesteps away from the belt and rifle, leaving his firearms and sheathed knife just out of reach.

“If you must know, it’s Monica” She says.

“I do, and that’s a very pretty name. I’m Grey, by the way.”

“Whatever.” She grumbles.

“Oh shit! I almost forgot!” Grey laughs.

Monica raises a brow as Grey sets down his chain whip. He quickly removes his hoodie and vest combo, before pulling his purple colored t-shirt over his head. He places his clothing neatly on the ground. Monica’s arm lowers to her side as she looks to him in confusion.

“What the hell are you doing?” She asks.

“I don’t want you to destroy my clothes... What? I like this shirt!” He smiles.

“You don’t like your black undershirt?”

“You won’t be able to fight me if you’re too busy staring at my toned muscles.” He winks.

“Aren’t you fucking confident.” She giggles.

Grey picks up his chain whip and begins spinning it counter clockwise, the sharp bolt swishing loudly through the air. He slowly steps toward her, further distancing himself from his equipment. She swirls her baton with her wrist, bringing it up and across her chest. She sidesteps towards his gear, her eyes glance over to his weapons that lay open on the ground. He suddenly turns his arm, swinging the whip across his body and scraping the bolt over the ground, kicking up dirt and startling her.

“Don’t even think about it.” He sternly warns her.

She growls and lunges at Grey, taking the offensive. He flicks his wrist, extending the whip in front of him and throwing the bolt forward. With a skillful strike, he slams the sharpened bolt into her lower leg. Monica cries out in pain as the bolt smacks into her bone. She falls forward, landing on her hands and knees on the ground. He continues spinning the whip, stepping slowly around her and facing her side. She turns her head, growling as she glares at him. She struggles to her feet and holds up her baton. With the whip spinning backward, he thrusts his arm forward, wrapping the links around her baton. Pulling back hard, he rips it from her grasp and flings it toward the group.

“You don’t need that!” He chirps.

“You little shit!” She yells.

“Ready to give up now?” He asks.

He kills the whip, draping it over his right arm.

“Fuck you, Grey.”

“Alright then.” He sighs.

She rises to her feet and charges him, but Grey dives out of the way. Rolling from his right shoulder to his left hip, he lands on one foot and one knee. He turns and swings his whip hard, wrapping it around her ankle. Pulling hard on the whip, he drags Monica to the ground. As she struggles to lift herself up, Grey drops his chain whip and charges, jumping onto the woman's back. She falls onto her chest, Grey's right arm tucked underneath her breasts. With her right hand planted firmly on the ground, she reaches up with her left, but he quickly slips his left arm around hers, pulling her arm back hard. She grunts he incapacitates her.

"I like this game." He coos.

Growling angrily, she drops herself to the ground, rolling Grey off of her back. He lands with a thud, staring at the darkening sky. Monice quickly lunges at him, landing on his body. She grips his throat tightly with both hands as she straddles his waist. He slips an arm between hers, grabbing a wrist tightly and jamming his arm downward, breaking her hold and bending her elbows. She falls forward, landing over him and pinning her arms between their chests. He slips an arm around her back and rolls over, pinning her onto her back.

"I can do this all day." He grins.

"Should we finish this someone more private?" She winks.

She turns a hand over and grips his shoulder, squeezing tightly and digging her claws into his flesh. He grunts as blood seeps through his shirt. He loses his grip on her and she quickly pushes him back. She jumps to her feet and coils her fingers like the cured blade of a scythe. He grips his bleeding shoulder and chuckles, glancing at it before turning back to her.

“I prefer it on my back.” He laughs.

She lunges forward, but Grey sidesteps again. As he moves out of the way, she swings her hand, clawing at his back. Her sharp claws slash through his shirt, cutting his shoulder blade rather deeply. He cries out in pain, spinning around to face her.

“How’s that?” She asks sweetly.

“That’s more like it.” Grey groans. “So, how long are we just going to play with each other?”

She turns her head, looking at her baton that sits a few meters in front of Trenton and the others. She quickly dives for the weapon, grabbing it as she rolls forward. The others all step backward, allowing the fight to continue. Grey scrambles for his whip as Monica rushes back toward him. He swings the whip toward her, but she holds up her baton, allowing the bolt to wrap around it again. She twists the

baton, locking the links and yanks forward, pulling his whip from his hand. Now unarmed, she swings the baton, tossing the whip aside as she rushes him.

He jumps back as she swings the baton, struggling to dodge her blows. She smacks the baton into his right arm, causing him to cry out in pain. She swings again, but he grabs her wrist and pulls her in. He turns around, slamming her chest into his back as her arm juts out before him. He grabs the baton and pulls back hard, bending her fingers and wrist back and ripping the weapon from her grasp. She grabs his shoulder hard, cutting him deeply before he swings her around his body, throwing her to the ground. She lands with a thud on her hands and knees as Grey mounts her from behind, wrapping his arm around her throat and choking her.

He pulls hard, bringing her up from the ground as her upper back presses tightly against his chest. Monica reaches a hand up, about to claw at Grey's arm to force him to release her. As her hand grabs the flesh of his forearm, he leans in and whispers something into her ear which makes her hesitate. Her angry scowl softens and her eyes become glossy with tears. The others turn to each other, looking curiously as Grey whispers to her. He loosens his grip, slowly releasing her. Monica surrenders without further struggle, kneeling in front of him with her head hanging low.

Grey returns to his belt and takes a length of rope from his waist pack. To everyone's surprise, Monica stays still, silently crying as she allows Grey to kneel behind her and tie her wrists together behind her back. He rises to his feet, resting a hand underneath her arm. He helps Monica to her feet, then gently wipes the tears as they roll down her cheeks.

"How does he do that?" Ruth thinks aloud.

"Here. Take good care of her, alright?" Grey says to Darren.

With a silent nod, Darren rests a hand on Monica's shoulder.

"What about you?" Ruth asks with a concerned expression.

"What about me?" He raises a brow.

She points to the bleeding wounds on his back and shoulders.

"Oh, these... I'm fine. It's just a scratch." He says with a smile.

“No, it’s not. We’re treating those wounds right now.” She says sternly.

“Might as well. It’s getting too late to travel anyway.” Rory grumbles.

The caravanners strip the weapons, gear and undamaged clothing from the two dead raiders, while Darren ties Monica to a tree alongside the road. Ruth removes Grey’s torn black undershirt, pausing for a moment at the sight of his toned muscles underneath. From her tree, Monica does the same thing. After blinking several times, Ruth snaps out it and quickly tears the black shirt into strips. She cleans his wound with homemade alcohol, while Rory’s men drag the naked corpses of the raiders away from their campsite. She bandages his wounds while Trenton and Darren start a fire.

“If you knew you were going to get hurt, why didn’t you save your black shirt too?” Trenton asks.

