

THE AFFLICTED



KJORTEO KALANTE

THE AFFLICTED

A NOVEL

BY KJORTEO KALANTE

Smashwords Edition

Text copyright © 2009-2014 Kjorteo Kalante

Cover illustration copyright © 2013-2014 Azlyn "theOwlette" Mennenga and
used with permission

Chapter illustrations copyright © 2013-2014 Clare Hoskins and used with
permission

Scene break graphic and "KjK" signature copyright © 2013-2014 Kjorteo
Kalante

All rights reserved

IMAGES AND ARTWORK BY AZLYN "THEOWLETTE" MENNENGA,
CLARE HOSKINS, AND KJORTEO KALANTE

Ebook Formatting by www.ebooklaunch.com

Version 1.55

Revised February 22, 2014

This novel is a work of fiction, and is an original product of the writer's imagination. Any similarity in name, appearance, or content to any real places, events, or persons, living or dead, or to any places, events, or characters in other creative works, is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

Version History

Version 1.55: February 22, 2014

Version 1.5: January 10, 2014

Version 1.41: December 20, 2013

Version 1.4: November 26, 2013

Version 1.3: November 16, 2013

Version 1.2: October 9, 2013

Version 1.1: September 12, 2013

Version 1.0: June 12, 2013

Table of Contents

[Version History](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter One: Our Father](#)

[Chapter Two: Mortal Enemy](#)

[Chapter Three: Pressure](#)

[Chapter Four: Terminal Disease](#)

[Chapter Five: Flames](#)

[Chapter Six: To Endure](#)

[Chapter Seven: Loyalty](#)

[Chapter Eight: Reason](#)

[Afterword](#)

Dedication

*To the artists, dreamers, and creators of the world, past, present, and future.
Nothing is more precious than the will to bring visions to life.*

Chapter One



Our Father

The mouse stood up, twitched his whiskers, and dusted off his pants. Dry autumn leaves crunched under his shoes as he walked. The sun remained in the sky for the time being, but he knew it wouldn't for much longer. Not that it made much difference to him, though; no amount of warmth it gave could ever be enough. He couldn't even protect himself from the actual cold, at least not with his clothes as worn as they were. What could he hope to do against the chill in his heart?

He attempted to speak, but faltered; he was too nervous to say anything on his first try. He looked down at the ground, took a deep breath, and tried again.

"I... I'm not really sure where to start," he sputtered. "I never know what to say at funerals."

He tried not to look at the figures surrounding him. Short as he was, he felt even smaller underneath their gaze. He was alone, unable to escape, and unlikely to avoid humiliating himself. The forest was thin enough to allow the light of the early evening into the clearing, but to him, the lone ray of sunshine in the center was a spotlight, there solely for further intimidation. At least his white fur glistened in the light, but his frayed and faded clothing ruined even that effect.

Five of the six figures surrounding him—a crocodile, a collie, a wolf, and two cats—stared at him. Even the sixth, a blindfolded crow, turned to face the direction of his voice. The mouse's body tensed.

"Scout," the crow spoke—an infrequent occurrence. His voice's impossible deepness was as jarring and startling as its rarity. "It's all right."

"We're not judging you," the younger of the two cats added. "Just do your best."

The mouse, Scout, gave the crow and the young cat a small nod. "A-all right." He took another breath.

"Um, well, I guess we're here to say goodbye to Keeper Edward."

The others' reactions were immediate. Most at least maintained their composure, but the crocodile held his hands over his eyes and openly wept. Scout closed his eyes.

"He deserves better," Scout said. "He should have a real funeral, not... this. Instead, here we are, because we couldn't even recover his... his... we don't even have anything to bury." He swallowed. "Still, at least we're all together, and we're remembering him as a group. Maybe, in a way, he would have liked that."

The crocodile temporarily reduced his crying to the occasional sniffle, at least while he waited to hear the mouse's explanation.

"I never had the best life back in the city," Scout added. "You know that. I know that. On the streets of the low district... well, you know how it goes. As weird as it sounds to say this, I think I actually did better out here. We have the sickness and Hunters and everything, now, but we also have each other."

He gave a smile, but it was fleeting, and it faded quickly.

"I still remember how cruel it seemed when I first came here. To live through everything I did, only to end up in the wilds? Hadn't they beaten us down enough already? What more did they want from me?"

He balled his fists, closed his eyes, and huffed. After a pause, he gave a much slower exhale, and relaxed his hands once more.

"But Keeper Edward took me in. He turned me around. The past is the past, and he taught me to let it go. Now, I can fish, I can make fire, and I can cook for you. He taught me that. He taught all of you the same."

His voice started to crack, so he stopped for a few moments, and took a deep breath. It didn't help.

"Sorry. A-anyway, none of us would be here without him. I wouldn't have even met most of you without him. I definitely wouldn't have survived as long as I have. He loved us, and he gave his life to save ours. This tribe is his doing. Maybe seeing us here, together like this, is what he would have wanted. Or, at least, I hope so."

The mouse's speech concluded, he vacated the center of the clearing, and rejoined the circle that had surrounded him. He took his place between the two who had encouraged him, the crow on his right and the younger cat on his left.

The tribe was quiet and pensive. No one spoke, and even the crocodile's weeping lessened. In fact, the contemplation was so great that a sudden silence filled the clearing, and there was little to dispel it.

Scout's whiskers twitched again. He had hoped for a volunteer to speak, but it eventually became clear that he needed to choose someone. He looked around the circle. His gaze finally settled two spaces to his left, past the younger cat, on the elder.

"Sir Coral?"



"Keeper Edward!"

I stopped in place as a middle-aged fox ran up to me.

"Ah, it is you!" The fox took my hand in an enthusiastic, almost forceful

shake, and grinned.

"It certainly is," I said. "Well met."

"I just wanted to thank you for your sermon the other day." The fox shook my hand again before he finally released it. He held his smile, and I even noticed the occasional swish of his tail. "I don't usually go to church, but I was curious. For someone who isn't a regular, you made me feel so...." He broke his gaze with me, and looked off to one side. His eyes then lit up, and he immediately faced me again. "Welcome! So welcome! I've never felt like that before."

"I'm certainly glad to hear that. I do all I can not to exclude."

I had frequently argued with Guardian Johansen over my sermons, since he believed that they were too secular. As important as my faith was to me, I never wanted to use it to narrow my audience. My words were not merely for those who worshipped the correct God. I wanted them to be a source of comfort for all. It was nice to see my approach having a positive effect.

The fox nodded as well. He must have been in some sort of hurry to be somewhere, as he bid farewell and left very shortly after he thanked me.

I held my smile long after he was gone. It was enough that I, a mere Valdric Keeper, had apparently done some good for the city. That someone appreciated it enough to tell me afterward was even better. I could hardly wait to tell Guardian Johansen about this encounter. The look I envisioned on his face!

Wait. No. That would be unlikely. If my plan worked, I would never see the Guardian again.

I resumed my trek toward the church, and idly glanced at the crowds as I walked. A parrot in an ill-fitting suit passed by a greyhound beggar, and scoffed. A sparrow and a jackal stood next to their damaged cars, shouting at each other. A dove asked a large family of wolves for directions, only for them to shy away, as if they anticipated a mugging.

Canine, canine, bird, bird, canine... where were the rodents? I knew that they had grown scarcer, since the warring street gangs' stalemate had finally broken, and not in their favor. Still, I hadn't expected them to disappear that completely or quickly.

Finding anyone outside of the three—now two—majority species of the low district was even more difficult. There were a few cats, I supposed, but only the "smaller" varieties. To my knowledge, I was still the only cheetah in the entire district.

Oh, well.

I looked up and tried to think, only to sigh at what I saw. As always, the city's dome let nothing through. The "sky" was a blank faded green ceiling. The dome easily reached and covered every horizon in all directions, and beneath its

thick metal, the masses had nothing but empty views and recycled air. Cold, warehouse-like artificial lighting shone down on the streets, making them seem even bleaker than they already were.

How I longed to see the true sky. The dome could steal the sun, but it could never replace it. As I considered my plan, I wondered: would basking under the sun's light again be worth it?

That reminded me; lighting. Nothing electric would work outside the city, of course, but I had to remember to bring torches, or at least the means to make them. Did one of my guidebooks have something about making fire? I opened my satchel and took out my personal notes, and checked my list again.

Lighting. Yes. There it was.

A small crowd gathered in front of me. A fully suited Hunter stood before the district inhabitants, mystifying those who had never seen a wilds suit before, while four armed but unsuited Hunters kept the crowd back. The Hunters themselves patrolled every corner of the city, of course, but they normally only wore the suits when venturing outside. The suited Hunter was a faceless, anonymous figure, clad only in the same faded green as the dome. A tinted black visor enabled the suit's wearer to see, without compromising his or her identity. Glowing green lights on the wrist confirmed that the suit functioned, and that its seals and safeguards were intact.

The crowd had several questions about the outside world, and about the disease that had destroyed it, but the suited Hunter ignored them all. Instead, he or she—it was impossible to tell which—silently pointed at two of the unsuited guards, and then toward a small alley. The guards trotted away, paying no more heed to the crowd than their leader had.

The suited Hunter then turned, in a different direction, and started to walk away, all without a single word. The two remaining guards gave the disappointed crowd a small shove, and then turned to leave alongside their commander.

The tail on the leader's suit was long, narrow, and straight, which suggested some sort of feline wearer. More importantly, though, it suggested that he or she must have been an officer. The lower-ranking Hunters, and others such as Keepers who needed to rent their suits, typically had to make do with standard, universal models. I always had to stuff my tail down my pant leg, and simply endure the discomfort. Much like many things in the city, custom-fitted suits with tails were a luxury reserved for the elite.

The presence of high-ranking Hunters in the wilds gave me pause. I swallowed, and briefly reconsidered....

No. I couldn't let anything deter me.

The crowd looked amongst themselves, and then slowly dispersed. They had

places to be, after all. I was no exception; there was but one Valdric church in the low district, and I still needed to visit it.

~

Valdric centers in the more affluent areas were lavish, ornate, and impressive, but our low district church was comparatively basic and bare. The furniture was unpainted, the building structure shabby at parts, and decorations completely absent. It provided only the minimum of shelter, a roof over the worshippers' heads, and simple wooden benches and an altar. However, it was serviceable. So long as it covered the essentials, we could make do with what we had.

It was a lonely church, though, as the elders had mostly forsaken the area. A scant two Keepers and one Guardian remained to run it, and the number of Keepers would soon fall to one.

I did not wish to abandon anyone. I would have stayed and fought for the low district myself, had circumstances been different. Unfortunately, the people outside the city needed me, even more than those within it did.

For all of the low district's poverty and crime, its people at least still had their health, and they still had access to their own city. They were not plague-stricken exiles. They would not die at the hands of the Hunters, or at least, not the Hunters tasked with purging the world of DLY.

The afflicted, by contrast, encountered those problems every day. It had been years since the quarantines had failed, and the city's countermeasures had only grown harsher since then: DLY sufferers first faced banishment outside the dome, and then the law changed to execution on sight, as if the disease itself were somehow not punishment enough.

They needed help. Specifically, they needed my help.

The church had a storeroom for wilds excursion supplies, which I entered. Once inside, I set my satchel down on the central table, and browsed the supply shelves that lined the walls.

I needed a suit, of course. No sane Hunter would even let me approach the checkpoint, let alone pass through it and exit the city, without one. Regrettably, that was why the afflicted mostly avoided us; if they saw anyone in a suit, they fled. Valdric Keepers were not Hunters, but the afflicted seldom lingered long enough to make the distinction. Still, I couldn't even make it that far without passing through a checkpoint, and so a suit remained necessary.

I needed loyalty oath forms, as well. The Valdric church used the Hunters' suits, and in return, the law required us to assist them. After we met with the afflicted, and after we provided whatever food, counseling, preaching, and other

comforts we deemed necessary, we then had to inform the Hunters, so they could track the afflicted down and kill them. Apparently, though, even that law was not enough, and so they needed my declared understanding and assent in writing.

Did I need a holy book? The Hunters had to eradicate DLY by eradicating its carriers, but the Keepers could convert them to Valdricism first. We prepared the afflicted for the next world while cleansing this one, and fulfilled our duties to both God and the city at once. At least, that was how Guardian Johansen had explained it to me, though I wasn't so sure.

It was difficult to decide what else to bring, since I had to strike a balance with how heavily to pack. I could have easily filled an entire wagon with supplies, had one been available, but I couldn't risk becoming overburdened. Even though I wasn't exactly traveling light, speed and mobility were still important considerations.

I settled for bags and backpacks, which I filled with spare clothing, writing supplies, some food, equipment such as fishing nets to help acquire more food later, and books on everything from making fire to preparing fish. I included a guidebook to identifying edible plants and berries. I also included a frying pan, knives, bedrolls, and any other miscellaneous sundries I could find. If it fit in one of the packs, and if it was even slightly useful, I took it.



"Sir Coral?"

The old red tabby cat started to rise, though he struggled with his movement at first. He winced, and turned to look to his right.

"Some help, please."

The younger cat, a brown patched tabby, immediately sprang up and ran to Sir Coral's side. "Easy, dad," she said. "I've got you. There." With some effort, she was able to help him to his feet.

Sir Coral frowned. "Father, dear." He then shambled toward the center of the clearing, though he did add a quick "thank you" for his daughter's help.

He commanded the attention of the entire tribe as he walked. Everyone except the crow watched him, and everyone without exception listened.

"When my daughter and I—"

He stopped and coughed, then took a small sip of water from his flask. "Excuse me." He cleared his throat, took another sip, and began again.

"When my daughter and I joined the tribe, there were only three other

people before us, including Keeper Edward himself. I remember seeing those three, and expecting an improvised, haphazard reception. Surely, no small group like that could organize itself out here, I thought. Instead, before he even knew we existed, let alone that we were coming, Keeper Edward had already prepared food and supplies for us."

The crocodile sniffled. Sir Coral closed his eyes.

"Even in that early stage, the tribe had structure. Keeper Edward was slow to make demands, but when he did, I saw the other two obey him without hesitation. He was their absolute, unquestioned leader. Eventually, he became ours, as well."

The crocodile buried his face in his hands. Sir Coral opened his eyes again, and looked over at him with some concern, but otherwise disregarded the resumed weeping.

"He knew that this migration was hard, perhaps even impossible, but he faced it anyway. He also knew that, whether we undertook this challenge or not, each of us would still face Hunters and DLY. He knew that all of us would die, including him. That never stopped him. He faced even a doomed mission with the kind of bravery, dedication, and sacrifice I haven't seen since the war."

He raised one foot and rapped his toes against the ground. Leaves crunched under his combat boots, startling a few of the others. Relics from his military days, his boots had remained as solid and sturdy as ever, and he still counted on their durability and practicality in the wilds. They were a poor match to his collared business shirt and pants, of course, but he had chosen function over style, and had never concerned himself with how they clashed.

"Such was his gift to the tribe. He could have founded a village, had circumstances been different. As it was, he formed a group that saved my daughter, and that built us up, and trained us to care for those who came after us. He formed this group, even knowing the cost. For that, the rest of us shall forever be grateful."

With that, he took some more water, and then reclaimed his position between his daughter and the crocodile. He gave the former a nod.

"Celine," he said.

The younger cat blinked, and then returned her father's nod. She stroked her brown and black tail, smoothing down the fur her nervousness had raised. It was a quick stroke, but still enough to give off an audible static crackle. Scout smiled at her, and she returned the smile, but only for an instant.