“If I did that, then what would Ruth use for bandages?” Grey chuckles.

“... What?!” Trenton scratches his head.

With his wounds cleaned and bandaged, Grey slips on a thin silver undershirt, taken from his waist pack. The group builds up their fire and sets up a campsite. As they eat their dinner, Rory picks four of his men and establishes shifts to keep watch during the night.

“That’s not necessary. Monica’s two buddies are dead, and no one is around for miles.” Grey comments.

“How do you know that?!” Rory snaps.

“Don’t ask.” Trenton chuckles.

As they sit and eat their meals, Grey pauses. He looks back at Monica, the fire illuminating her with yellow-orange light. She stares straight ahead, her lips curled down into a frown and her eyes blank. She doesn’t blink, even after many seconds, the glow of the fire bouncing in the whites of her eyes. Grey stands to his feet and approaches her. With her head kept straight, she turns her eyes toward him. He takes a knee beside her, looking to her.

“Hey, Monica... Are you hungry?” He asks her softly.

“Fuck off.” She grumbles.

“Suit yourself.” He sighs.

He returns to the camp and sets down his can of SPAM. He digs through the small cart pulled by the third mule. He takes out a wool blanket and returns to Monica. She pulls her head back, glaring apprehensively at him as he wraps the blanket around her, tucking it just behind her shoulders and sides.

“It’s going to get cold tonight. Call me over if you need anything, alright?”

“Whatever...” She murmurs.

He returns to his can, picking it up as he sits down beside Ruth. She stares at him with a surprised look on her face.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She mutters.

As Ruth looks over her shoulder at the bound Monica, Rory can’t help but glare at the horse woman. The way that she looks at Monica gives him the impression that Ruth is jealous of the way Grey treats the raider. After a quiet dinner, the group lies down for the night. Rory stares up at the night sky, watching the stars slowly pass overhead. He struggles to sleep, uneasy about the bound woman who sits only a few meters away. He sits up, pushing the wool blanket off of his body. Monica’s head leans to the side, resting against a short branch as though it were a pillow. He slowly rises to his feet, his hand resting on the handle of his belt knife.

“Touch her, and I’ll rip your head off.” Grey quietly warns him.

Rory's heart skips a beat, certain he was the only one still awake. He quickly turns to Grey, who lies on his back with his blanket pulled up to his shoulders. Grey's eyes open, glancing down at Rory, who stands by him.

"She's too dangerous to keep alive. What if she gets out of her ropes?" Rory quietly asks.

"She won't..." Grey sternly answers.

"How do you know that?"

Grey stares blankly at Rory, his fleshy tail swaying as his fingers tap the wooden handle of his knife. He turns his head to Monica, her head still resting against the low branch as she soundly sleeps. His thumb caresses the button of his retention strap; he considers killing her anyway. He turns back to Grey, pondering what may occur if he rushes Monica and slits her throat right now. Grey's left arm moves underneath his blanket, pulling up and over the edge. His arm rests over his blanket, his Kahr CT9 pistol held tightly in his hand, trigger finger outstretched and resting alongside the frame. Grey's eyes narrow.

"Do you really want to do this now?" Grey growls.

Rory grits his teeth. He seethes with rage and jealousy as he stares at the human lying on the ground. His fingers coil uncontrollably, his claws scratching the sheath of his knife.

With a low grumble, he returns to his blanket and lies back down, leaving both Monica and Grey alone. Grey watches the rodent Voeldahn for several minutes before rolling over, his pistol still in his hand as he rests it beneath his head for support. Grey awakens early the next morning, before the other caravanners. As he sits up, he looks around the camp. Rory snores loudly. He turns to Monica, but she is already awake. He rises to his feet and casually approaches her.

“Hey... Did you get any sleep?” He asks, kneeling beside her.

“Some... Next time, could you pick a softer tree?” She replies.

“So picky. Pretty soon you’re going to ask for a tree that’s a little less vertical.”

“That would be nice.” She smirks.

After checking her ropes, Grey returns to the primary wagon. Digging through a crate that holds their food stores, he collects several easy-open tins of food and returns to Monica. She raises her head, looking curiously as Grey sits on the ground beside her legs. He holds up several tins, waiting for her to pick; she remains silent. After waiting for a moment, he chooses for her. With a sigh he opens a tin of chicken breast. He scoops out a piece of meat with a folding hobo fork, bringing the food toward her face. She leans in, their eyes locking as she opens her mouth. As his hand draws near, she leans over and attempts to bite him.

“What the hell?! ... I’m assuming you like food?”

“Only when I’m hungry.” She retorts.

“Aren’t you?”

Monica doesn’t answer him, simply glaring at him with narrowed eyes.

“Right... ... You know, I think there’s an old saying about biting the hand that feeds you.” Grey comments.

“Well, maybe I’d rather eat you instead?” Monica winks.

“Only if you don’t use your teeth.” Grey smirks.

Monica giggles, her lips curling around the edges of her snout in a faint grin. She lowers her head and looks down, as though trying to hide her amusement.

“I walked right into that one, didn’t I?”

“You sure did.” Grey says. “Whenever you’re hungry, just let me know.”

“I’m sorry... I’m hungry.” She replies softly.

Trying again, he slowly and carefully feeds her, periodically stopping to give her water from his water bottle. She looks over the human as he scoops another piece of chicken from the can. He smiles warmly as he hand feeds her. After taking the last bite, Grey reaches out with a piece of cloth taken from his pants pocket. Startled, she leans back and turns her head, but Grey reaches over. He dabs the cloth around her lips, wiping her mouth for her. Her brow lowers and her eyes narrow as she looks him over. She never expected her captor to be so generous and compassionate.

“Who are you?” She asks.

Grey smiles, rising to his feet. He slips the cloth back into his pocket, ignoring her question. By now, the others have begun to awaken, some of them already eating breakfast. He walks around the tree and unties the rope that binds her to the trunk, slipping it into his waist pack and freeing all but her wrists. He helps her to her feet and returns to the others a short distance away, keeping her close. Ruth glares at Monica as she sits beside Grey.

“So, what’s the plan?” Ruth asks.

“Walk?” Grey asks with a raised brow.

“I meant for her.”

“Oh! ... Nothing.” Grey says.

“So, she’s just a tag along?” Trenton asks.

“No. She’s one of us, or at least she will be.” Grey answers.

Everyone, including Monica turn their heads to him, their eyes wide in shock.

“Are you serious?!” Ruth snaps.

Grey looks around at his companions, before turning to Monica. Her head tilts downward, her snout pointing at the campfire. Her curious eyes turn up to him, her brow soft and non-threatening. He flashes a pleasant smile and he reaches a hand out, brushing her bangs from her face. Her lips curl up into a faint smile as their eyes lock.

“Trust me.” Grey murmurs.