She hopped up from her seat, and made her way toward the center. Once there, she put her hand on the back of her neck, beneath her hair, while she tried to think.

"Keeper Edward was...."

She saw the crocodile move over to her father and whisper something, and she saw her father twitch his ear in response. She was too far away to hear what the crocodile had said, but she saw both of them glance toward Scout for a moment. With some effort, she forced herself to ignore the exchange.

"Keeper Edward was everything that Dad—sorry—Father said he was." Her hesitancy rendered her first few words too quiet to hear, though she eventually was able to recover. "I never knew why, though. Brave people don't just wander around, doing brave things at random. They need a reason, don't they? I once asked Keeper Edward what his was, and he told me that he was merely doing his duty. Why was this tribe his duty, though? I thought about it, but now that I see all of you here, I think I finally understand."

Celine looked to her father and to Scout. The cat and the mouse each gave her small, encouraging nods.

"I always felt like I could trust him," she said. "He listened to me. Even though we're all sick and dying, and even though worrying about relationships and such seemed pointless by comparison, he always listened. No problem was ever too small for him. Even when I was too embarrassed to talk to Father or Scout, I could always talk to him."

The others' pained expressions were more than she could handle, so she closed her eyes. However, the gesture did not protect her from hearing the crocodile's sniffles. She opened her eyes again, but only to stare at the leaves by her feet.

"We each have our problems and our issues, of course, but he listened to all of them. Even though...."

Her tail had bristled again, and it crackled at her ineffectual attempt to smooth it.

"Well, some of us have had our disagreements before," she said, "and some of us still have them now. Not all of us always get along."

She kept her head down. She couldn't look at the crocodile when she said that. She knew how many problems it would cause if she did.

"Still, no matter what happened, he never thought less of any of us. That was why he did what he did. Love." She tried to force a smile. "He brought us together because of the fondness he had for us. He didn't see us as afflicted, or as his patients, or even as members of a tribe. He saw us as his family. Each of us was his beloved child. He was willing to do anything for us... so he did."

She had finished her speech, but there was still one more challenge to face. She kept her head low, tucked her ears back, and waited.

Sir Coral remained unmoving, and maintained his stern expression. After a

pause, though, he closed his eyes and gave her a single nod.

Relieved, Celine's head and ears perked back up, and she trotted back to her seat, between her father and Scout.

She looked around at the others, and struggled with indecision. She likely would have chosen either of the people next to her, but both had already spoken. It was difficult to name anyone else without offending someone, though, especially after working so hard to secure her father's approval.

Ultimately, one option stood out to her. She feared that it might cause trouble, but she had to accept the risk. She swallowed, gathered her courage, and made her decision. Her gaze moved two spaces to her right, and settled on the crow.

"Um... Rook?"



I had long since finished packing, but my mind refused to rest. I couldn't stop worrying about what I might have forgotten. I had gone through the list of everything I would need. I had packed everything that I could fit. The shelves were almost bare after I had finished with them. I checked, double-checked, triple-checked, and quadruple-checked my supplies, but none of that was of any comfort to me. There was simply nothing left to do but leave, and yet, I could not bring myself to do so.

I supposed that the hesitation was only natural, given my plan. I was not preparing for a mere camping trip, after all. I had exactly one chance to choose my supplies, and my decisions would quite literally affect the rest of my life.

I sighed. It was no use. I was still too timid. I picked up one of my packs and opened it. Perhaps I would feel bolder after a fifth check....

There was a knock on the supply room door.

"Enter," I said.

I set the pack down, and turned to face the room's only entrance. There, standing by the door, was an otter in Keepers' vestment. He carried a small cudgel, and held it tightly until he saw me, at which point his face and his grip both softened.

"Oh! It's you," he said. "That's a relief."

"Keeper Bartholomew!" I smiled at the sight of my old friend. As always, I remembered an instant too late that, since we were of equal rank, he preferred that I use his given name. "Francis, rather. A pleasure, as always."

I had known Francis Bartholomew since seminary. We had studied together, graduated together, and heeded the calling of the low district together. We were the only ones who had done so on purpose; our Guardian was someone who had tried to play the political game, failed to impress his superiors, and ended up reassigned to the low district as punishment. By contrast, Francis was a believer, and he truly wished to assist those who needed his assistance. Guardian Johansen dreamed of escaping the low district, but Francis dreamed of saving it.

"As always, James." Francis returned the smile, and left the door open as he entered. "I wasn't aware you were coming in today."

"I'm not." I saw the confusion on his face, and added, "Not officially, anyway."

Francis started to give me a blank stare, but recovered when he saw the packs. "Ah. Preparing for a trip?" he asked.

I nodded. "I'm going into the wilds again. I would really like to work with the afflicted, if I can."

"Again? So soon?" He gave me an amused grin. "I realize that this church must be depressing, but surely you must know by now that there's nothing outside, either. We're one of only two remaining cities in the continent, if not the entire world; the rest is ruins and wilderness."

"I like wilderness." I let my tail flick, once. "I used to camp out there before the dome, you know."

"You can still do that in the park zones."

"Yes, but it was different back then. Pure air. The sky. The real sky, Francis, not the light show the wealthy districts put on."

"I'm the same age as you are, James. I remember, too." He shook his head. "More importantly, do you expect to encounter any afflicted out there?"

"I haven't yet, but I'm not giving up. They never approach anyone in a suit, but there must be a way around that. Actually, I do have a few ideas, and if they work, then this time should be different. So, yes, I'd like to try, at least."

"Are you willing to report to the Hunters, if these ideas of yours work?"

I scoffed. "Of course not."

Pressure or no pressure, law or no law, I had always been open about my refusal to betray the afflicted. The only reason Guardian Johansen had allowed my rebellion was its irrelevance; it didn't matter what I would or would not theoretically do, since the situation had never actually arisen. Still, even the very thought of sending Hunters after the afflicted was unconscionable. Francis knew that.

He exhaled. He looked carefully, skeptically at my packs, and then at me. "You're hiding something," he said.

"Excuse me?"

He folded his arms. "You mean to leave again, and to take a large portion of our supplies with you. To leave the Guardian and me to run the church, with no help and a diminished inventory. Meanwhile, you will be out on a mission that has never succeeded before. For what? A camping vacation?"

I winced. "It wasn't my intention—"

"Of course it wasn't. I know you, and I know you would never do something like that, because you're not that selfish. If you're leaving, there must be another reason. Hence, you're hiding something."

"W-what would I be hiding, exactly?"

My brief stammer gave me away, though even without it, I doubted that I could have held the deception for long. Misleading others had been difficult enough, but I could never lie to Francis.

He noticed my hesitation, knew he had me, and sighed. "I knew it. You're not coming back."

"What? How can you say... what would make you think...." I made a small effort to feign innocence, but then stopped, defeated. "No. I am not."

"All the more reason to question your scheme, then. What this looks like and what I know about you don't match. You can't be going anywhere else in the city; you wouldn't leave this post for a more comfortable one, and you definitely wouldn't rob us on your way out. So, what are you up to, and why are you preparing for another outside run? You wouldn't...." He stopped for a moment, as the realization hit him. His eyes widened, and his jaw fell. "No. You wouldn't."

I said nothing, but I gave him a slow, solemn nod.

He lost his grip on the cudgel, and it fell to the ground with a loud clatter. Both of us jumped, subconsciously worried that the noise would attract the Guardian, even though we both knew that he was absent that day.

"You are insane." He entered the room, closed the door behind him, and had a seat directly across from me. He then added, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. It's just—"

"I know. I thought it to be madness, too, at least when I first had the idea. The more I dwell on it, though, the more I think I can do it. No, not just can; I have to do it. This is my calling, Francis."

"Are you listening to yourself? Think what you're saying!"

"I'm saying that, after all this time, I finally understand what I need to do to help them."

"You're going to die."

"Yes."

I kept my eyes closed. I was unable to face him, so I delivered my reasoning as if it were a memorized recitation.

"I know that once I do this, I can never return," I said. "The instant I expose myself to the outside air, I legally become one of them. They won't come to me if I'm in a suit, though. They never have, and they never will. If I am to help them, then I must join them."

There. I opened my eyes and looked up once more.

Francis had nothing to say in response, at least not at first. He was most likely still absorbing my words.

"Why?" he finally asked. "Why would you forsake your life in here for death out there? I know you want to help and comfort people. You always have. This is suicide, though. Even if you evade the Hunters—and you likely won't—then you still subject yourself to death from DLY. Why would you end your life in such a manner?"

I gave him a sad smile. I suspected that he already knew my answer, but if he had to hear it from me, then so be it.

"It is more duty than desire that led me to this decision, believe me," I said. "I don't want to face the unforgiving cruelty of the wilds, but face it I must. The afflicted suffer hardships that are unfathomable, even to those in the low district, yet we cannot even approach them in this state. I cannot stand by and do nothing. Not while they live and die like that."

"You aren't just standing by, though. Your work here is important, too. The city suffers, this district most of all. Have you heard the latest news regarding Mayor King?"

The mayor's name was a most unwelcome intrusion into our conversation, and I winced upon hearing it. "No, I have not. I did see what might have been the Hunter General, on the way here, but I have not seen or heard anything from the mayor. What has he done this time?"

Francis' gaze darted around the room, as if he worried that the very walls were the mayor's spies. He leaned forward, and his voice lowered. "I don't know if this is true," he whispered, "but they say that he means to crack down on the low district. Looking for so-called sedition, allegedly."

"Would that search include us?"

The Valdric church was not especially political. The elders and Guardians remained neutral, and therefore quietly condoned Mayor King's reign, especially in the wealthier portions of the city. However, the mayor never had a positive relationship with the low district, and it was hard to predict his seemingly arbitrary targets within it.

"Not directly," Francis said, "but they will scrutinize our relations with the

people more than ever. For example, say you were to give kind words, a sermon, and possibly food and the like to a homeless rodent. If the Mayor declared the rodent gangs to be subversive, and said that the one we helped had ties to them, then we could get in trouble for aiding rebels. Or so they say."

"That would explain the Hunters I saw earlier, I suppose." I briefly closed my eyes. "So what will the church do? We can't just ignore the needs of the people."

"And therein lies the problem. Don't you understand? This is why you must stay."

Was it? Could I have been wrong? I considered the possibility, but....

"No."

Francis blinked, and gave a sharp exhale.

"Listen, James. The city has problems both within and without. I will not deny the suffering in the wilds, nor will I deny that you want to help them. I beg you, though; help us, instead. Do not choose DLY over King."

I considered his plea. "To exile one's self to the wilds and face sickness and Hunters," I said, "or to stay here and face the mayor, easing the city's pain without drawing his wrath...."

I sighed. Neither was a particularly comfortable position. If I left the city and Francis remained, neither of us could say the other had the easier job.

"I can only try to match the problems to our skills," I continued. "I am a source of comfort, not justice. I can tend to the afflicted, but you can deal with the city and its politics. You are a better fit for the problems here."

"Then you are giving your life for nothing!" Francis pounded the table. "How much will it help the afflicted, if you get yourself killed? Do you think you can build a church out there? Do you think you can establish anything that will last? Even if you escape the Hunters, do you think you'll live long enough to make a difference? There will be more afflicted after you're gone. There are always more afflicted."

"To stop the problem once and for all, the war against the afflicted has to end. I will not dispute that point."

"Then why are you still going?"

"Because ending that war is your job, not mine." I clasped my hands, fingers interlocking, and then bowed my head. "It falls to you, and to people like you—people with good hearts who remain in the city, and fight for it. Alas, I do not fight for things. I bring aid, something the afflicted currently lack."

"That's not—"

"It is true, and you know it. In the city, I would be one of several people trying to help. In the wilds, I would be the only one. Does that not make a larger

difference?"

"No."

"No?"

Francis shook his head. "It's not that simple. Even with the two of us working together, tending to the low district is an almost impossible challenge. How do you expect me to do it alone? This city needs you."

I smiled at him, flattered by the sentiment, even if I disagreed. "I am no activist, Francis. I cannot stop Mayor King or the Hunters. My role is merely to comfort the dying. The city suffers, but it is not yet beyond hope. It does not need someone like me, and I suggest you and I both pray that it never will."

"What does it need, then?"

"Saving. Something you were always better at than I was."

Francis shifted in his seat, but said nothing.

Satisfied that both of our paths were clear, I pushed my chair back and stood. It was no easier to leave than it had been before, but with that conversation, I had committed myself to it.

I had one final duty before I left. I reached into my satchel, pulled out a letter I had written, and gave it to Francis.

"What's this?" He knew better than to open it without asking, but he did turn it over in his hands a few times.

"It's a note that explains everything I just told you. I would like you to keep it safe for a few days, to give me enough time to leave the city, and then deliver it to Guardian Johansen. I can't let him stop me, but he should at least know what became of me." I gave a somewhat mischievous smile. "Eventually."

Francis held the letter to his chest, and for the first time since the conversation had started, I saw true heartbreak in his eyes. It was as if he held my death certificate in his hands. In at least some small way, perhaps he did.

"I don't want you to do this," he said. "We've always been—"

"I know. I'll miss you too, Francis."

"Does it...."

His attempt to remain strong and composed finally failed, and he lunged forward to give me a close hug. He buried his head against my chest, and struggled not to sob. With a sad smile, I placed my arms around him and returned the hug. I held him for as long as he needed; I was in no hurry to leave.

"Does it really have to be this way?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"It's going to be hard to do this alone."

"My task is no easier, I assure you."

"I know. It's just...." He looked up at me. "Even as you march toward your

own death, you're always the one comforting others, aren't you?"

"I am a Keeper, am I not?"

If he hadn't been crying, he would have laughed. Instead, he gave a sharp exhale somewhere between the two.

"I'll miss you," he said. "The world will miss you. Don't die in vain, though. At least make it mean something."

"I'll try." I patted his shoulder.

"I just wish there were more people in this city like you."

As we broke the hug, I held him with one hand on either shoulder. I took one last look at my old friend, my fellow Keeper, my successor. As I did, my smile grew less sad and more genuine. How could I feel bad about leaving the city in Francis' hands?

"There are," I said.



"Um... Rook?"

If the crow had any reaction at all to Celine calling him, then it was silent, internal, and invisible to the others. His beak limited his ability to convey facial expressions, and his blindfold prevented the others from seeing his eyes. He stood without a word; his response was every bit as nonexistent as his appearance implied.

He was slow to rise, but quick to tower over the others once he did. He was much taller and wider than they were. A muscular build and a deep voice complemented his black-feathered frame, though he almost never used them.

Before he spoke, he first reached back behind his head and untied his blindfold. The pure white cloth fell away, and revealed equally pure white eyes. The gesture was a favor to the others; his eyes were opaque, clouded, and as blank as the rest of him was, but exposing them at least made his expressions slightly easier to read.

He did not walk forward. He remained where he stood, between the wolf on his right and the mouse, Scout, on his left.

"Keeper Edward was more than a leader," he said, after a long pause.

Silence.

"He knew that he was going to die," the crow added. "That we all were. That even the best leader could not live forever, nor could his successor, or his successor's successor. He taught us how to live on in his image, instead. He

became an ideal."

The crocodile's gaze fell. He went from an indeterminate expression to an icy, almost murderous glare.

"We all have an incurable disease, and for this, they hunt us down," Rook continued, oblivious to the reaction.

He lightly kicked the ground, as if to make a point or a reference using his shoes, just as Sir Coral had done. However, he did not have shoes. Unlike Sir Coral, Rook lacked anything at all to cover his black, scaled feet.