Chapter 9: Good Behavior

After eating their meals and packing up the campsite, the caravan continues their journey. Monica walks beside Grey, her hands still tied at the wrists and behind her back.

Though Grey keeps her close to him, he rarely makes physical contact with her, only occasionally grabbing onto her arm to steady her when she trips over the broken ground of the old road. For the most part, he seems content to leave her be, trusting her not to escape. None of the others can believe Grey's behavior; the longer they watch him with the raider, the more gullible and naïve he appears.

The group hikes for many hours, following the shattered concrete as it winds through hills, tall grasses jutting from the gaps and caressing their thighs. As the sun reaches high into the sky, the road runs alongside a stream. After silently looking between each other, they collectively decide to take an extended rest. Grey leads Monica to a tree beside the road, the stream several meters away and down a grassy slope. She takes a seat on the ground and stretches out her legs, sighing in relief. Grey takes a drink of water from his bottle, before offering the last to Monica. He rises to his feet and begins to walk away.

"Where are you going?" Monica calls out.

"To refill my bottle. Can I trust you to be a good girl and wait here for me?" He asks with a little smile.

"Probably not." She grins back.

"That's what I thought." He chuckles.

"H-hey..."

"Yeah?" He turns back.

“Hurry up, okay?” She remarks.

He nods and shifts his body, sliding gently down the slope and toward the stream below, disappearing from sight. Monica rests her back and head against the tree, her silver eyes gazing up at the blue sky. Rory patrols the perimeter, looking for potential threats, checking on his men, and regularly staring at Ruth when she can’t see him doing it. As he walks around the site, he notices Monica sitting against a tree, alone. He blinks, his eyes widening in shock as he realizes that she is not tied to the trunk, or in any way immobilized. Could Grey be any more irresponsible?

“That son of a bitch.” Rory grumbles.

He stomps up toward Monica, who turns her head toward him. She can see the anger on his face and scoots back, unable to defend herself with her hands behind her back. As Rory closes in, Grey appears from the side of the road. He climbs up the slope with a freshly filled water bottle, the clear liquid running down the stainless-steel sides as he clutches the cylinder in his hands. The human sees the rodent Voeldahn marching up to the bound canine woman and quickly sheaths his bottle.

“Can I help you?!” Grey yells, gaining Rory’s attention.

Rory stops and turns, glaring at the pale skinned human with fiery eyes.

“What the fuck do you think you are doing?!” Rory growls.

“Gathering water.” Grey smirks.

“She could have escaped! How stupid can you be?!”

“Do you really want to find out?” Grey laughs.

“I’m being serious, you ass hole! You’re endangering our lives!” Rory screams.

By now, the rest of the caravan has turned to watch. Trenton, Ruth, Beth, Stan and Darren step closer to the men.

“Her hands are tied *behind her back*, and she wasn’t going to run. She’s far too smart for that.” Grey says defensively.

Monica’s lips curl up into a faint smile.

“I don’t trust her!”

“Well, I do. Have a little faith, man.” Grey grins.

“Fuck you!” Rory barks.

Grey opens his mouth to speak, but Rory quickly draws his revolver from his waistband, aiming it at Grey. Grey lifts his hands into the air in surrender.

“What are you doing? I’m not your enemy!” Grey says.

“How can you be so sure?” Rory mutters.

His thumb cocks the hammer, the cylinder rotating as it locks into place. His finger slips into the trigger guard, gently caressing the bent metal within. Grey stares at him, but he does not see fear in his eyes, or even anger. His expression is soft, even forgiving; it makes Rory even angrier. As he prepares to pull the trigger, he hears a familiar noise. Turning his head, he stares down the barrel of Darren’s Taurus 66-7 revolver. Six tarnished rounds are visible in the chambers of his seven-shot .357 magnum.

“Drop that gun!” Darren yells.

“And what if I don’t? What if I pull this trigger?” Rory grins.

“Then I’ll bore a hole in your skull and eat your fucking brains!” Darren growls.

The dark-skinned human’s brown eyes burn with a rage even more intense than Rory’s. For the first time in years, Rory feels genuinely afraid. His arm swings downward,

pointing the barrel at the ground as he slowly lowers the hammer of his revolver. He isn't done with Grey, but he won't survive outright shooting him. He can't allow Grey to live, endangering their lives with his recklessness, or threatening his chances with Ruth; he must devise a new plan to eliminate his rival.

"Happy now, bitch?" Rory mutters.

Darren waves his weapon, directing Rory away from Grey. He keeps the hammer cocked and his finger on the trigger. The caravan leader turns and walks away, leaving the humans alone. Ruth, Trenton and Beth quickly approach the two.

"Are you alright?!" Ruth asks.

"Yeah, we're fine." Grey replies. "Thanks Darren. Are we even now?"

"Not even close..." Darren mutters.

He lowers the hammer of his revolver and holsters his sidearm, snapping the retention strap before pulling his dreadlocks away from his face. Darren walks away from the others, his eyes narrowed as he focuses on Rory.

"What was that about?" Trenton asks.

“He thinks he owes me for saving his life.” Grey answers.

“Doesn’t he, though?” Ruth poses.

“He doesn’t owe me anything. That’s not how this works.” Grey laughs. “Isn’t that right, Trent?”

Grey leaves his companions, walking back to Monica and kneeling beside her. He rests his hand on her shoulder and leans in, whispering into her ear. She turns her eyes to him and subtly nods her head. The others watch curiously as Grey helps Monica to her feet. He pats her back softly before leading her toward the rear of the caravan. As he passes his friends, Trenton looks over at Ruth. Her eyes narrow as she watches the pair, staring intently at Monica. Ruth clearly does not trust the woman, and Trenton can’t honestly say that he does either, but he respects Grey enough to give him the benefit of the doubt.

After a few minutes, Rory gathers his men and the caravan continues their journey. Unwilling to let the rodent Voeldahn walk behind them, Grey keeps Monica close, walking near the center of the group and staying as far away from the man as he can. The caravan walks for many hours, until the sun begins to sink behind the trees. They stop along the side of the road in a wide patch of grass that once was a shoulder, their eyes tired and bodies sore. They tie the mules to nearby trees and lock the wheels of their carts.

Grey motions with his head before pulling Monica off to the side. Her eyes narrow as he leads her toward a large bush. She prepares herself for the worst. Will she merely scream, or try to fight him? She wasn't necessarily winning their first fight. As she sorts out her various strategies in her mind, she is surprised when Grey unties the ropes that bind her wrists together. She looks over her shoulder at him, watching as Grey looks carefully from side to side, making sure that no one is watching them.

"I'll wait here for you." He says casually.

"What are you doing?" She raises a brow.

"Even women have to relieve themselves eventually." He chuckles.

"When I'm done, are you going to tie me back up?" She asks.

"Only because I have too. If it was up to me, you'd already be free. Please be patient."