"Keeper Edward was the first of us to die," he added, "but we can still ensure that he lives forever. We need only honor his words and his teachings."

The crocodile placed his hands on either side of his seat and pressed down, starting to rise. Sir Coral quickly raised his arm. He was too far away to block the crocodile, but the intent with his gesture was nonetheless clear. The crocodile's gaze moved between Sir Coral and Rook. The crocodile then nodded, sat back down, and grudgingly allowed the crow to finish.

"As long as we remember him, he is immortal," Rook said. He paused, and then sat. He said nothing further, at least until he had finished retying his blindfold around his head. Just as the rest of the tribe started to look around in awkward confusion, he finally uttered his choice for the next speaker.

"Girard."

The crocodile sputtered when he heard his name. His gaze darted between Sir Coral and the collie, as if their sitting next to him would somehow protect him. Both returned the glance, and Sir Coral lowered his arm, but neither said anything. Girard swallowed, and then stood.

Girard was the second-tallest member of the tribe—only Rook stood above him—but he was much less massive. He might have had comparable physique once, but DLY had long since robbed him of his muscle mass, leaving behind only a deflated shell. His emotional state, as well as his borrowed, ill-fitting cloth shirt and pants, only emphasized all that he had lost. Tall but thin even on the best of days, the crocodile looked that much narrower in his grief.

Girard cleared his throat. Like Rook, he remained where he stood, and did not approach the center.

"Keeper Edward was...."

He choked up, and stopped. He took several breaths before he calmed down enough to try again.

"He was... no. Let me... let me start over. I remember when I first... he...."

He spoke slowly and attempted to ease into his words, but he still failed. He closed his eyes, and took as deep a breath as he could manage.

"I was... I was there in the beginning. I remember... I was all alone at first. I

didn't know how to catch food or do anything. And then he... he... oh, God!"

He dropped to his knees, covered his eyes with his hands, and sobbed.

The others exchanged glances, no one quite sure what to say or how to respond. After a few moments, Sir Coral stood, shuffled over to Girard, and placed his furred hand on the crocodile's scaly shoulder. Girard accepted the gesture, for what little it helped. The others watched and waited in silence, until Girard finally calmed down enough to speak again.

"I'm... I'm sorry," he said. "I've got nothing. I can't... I..."

He looked to his left, at the collie. "Cam, you do this."

Girard fell back into his seat, and cried again. He only stopped long enough to shoot another glare at Rook.

As the crocodile sat, the collie rose. The latter brushed off his dusty laboratory coat, and then approached the center of the clearing. The sunlight illuminated the portions of his red, white, and black fur that his clothing had not concealed. He carried a pile of loose pages in a folder, which he had attached to a clipboard. He paused to find the right page before he began.

"Ahem...."

The others all turned to face him, which finally tore their attention away from Girard. He looked down at his notes, and since his hair was easily as long as Celine's was, that gesture caused some of it to fall forward. He twitched an ear, and quickly smoothed the hair back, away from his eyes. He then looked forward, and began.

"This is a difficult time for us all," he said. "For as long as I knew Keeper Edward, he never failed to assist any of us. Be it survival lessons, guidance, advice, or even simple companionship, he was always eager to provide whatever he could for us. His compassion, his openness, and his willingness to listen to us were truly limitless, and his loss is understandably devastating."

Girard sniffled again, but started to calm down, at least slightly. His breathing slowly steadied, and he eventually gathered the courage to look up.

"I still recall the state I was in upon discovering this tribe," the collie continued. "I had lost my research station, my colleagues, and, upon realizing my affliction, my very life itself. I saved only these files, which became all that remained of who I was. I had acquired a few mild injuries, but they hardly seemed to matter; there was nothing but death behind me, and seemingly ahead of me as well. Even if they were mere cuts and scrapes, what purpose would it serve to recover from them? Much like the rest of you, I believed that I had lost everything."

He looked down at his notes, but only for a moment. Easy as it was to reminisce, his gaze quickly returned to those around him in the present. He could

only bear to remember one fallen friend at a time.

"As I wandered the wilds, I met Keeper Edward, and he welcomed me. He fed me, and he even attempted to treat my injuries. We had known each other for less than a day, and he was no doctor, of course, but he still unhesitatingly did what he could for me. It was a sentiment that...." He closed his eyes. "Well, it was a sentiment that I could respect."

He then opened his eyes again, and spread his arms. He raised one hand toward the space between Rook and Scout, and the other, which still held his clipboard, toward somewhere between Girard and Sir Coral.

"Keeper Edward's fondness for each of us was beyond dispute, and so became our fondness for him. Even in instances in which we agreed on very little else, we have always been able to unite behind him. He inspired us to disregard our differences and coexist under his guidance."

He lowered his arms, and turned his attention toward another figure.

"His loss is an immeasurable tragedy, but if there is any solace or consolation that we can take, it is that he had the foresight to prepare for it. His last gift to us, his final act to ensure lasting peace, was to name a successor. Since he has fallen, a new leader shall guide us in his stead, and it is only fitting that he concludes this memorial. Leader Noble, if you would, please?"

All eyes turned to the wolf, who yipped and jumped up.

"Um, thank you, Doctor Signey," the wolf said. "Though 'Marcus' is fine, as always."

"As is 'Cameron', Leader."

Marcus Noble and Cameron Signey stared at each other, and neither of them moved or looked away. The wolf was the first to crack a small smile, but the collie followed shortly. Under happier circumstances, both would have laughed.

Doctor Signey and Marcus had chosen to sit next to each other, with Girard on Doctor Signey's right and Rook on Marcus' left. As one canine sat, the other rose, and trotted forward.

"The task Keeper Edward left me is huge," Marcus began, before he had even reached the center.

The young wolf looked as frail as he did nervous, but possessed a degree of energy that defied his malnourished appearance. His gray and white track outfit, which had once matched his physique as well as his fur, somehow remained appropriate despite his muscle loss. It hung pitifully off his bony frame, yet still captured his undeterred athleticism. Even Girard looked healthy compared to Marcus' emaciation, yet Marcus still ran.

"Keeper Edward had more faith in me than I did," he continued, once he had reached the center. "He proved that when he chose me. I wasn't sure he made the

right choice, but he was. He called me up on that hill, and he encouraged me. He even chided me when I questioned myself."

He shifted his meager weight from one leg to the other. "Like Doctor Signey, I lost everything. The tribe took me in and cared for me. I wasn't sure how to repay the favor, though. The rest of you had everything figured out, so what could I do? I couldn't even watch the sky with him. I wish I could have, now. Still, he never minded, and he never made me. He wanted what was best for me. He saw something in me."

Marcus tucked his ears back against his head.

"Leading us will be hard, of course. Sir Coral mentioned Keeper Edward's authority. Doctor Signey mentioned his ability to unite us. I don't have either of those. I'm not him. No one could ever be him."

He scratched an itch on the back of his neck, paused, and then scratched it again. He gave a sharp exhale after the second scratch.

"Keeper Edward helped us because we couldn't make it alone. We still can't. That's why I'm begging for your cooperation now. This migration is long, and we've only just begun. Please set aside your differences and stand together. I need you to support my attempt to lead us, just as you supported his."

Marcus looked around the clearing, at each individual member of the tribe. If anyone had any objections, then no one chose to voice them. His ears tentatively perked up again.

"We have each now spoken. Unless anyone has anything more to add, I think we have finished this gathering. I hope Keeper Edward is at peace, and that he smiles down on us. However, we should probably move out soon. We still have some time left before dark, and I'd like to cover more ground before we stop. The Hunters—"

"I do have one thing," Girard said, though he struggled to keep his voice from cracking. "There is something I want to do first."

"Yes?" Marcus looked at Girard.

Girard's gaze narrowed into a sudden scowl.

"I want to talk to Rook. Alone."



"I don't know." Girard cast a suspicious glare at the newcomer.

"What's there not to know?" Scout cast an equally suspicious glare at Girard.

"You don't think he's going to be a problem?" Girard asked.

Scout shook his head. "No more so than you."

"Scout, please," I said.

Scout winced, and was quiet. Girard grinned, but only until I cleared my throat at him. I may have been powerless to prevent their squabbles from starting, but I could at least end them with relative ease.

I looked at the newcomer, a muscle-bound crow. Physically, he was striking. He was even taller and more massive than Girard had once been. His pants were clearly part of a uniform, and he had a hip holster that housed a small revolver. He displayed no other portion of military dress, though. In place of an official shirt, he wore a simple white tank top. In place of boots, he wore nothing at all. Shame? A lack of pride in his service? Perhaps some sort of dishonorable expulsion?

Of course, it was not my place to pry for answers. If the crow wished to remain mysterious, then he certainly had that right.

"You said you wished to go by 'Rook,' yes?" I asked. That was not what Scout had called him at first, though the crow had been quick to correct him.

"Yes." The crow, Rook, took longer than I would have expected before he finally answered.

"Very well. Rook it is, then." I smiled.

Rook hung his head, and avoided eye contact with everyone except Scout.

"If you wish to join our tribe," I continued, "then I must explain our rules and our goals, and you must agree to them. However, even if you do not, you are still welcome to share this one meal with us. Please, have a seat."

"Thank you."

Rook trudged away from the hillside, and toward us. The sun hung low behind him, and against its light, he appeared even darker than he already was.

Few of the others knew what to make of the quiet, yet intimidating newcomer. Scout alone welcomed him, and patted the ground next to him as an invitation. Rook accepted, which placed Scout between Rook and Celine. After Rook sat, Scout passed him some of our extra plants and fish.

I introduced the rest of the tribe to Rook, in the order in which they had joined: myself, then Girard, Scout, the two Corals, Marcus, and Doctor Signey. Rook nodded at each name and exchanged greetings, as well as "nice to meet you" statements and other various automatic pleasantries, as he received them. He was at least courteous, even if his tone was somewhat dull and mechanical.

I waited until the introductions had concluded and Rook had begun eating, and then told him our mission.

"I first left the city so that I could help the afflicted," I said. "I find them, feed them, and give them anything they need, from food and clothing to spiritual

guidance. I teach them skills such as fishing and identifying edible plants, so that they won't starve. I enable them to survive, at least for a while. I can't stop their DLY, of course, but I can at least bring comfort to their final days."

"Clothing?" Rook looked down at his pants, then back up at me. "May I? That is...." He stopped, as if he had changed his mind about asking, and hung his head. "Never mind," he said.

Sir Coral scowled.

I overlooked his aborted question for the time being. I would be happy to discuss clothing later, if that was what he wished, but I had a more important point to make at that moment.

"At any rate," I continued, "my initial plan was to find one afflicted person at a time, help him or her, and then move on. However, Girard had the idea of forming a tribe. This way, we can share the responsibilities. We help each other gather food, cook, and watch for Hunters as we sleep. We provide care when we inevitably fall ill. We provide companionship, and look after one another as needed."

Rook nodded.

"Excuse me." Sir Coral cleared his throat. "Rook, may I speak freely?"

Rook turned toward Sir Coral. "Yes," he answered.

"Father—"

Sir Coral gave a stern look to Celine, who immediately abandoned her protest. Scout took her hand in his, which only made Sir Coral's expression worsen. Still, after a few moments, he gave up on them, and turned his attention toward the newcomer.

"I'm sorry, but neither Girard nor I are comfortable with your presence," Sir Coral said. "Your father's misdeeds are hard to overlook, especially for someone like me. Furthermore, if I'm reading the signs correctly, your treatment of your own service isn't that much—"

I cleared my throat, and then folded my arms. "Sir Coral, please. That is enough."

Rook turned toward me. "Thank you, but I said he could speak freely."

Sir Coral smiled.

"Yes, but he should still know better." I shook my head. "We have two major rules—two edicts—that I ask all members of this tribe to obey. The first edict specifically forbids what Sir Coral just did."

Sir Coral tucked his ears back and hung his head, but said nothing.

"No one may judge another based on his or her past," I said. "Some people here have more questionable backgrounds than others do, but if they have reformed, then I consider those backgrounds irrelevant. All here are current

members of this tribe. Nothing more, nothing less. So long as they behave well, then that is all one may say about them."

Sir Coral fidgeted in his seat, as did Girard. Marcus did, too, though his discomfort was for a different reason.

"What about group size?" Girard asked. "Too many people, and it's easier for Hunters to spot us. And since we're not allowed to fight them, we don't have a lot of options."

"We're not?" Rook thought about his words for a moment, and then corrected himself. "That is, you're not?"

"That is the second edict." Doctor Signey answered the question before I could.

Girard scowled, and Doctor Signey ignored him.

"One may never commit violent or harmful acts against another," Doctor Signey said. "We must treat all others with respect. This includes the Hunters."

Rook placed his hand over his holster, as if to hide its contents. "I see."

"The Hunters are not evil," I explained. "They are simply people of the city performing their duty. They have lives, and families. I oppose their mission, of course, but not them. I believe that we have every right to exist and to live, but so do they."

"Like I was saying, though, size." Girard folded his arms. "Eight's just too many. We're too big and slow, especially if we add someone like him. And that has nothing to do with the edicts."

"You used to be that big, you know," Scout said.

"What did you say...?" Girard started to stand up.

"Girard. Scout." I scowled.

Marcus turned toward Rook, then me. "Perhaps if we can remain stealthy—"

"Are you kidding?" Girard folded his arms. "This guy, stealthy? Look at him!"

"Girard!" I normally tried not to raise my voice, but he was being difficult.

He winced, and backed down. There. That was better.

Rook winced, too, as if he were somehow part of that scolding. "I don't want to cause any trouble," he said. "If I'm not welcome, then—"

"No!"

Scout leapt up from his seat. He stood between Girard and Rook, and spun to face me.

"Everyone, please," Scout said. "I've known this crow for ages. I knew him in the city, way back when we were kids. But he moved away, and I haven't seen him in years, and I... I missed him. I never expected to run into him out here, but now that I have, I don't want to him to disappear again. We have so much to

catch up on!" He swallowed. "Please. He's my friend."

Silence. It was impossible to deny the sincerity of Scout's plea. Furthermore, as my second-most longstanding follower behind only Girard, Scout's opinion did carry a certain degree of weight.

All eyes turned to Girard. He looked around, and tried to hold firm despite their stares, but ultimately gave in.

"Oh, for... fine. But he's the last one! And if anything happens, I'm blaming you two."



"I want to talk to Rook. Alone."

Rook held still, and suppressed any visible reaction to Girard's statement.

"Will you bring him back when you're done?" Marcus asked. "He needs a guide. You know that."

"I'll stay behind," Scout said. "I can do it."

"I said alone, Scout." Girard found a second member of the tribe at which he could glare.

"I'll stay just far enough away not to hear," Scout said, "and if he's not with you when you come back, I'll come get him. And then I'll come get you." Scout was short and thin, and Girard had the size advantage even after his muscle loss, but Scout refused to show fear.

"Try it, mouse," Girard said. "I dare you."

"Enough, both of you." Marcus raised his arms, as if attempting to separate the two.

"Scout, come on. It's all right." Celine grabbed Scout's arm, and pulled him back a step.

Scout looked at Celine, Sir Coral, and then back to Celine, and sighed. "Yeah. You're right. I'm sorry."

Sir Coral scoffed.

"We will all stay and wait," Marcus said, in a desperate attempt to impose order. "Girard, you may speak with Rook in private. Guide him back to us when you're finished. Should you...." He paused, and considered his phrasing. "Should you need someone else to lead him, instead, we will be here."

Girard snorted.

The rest of the tribe stood up to leave. Scout chose to wait until the others had gone, and Celine chose to stay with Scout. Marcus trotted away first, and

Doctor Signey and Sir Coral followed close behind him. Then, Scout and Celine finally left, hand in hand.

Girard and Rook were alone in the clearing. Girard stood and paced, while Rook remained seated and still.

Once Girard had determined that the others were sufficiently far away, he spun to face Rook.

"Stand up."

Rook stood. Girard walked directly in front of him.

"How could you?" Girard asked.

Rook remained still and mostly silent, and only answered the question after a long pause and a slow inhale.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

Girard barely stifled a roar. "You! You...!"

He reached back, his hand balled tightly into a fist. He held that pose for a moment, but then ultimately backed down. He lowered his arm, but not without a threatening growl.

"You know what I mean," Girard said. "Your speech. Keeper Edward is... is dead. He's dead, and you can't bury him fast enough. All this stuff about legacy, ideals, carrying on after him. What about him? Does he matter? Hey, we still have the edicts, and we even have a new leader, so who cares about the old one, right? Who cares that Keeper Edward is dead?"

Rook said nothing. He simply held still, and waited for Girard to finish.

"And then," Girard continued, "as if that wasn't enough, you call on me, even when I couldn't speak. You saw... well, maybe you didn't see, but you must have heard me. You knew I couldn't do it, and you called me anyway. You embarrassed me in front of everyone."

Girard waited, and then growled at the silent crow.

"Well?" he asked.

Rook paused again before answering. "Do you really want to argue this now? On the day of—"

"Don't tell me what day it is!" Girard took several short breaths through his clenched jaws. "Yes, I'm... I know, I'm being respectful and all that, and that's why we're here now, after the gathering. I didn't say anything earlier, did I? So, quit changing the subject, and answer me."

"I wasn't trying to shame you," Rook said.

"You weren't? So what, I'm wrong? I'm lying? What I just said isn't what happened?"

"I wasn't trying to shame you," Rook repeated.

"Let's hear your version, then. Why did you say what you said? Why did you

choose me?"

Rook's pause before answering was long, even for him.

"No," Rook finally said. "I'm sorry. I don't want to challenge you."

Girard tilted his head. "What?"

"You won't accept my reasons, so I don't want to argue them. I can't say anything you won't reject, so it's pointless to try. I'm sorry."

The crocodile took an equally long time to answer. He stared at the crow, his fists balled. "You're not going to explain yourself?"

"I am sorry, Girard."

Girard turned, then started to pace away from Rook. As he continued to walk, it became more difficult for him to contain himself. His first few steps were normal, but he shook and trembled afterward. Unable to hold it any more, he finally spun around and cast a loud, feral roar at the crow, who failed to react in any visible way.

"Please," Rook finally said, "don't alert the Hunt—"

"Of course! Stupid me!" Girard ignored Rook's warning and stomped back toward him, at a much faster pace than when he had left. "How could I expect a straight answer from you? You don't talk! Not even Keeper Edward dying gets you to talk!"

Rook went silent again.

"You don't care at all, do you? His death means nothing to you. For all I know, you could have been the one—"

Girard froze for a few moments. He then slowly backed away, while keeping his widened gaze on Rook.

"Oh, God," he said. "I know what this is about. I know what you did."

"Oh?" Rook gave the slightest tilt of his head.

Girard took a breath, held it, and stepped forward again.

"You murdered Keeper Edward," he said.

Rook said nothing.

"You did, didn't you?" Girard started to pace in a circle with Rook in the center, as if he alone could surround the crow. "This whole thing is too convenient. You act all quiet, but I know who you really are. I remember that time on the roof. I remember what you did there."

Rook said nothing.

"You weren't even supposed to be in this tribe, and he let you in anyway. He gave you food. He gave you clothing. He gave you everything you wanted, and you killed him. Why?"

Rook said nothing.

Girard stopped pacing. "No, that's fine; I know you won't tell me. You just

keep quiet, in that way you have. I'll find out, though. I'll figure it out soon enough. You keep trying to hide your reasons, but I'll find them. I've already figured out that you did it, after all."

Rook said nothing.

"You have Marcus and the others fooled, but I'll show them. I'll show everyone who you are and what you did. You can't get away with this. I won't let you!"

Rook absorbed the entirety of Girard's accusation in utter silence. He deliberately repressed every visible reaction, aside from a subtle increase in the intensity of his breathing.

"No response, huh? Do you even understand what I'm saying?"

"I understand," Rook finally answered.

"And you're not going to deny it?"

"You've already made up your mind," Rook said after another pause. "It doesn't matter what I say. Since you will never believe me, I have nothing to offer that would make a difference. Not in these circumstances. Not to you."

"Oh, ho. So that's how it's going to be." Girard grinned, his first smile since before the gathering had begun. "Fine, then. You stay there and sulk, while I work on exposing you."

"Are you going to leave me here?" Rook turned his head, facing the general direction in which he had heard the others leave.

"Oh, no, I'll lead you back. You heard how Marc and the others don't trust me. It wouldn't help if they thought I was picking on you. So, no, nice try, but you're coming with me."

Rook silently raised his arms and extended his hands, and waited for Girard to take them.

"No," Girard said. "You can follow me by sound."

Girard stormed out of the clearing, which at least made it easier to establish his general direction. As soon as Rook understood what was happening, he stumbled toward Girard, and was gone.

~

The clearing was empty, and I resumed my eternal rest.

Chapter Two



Mortal Enemy

It was hard to wake up. I was groggy, and my head hurt. I wasn't even awake long enough to open my eyes, and I already wanted to go back to sleep. Maybe I did. It was hard to tell. I drifted between awake and asleep for a while. I had no idea when, how, or why I finally woke up.

I was flat on the ground, belly-down. Huh. That was weird. I lifted my head, lowered my snout, and looked down. My arms were as green and scaly as ever, but those were about the only familiar things I saw. The ground was definitely different. Was that dirt? Was I in one of those park areas?

Maybe I was just used to seedy palace district clubs, but the air in this place was fresh, with a cool wind and everything. It was a nice day out, really.

Wait. Out?

I tried to get up, but I stopped when my shoulder hurt too much. I looked, and there was dried blood everywhere, even the dirt below. How did that happen?

I winced, groaned, and tried to stand up again. That was when I noticed that I was completely naked.

What was going on?

Clearly, someone had done this to me. I just had to figure out what had happened, and who had done it, and then I'd get them back. No one messed with Girard Drake!

Oh, hey, I remembered my name. That was a good sign, at least.

Could I remember anything else? There had been a fight, then... oh, right.

I was in a match, and the other guy cheated and bit me, and I won. By disqualification, sure, but a win's a win. That explained the shoulder, then. Now, if I could just remember what had happened after that, maybe I could figure out everything else, like where I was, and where my clothes were.

Everywhere I looked, I saw dirt, fresh air, and warm sun. There were trees, too. This was way too big to be a park area. Was I even in the city? No, of course not. The city had a dome. It didn't have open sky.

I kept looking around until I saw the city in the distance. See? There it was. So that proved I was outside, then.

Wait.

Oh, God.

I was outside.

In the wilds.

Naked.

They had exposed me to DLY!

No, no, no! That couldn't be right. I scrambled and looked around, like I could find something that would make it not true. Like if I looked hard enough, I'd suddenly remember I was wearing a suit the whole time, and was fine. Or maybe I'd find the alarm clock to wake me up. The whole thing was a dream, right? It had to be; I still couldn't even remember how it had happened.

I wasn't sure what I was looking for, really. I was in a panic. Whatever it was, though, I didn't find it. There was nothing around me at all. No belongings, no clothes, nothing.

And I was afflicted.

How? How could I have woken up in the wilds? What had happened after that match?

The other guy had bit me. I remembered that much. I remembered my manager coming up to me after the fight, saying it was a trap, saying that the other guy had laced his fangs with something, like he was trying to kill me. And I remembered him giving me....

It was my manager!

He had given me a drink, and said it was the antidote for the stuff in the bite. I remembered taking it, then nothing.

He must have drugged me. His "antidote" must have just been part of the trap.

But why?

No. No matter. Whatever the reason, I would march back to the city and murder him.

Wait, no, I wouldn't. I was afflicted.

Hunters!

If I ran into any Hunters, I couldn't exactly count on them to let me explain myself. They killed the afflicted on sight. Even if they didn't, King would never let them investigate his own fighting promotion.

No, this was the perfect crime. This was even better for them than killing me would have been. Bodies in the city meant investigations. In the wilds, they'd treat me like any other random afflicted outcast. They'd shoot and burn me, and that would be that. No one would know, no one would care, and everyone would get away with it.

What could I do about it? Go back to the city? No. I had no options at all, except maybe slink away.

Actually, maybe slinking wasn't fast enough. I didn't see any Hunters yet, but I really didn't want to wait for them to show up.

I ran. My life was already over, but I ran anyway.



I used to have it easy. Life in the city was hard for King's enemies, but I had found a career with good pay and King's protection. Where had it all gone wrong?

It wasn't like I had thought the good times would last forever. I just hadn't ever really thought about it at all. I was never one to think ahead. On the night of my last match, I'd only been thinking about the match. Whatever problems came up later, I'd deal with them later.

After they dumped me in the wilds, I learned just how lost I was. I was a cage fighter, so I didn't think I was helpless, but it turned out I really was. I had always relied on my manager for everything. He would arrange the fights, I would do what he told me, he'd give me a small fortune after he made a large one, and we'd both leave happy. I didn't know how to fend for myself without him. What could I do in the wilds? I couldn't buy food or anything. It was just me and my survival skills, and I didn't actually have any survival skills.

It had been... what, three days? Four? Something like four days since I had woken up outside the city. I had gotten away from that spot, sure, but I had no idea what to do after that. I hadn't eaten at all, and I was getting weak from the hunger. I had found a small stream and could at least drink, but there were almost no fish to eat. Even when there were, I couldn't catch them. Not with my bare hands, anyway.

I stood in that same knee-deep water as always, and I looked around again, but—

Wait.

I looked further upstream.

A fish, coming my way. A big one, too.

Food!

All right. I could catch it. No problem. I spread my legs and hunched down, arms spread out, hands forward, like I was about to tackle someone. The fish had to get through me, and I was ready for it.

I waited until it was in range, and then thrust both hands into the water.

Nothing. Missed!

I pulled my hands out again. Where did it—there! I grabbed at it again.

Nothing. Another miss.

I pulled back again and scanned the water in front of me. I didn't see it. I

spun around, in case it had somehow got past me already.

There it was.

It was almost out of range now, but I leaned forward and made one last desperate grab at it. I felt something in my hands as I squeezed down. Yes! I caught it!

I tried to pull it up out of the water, but it thrashed in my grip, and it was just too slippery for me. It jumped right out of my hands. I tried to grab at it while it was in the air, but missed every time, and then it landed in the stream again. I reached for it, but I leaned too far forward, lost my balance, and fell face-first into the stream.

With no time to think or aim, I lunged forward and blindly bit in front of me, just in case that was where it went. Naturally, I got a mouthful of water, but no fish.

It was easy enough to get up again after that. I wasn't hurt or anything. By the time I did, though, it was gone.

It was gone. The fish was gone.

Maybe I should have started with the jaws, instead of my hands. I made a note to remember that for—

Oh, no, I didn't. What was the point? Why bother?

I had gotten my hopes up so high, but it had gotten away. I had no idea when, or even if I would see another one. Even if I did, what if it escaped again? How many more times would I fail like that? How much longer before I could eat again? Would I ever eat again? Was I going to starve?

It wasn't fair. None of it was fair.

I shouted, and pounded my fist against the surface of the stream, making a small and useless splash. Everything I did was small and useless. I trudged my way out of the stream and got down on the ground, on my hands and knees.

Maybe this was the end for me. Maybe it served me right. I was just a cage fighter for the mob, after all. Maybe a dumb brute like me deserved to die.

I folded my arms and pressed my head against them, snout on the ground, and I cried. I cried for my hunger. For my inability to catch food. For my inability to survive. For my being so dependent on my manager. For his betrayal. For the bad end to a bad life. For everything.

After a while, I heard a noise. An animal in a bush, maybe? No, that wasn't it. Too evenly paced, and slowly getting louder.

Footsteps. Coming toward me.

A Hunter?

If that was a Hunter, he was already too close for me to get away, but I didn't care. He could go ahead and kill me. Why not? I wasn't going to last much

longer, anyway.

Wait, a Hunter wouldn't have gotten that close. He'd have taken his shot already. Maybe it was actually worth checking out.

I looked up. My vision was a bit blurry from all the crying, so I rubbed my eyes. I looked again, and there was a cheetah in a black Keeper robe and sandals—no suit!—with more backpacks than I ever thought one man could carry. Was he real? I wouldn't have put it past myself to imagine things, given how hungry I was.

The cheetah-Keeper walked right up to me and stopped. He looked down and tilted his head, like he was trying to figure out what he was seeing.

No, more like he was trying to figure out why. Obviously, he saw a big, naked, starving crocodile, kneeling on the ground and crying. Obviously, there was some sort of story behind that. That had to be what he was looking for.

"Do you need any help?" he asked.



The Keeper, who had told me his name was James Edward, gave me pants before we had left. They were kind of plain, and a bit too small, but they were better than nothing. He didn't have any shirts that were big enough for me, and he didn't have any shoes at all, but oh, well.

It was a long walk, but it was worth it. Keeper Edward said he knew a better fishing spot, and he was right.

We had walked for what felt like ages, and it was almost dark when we finally made it. Keeper Edward had led me to a little lake surrounded by trees, which provided some cover from the Hunters, especially at night. He said he used to visit the lake when he was younger, before the dome went up, and he had always liked it there. I had to admit it was pretty, especially at sunset, with the way the light reflected off the lake's surface. I had never really gotten a chance to notice the scenery before, since I was usually too worried about survival.

He taught me how to use a cast net, and thanks to his help, I actually caught a few fish. It was slow, but he was patient, and after a lot of tries, I finally did it. So, I wouldn't starve after all.

Not only was I thrilled to finally have some food, he was happy with me, too. He was proud, because I did it. That felt really good, for some reason.

He started a fire to cook up the fish I had caught. He said he'd eventually teach me how to do that, but that could come later. One thing at a time. While

that was going, he opened one of his packs and took out some plants. He said he had gathered them earlier, and identified them as edible, and someday he'd show me how to do that, too. Meanwhile, he made the fire bigger, so he had room to boil the plants and cook the fish.

I stared at the fire, not able to keep up with him at all. He really expected me to learn all that?

"So, uh, you said you're a Keeper, right?" I asked, hoping to change the subject to something easier.

"That's correct." He must have seen my blank stare, since he added, "Don't worry. We have time. You'll get this eventually. You already caught the fish, after all. For now, just focus on recovering your strength."

"Um, all right." Not like I could do anything else, anyway. "So where is... sorry. Where was your church?"

"Ah, we were in the low district, actually."

I blinked. "There's a church there?"

"A small one. Before I left, it was just me, another Keeper, and a Guardian. Have you ever been there?"

"What, to your church? I didn't even know there was one there. And, um, I'm not really the religious type."

"To the low district," he clarified.

"Oh."

I shifted a little in my seat. The low district was a dump for people who angered Mayor King. Would it offend him to admit I was actually from there? I had gotten out when I had worked my way up, of course; people King actually liked enjoyed something a bit more upscale, like the palace district. Then again, being a high-class criminal probably wasn't that much better.

No, I had to tell him. For whatever reason, I didn't think I could lie to him.

"I grew up there," I said. I looked down, and rubbed the back of my neck.