Monica quickly disappears beyond the bushes. She peeks through, watching Grey for a moment. He turns his back on the bush and sits on the ground, keeping watch for her. She turns back, looking at an old trail that leads away from the road, and her captor's campsite. She rests her palm against the trunk of a thin tree, contemplating her options. Though she doesn't want to be bound again, her conscience yells at her, telling her to trust Grey, and not to betray him. Grey waits patiently for several minutes, humming quietly to

himself as he watches the other. So far, no one has noticed that Monica is missing.

The bushes rustle behind him as Monica reappears, stepping out from the shadows. Grey turns back, smiling warmly at the woman. She grins in kind as he rises to his feet. Taking the rope, he ties her wrists once again, leaving considerable play in her bindings.

“I hope you washed your hands.” Grey teases.

“Fuck you.” Monica giggles.

“Promises, promises.” He coos.

“Hey... Thank you for not being a bastard.” She says sincerely.

“Don’t worry about it... Thank you for trusting me.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She murmurs.

The caravan builds a camp for the night, setting up a large fire and placing their bedrolls and sleeping bags around it. Grey picks a tree with a subtle lean, sitting Monica down and wrapping the rope around her torso. Instead of tying the rope, however, he takes both ends and slips them behind her back, giving her both ends to hold. From a distance, she would appear bound to the tree trunk, but in actuality, she is free to stand and leave, should she

choose to. He leaves her be, returning to the campsite as everyone collects tins of food for their dinner.

Grey opens a can of ground beef but is suddenly called away by Trenton. Grey sets his tin on the back of the cart, leaving it unattended as he approaches Trenton. Monica watches as he sits beside the feline Voeldahn, showing the teenager how to take apart his compact Glock for cleaning. As she watches the two, movement from the corner of her eye draws her attention. She turns her eyes to see that Rory is standing alone, on the left side of the cart. His back faces the woman, and Grey's tin of food is missing. As she watches, Rory looks over to the campsite, glaring at Grey.

He suddenly reaches over, the tin in his right hand. He sets the tin on the back of the cart, roughly where Grey had left it. A strange powder falls from his palms, sticking to the rim of the tin, which Rory is quick to brush away. He wipes his palms together, sweeping away any residue as he walks away. With his back turned to the woman, who was already at a bit of an angle, she wonders if he even saw her sitting several meters away. Rory returns to the camp and sits with his man, holding his own tin of food. Grey stands to his feet, moving back to the rear of the cart.

Monica's heart beats faster as she watches the human taking the tin of ground beef in his hands. He removes a folding hobo fork from his waist pack, sticking it into the tin. He takes a seat between Trenton and Ruth. He takes the

fork in one hand, the tin held tightly in the other. He scoops out a wad of meat with the fork, bringing it to his lips. She can't be sure what Rory did to Grey's food, but she can't take a chance that it will hurt or kill him.

"Grey!" Monica yells.

Everyone stops what they're doing, some holding food still in their mouths as they turn to look at the prisoner. Grey sets the fork back into the can, not yet having taking a single bite. Rory's eyes grow wide as he realizes that Monica was bound just behind him when he tampered with Grey's food. Grey sets the tin on the ground, leaving it behind as he approaches the woman. He kneels down in front of her, his wrists resting on his knees.

"What's up? Did you need a blanket, or are you hungry?" He asks.

"Uh... Yeah..." She murmurs.

"Yeah what?" He chuckles.

"I'm hungry."

Grey moves toward the cart, taking several tins from a crate in the back. He kneels in front of her, holding up the selection. She bows her head at her preference, and he promptly opens the can, placing a folding spoon into it.

“Remember, food good; hand bad.” He teases.

“Hey, less talking and more feeding.” She snaps.

“Geez. Someone woke up on the wrong side of the tree this morning.” He chuckles.

He scoops out food with the spoon, bringing it up to her lips.

“You need to know something...” She begins.

“What’s that?”

“You have a rat in your party...” She whispers.

“Uh... I know... He’s more like a mouse, by the way.”

“... What? No, I mean he can’t be trusted. He put something in your food when you left to help that kid with his gun; I don’t think it was seasoning.”

Grey sighs, lowering the tin as he looks sullenly at the ground.

“I guess that means we won’t be friends.” Grey mutters.

“That’s a safe bet.”

“Maybe we can be friends instead?” He asks, turning his eyes up to her.

“I doubt it.” She smirks.

He silently chuckles, smiling warmly as he reaches out with a hand. He gently rubs her shoulder, his fingers giving her an assuring squeeze. She turns her head, resting her chin on the back of his hand, her silver eyes locking onto his. To maintain the façade, he hand feeds her until the tin is empty, wiping her lips with the same cloth. He tosses the empty tin aside as he returns to the campsite. Most of the others have since finished their meals, and some have already stretched out over their bedrolls and sleeping bags.

Grey takes his tin of ground beef, glancing over at Monica, who stares at him. He sighs and takes a seat beside Darren. The dark-skinned human turns to his companion, looking curiously as Grey leans close to him. Grey whispers to the man, who nods his head once, carefully reaches for his holster on his right hip, and unbuttons his retention strap. Rory turns his eyes to the humans and his heart sinks when Grey tosses the entire tin into the campfire. He clenches a fist, resting it over his revolver that sits tucked within his waistband.

“What was that for?!” Stan asks in shock. “We don’t have food to waste.”

“Maybe we should ask Rory.” Grey mutters.

The others all turn to look at the rodent Voeldahn, their stares burning into his skull. Having used his only supply on poison on Grey's food, and with no options left, Rory stands to his feet. He pulls his revolver from his waistband as Grey stands to his feet.

"What the hell is going on?" Ruth asks.

"Stay out of this!" Rory snaps.

"I left food out when Trenton called me over. Rory took the time to put something in it, didn't you, Rory?" Grey glares at him.

"You've been nothing but trouble since you showed up!" Rory yells angrily. "You managed to free Ruth, but April chased us! You left me with that fucking brat of yours, who ruined a good deal and rushed us out of the door just so he could rescue that little bitch! You show up with another fucking human, kill some raiders and take another one prisoner, and then you don't even keep a close eye on her!"

"She's not a threat to you." Grey calmly replies.

"And then there's Ruth..."

"What did you put in his food, Rory?" Stan asks his boss.

"Ruth is going to be mine, one way or the other; you're standing in the way!" Rory growls.

The caravanners spread out, moving into a semi-circle, while Grey's companions form their own crescent opposite them. In the center of the two bent rows of people stand Rory and Grey. Rory cocks the hammer of his revolver, slipping his finger into the trigger guard. Grey rests his left hand on the backstrap of his Kahr CT9, his fingers coiling around the front of the grip.

"Don't do it... Please." Grey pleads with his opponent.

"Fuck you!" Rory yells in response.