He nodded. If he judged me for that, he kept it to himself. "We would have welcomed you in our church, then," he said. "I can certainly understand a lack of spiritualism, though. Not all are devout, nor should they be. I merely offered them an option, primarily because I wanted to help the district."

"And now you're out here helping me, instead?"

He chuckled. "Something like that."

I squirmed again. I really wasn't used to that kind of treatment. "You're being really nice to me," I said. "You saved my life, even. I mean... thank you."

"It is truly my pleasure." He gave me the biggest and warmest smile I had ever seen.

I tilted my head. "I don't know, though. I mean, I'm not complaining, I'm

really not. I just...." I stopped, not sure how to put it.

"You wish to know why I am doing this?"

"No. Well, yeah, but not just that. I also want to know how you're so ready for it. I mean, you have all these supplies and everything. Did you prepare for this? Did you know you'd end up here? You didn't come out here on purpose, did you?"

He just kept smiling. "You've caught me, I'm afraid," he finally said.

I blinked. "Really? But... why?"

"Because you would have starved if I hadn't. Am I wrong?"

"Wait. What?"

He chuckled, but only for a moment. "Ah, forgive me; I shouldn't take this lightly. In all seriousness, you are an example of what I expected to encounter out here. I believed that there were people like you, struggling as you had been. It is my duty as a Keeper to help them, however I can."

"That's... huh." I tried my best to give him a real smile, and not just a sad one, but it was hard. "I wish my being here was that noble."

"Oh?" He tilted his head. "You mentioned... well, actually, you haven't mentioned anything at all about your past. I will not pry if it is sensitive, but...."

"No, it's all right. It's just...." I was having trouble putting it into words, but he was as patient with me as ever. "I'm just afraid, I guess."

He checked the pan of fish and the boiling plants, probably to make sure they'd be all right without him, and then looked at me.

"Why are you afraid, Girard?"

I quickly looked away. For the first time in my life, I felt not just embarrassment, but actual genuine shame. I was disappointed in myself. Why? That wasn't something I usually felt. That wasn't normal.

"I'm not a nice guy," I admitted. "Especially compared to you." I had no idea why that suddenly bothered me.

He said nothing at first. He just kept looking at me, waiting for me to explain.

"The low district doesn't offer a lot outside of crime," I continued, even though I didn't really want to. "Gangs are pretty much the only way to get ahead there. But I grew up in Flock territory, and I'm not a bird. I didn't want to be a junior member behind them, you know? So I, um, I joined King's mob, instead."

I kept looking away. I just couldn't meet his eyes. I should have stopped talking, but I couldn't. Why couldn't I stop?

"I was big and strong, so they made me a cage fighter. Girard 'The Dragon' Drake, they called me—"

I wished the sizzling fish and boiling plants weren't so loud. They were an

uncomfortable reminder, like suddenly I was the one cooking over that fire.

"Th-They had a betting racket going on. My manager, um, fixed a lot of matches, and I was just part of the show. I fought, or pretended to fight, they made their money, I got a cut, we were all happy. Then... well, I guess he turned on me, and he tricked me, and I passed out and woke up out here."

There. I had told him everything. I wasn't sure what else to say, so I just kept looking away. It really wasn't like me to admit stuff like that. There was just something about him, though. I would have lied to anyone else, but not him. I couldn't hide anything from him.

He waited a while before he asked, "Is that why you're afraid?"

"A little, yeah. I mean, there's a lot of stuff. Being shot by Hunters scares me. So does DLY. Starving, too, at least until you showed up. Doesn't any of that scare you?"

He took a deep breath. "Yes," he said.

"But even beyond that," I said, "the real thing I'm afraid of is... well, look at me. You're a Keeper, and you're here because you want to help people. I'm just a crooked fighter, and I'm here because I got in some equally crooked manager's way. But you saved my life, and you gave me food, and now you're teaching me to fish, and... and...."

I swallowed.

"I... I don't deserve your help." I sniffled, then cursed myself for the sniffling. "I guess I'm scared that if you knew me, then you wouldn't think I deserve it, either. But... I don't want you to leave."

"Girard, I'm not going anywhere."

I was finally able to raise my head, and I looked into his eyes. "You're not?"

"You need my help, and so I shall help you. It is as simple as that."

"You mean it? But, I mean... I'm just—"

"I'm a Valdric Keeper. We're somewhat big on forgiveness."

There was that smile of his again.

"Don't you have to convert me or something for that?" I asked. "I mean, I'm not... I never really believed in that sort of stuff, you know."

It probably wasn't smart to admit that. Even after he had said he wasn't going to leave me, I didn't want to offend him. Still, I had to be honest with him. I just had to.

"There are those who would ask that of you, yes," he said. "I've had quite a few spirited discussions with my Guardian about that, actually."

"But not you?"

He shook his head. "I'd rather just comfort people. I don't want to attach prerequisites to that. I didn't even bring a holy book with me, you know."

I blinked. "Why not?"

"I considered it, but I know it well enough to recite from memory, if I have to. Besides, I needed room for the pan."

He swirled that pan, swishing our food around over the fire, like it should have been obvious to anyone who saw it.

"You're a bit, um... worldly, for a Keeper," I said.

"You are not the first to tell me that." He beamed, like he was proud of it. "At any rate, I hope that puts your fears at ease. I am still here, and I am still going to help you. That is not going to change."

I gave my best attempt at a smile myself, but I made myself stop when I realized it wouldn't look right. My fangs were a bit scary sometimes.

"Thank you," I said. I just had to leave it at that.

"I should warn you, though, that I cannot change our situation." His smile suddenly disappeared. "I can help you live with your fate, but I cannot help you escape it. You must still accept your affliction, just as I must still accept mine. Be it from DLY or from Hunters, one way or another, we both still will die."

I didn't want to think about that, but I didn't really have a choice. Not when he brought it up like that. He wouldn't let me ignore it.

"Yeah, I know." I sighed. "But what can we do, then? What's your goal?"

"My goal is to make your final days as pleasant as possible. I don't want you to die naked and starving, like you were about to do before I found you. I want you to be comfortable, and to find some sort of meaning along the way. When your time comes, I want you to be able to look back, and feel that at least you were alive, once."

"That I was alive, once...."

It was weird. I wasn't used to thinking about things like that. I was used to living without really thinking at all, mostly just doing whatever my manager told me. Being with Keeper Edward made me feel good, in a way I never really felt before. Alive? Was that it?

"That I was alive, once." I smiled. I didn't even care if it looked scary. "Yeah. I like that."



How long had Keeper Edward and I been together? Neither of us had a way to count the passing days, but there had probably been a lot of them.

He taught me everything he knew about survival. Once I could throw a net, I

learned how to cook the fish I caught. Then it was how to start and stop a fire, how to find edible plants, and more. He always seemed to have something to teach me. Some of it was easier to learn than others, and sometimes I struggled, but he never rushed me. He taught me one thing at a time. He was as slow as I needed, and always proud of me when I finally figured something out.

I once asked him how a Keeper could know so much, especially since no one camped or anything anymore. He said it used to be a hobby of his before the dome. Also, he had read up on wilderness stuff before he had left, just so he could teach it to people. Even though he hadn't done it just for me, I still felt kind of honored by that.

Every time I finally learned something, like fishing or cooking, I would start doing it in our daily lives. Soon, I ended up doing as much of the chores as he did. Normally, I would have complained, but it was all right when it was for him.

Compared to my old life, it was a lot more work for a lot less in return. There was no money in the wilds, after all. No exotic entertainment like the palace district had, either. Still, I somehow felt better than I ever did before. There was less reward, but it was more rewarding. I liked the feeling of having a simple life, honest work, and someone who actually cared about me. It was better than fighting for a mob promotion, anyway.

~

I had thought things were going to be all right, but one morning changed that. Well, it wasn't actually morning. I had no way of telling time, but based on how high and bright the sun was, and the fact that I was actually awake, it couldn't have been too early. I groaned, stretched, and looked around, and that was when I saw him.

He was going through his packs, moving stuff between them. He looked sad for some reason. That surprised me. It also made me suspicious.

"Keeper Edward?" I rubbed my eyes.

"Yes?" He froze, like I'd caught him doing something bad.

"What's going on?"

"Oh, I, um...."

That was weird. He never hesitated around me.

He sighed. "Girard. There is no easy way for me to approach this. It pains me to say this, but I feel that you are ready for me to move on, now."

"For you to what?" I opened my eyes wide when I figured out what he was getting at. "Wait! No! Hold on!" I was instantly out of my bedroll.

"I am sorry, Girard. I have truly enjoyed our time together—"

"No! Don't leave me! Why? Why would you do that?"

I took a couple steps forward, like I was going to try to physically stop him.

"I came out here to help people," he said. "When I found you, you were struggling with starvation and despair. I taught you everything you need, so that you may take care of yourself from here. You've grown so strong—"

"That doesn't answer my question. Why do you have to leave?"

"Because you're not the only person who needs my help, Girard." He looked at me with those piercing, golden eyes of his, and I stopped. I was always helpless when our gazes met like that. "What about the next person who's struggling? What about the next person like you, crying and hungry? I wish I could stay with you, but... I cannot leave anyone else to die. I'm sorry."

He hung his head and shut his eyes, freeing me from them.

"I've split the supplies," he said, quietly. "I left you everything you need to take care of yourself. There's a net, a—"

"No!"

"Girard—"

"Is that really your plan?" I asked, mostly out of desperation. I couldn't let him go through with it. I had to stall him until I thought of something. I had to stop him, somehow. "You're just going to wander the wilds, go from person to person, teach them skills and give them stuff, then move on?"

He opened his eyes again, but he didn't look up at me.

"Is there something wrong with that?" he asked.

"Yes! I don't want you to go!"

I hadn't been this scared since I'd told him about my past. There had to be something I could say, something that could change his mind.

"Besides," I tried, "there are... there are, um... limits!"

Yeah, I could use that. That could work.

"Limits?" he asked.

"Yeah. On your supplies. You can't just go on forever and not run out. What are you going to do? Give nets to everyone you meet? How many nets do you have, exactly?"

He was quiet. Was it working?

"Do you have any better ideas?" he asked.

I wanted him to just stay with me and forget everyone else, but I knew that he wouldn't agree to that. And I could sort of see his point, too. I mean, what if he had found someone else before he had found me? I wouldn't have wanted him to leave me to die. So I guessed that I couldn't talk him out of helping others.

But I couldn't just let him go. Not after all he did for me. There had to be a way for him to stay with me, or me with him—

Me with him! Yes. Suddenly, I had it.

"Take me with you!" I said.

"Excuse me?" He finally looked up at me.

I took a step forward and smiled. My idea was going to work. I knew it was.

"I'll come with you," I said, "and we'll both help the next person we find. I can help carry the packs, and help with the cooking and stuff. We can teach them together. It'll be great!"

He thought about it. "Perhaps, but... what would we do if the next person also reacted like this? Would he or she join us, as well?"

I cringed. I really didn't like the thought of that. This was supposed to be our thing, wasn't it? "Um, maybe they won't mind being left as much as I do?" I tried.

Wait. No. That wasn't what he wanted to hear. I had come too close to give up, though. There had to be a way.

Maybe... yes. I had an idea. It wasn't my favorite idea, but it was an opening, and I had to take it. If I wanted us to stay together, then there was no other way.

"Or maybe we'll turn it into a group or something," I said. "Like a family. Or a tribe."

He didn't answer at first. He was thinking about it, at least.

"Girard, may I be perfectly honest with you?" he finally asked.

"Um..." I didn't like the sound of that. "Sure?"

"I think your idea has merit," he said. "A tribe-like structure does have certain advantages. For example, it could continue itself and its goal, even if something were to happen to you or me. It would solve the problem of my work dying when I do."

I hadn't even thought of that, but it helped my case, so I grinned.

"However, I worry about your growing attachment to me."

I stopped grinning. "My what?"

"Keep in mind that I am trying to make you self-reliant. You used to cling to people, and were unable to stand on your own. I am trying to help you move beyond that. If you merely choose to follow me instead of your manager, then I have taught you nothing."

I took a step back. "Hey, it's not like that! You taught me stuff, didn't you?"

"Girard, please do not misunderstand me. I have nothing against you at all. However, remember that we are in the wilds. We are both marked for death. If my time comes first, I want you to be able to carry on without me. Can you do that?"

"Please don't talk like that," I said. It was probably the wrong answer.

He sighed. "You see, that is precisely the problem. It is a harsh and

unpleasant reality, yes. I do not enjoy it any more than you do. However, we both must face it. Are you able to?"

I sniffled, and then clenched my jaw. No. I couldn't cry. It would only prove him right about me if I cried.

He walked over to me, and placed a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "It is no easier for me, I assure you. Still, if you feel this strongly, then there may be a way...."

That sounded promising. I looked at him, and tried and failed not to sniffle again.

"Your self-reliance is the top priority," he said, "but perhaps it can coexist with my presence. If you promise to work on your attachments, and to accept the reality that nothing in the wilds lasts forever, then I will allow you to join me. We can form a tribe together, as you have said. However, you must learn to stand on your own. I am mortal, as are you, and you must accept that. Is that clear?"

My eyes and smile widened. He wasn't going to leave me!

"That also includes not becoming jealous when I help others."

I grunted, and looked to the side. Why did I have such a problem with that? I wanted to say anything he wanted, just so I could stay with him, but maybe that meant he was right about me. Was I really that bad?

Well, at least the choice was clear. Either I really did need his help to figure out my attachments, or I just didn't want to lose him, but either way meant that I should stay with him. So....

"Yeah. All right. I promise."

And just like that, I had started a tribe.

He smiled. "Thank you. I must admit, these packs are a bit heavy for one person." He grabbed half of them, and nudged the other half toward me. "Shall we go, then?"

"Sure."

I took his packs and followed him in a daze, not even slightly aware of what I had just done.



The dinner groups were different that night. I didn't get to sit with Jon, like I usually did. He wanted to be with Celine, and since she was nervous around me for some reason, I couldn't join him. Normally, I'd sit with him while she sat with Scout and Rook. Instead, Jon chose her over me, which left Scout with Rook,

Marc with Cam, and me with Keeper Edward. Which was fine, of course.

Dinner itself was nice enough. I didn't like eating at the hill where we had found Rook, but at least it was a nice evening. The dusty ground, thin trees, and clear view of the sunset all made for a pretty view. The food was as good as ever, too. More people helping meant more types of food for everyone, as much as I hated to admit it.

It should have been a nice night. We shouldn't have been arguing about the tribe's future, but there we were.

"So what now?" I asked. "I mean, if we're not taking anyone else after Rook, what do we do next?"

"We should migrate," Scout said.

Everyone looked at him weird, so he explained.

"The area around here has been getting more dangerous lately," he said. "Rook, you said the Hunters are gearing up for some sort of crackdown, right?"

I always thought that little pause before Rook said anything was creepy. It was like it actually pained him to speak, unless he stopped and worked up the nerve first. Or worse, like he had to check everything he said against some hidden scheme.

"Yes," he finally answered.

"Can we be sure of that?" Jon—or Sir Coral to the others, I guessed, but I was his friend—shifted in his seat, and coughed. "You don't know what you saw; you were in too much of a hurry to leave. Furthermore, even if the Hunters are preparing for something, we don't know what."

"That may well prove irrelevant," Cam said. "Either there will be an eventual increase in Hunter activity, or there will not. If the crackdown does occur, then the wilds will grow increasingly dangerous. However, even if it does not, are they not dangerous enough already? Even with the Hunters' current presence, we are vulnerable so long as we remain here."