He swings his revolver towards the human, but Grey is much faster, drawing his weapon and firing two rounds in the time it takes Rory to lift his gun. Everyone jumps back at the sight of the duel. Struck twice in the chest, Rory falls back, his finger squeezing the trigger and firing a shot as he drops dead on the ground. Luckily, no one is struck by the wild round. With their leader dead, the caravanners draw their weapons and aim at Grey, while his companions do the same, pointing their firearms at the caravanners. No one knows what to expect.

Stan, now the defacto leader, quickly steps in and takes control of the situation. He holds up his empty hands, stepping between his men and Grey.

“Don’t shoot!” Stan commands. “It was clearly self-defense. Rory was losing his grip, and Grey even asked him not to do it.”

“So... What now?” A caravanner asks.

“Now I’m in charge. We’ll take care of his body, and in the morning, we keep walking.” Stan answers.

Ruth walks up to Grey, resting her hand on his shoulder. He quickly turns his head, startled by her sudden touch. He sighs and holsters his pistol, staring down at Rory’s corpse. Muscle spasms cause his arms and legs to gently twitch and sway.

“How did you know?” Ruth asks him.

“Monica... She saw him poison my food. She called me over to warn me.” Grey answers.

Ruth turns back to Monica, who nods her head once.

“She saved my life...” He murmurs.

Ruth lets go of Grey’s shoulder, walking up to Monica. She takes a knee in front of the woman, resting her forearm over her leg.

“Thank you.” Ruth says to Monica.

“Don’t worry about it.” Monica remarks with a shrug.

Grey quickly joins her, kneeling beside Monica and pretending to untie her from the tree trunk. He removes the rope from around her torso, helping her to her feet.

“What are you doing?” Ruth asks him.

“She earned it.” Grey replies.

He unties the rope that binds her wrists together. Monica feels her wrists, gently rubbing them as her lips curl up into a faint smile.

“I trust that you won’t be needing these anymore.” Grey says as he holds the ropes before her.

“Maybe I will, but we’d need some time alone first.” She says rather sinisterly.

Ruth can feel her face flush.

“Oh my... You always know just what to say.” Grey winks,

He rests a hand on her shoulder, giving her a light squeeze before returning to the campfire. Stan's men strip Rory's body of his weapon, valuables and undamaged clothes, before dragging his corpse away from the road. Ruth looks over her shoulder, watching Grey as he takes a seat between Trenton and Darren. Darren hands Grey his Cobray CM-11 rifle, apparently worried that someone might try to avenge Rory during the night.

"You like him, don't you?" Monica suddenly asks Ruth.

"Huh?" Ruth turns back to the canine Voeldahn.

"Grey... You like him?" Monica reiterates.

"He saved my life. He's a good friend, but he's just a friend." She answers.

"Oh... Good." Monica remarks.

She walks past Ruth, her tail swaying from side to side as she approaches Grey and the others. Grey sees her approaching and motions for Trenton to move over, patting the space beside him. She sits down, glancing over to him.

"Nice rifle." She comments.

"It's technically a pistol caliber carbine."

"Whatever. It's still nice." She remarks.

"You like rifles?" He asks.

“Sure.”

He looks down at the weapon, then back at Monica. He reaches over, setting the firearm in her lap, to everyone’s surprise.

“You’re one of us now.” He says.

“Are you serious?” She asks with wide eyes.

“Sure. I only need my pistol anyway.” Grey smiles.

She takes hold of the cold steel of the weapon, clutching it in her hands. Her two previous companions, if she could even consider them that, had never trusted her with a gun. She looks over to Grey as he pulls open a tin of beans. He sticks his folding spoon into the tin, scooping out a large pile from the can.

“I was looking forward to that ground beef too.” He chuckles.

After quietly eating, Grey lays out a spare wool blanket for Monica, placing it beside his own bedroll. As they all lie down for the night, she looks over to the human who rests barely a meter away. He is so close to her that she could reach out and hold him if she wanted to. It’s the first night she has slept without ropes. She lies just to his right,

staring at him for some time. He looks over at her and smiles, before rolling over, his back facing her.

“I wouldn’t want to sleep looking at you either.” She quips.

“Showing you my back is a sign of trust... Plus, I like sleeping on my left side. Good night.” He replies.

Chapter 10: Recompense

Monica awakens the next morning to someone gently shaking her. She opens her eyes, seeing the hazy figure before her. Instinctively she bolts upright, startling Grey, who falls backward.

“Woah! Relax.”

“I’m sorry.” She grumbles.

“I let you sleep in, but we need to get going soon.” He says.

He rises to his feet, holding a hand out to her. Looking up to him, she takes hold of his hand and squeezes tightly as he pulls her up from the ground. With considerable force, he draws her up to him, her chest bumping into his. She gazes

at him, still holding onto his hand. Trenton stands beside Beth, watching Grey from a distance. He can't help but chuckle as he watches the human and his Voeldahn companion.

"So, uh... Are you hungry?" Grey asks after a long pause.

"I could eat." She replies.

She takes a quick look around at the camp. Most of the caravan have already eaten breakfast and are packing away portions of the campsite. To her surprise, Grey holds up an open tin, a can with a mixture of chicken and beans; he has saved her some cooked food.

"You're too kind." She comments, taking the tin.

"Yeah, I know." He smirks.

With little time to waste, Grey packs Monica's blanket for her as she slings her Cobray CM-11 rifle. Only moments after she has awakened, the caravan continues north along the road towards Vahdalia. Stan leads his men, walking at the front of the line. Darren stays beside him as they maintain idle chatter. Near the center of the convoy, Ruth, Trenton, Beth, Grey and Monica walk by the mule driven carts. The wheels squeak, the contents clanking and thumping as they shift over the fractured asphalt beneath. With a subtle

glance, Trenton looks over to Beth, his hand gently brushing hers as they sway at their sides.

She looks over, her lips curling into a faint smile as her fingers gently slip into his palm. Their eyes lock as they walk in synch, sharing a silent moment with each other.

“So, what’s your story, kid?” Monica suddenly asks him.

“My name is Trenton.” The annoyed teenager grumbles.

“So, what’s your story, Trent?”

He turns his head to Monica, who walks beside him. She raises a brow, as though silently demanding an answer from the boy.

“Well?!” Monica becomes impatient.

“Easy, girl.” Grey chuckles.

“You first.” Trenton says.

“Monica. Former raider. Twenty-two-years-old, I think... Your turn.” She replies matter-of-factly.

“What an enthralling story.” Grey facetiously remarks.

“Fuck you.” Monica says, flashing Grey a smile.

She turns back to Trenton, waiting for him to speak.

“Trenton. Sixteen, and going home.” He says matter-of-factly.