"So long as we remain here? As opposed to what? Leaving?" Celine looked back and forth between Cam and Scout.

Scout smiled. "Exactly. We can escape the Hunters by migrating away from them."

"Where would we go?" Marc asked.

"North," Scout answered. "There's a city up there. The only other live, populated city I know of besides this one."

"The northern city?" Celine tilted her head. "Why would we want to go there? We're still afflicted. They're not going to welcome us either, are they?"

"No, but it's at least an option, and I know the way. It's right next to Roc's Nest, and I used to go to Roc's Nest all the time. It was... a useful location."

Scout suddenly got tense, like he said too much.

Jon folded his arms, but didn't say anything. He couldn't; the first edict wouldn't let him. He didn't have to, though. Scout knew what Jon thought about his smuggling days.

"You'd better not be thinking of taking us near the main roads," I said.

"Of course not. Hunters patrol those every day. I always took the secret trails and such, even before my affliction."

"The policy of executing the afflicted originated with Mayor King," Cam said. "The Hunters are his subjects, and they follow his orders. The northern city might have a different policy. Are you familiar with it?"

Scout shook his head. "I don't know. I don't think they have Hunters or anything like that up there, but it could just be that I've never seen any. I've never actually been inside the northern city, you know. I just...." Scout looked at Jon, then the ground. "I just stashed goods and picked up payments in Roc's Nest. The people in the northern city took it from there."

Jon shook his head. Keeper Edward looked at Jon, but didn't say anything.

"How far is it to the northern city?" Keeper Edward asked.

"A long way," Scout answered. "Even longer when sticking to the hidden paths. We'd have to go west, deep into the forest, and then north all the way through Crown's Pass, until we reach Garreton. Then, we'd follow the river to Gilded Bend, and then to Roc's Nest. The northern city is only about a day's walk from there, at least, but... still. I used take at least a full day just to drive there. Usually more. On foot, with all of us, well...."

"How quickly do you intend to travel?" Jon asked. "We're all sick. Girard and Marcus are wasting away. I have this cough, and I'm old. Who knows what problems the rest of us will develop? We are weak. Furthermore, we are supposed to be living our last days in comfort, are we not?"

"So, go slower, then?" Marc asked, as much as it must have pained him to do so.

"If we take too long, most of us will run out of time." Jon coughed, then took some water. "Or did you think someone in my shape could last that long?"

"Father!" Celine grabbed Jon's arm.

"And we still don't even know why we're going there," I added. "I mean, what's the point? They're not going to let us in. And what if they have Hunters, too?"

"Well, staying here isn't doing us any good." Scout looked off at the sunset, then back at me, like he wanted me to be impressed with the horizon or something. "We're already dealing with Hunters right now, and if Rook is right, then there may be more on the way. We have to leave."

"So pick a direction and wander." I folded my arms. "Why the northern city? It's too long, and there's nothing for us there."

"If I may," Cam said, "there may be some incentive to this proposal. We possess knowledge that is worth preserving and presenting to others. Suppose we could entrust it to someone at the northern city?"

I gave him a funny look. "What, you mean, just walk up to their dome, find the nearest guard, and say 'hi, we're afflicted, here are our life stories?'"

Cam smiled. "Something to that effect, yes."

"What knowledge do we have that they would want?" Marc didn't understand the idea, either.

"Do keep in mind that I was a medical researcher," Cam said. "I studied DLY before I contracted it. My research station is gone now, of course, and unless something changes, everything my entire team discovered will die with me. There is but one hope, which is that I reach someone who will accept our findings."

He stopped long enough to look at each of us, one at a time.

"Furthermore, there are no fewer than three people here, and perhaps even more, who have personal experience with Mayor King's activities. Any report on his wrongdoings and criminal connections is potentially valuable, is it not? If we take our testimonies to an area beyond his influence, then it is possible that they could investigate and intervene."

I hadn't thought of that. I just assumed that King could do whatever he wanted, because it was his city. Nothing could stop him, could it? But we weren't talking about his city. Even he couldn't rule two cities at the same time, at least not from under his dome. The northern city had to be free, and telling them about him was an interesting idea.

Maybe....

"Promising, but unlikely," Jon said, which pulled me out of my daydream. "We don't know what their policy is. Suppose they don't accept us, either. Suppose they kill their afflicted, too. Suppose the entire migration turns out to be a waste of time. No small amount of time, either; the northern city is far away. What would happen if we make this grand journey, and probably have most of us die along the way, only for their guards to shoot the survivors the moment they arrive?"

"Then we can at least say we tried," Scout said. "We don't have a lot to lose. This area will probably end up overrun with Hunters, and I say we get out now. And if we have to go somewhere, then why not try for the northern city? We're not going to end up any less dead anywhere else."

"A choice between an impossibly small chance of success or guaranteed

failure, then?" Keeper Edward asked. "To be honest, the question of legacy is one with which I have struggled. I don't want to die. Nor do you, I would imagine. If it is truly unavoidable, though, then I at least don't want to die in vain. If this gives us a chance, then it may be worth making the attempt."

"Yes, but Dad's right to—"

"Father, dear."

"Father's right to worry about the distance," Celine said, after Jon corrected her. "I don't want us to exhaust ourselves, just to try to make it to the northern city before... well, before it's too late. It'd be nice to give our legacy to someone, but we're here to make our ends as comfortable as possible, aren't we? I don't want to die marching."

"But we can't just—"

"The Hunters are still—"

"I never said we should—"

"If we have to leave anyway—"

"Leave my daughter out of this!"

The conversation quickly fell apart. Keeper Edward and Rook were quiet, but everyone else broke into smaller groups and squabbled, until I couldn't tell words apart from the noise anymore. I liked the idea of passing our knowledge along, but I agreed that the northern city was just too far, so I found myself stuck between—

"Enough!"

Suddenly, it was quiet.

Keeper Edward almost never shouted. When he did, we all froze. Even Rook, who hadn't said anything, winced like he was guilty, too.

"I'm sorry for that," Keeper Edward said. "Let us all try to remain calm. Can you do that?"

Keeper Edward looked at each of us. No one said anything, but we all nodded. Just like that, he was in control again.

"Thank you. Now...." His gaze settled on one particular target. "Rook, you've been quiet throughout this gathering. What do you think?"

I scoffed. Rook being quiet wasn't exactly new.

Keeper Edward looked at me and frowned. I quickly wished I hadn't scoffed.

"If the others want it," Rook said, after a long pause, "then I support them."

"I see. Thank you."

Keeper Edward rubbed his own lower jaw while he thought it over.

"All sides bring up valid points," he said. "If Rook is correct, then this area could become too dangerous for us to stay. Presenting Doctor Signey's research, our information about Mayor King, or even our personal stories is a noble goal,

but the journey seems prohibitively long. Am I correct in summarizing the problem?"

The rest of us looked at each other, then back at him. That seemed right, more or less.

"It has always been my goal to help you," he continued. "I want you to live your last days well. Therefore, if this migration means an endless, miserable march, then I cannot support that."

Scout slumped into his seat. So did Cam.

Keeper Edward smiled. "However, Marcus' suggestion intrigues me. We could still migrate, but at a slower pace. Not all of us would make it. Perhaps none of us would. The journey would take a great deal of time to complete, perhaps more than what some of us have left to live. However, we would refrain from working anyone too hard, and if anyone perishes along the way, well, dying in one place is as good as any other, is it not? Better, if we can escape the Hunters and pass away peacefully."

"So we're doing it?" Scout perked up again.

"Possibly," Keeper Edward answered. "I support Marcus' proposal. We move, but slowly. If anyone grows tired, we stop. If anyone falls ill, we rest. We take as much time as we need. We will mourn those who fall along the way, but know that they at least ended their lives in relative comfort. If any of us do make it to the northern city, then we will attempt to pass on our legacy. If not, then at least we'll have tried. Does this sound fair?"

The rest of us were quiet as we thought it over. We looked around, some of us at each other, some at Keeper Edward, and some at the ground or the sky.

Scout was the first to answer. "I like that solution, yeah," he said.

"It is a fair compromise," Cam added. "I accept."

"Yeah, that works." I was next. It wasn't a bad idea, I guessed.

"I think can accept that," Jon said.

"That's good, yes." Anything that Scout and Jon both liked naturally had to get Celine's vote.

"It seems fair to me," Marc said. "Thank you, Keeper."

Rook waited until everyone else had agreed, and finally added a quick "All right" when he was the only one left.

Keeper Edward gave us all a broad smile. "Then it is decided. I hope and pray that this migration goes well, and I thank you all for your cooperation."

Once again, Keeper Edward had gotten the entire tribe to agree. How did he do that? Why was he so compelling? I had always felt that power he had over me, but I had never understood it.



"All right, we're here. See anything?"

"No."

What? Rook never answered a question without stopping and thinking about it first. How was it that the one time I actually wanted him to, he just spat his answer back like that? He didn't even look!

I turned around to yell at him, but then I saw him and his blindfold, and I thought about it for a moment.

Oh. Right.

We had been migrating for a long time. The marching was a part of the daily routine, just as much as the cooking or watching or anything else. No one's DLY was fatal yet, but Marc and I had grown even skinnier, and Rook had gone blind.

That seemed like a weird kind of symptom to me. It wasn't even deadly, was it? Jon had his coughing fits, and those would probably get worse and kill him at some point. I was wasting away, and so was Marc, and someday that would probably get us, too. But what was Rook going to do? Be blind to death?

I rolled my eyes, even though he didn't see that, either. "Never mind. I'll look. Stay down."

We were passing through some abandoned town. I wasn't even paying attention to their names anymore; they were all just ruins, anyway. It wasn't Crown's Pass, though. We weren't even that far yet, let alone Garreton, Gilded Bend, or Roc's Nest.

Whatever. We were in the town of wherever it was, and we had climbed to the top of its tallest building, just so I could look around. Farther out, after the buildings ended, there was flat nothing in all directions. To the south, there was the forest we had just come from, on the other side of the vast, empty plains. There were some distant hills to the east and west. And, of course, there was absolutely nothing at all to the north. It was just clear, flat, and open forever.

The one direction that didn't have any cover, and that was where we had to go. Stupid migration.

My volunteering to look for Hunters wasn't really surprising, but no one had expected me to take Rook along. He couldn't help me see anything, after all, and they all thought we hated each other. But Keeper Edward thought that I was trying to be good, like I was making peace with Rook by doing it, so he allowed it.

The others weren't so sure, but really, what was I going to do? Throw him off the roof? No. If anything, I had to try even harder to keep him safe. If anything happened to him, then everyone would think I did it. They knew me and Rook didn't get along, so even if it was an accident, or a Hunter, or something that clearly wasn't my fault like that, they'd find a way to blame me for it.

It wasn't fair, really, but what could I do?

I snorted, then looked around. Even from a tall building, even with a clear view of the wilds outside the town, and even in the middle of the day with bright, clear skies, I wasn't expecting anything. I couldn't even remember the last time we had seen anyone else. We were good at avoiding Hunters, and other afflicted were good at avoiding us.

It was probably a complete waste of time, and I had probably put up with Rook for absolutely nothing. Oh, well. Maybe I'd get credit for trying to being nice to him, at least.

I almost dropped the binoculars when I actually saw someone.

There was a figure way off in the distance, to the south. Someone in a hazard suit.

Hunter!

He was coming out of the forest. He was easier to see the further he got from the trees, and I finally spotted him when he was in the open. He was heading north, toward the abandoned town.

Toward us.

I put down the binoculars and looked at Rook. I almost said something, but then decided not to. One more look, first. I had to be sure.

Yes, the Hunter was still there, and he was still getting closer. It was hard to make out details at that distance, even with the binoculars, but the hazard suit and the gun said enough.

Well, then.

"Rook," I said very quietly, just above a whisper. It wasn't like the Hunter could hear us from that far away, but it was instinct. "I see someone. Hunter."

Rook thought before he answered. "Just one?"

"Yeah."

More thinking. "What kind of weapon?"

I looked again, but even with the binoculars, it was hard to tell. "I don't know. Some sort of rifle, maybe? It's big."

Even more thinking. I wasn't sure there was time for that, but he apparently thought there was.

"Advance scout," he finally said. "Part of a group. There's a radio

communicator in his suit. He'll signal the others if he sees anything. How far out?"

I looked again. "Pretty far, still. He just left the woods. Definitely heading this way, but he doesn't see us yet."

Rook was quiet again. This time, I decided to keep talking, instead of waiting for whatever he was going to say. It was time for the real reason I brought Rook with me.

"Rook. Give me your gun."

No response, but he turned his head to face me. The beak and blindfold made it hard to see his expression, but I guessed he must have been surprised. Had he expected me to forget he had one, or something?

"Rook," I hissed. It was the best I could do to speak up without yelling. "This is important. Give me your gun."

"You mean to shoot him?"

I gave him a look, which he didn't see. "No, I'm going to throw the gun at him. From really, really far away. Yes, I mean to shoot him!"

Rook turned away, quiet at first, as always. "There are more things wrong with that than I care to discuss," he finally answered.

I growled. I only had so much patience anyway, and I certainly wasn't going to take it with a Hunter coming.

"Listen, crow."

He listened.

"This is more important than whatever weird vow of silence you have. Or did I not mention the Hunter coming for us? Now, start talking."

Rook took a few quick breaths, like he was bracing himself for something.

"You're... right. I'm sorry."

"Good." I smiled. "Now, give me the gun."

"No."

I stopped smiling. "Didn't you just say I was right?"

"You were right about my silence. I will speak. I will not give you my gun."

I wished he could have seen my scowl. "Why not?" I asked.

"It's disabled. It's just a keepsake. It doesn't actually work."

I snorted. "Yeah, right."

"Believe what you will, but belief won't make it fire."

The whole argument was stupid. He knew that there was no time, right?

"You're really going to risk our lives, just to stand by that story?" I asked.

"Even if it did work, you couldn't hit anything that far away with a revolver. That Hunter has a long-range weapon, and you don't. Don't try it."

"It's better than just sitting here!"

"No, it's not."

"Why not?"

"Second edict."

How had he gotten so fast with his responses? No matter. I couldn't let this go.

"Rook, you know how much I hate to say this, but Keeper Edward is wrong. He's great and all, but he's wrong. The second edict is the worst idea he ever had. We're going to die if we don't stop this Hunter."

"Not if we alert the others and escape."

I blinked. "What, just leave the Hunter and run away? What if he sees us? What if he figures out we were here? What if he calls the other Hunters, like you said?"

"The other Hunters would notice and investigate if this one died, anyway."

"But that would at least give us time to escape."

"We already have time to escape."

"But that's... that's...."

I couldn't think of the words for my answer, so I just gave a frustrated yell.

Rook was a much quicker thinker than he had let on, and arguing with him was harder than I thought it would be. I was used to him taking forever to say anything, not to him always having instant comebacks. Had he just been holding back?

"We're wasting time," he said. "I shouldn't have agreed to speak. I need to warn the others."

"What? You can't just—"

"I'm sorry."

Without even waiting for me to finish, he stood up. He turned around, and felt his way to the door leading back to the stairwell. Once his hand found the guardrail, and he could use it to navigate the stairs, he was gone.

How could he do that? He wouldn't let me discuss anything with him. He just left, and he took his gun with him. It was completely unfair.

I wanted so bad to push him down the stairs, take his gun, and deal with the Hunter myself. But no, I couldn't do that. Even if it saved the tribe, they'd never forgive me if something happened to Rook.