She glares at him, her eyes narrowed as Trenton imitates her own response. He sighs, realizing that she won't be satisfied with anything less than extensive details. He looks over to Beth, who looks equally intrigued. He realizes that he has never shared his background with her. Her hand gently squeezes his, silently urging him to speak. He squeezes her hand back and takes a breath. He begins his story, running away from Vahdalia to catch up to his father and their convoy. Several eyebrows raise as he describes his journey through the storm, and his first encounter with Grey.

“How did you know he would be there?” Monica asks the human.

Grey merely shrugs. Trenton answers for him, describing Grey's initial explanation disparagingly, embarrassing his friend. Monica turns her head to Grey, a brow sharply raised with a twisted grin on her face. He shrugs again as she snickers, the flesh of his face flushing as he turns away. Trenton sees the swift change in Grey's demeanor and immediately regrets his tone. He quickly continues the story, leading up to Coalton, and Ruth's rescue. Ruth joins the

conversation, explaining her side and also verifying Trenton's version. She is quick to point out Grey's behavior, and uncanny knowledge of her and others.

Monica looks back at Grey, her expression less derisive and more curious. Her eyes slowly scan the human, and she seems to be deep in thought. Trenton continues the story, describing the caravan and Grey's leave. Monica turns her head back to the teenager, her eyes wide with shock.

"You escaped from April?!" She asks.

"A friend of yours?" Trenton chuckles.

"Hardly." Monica murmurs.

"But you know her name." Ruth comments.

"Yeah. Every badass in a hundred-mile radius knows her name. She's a demon. I'm amazed that all of you are still alive." Monica explains.

"We have our moments." Grey smirks.

"I've noticed." Monica coos.

After walking for hours, the caravan stops to rest. Grey sits alone atop an old and weathered log, taking a drink from his water bottle. Monica approaches and sits beside him, her bushy tail swaying as she looks him over. As he had done before, Grey shares his water with her, offering her his bottle. She takes hold of the bottle, their fingers brushing

together. She glances up at him, her eyes locking onto his as her lips curl into a faint smile.

“I thought you were thirsty.” He comments.

She looks down at their hands, hers resting over his, before pulling the bottle away. She brings the opening to her lips, her eyes still locked onto him as she takes a drink. Water flows over the rim and runs down her chin and the container. She quickly tips the bottle back, wiping her chin with her palm.

“Don’t drown.” He teases.

She holds up the bottle upright, grinning wide and bearing her teeth as she stares into his eyes. She sticks out her tongue and licks the beads of water that run the entire length of the cylinder in a single drawn out motion. Grey slips a finger underneath the collar of his purple shirt, gently pulling it away from him body.

“Did it just get warmer?”

Monica chuckles, passing the bottle back to him.

“Maybe it did.” She winks.

Grey slips off his black hooded jacket and denim vest, placing them on the log beside him. She looks him over once more, her smile fading; she’s disappointed by his reserved reaction. He immediately notices and turns toward her.

“Is something wrong?” He asks with concern.

“Who are you, really?” She asks.

“What? ... I’m just some guy.” He answers.

“You’re not just ‘some guy’.” She begins.

“Aww, thanks.”

“You know things about people you have never met before, including me. You walk around the wilderness helping strangers for no reason, you saved me after I tried to kill you, and you haven’t even made a single pass at me!” She continues.

“Hey, we’ve flirted a little.” He says defensively.

“That’s not the same thing. What do you get out of this?”

“Nothing...” He sighs.

“So, why do it? What’s your deal?”

“I don’t know...” He murmurs.

“Bullshit. I warned you about that guy trying to poison you. I think I have earned some answers.”

“Fair enough.” He shrugs. “I’m not really a good guy...”

“You could have fooled me.” She remarks.

“Think of it this way... You’re sitting in a comfy chair and holding a mint condition porn magazine from before ‘The Ending’. Across the room is your mother, child, etc. Do you open the magazine and masturbate right there in front of them, or pretend you aren’t interested and throw it away?” He poses.

“Masturbate.” She winks.

Grey chuckles, lowering his head as he looks down at the ground.

“I appreciate your honesty.” He mutters.

“That still doesn’t answer my question.”

“I don’t really want to help people, I’m just supposed to. I have my own desires, and don’t think that you haven’t caught my eye. I just do what I’m supposed to do. Nothing more and nothing less.” He answers sternly.

“Wait... You’ve been checking me out?” She asks with a grin.

“Are you surprised?” He laughs.

“No.”

“Aren’t we cocky.” He chuckles.

He turns his eyes to her, peering into her silver orbs. They gaze at each other for a considerable time, losing themselves in the moment. Darren suddenly interrupts, clearing his throat loudly. The pair turn their heads, collectively glaring at the intruder.

“We’re heading out... Just thought you might want to know.” Darren says to them.

With a frustrated sigh, Grey grabs onto his jacket and vest, slipping them on as he rises from the old log. He turns back, holding out a hand to Monica. With a smug grin, she grabs his hand and stands to her feet. Darren silently excuses himself, leaving the two alone. Grey strokes the back of her hand, feeling her soft fur with his thumb. She shifts her hand, clasping their palms together and squeezing him tighter. Reaching up with his free hand, Grey moves her bangs away from her face.

“I guess we’d better go.” Her murmurs.

She nods her head, leaving it lowered to conceal the smile that spreads uncontrollably across her face. Rejoining the others, the caravan continues their journey. They follow the road as it winds arounds several hills and along a familiar looking stream. Trenton feels his heart beating faster, expecting to see the edge of Vahdalia at any moment. He quickens his pace, moving toward the front of the convoy.

He steps between Darren and Stan, who both turn back at the teenager.

“I think I know this river.” Trenton says.

“I would hope so. This *is* the river that runs through your town.” Stan remarks.

“Are we almost there?!” Trenton asks excitedly.

“It’s a long river. I doubt we’ll make it today, but by tomorrow afternoon, you’ll be back.” Stan answers.

Trenton can barely contain his elation, moving back to his companions. His mind races at the thought of seeing his mother, father and sister again. The anticipation is palpable. The march along the road lasts throughout the day, though to Trenton it feels like an eternity. When they set up their camp, eat their dinner, and lie down to sleep, all he can think about is going back home. Grey sits by the fire, his legs bent at the knee, his forearms resting over them. He stares into the flames, listening to the subtle pops and crackling of the wood.

A cold breeze blows through, fluttering the flames and sending a chill down his spine. He hears a shifting beside him and turns his head. Monica sits next to him, crossing her legs and resting her hands in her lap. She looks to him with a little grin, another gust shaking her hair. He sees her

shudder at the cold, immediately taking off his jacket and vest and draping them over her shoulders.

“It feels like it’s going to be a cold night.” He comments.

“Maybe you could keep me warm?” She winks.

“Don’t tempt me.” He grins.

“Can’t blame a girl for trying.” She chuckles.