In fact, I had to protect him. Not only could I not push him, but I also had to go make sure he wouldn't fall anyway, just in case they blamed me for it.

I had to follow him down. I had no choice. I was completely powerless. I wanted to tell him why it was worth killing the Hunter, but I couldn't. I wanted to tell him that it was just a single scout, and we wouldn't be fighting a group of them or anything, but I couldn't. I wanted to tell him that we were saving their

lives, and Keeper Edward wouldn't even have to know, but I couldn't. Rook made his move, and that was that. I only wanted to talk to him, but he made me do it his way.

And they were still suspicious of me! Me! I snorted. Anything that happened from that point on was his fault, not mine. I tried to stop him. I really did.



It was the worst day of my life. Worse than when I woke up in the wilds, naked and afflicted. Worse than when I was alone and starving. Worse than anything, ever.

It was the day I lost Keeper Edward.

~

It happened early in the morning. Sunrise. I had been sleeping, and so had everyone except for whoever had watch—Celine?—and whoever had felt like being up at that hour anyway. Not me. I had heard a loud noise, or at least I thought I had, but I hadn't really woken up yet. That only happened after Celine shook me.

"Hunters!" she shouted. "Keeper Edward's dead! We have to move! Get up! Get your things! Run!"

My memory of our escape was a little fuzzy. I only remembered going from barely awake to grief-stricken. Keeper Edward? Dead? I hadn't even had time to process it, and suddenly we had to scramble, break and cover up the campsite, hide any evidence that anyone else had been there, and run.

It didn't really hit me until we stopped moving. Once it did, I cried off and on for the whole rest of the day. Every time I started to calm down, I looked around and saw that Keeper Edward wasn't with us, and I cried again.

Dead. He was dead.

Marc decided that we should have a funeral. We had to do something. Keeper Edward meant too much to everyone not to. We had left his body behind in our escape, so we couldn't give him a proper burial or anything, but we still held a gathering for him. We had to. It was the most we could do, but at the same time, it was the least we could do.

~

"Keeper Edward was more than a leader."

No one was happy that evening, but I was in the worst shape. Every time I thought I'd be all right, someone else's speech would make me cry all over again. Then, as if that wasn't bad enough, I had to listen to Rook.

"He knew that he was going to die. That we all were. That even the best leader could not live forever, nor could his successor, or his successor's successor. He taught us how to live on in his image, instead. He became an ideal."

I knew what Rook was trying to do. He cared more about Keeper Edward's laws than about Keeper Edward. He had made that clear back on the roof, when he had chosen the second edict over our lives.

"We all have an incurable disease, and for this, they hunt us down."

He kicked the ground. Was he mocking me? Pointing out my sickness, and kicking me when I was already suffering?

"Keeper Edward was the first of us to die, but we can still ensure that he lives forever. We need only honor his words and his teachings."

It wasn't enough that Rook was responsible for Keeper Edward's death. He had the nerve to say we should take the teachings, and forget the teacher!

That was enough. I had to stop him.

Just as I was getting up, Jon raised his arm.

Jon was always more careful than me, and sometimes had to be the one to keep me in line. He was a good man, and was usually on my side. I respected him. Anyone else would get a thrashing for doing that, but not him.

I backed down. I placed my hands back in my lap. Jon lowered his arm.

"As long as we remember him, he is immortal."

As insulting as Rook's speech was, Jon was right, I guessed. I had to just let him go, and worry about who would choose to speak next. Hopefully he wouldn't—

"Girard."

That feathery sack of—as if everything else he had done wasn't enough!

As soon as he had said my name, the whole tribe turned to look at me. I still couldn't speak, but suddenly I had to.

I stood up, and tried my best.

"Keeper Edward was...."

I felt tears coming on as soon as I said his name.

No. I had to get through this.

"He was... no. Let me... let me try that again. I remember when I first... he...."

Every time I tried to start one thought, my mind raced to the end of a million other ones, and I tripped over them all. Then the tears came again. It was

hopeless.

I didn't want it to end like that, though. Everyone else got a speech. I didn't want to be the only one who didn't. I was his follower before any of them. I deserved to speak more than any of them. I had to have something!

I tried again, slowly.

"I was... I was there in the beginning. I remember... I was all alone at first. I... I didn't know how to catch food or do anything. And then he... he... oh, God!"

The grief knocked me off my feet, and I fell back in my seat and sobbed. I couldn't do it. I just couldn't.

"I've got nothing. I'm sorry. I can't... I...."

I looked over.

"Cam, you do this."

Whatever Rook was trying to pull by going after me, it worked. He had beaten me again. Once again, I couldn't even speak, couldn't even plead my case.

I was tired of being his victim. I decided to speak to him alone after the gathering. He couldn't stop me then. I'd had enough of him stopping me.



Fishing was kind of boring, but the tribe needed to eat, I guessed. Even Rook. I had told him that I would expose his treachery, but I wasn't ready, yet. Until I was, I needed to keep quiet and be nice. So, I fished.

I stood on the rocky shore and threw my net into the lake. I waited a bit, then pulled it back up. Nothing. I sighed. I figured I'd get something eventually, but it was slow. Maybe I'd gather the plants next time. Where was Cam, anyway?

I heard someone behind me clear his throat. I turned around. That wasn't Cam.

"Jon?"

Jon opened his mouth like he was going to complain about something, but then just sighed. "Good evening," he said.

"Well, this is a pleasant surprise." I looked past Jon, back toward the camp. "Wasn't Cam going to do the fishing with me? And you were going to cook with Celine?"

"Doctor Signey and I traded places," he said. "Celine is not feeling well, and I wanted him to examine her. Also, I wanted to speak with you alone."

"That's good, that's good." I smiled, then realized what I had said. "Um, that

I get to speak to you, I mean. Not that Celine's... you know. Hope she's all right."

Jon gave me a funny look. "She's afflicted, Girard. She's probably dying from DLY, just like the rest of us are. We just need to learn how her symptoms will progress."

I winced. "Yeah, that's not what I meant. Sorry."

"I know. Thank you for the attempt, at least."

There was some awkward silence while he got in position. He was older, weaker, and his boots were heavy and not exactly graceful, so it was harder for him to get around the rocks. I even had to help him a bit.

"I take it you want to know how things went with Rook?" I asked, once we were ready.

It had been a few days since the funeral, and I hadn't really talked about what had happened since then. Jon and I almost never got to be completely alone, and I didn't trust anyone else.

"Whatever you told him, he hasn't reacted very strongly to it." Jon threw his net.

"He never does. You know how it is with him." I threw mine as well.

"Do you think there's something deliberate about that?"

"Oh, of course. Look what happened at the funeral, when I said I wanted to talk to him. Everyone got suspicious, and Scout even went after me, while Rook just sat there. He's using this silent victim act to manipulate everyone, you see. I say anything to him, his friends attack while he acts innocent, and I look like the bad guy for it."

Jon shut his eyes for a moment. "Scout was rather eager to defend him, wasn't he? His involvement in this troubles me."

"Whose, Scout's? Because of Celine?"

Jon nodded.

"Neither has admitted anything to me yet," he said, "but I've seen the way they act around each other. Everyone has."

"It's pretty obvious, yeah. And also a problem. Rook is clever and twisted enough to try to use that."

Jon opened his eyes again. He tried to sputter in surprise, but it turned into more of a cough. "You think so?"

"Well, yeah."

He took a step back from the shore, or at least as much of one as he could. "I already didn't want Scout taking my daughter away from me. If Rook is using Scout's loyalty to get to her...."

I wasn't sure what to say. I wanted to remind him that I wanted to get rid of

Rook, but he knew that already.

"So what did you tell Rook?" Jon gave up trying to find comfort from me, and changed subjects.

"Oh, right."

I pulled my net back, and so did he.

"Listen, this is secret," I said. "I only told Rook that I know because, well, I got carried away, I guess. And because he won't tell anyone. Maybe Scout, but that's it. He's too quiet and too crafty to tell anyone else. Anyway, at the very least, don't let this reach Marc until I'm ready."

"Understood."

"All right." I scowled. "Rook killed Keeper Edward."

Jon was about to throw his net again, but stopped as soon as he heard that.

"He what?"

He stared at me like he didn't know if I was serious. I stared back, because I was.

"This isn't about that incident on the roof, is it?" he asked.

"It started with that, yeah. At first, I was just going to yell at him for that. You know, we could have saved Keeper Edward, if only Rook had let me stop that Hunter. Not only that, Rook insulted Keeper Edward at the funeral, and then embarrassed me. Yeah, I was going to get him for a lot of stuff."

"But you didn't?"

"I was going to, but then I figured it out."

My net seemed heavier than usual. Oh! I actually caught something. I was going to throw it again, but never mind. I sat down to deal with the fish, instead.

"What do you remember about that morning?" I asked, while I took out my knife.

"What, you mean when the Keeper...?"

"Yeah."

"Not a lot." Unlike me, Jon's net was empty, so he threw it again. "I awoke when I heard a gunshot. Celine was in a panic, trying to wake everyone else up. She saw that I was already up, and told me that... that Keeper Edward was dead."

He pulled in his empty net again, and sighed. I couldn't tell whether that was aimed at the memory, or at his not catching anything.

"Yeah, but that's the problem. Think about it." I squirmed while working on the fish. The thing wouldn't hold still, and it was hard to get comfortable with those rocks everywhere. "Everyone was asleep except Keeper Edward and Celine. By the time we were up, he was already dead, and then there were Hunters and we had to run. We didn't have time to take his body. No time to look

back. No witnesses. No crime scene."

"And you think that's suspicious? It's not like we had time to—"

"Of course it's suspicious! Jon, we don't know that a Hunter killed him at all! One of us could have done it, and used the confusion to blame the Hunters. Like, say, Rook."

Jon raised a brow, but otherwise didn't react. "This theory occurred to you while you were arguing with him?" he finally asked.

I nodded. "The more I thought about it, the more I saw things that just didn't add up."

"Such as?" He threw his net again.

I looked up. I still wanted to work on that fish, but my explanation needed my full attention.

"Well, that Hunter we saw on the roof," I said. "I really thought we got away from him. How could we escape, and then still have him catch up to us later? Rook said there might have been more of them, working in a group, but you know what I think about taking his word for anything."

"Why would he lie about something like that, though?"

"To blame it on the Hunters when he murdered Keeper Edward, of course."

"And why would he want the Keeper dead?"

I winced. I thought Jon was on my side about Rook. What was with all the questions? Was I losing him?

"I haven't figured that part out yet," I admitted. There had to be a reason, though. Had to. "Maybe it was some sort of power grab? He takes out the leader, the one who was holding us all together, then he makes me look crazy and turns Marc against me. If he gets rid of us, he could be in line to take over the tribe. Maybe. I don't know."

Jon pulled in his net. He finally caught something, so he sat down with me to prepare it. The tribe would eat tonight, at least.

"Wait." Jon looked at me. "Celine had watch. She was the one who woke us up when it happened. Wouldn't she have seen something like Rook shooting the Keeper?"

I squirmed. "Listen, I know you don't want to think something like this, but...."

Jon stopped working on his fish, and looked at me with a scowl. "Girard, are you accusing her of having a hand in this?"

I really wished he hadn't grabbed his knife before he said that. Well, no matter. I tried to smile. It was all right. I was still on his side. We were still friends, right?

"Well," I said, "Rook couldn't have done it without her seeing. He couldn't

have gotten too close without getting caught, and he obviously couldn't have aimed from too far away."

"But you say that he murdered Keeper Edward, yes?"

"Or had him murdered. I told you; Rook is crafty. He acts quiet while slowly poisoning the others' minds. You said you were worried about Celine and Scout, right?" I put down my knife, and put my hand on Jon's shoulder. "Look, I don't like this idea, either, but we have to be willing to face it. Maybe he made someone from his cult do it."

He looked at my hand weird, like he wasn't sure what to make of it. "Rook has a cult?" he asked.

"Well, yeah. He already has Scout under his control. Anyone can see that. He managed to get Marc, too—you saw that at the funeral. What if he's working on Celine? He can get to her through Scout, after all."

"So you are accusing her, then."

"No, I'm accusing Rook. It's not her fault that he's as manipulative as he is."

Jon went quiet. It was tough news to accept, and I wasn't sure he would.

"If you are correct, then what can we do...?" he finally asked. He was strong and proud, but I could hear the pain in his voice. He wasn't working on his fish anymore. He was just staring at the water, and his tail was flat and lifeless on the rocks. "Celine means everything to me. After the crash, she was... she's all I have left."

"I know. That's why we have to get rid of Rook, before he poisons her mind any further, right?" I smiled, forgetting again that it would look scarier than I wanted.

Jon just kept looking at that lake for a while, but then finally turned back to me. "Get rid of Rook, yes. Fine. What about Celine, though? And Scout?"

"I'm not going after her. Him, we'll wait and see. I'm thinking that this could work out a couple of ways. Maybe without Rook corrupting her, she'll come around and dump Scout. Or maybe Scout will come around, and then their being together won't be so bad. It could work, just as long as we take out Rook's influence. He's the one that's ruining everything."

Those were the best cases among several bad ones, of course, but I needed to stay positive. More importantly, I needed Jon to stay positive.

Jon gave a soft "hmm," then asked, "Permission to speak freely?"

"Sure."

He folded his arms. "I have my doubts about your theory. It is intriguing, of course, and I can't disprove it. Still... I don't know."

I hung my head. He stopped, and left me thinking the worst, while he went for his flask.

"However," he said, after a long pause and some water, "I have never trusted Rook. His father is a coward and a traitor, and he seems little better."

I looked up again. I never really cared about the old war stuff, but if it helped keep Jon on my side, then I would take whatever excuse I could get.

"I worry about Scout's loyalty to Rook, too," he added. "Are the two of them really influencing Celine? I... I can't—"

Whatever he was about to say turned into a coughing fit, instead. I guessed the water must not have helped. He took another drink, and pounded his chest a few times. "Sorry."

"Remember who she called at the funeral," I said, while waiting for him to recover.

"Yes, you're right," he said, and then cleared his throat. "Furthermore, as much as I don't know about your theory, I can't take any chances with my daughter at stake. Therefore, you can still count on my full support."

I grinned. That was what I needed to hear.

"You're a good man, Sir Coral."

I usually didn't call him that, but it was a special occasion. He had earned it.



"Sorry about the fish."

Well, I wasn't really, but I was trying to start a conversation. Eating dinner in total silence was kind of weird.

"We wanted to get more, but... well, we did what we could," Jon added.

"Hey, at least there's enough for everyone to get something." Scout smiled. "I know this stretch. It's lean here, but it'll get better as we press on."

I didn't believe him.

I tried to read Celine. She was sitting right between Jon and Scout, which told me absolutely nothing. Whose side was she really on? And why had she picked Rook at the funeral? That still bothered me.

"Girard?" Just when I thought the conversation had died again, Marc spoke up.

"Yeah?"

"I'd like to have a word with you. In private, please. If you don't mind." He glanced around at the others, like he was willing them to be gone.

"Um, why?" I asked.

Marc shrugged. "Call it an interview, I guess. I'm supposed to lead this tribe

now that... well... I'm supposed to lead this tribe now. I need to see where everyone stands on things."

Oh. Of course. He was trying to figure me out. Well, I needed to figure him out, too. Was he already on Rook's side, or was there still hope for him? He was young, and maybe that made it easier for Rook to corrupt him. Or, maybe he was mature for his age. Keeper Edward had chosen him, after all, and that had to mean something.

"Fine," I said. "Now?"

"Yes, please." Marc stood up before I could even answer. He smiled, then left.