They gaze at each other for a moment before another cold breeze makes Grey shiver. He moves toward his bedroll, slipping inside of the woolen blanket. Monica slips into her own bedroll several meters away, wrapping the wool blanket around her body and still wearing Grey’s jacket. She looks over to Grey, who glances at her. She rolls over, facing her back toward him. She stares at the horizon, her head resting on her bent arm. She runs her claws through her hair a cold spot in the middle of her chest. Her ears prick as she hears someone approaching her.

Grey lays out his bedroll beside her, lying down and pulling the blanket over them. He slips an arm underneath the fabric cover, draping an arm over her and pulling her body closer to him. He presses their bodies together, her back against his chest and her buttocks just before his pelvis.

“It’s just because it’s cold, alright?” Grey says softly.

“You just keep telling yourself that.” Monica grins.

“Hey, if I had a nice coat of warm fur, maybe I wouldn’t be holding you so close.”

“Oh, so you’re just using me?” She looks over her shoulder.

“Think of it as a symbiotic relationship; I get your warm fur, and you get to sleep in my arms.” He teases her.

“Whatever, asshole.” She giggles.

She looks over her shoulder, her eyes staring into his. He rests his nose on her shoulder and sighs contently. He may not admit it, but he doesn’t have to; it’s obvious that he enjoys their time together. She scoots back, pressing herself hard against him, her buttocks pressing into his pelvis as she buries herself in his arms. His body radiates warmth, and his gentle yet firm squeeze makes her feel so safe and comfortable. It takes only a few moments of cuddling before they both fall asleep together, undisturbed by the chill in the night air.

After a peaceful sleep, they both awaken early in the morning, Grey’s arms still wrapped around Monica’s slender frame. After lying together for a moment, the two reluctantly sit up, looking around the campsite. To their surprise, they are up before everyone except for Stan and Darren, neither of whom are interested in their personal matters. The morning sun is warm, even somewhat hot.

Monica quickly removes his jacket, passing it back to him. Grey cooks her breakfast, the sizzling wakes up some of the other caravanners.

Though they don't say a single word to each other, they share subtle glances as they sit together and eat. It isn't long before the entire caravan is awake and packing their campsite. Trenton is visibly nervous, anxiously pacing back and forth near the burned-out campfire. He is too excited to eat, ignoring his own hunger and instead thinking of home. With the road ahead well lit by the rising sun, the caravan continues their journey. Eager to return, Trenton walks near the front of the line with Stan and Darren. It doesn't take long for the travelers to see smoke rising in the distance.

It is not the smoke of destruction and chaos, but of several chimneys burning cords of wood. As the sun reaches its zenith, they pass a hill and the edge of Vahdalia comes into view. Trenton stops in his tracks, overcome with joy as he sees the town militia standing guard by a bridge that crosses the river. Stan and Darren continue walking, leading the caravan toward the town. The guards keep their rifles close as they approach the traveling merchants. Trenton is suddenly startled by a pat on the back, turning to see Grey, who nods reassuringly.

The boy turns back to Beth, Ruth and Monica, who stand just behind him. Urging them to hurry, he rushes toward the guards, one of whom brings up his rifle. As he shoulders his

weapon, Trenton calls out to the man by name, startling the soldiers. They turn, glancing between each other as the boy closes in.

“Trenton? ... Is that you?!” A guard asks.

“Who else were you expecting?” He casually replies.

“Your dad has been freaking out since he found out you were gone.” The guard adds.

“... He’s back already?” Trenton gulps nervously.

“Yeah! They returned yesterday.” The guard answers.

“They were driven back here in a convoy by the Sijians if you can believe that. I’ve never even seen a working car before!” The other continues.

“Who are your friends?” The first guard asks.

“It’s... A long story.” Trenton murmurs.

“Come on. Let’s get you back home.” The other guard remarks.

The guards lead the caravan across the bridge and into outer Vahdalia, which is primarily farms and ranch land. Domesticated chickens, cows and sheep roam within fenced land. The guards stay behind, using a handheld radio to call ahead and warn the town of their arrival. Trenton becomes increasingly nervous, worried about how his father will react to his ill-fated attempt to join their convoy to Leota. His hand trembles in a mixture of nervousness and fear. He is

suddenly comforted by a gentle grip. Turning his head, he sees Beth walking beside him, her hand steadying his.

“Trent!” Kyle’s voice yells out.

The boy stops in his tracks, looking ahead at his human father who rushes up to him, flanked by his uncle Drake and several of Vahdalia’s militia.

“Hey dad...” Trenton chokes out.

His eyes well with joyful tears as Kyle races up to his son, throwing his arms around him and giving him a tight embrace. Everyone except Grey seems surprised that Trenton’s father is not a Voeldahn, watching curiously. Kyle rests a hand on the back of Trenton’s head, shifting his hair. He kisses his son’s cheek, his voice trembling as he speaks.

“What the hell were you thinking, leaving town like that?!” He asks.

“I’m sorry, dad. I... I just...” Trenton mutters.

Drake glances over at the others, his eyes narrowing at the sight of Grey, Darren and Monica, who look far more

experienced than the others, and therefore more dangerous. He steps up to Trenton and pats him on the back.

“It’s good to have you home, Trent. We were starting to get a little worried about you.” He says with a smirk.

“You don’t say.” Trenton murmurs, his chin resting on Kyle’s shoulder.

“Come on. Let’s get you home. Just wait until your mom sees you.” Kyle says to his son.

“You’ll have to give us your report too.” Drake adds. “In the meantime, you’ll have to wait in a vacant bunkhouse... As a precaution, of course.” He says, turning to Grey and the others.

“Of course.” Stan murmurs.

Drake leads the caravan to a large bunkhouse with painted metal bars over the plate glass windows. Several militia stand guard outside, armed with rifles and sidearms, wearing homemade plate armor. Though initially reluctant to leave his companions, Trenton is led away and taken back to his home. After an emotional reunion with his mother and sister, Drake sits Trenton down at the kitchen table, David sitting beside Drake, and Kyle beside his son. There, Trenton explains the details of his journey in as much detail as he can, omitting only the portion of Grey’s background that he believes will make them nervous and mistrustful.

To his surprise, Kyle and Drake have both heard of April and her men. The relative vicinity of her town, Coalton, puts them on edge. The elders share a brief and severely edited version of Danny's story to satisfy Trenton's curiosity. They urge the boy to continue, and regale them he does, sparing few details. Grey sits in a chair, looking out a barred window with a foot on the wall, gently tilting the seat backward. Monica stands by him, using her claw to etch her name into the paint. Darren sits on the floor, Stan paces nervously between two beds of the bunkhouse, while Ruth and Beth lie down on real mattresses for the first time in many months.

"I hope this wasn't a mistake..." Stan thinks aloud.

"Relax. There's nothing to worry about." Grey remarks.

"What makes you so sure?!" A caravanner exclaims.

"Well for one, they let us keep our guns; that was the first clue. Besides, how do you think that conversation is going? 'Hey dad. Sorry I ran away. These people saved my life, put up with me for about a week, and then brought me home. Please kill them for me!'" Grey jokes.

After a while, Grey moves from the chair and onto an empty bed, stretching out on the bottom bunk. Monica follows him, sitting on the edge of the bed. She turns to him, looking down at him with a concerned look on her face.

“So... What are you going to do now?” She asks him.

“Rest. Why? Do you want to cuddle?” He winks.

“No, smartass...” She says, feeling her face flush.

“Suit yourself!” He chirps.

“I meant after this. What if they let you stay? Are you going to?” She elaborates.

“That’s a good question.” Ruth interjects. “I’d stay.”

“Me too.” Beth nods.

“I’m joining the caravan. Stan needs a second, and he offered me the spot.” Darren remarks.

“I’d like to stay too... What about you, Grey?” Monica asks him again.

He looks to her, his expression sullen. Monica’s heart sinks, reading his answer on his face before he utters a word.

“My place is out there, at least for now.” He finally answers.

“Don’t you want to settle down someplace safe?!” Ruth asks in shock.

Grey turns his head to her, shrugging his shoulders. He looks back to Monica, who stares down at the bed. He rests a hand on her forearm, stroking her softly with his thumb.

“It’s not all bad! I get to meet new people and get in outrageous adventures.”

“Right...” She sighs. “Then I’ll just have to enjoy you while I can.” She grins.

She turns and stretches out on the bed, resting her head on his shoulder and a hand on his chest. He slips an arm around her body, holding onto her.

“Hey, there are children in here.” Ruth remarks.

“So, turn around.” Monica retorts.

Grey turns his eyes to Monica, who gently brushes his neck with her nose. She gazes up at him with her shimmering silver eyes, her lips curled into a little smile. He pulls his arm tighter, pressing her into him. As comfortable as they are, the pair quickly drift off to sleep. After nearly two hours within the bunkhouse a group of armed militia approach, led by Drake and Kyle. Ruth shakes Grey and Monica awake as the group reach the front door. Stan and Darren stand at attention, waiting for the envoy. The door swings open and the human and Voeldahn enter, standing side by side.

“Well, we heard Trenton’s report, and it was quite a story.” Drake begins.

“Thank you for helping my son. I don’t know what I would have done if he never came home.” Kyle interjects.

“Aww.” Ruth grins.

“The caravan is free to trade with whoever, and the rest of you can stay if you’d like. Trenton spent enough time with all of you to vouch for you. Sorry for the inconvenience.” Drake continues.

“Of course, anyone who does decide to stay, we have a placement program to put your skills to good use, and we have quite a few houses that are still vacant. Think it over.” Kyle adds.

The two men leave the bunkhouse, immediately followed by the travelers. As they leave the house, Ruth stops Kyle, asking about the program and revealing her extensive medical training. As Beth exits the house, she sees Trenton standing a distance away. To her surprise he is accompanied by a teenage girl and a woman, both Voeldahn and bearing a striking resemblance to himself. Rushing up to meet him, he quickly introduces her to his mother and younger sister. The caravanners wander through the town, making several deals with other permanent merchants, farmers and tradesmen.

Grey, however, walks to the edge of Vahdalia. He sits by the edge of the river, the bridge to his left as he looks to the road ahead. He sighs, slouching forward and resting his chin on his arms, which drape over his knees. He doesn't really want to leave, but it's what he is required to do; he feels as though he doesn't have a choice in the matter. His heart weighs heavy as he watches the river flowing before him, the crystalline water shimmering so beautifully. The sound of footsteps moving closer draws his attention. He turns his head as Monica sits on the grass beside him.

"I wondered where you ran off too." She says.

"I didn't really run, per se. I casually strolled off." He grins.

"Whatever..." She murmurs.

She takes hold of her Cobray CM-11 rifle, pulling it over her shoulders and setting it down on the grass beside her. She looks to the river, watching the ripples reflecting the sunlight.

"It's beautiful here." She comments.

"How romantic of you to notice." He teases.

"Fuck you." She chuckles.

After a moment, Grey scoots closer, their sides nearly touching. She turns her head to him, her eyes quickly scanning him.

“Are you really leaving?” She asks.

“Yeah... I kind of have too.” He replies.

“Okay... .. Can we leave tomorrow then? I’d like one night in a real bed.”

“We?!” He turns to her.

“I don’t recall stuttering.” She quips.

“I thought you wanted to stay.”

“Yeah well... You’re a fun road buddy, and I don’t think I’ll find someone as amusing as you in this town.” She grins.

Grey can’t help but crack a smile, the weight lifting off of him. The ache in his chest quickly evaporates, replaced by a soothing warmth. He reaches out, draping an arm over her shoulders.

“So, is that a ‘yes’?” She asks.

“Sure. Sleeping in a bed sounds nice, just don’t get used to being comfortable.” He says.

“Why not? You’re a comfortable pillow.” She winks.

“Go pack your things.”

“What things?” She chuckles.

Monica slings her rifle as she stands to her feet. She holds out a hand to Grey, pulling him up with considerable force as soon as he takes hold of it. Their chests brush together as they gaze at one another for a moment. Returning to town, they spend a final night with Trenton, Ruth and the others, eating dinner outside at a small campfire that they had built in front of the bunkhouse. Ruth and Beth return to their own shared house, a temporary dwelling as they settle in. While the caravan sleep in the original bunkhouse, Monica and Grey sleep away from the others in a small bungalow.

As the sun rises early the next morning, Trenton is quick to rush out of the house. He was so overwhelmed by his return that he was unable to sleep throughout the night, lying awake for much of it. Eager to see his friends one last time before they depart, he leaves for the bunkhouse, stopping to see if Ruth and Beth would join him. They don't hesitate to accompany him. The caravan is already awake. After sitting with them for breakfast, he stands alongside Ruth and Beth, saying their goodbyes and waving as the caravan leaves Vahdalia with Monica and Grey in tow.

“So, what now?” Beth asks.

“Well, I can show you around... Help you adjust to life in a safe, boring town.” Trenton offers.

“That’d be nice.” She says with a smile.

“Hey... Uh... After your settled in, do you think we could still see each other? Hang out, or something?” He asks nervously.

Ruth grins as she walks away from the teenagers. Beth turns to Trenton, reaching out and resting a hand on his cheek. She leans in, giving him a quick kiss. Trenton feels his face flush, thankful that he is covered with fur, lest she see how nervous he is.

“I guess that’s a yes.” He says.

“Yeah.” She giggles.

He turns, walking Beth back to her house. As they pass through the town center, he can see Kyle and Cassie watching them from their front porch a distance away. His parents wave at the pair, little smiles on their faces before entering their house. Trenton turns to Beth, thankful for far more than returning home.