I looked at the others, and shrugged. "Be right back, I guess." I then got up and followed him.

~

Marc led me a little ways into the forest, close enough to still see everyone else, but only barely. Talking in private, away from the others, was always tricky. We had to get far enough that they couldn't hear us, but stay close enough to be there if something happened. Who knew when a Hunter could suddenly attack?

It was dark. The trees covered most of the night sky, and Marc decided it was too risky to have a campfire after sundown. A little bit of moonlight managed to make it through the trees, and that was pretty much all we had.

"This should be good enough," He said, quietly, but not before glancing around again.

"All right." I tried to be quiet, too. "So what did you need to know?"

"I want to ask you about your feud with Rook." His eyes glowed in the almost-total darkness, which was how I knew he was staring at me.

"Um, what about it?" I asked.

"It's up to me to keep us together, now." He looked around the area again, like the first check wasn't good enough, then turned back to me. "Clearly, you two don't get along. Why not? What happened, and how can we get past it?"

I had to decide how much to tell him. If Rook had gotten to him, then anything I said would get back to Rook. I couldn't risk that. Then again, if he hadn't, and if he would actually listen to me, then I didn't want to ruin my chances by seeming unhelpful.

"Um, you haven't figured out what most of it's about by now?"

It was not the smoothest thing I had ever said. In fact, it was terrible. I was still feeling him out, though. Hopefully I would get a chance to recover from it.

"Assumptions and gossip. I'd like to hear it in your own words, please."

"Right." He was good. I had to give him that.

"I'd also like to keep moving, if that's all right. Walk with me?"

"Um, sure?"

"Thanks."

And he was off. Again.

~

Marc led me in circles around the campsite. He'd keep the others on his distant left, walk forward until he almost couldn't see them anymore, then turn left and keep going. My night vision was as good as his, so I could at least keep up, but his pace wore me out. Besides, it was cold. Neither of us had any body fat left, but he at least had fur, and I was suddenly jealous.

He said it was easier for him to think while moving. Was it, really? I hoped it was worth it. The things I did to be nice to our new leader, I guessed.

"Hey, Marc?" I had a question, and even though I knew he wasn't going to like it, I figured that walking with him earned me the right to ask.

"Marcus, please, but yes?"

"Marcus, sorry." I made a mental note of that, and then immediately forgot about it. "Anyway, is it really necessary to keep the tribe together?"

He didn't answer at first. Maybe he wasn't expecting that. "You think we should disband?" he finally asked.

"No. Well, not yet, anyway. It's just, well, you think we should all stay together, no matter what, but that might not always be true, you know? If someone's bad for the tribe, it may be better for everyone else to let them go."

Marc sighed when he caught on. "You're saying I should banish Rook."

"He's poisonous!"

I surprised myself with that outburst. I probably shouldn't have said it out loud, but it had just sort of slipped.

"Poisonous," Marc repeated. He stopped walking, and gave me a weird look.

It was obvious to me, but I still had to be careful what I told him. What if Marc was a spy for Rook? I had to try to convince him, without letting him know what I knew. But how?

"Well, um, you know we don't get along," I tried. "That's why you're talking to me now, isn't it? And it's not just me; Jon doesn't like him, either. So, clearly, he's bad for the tribe."

Marc put his hand over his eyes, and squeezed his own temples. "I was hoping that whatever problem you two have—"

"Three! I just said Jon. Actually, four, since Scout is on Rook's—"

"—that whatever problem you however-many people have would be fixable. I want to resolve it without banishing anyone."

"Oh, that's what we all want, sure. But what if it's not that easy? What if you try to keep us all together, but it only leads to an even bigger disaster later? It won't be long before the poison—"

"Girard." He stopped rubbing his temples, but still kept his hand there. I guessed that he was about to scold me, but then backed down. "Never mind. Let's keep moving."

He took off again, and I had to scramble to follow him.

~

"If that is really your solution," he said, once I had finally caught up, "then I'm going to need proof."

"Proof?"

I clenched my jaws. My case still wasn't solid yet. I knew that Rook had killed Keeper Edward, or at least had gotten Scout or Celine to do it, but I couldn't prove anything. I didn't even know why he had done it, yet. I wasn't sure about sharing my theories with Marc, either.

"I'm not going to banish someone just because you don't like him. Give me a reason why. Why can't he stay? Why is removing him best for everyone else?"

He turned left, and took off before I could answer.

~

"Well?" He stopped while I was catching up, though the waiting made him fidget. "Any accusations you'd like to bring to my attention?" His eyes somehow glowed brighter than I thought they would, and I winced.

I hung my head. I couldn't do it. It was just too risky, and I wasn't ready yet. I had to hold back.

"No." I said, then added, "Not yet, anyway."

I had lost for the time being, sure, but I had to wait for my chance. I had to be careful. I had to strike when I was ready, not before.

"Then Rook stays. I can't expel anyone without reason. I hope you understand."

I sighed. "Yeah."

"Furthermore, I expect you to behave. If you can prove he doesn't belong here, fine. Until then, I will assume he does, and treat him accordingly. I expect you to do the same."

"I... yes, Marcus."

"Now, let's go back. You're not the only one I'd like to speak to about this." He started to walk away again.

"You're going to go talk to Rook?"

He stopped, surprisingly. "Well, yes," he said.

I was suddenly very glad I hadn't told him anything.

He waited a moment for me to say something, but then gave up and went back to the camp. When he saw that I wasn't following him, he stopped just long enough to turn and look at me. He shook his head, added a quick "Thank you for the discussion," and was gone.

That was fine; I could find my own way back. He wasn't the only one who could see in the dark.

I yelled and kicked the nearest rock I saw into a tree. Not the smartest thing to do with Hunters out there, or without shoes, but I only thought about that after I had already done it. Oops.

So, Marc wasn't on my side. Well, fine. Who needed him, anyway? He was our new leader, sure, but he was still just a kid. I still had Jon.

Rook's friends weren't going to stop me. I had to play nice until I was ready, but I would stand up to him eventually. He had taken away the only thing I had ever truly cherished, and I wouldn't stop until I made the others see that. For the sake of the tribe, I would have justice. For my own sake, I would have revenge.

I had no idea what it would take to bring Rook down, but I didn't care. I didn't know what price I would have to pay, but I had already vowed to accept the cost. Any cost. Whatever the cost. Whatever it took. Anything. Anything to end this. Even if it ended up being Rook's life. Even if it ended up being mine.

Chapter Three



Pressure

I didn't want to be on that hill, but there I was. I had to be. I couldn't have refused an invitation from Keeper Edward, after all.

I found him at the summit, watching the sky. I should have known. The sun was setting, and the sky was just starting to change color. Where else would he have been? What else would he have been doing?

He turned to face me, smiling as he always did. "Thank you for coming, Marcus."

"My pleasure." I faked a return smile.

"Would you like to join me?"

Not really. "Of course."

I sat down next to him. He turned back toward the horizon. I tried in vain to get comfortable.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he asked.

Once, I would have adored that landscape. The sunset lit up the sky. There were just enough clouds to catch the colors, but not enough to obscure the hills. The trees were orange from the changing of the seasons. They caught and returned the warm glow of the evening sun. It was as if the entire world basked in soft orange, and we had a perfect view of it all.

"I guess." My halfhearted response was the best I could do. I used to love that sky almost as much as he did. I loved it so much that I ended up exiled over it. However, those days were gone.

"Conflicted?" he asked.

I ignored his question. He hadn't called me just to discuss the sky. "What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Ah, eager as always, I see." He smiled again, but his gaze never left the horizon. "I, of course, believe that relaxation is important, even out here."

That was neither surprising nor relevant.

"I can't relax," I said. "Not anymore."

Even thinking about relaxing made me squirm. Did we have to be sitting for this? I tried looking at the sky again, but it didn't help.

"Has it progressed that far already? That is a shame." His smile faded. "I won't keep you here any longer than necessary, then."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry," he said. Was his answer an acknowledgment of my apology, or an order?

I fidgeted, but I didn't say anything.

"At any rate," he added, "I have been thinking about the future of this tribe. Specifically, I have decided who will lead after I am gone."

"Gone? You're not thinking of leaving, are you?"

"No, of course not. I merely feel that we should to have a plan in place, should something unexpected happen to me. What would the tribe do if I were to fall ill, or if a Hunter were to kill me?"

I had no answer for him. I had wondered about that, but I had never considered it my place to ask. It was his tribe, after all.

"Marcus," he said, "if anything happens to me, I want you to lead the tribe, as my successor."

I blinked. "Me? Are you serious?"

"Is there a problem?"

I tried to think of a response, and failed. With a small voice, I eventually offered, "Why me?"

"Do you doubt your ability?" he asked.

"What, to lead the tribe? Of course I do. I haven't been here nearly as long as the others have. I'm the third-newest member of this tribe. I'm also the youngest, and—"

"You worry too much about statistics." He chuckled.

"Keeper, there are better choices. We still have the actual guide for this migration. We have a medical researcher. We have a war hero and his daughter. Who am I, next to them? I was supposed to become something like that when I grew up, sure, but... I didn't."

Keeper Edward smiled, but wagged a finger. "Ah, ah. First edict."

Was he forbidding me from impugning the past of... myself?

"I just don't think I'm the most qualified," I said.

"Is that so?" He paused, and then turned back toward the sky. "Who would you suggest, then?"

Was he honestly seeking my input? It could have been some sort of test. I supposed that I had to try, though, either way.

"Well," I said, "Logically, Girard was your first follower, so...." I thought about that for a moment, and then had an awful vision of Girard actually leading us. "Wait. No. Um...."

Obviously, Girard or Rook as leader would tear the tribe apart. Scout? He was our guide. He also had the second-most seniority of any follower, behind only Girard. However, he was too close to Rook. That made him controversial. That wouldn't work. The Corals were third in line, but Sir Coral was too close to Girard. Celine was more neutral, but she was passive. She struggled with her position between the factions. She could have been a champion of the middle,

but instead, she was a captive of it. That left Doctor Signey, who was even newer to the tribe than I was. I respected him, but did the others?

If not, then the tribe was out of options. The only hope at that point would be someone new, who hadn't yet fallen in with any of the factions. That wouldn't be possible, though; Girard had refused to allow any more new members after Rook. There would be no outside assistance. It had to be one of us.

"All right, so it's not as easy as I thought it was," I admitted. "That still doesn't say a lot about me, though."

"You do yourself a disservice, Marcus. Leadership is in your background, after all, and I have every reason to believe you've inherited that skill."

"What, because of my family? Aren't you the one who says our backgrounds don't matter? You did just cite the first edict at me."

"Yes, and if you were less capable than your family was, I'd have acknowledged that. However, I do think highly of you on your own merit."

"I don't know."

"I do." Keeper Edward chuckled, but only briefly. "Few in the tribe appreciate the gravity of what we're up against, at least to the extent that you do. You may worry too much at times, but you would at least take the role seriously."

"Maybe. I guess I should be flattered that you think that. It's just...." Something about his decision bothered me. "I'm not your first choice, am I?"

He didn't answer.

"I've been watching the tribe, too," I said. "I see the factions, and I know how careful you have to be. That's why I changed my mind about picking Girard. It's why I couldn't think of anyone else, either."

"You're asking me whom I'd have chosen instead, were it not for their allegiances?"

"No. You don't have to say who your first choice would have been. I just want...." I paused. What did I want? "I guess I just want to know if that was a factor." That wasn't quite right, but I didn't know what else to say.

"Well, of course it was," he answered, and I flattened my ears. "However," he added, "I do have faith in you. Please believe that."

"Thank you," I said. I knew he believed in me, but it was still nice to hear. "I'm just nervous, is all. This is no small thing you're asking of me."

"I know. It is a heavy burden to bear, and I am sorry for that."

"Heavy burdens are something I'm used to, I guess." I gave him a nervous smile. I belatedly understood why he had mentioned my family. "I hope this never comes to pass. If it does, though, then I'll do my best."

Keeper Edward looked back toward the sky once again. "Thank you,

Marcus."

"Thank you, Keeper."

There was a long silence, as the conversation had apparently ended. I should have stayed with him longer. I just couldn't take the nervousness anymore, though. I excused myself, leapt up from my seat, and literally ran back down the hill.



My family always expected great things from me. I came from two generations of success and importance, and they always assumed that I would live up to their legacy. They never spoiled me, though, nor did they treat wealth or status as something I automatically deserved. We lived comfortably, but not excessively. Only their expectations grew with the name I carried.

My grandfather was Thomas Noble, founder and longtime owner of the Noble Bank. He started it in his youth, and grew it from a small, local institution into a large financial empire. After the War of Cities ended, he took advantage of the need to rebuild. He expanded, and made the Noble Bank of Roc's Nest another success.

My father, of course, was Vincent Noble, last mayor of the city before Mayor King took over. Father rose to power after the war, and immediately reached out to Roc's Nest. He secured a financial allegiance through Grandfather, which helped both cities recover, and served as an example to others. Father proved that the victorious loyalist and defeated secessionist territories could coexist, and work together toward reconciliation.

Unfortunately, the crime syndicates that had appeared during the turmoil had other plans. Unhappy with Father's reform and anti-corruption efforts, they waited until his reelection bid, and then ran their own candidate against him.

King was a shady businessman and obvious mob boss, and wouldn't have stood a chance in a fair contest. However, many workers in the various city services were corrupt, and Father's reforms threatened some in his own office. They were happy to falsify the voting results in King's favor, in what was more a coup than a legitimate election.

Once King owned both the official government and the criminal underworld, of course, he consolidated his power and became invincible.

Grandfather tried to warn us that the city wasn't safe anymore. He told us that the newly elected Mayor King might target us. He urged us to flee to Roc's

Nest, where it would be safer. Father refused, and said that he had a duty to his own city, even if he no longer had the power to change its course. Father would not abandon his people.

I was still a young child, only just learning to walk, when Mayor King announced the outbreak of a terrible new disease. He called it Dorter-Logan-Yeates syndrome, after its discoverers. The first strain of DLY was violent, but not particularly lasting; it killed too quickly to sustain a long-term presence. Like a flash fire, it came from nowhere, decimated entire communities, and was gone.

Citing concern about future epidemics, Mayor King ordered the construction of a temporary dome—a tarp-like structure that could cover the entire city when deployed, and thus protect it from short-term threats. If an outbreak on the scale of DLY were to happen again, he could quarantine the afflicted outside the city, and then protect it with the temporary dome until the danger passed, or until he had time to build a more permanent solution.

DLY did return, of course. It was a mutated form, slower to kill but even more contagious than before. King deployed the temporary dome, looked at the severity of the strain, and ordered the construction of the permanent dome. It was the last time anyone saw the outside world without protection.

My family had always expected me to overcome life in King's city. Yes, Father had lost his seat, and the city seldom, if ever made progress in the war against DLY, but that was never supposed to stop me. I was supposed to find success anyway, like my father and my grandfather before me had done. I was supposed to be a champion of the city, as they had been.

Father had never liked how his mayoral career had ended, or how the city faced DLY even among its other problems. "I never would have allowed things to fall this far," he would frequently point out. "Perhaps the next Mayor Noble will end this nightmare," he would say with a certain lack of subtlety.

Then again, maybe I didn't have to be the next mayor. Maybe I could become phenomenally successful in business, as Grandfather had, and use my company's wealth to weaken King. Perhaps I could become a genius scientist, and find the cure for DLY. I had several options, really, so long as I left my mark on the city. So long as I upheld the family name.

I had spent every stage of my life preparing, just to give me an advantage in each subsequent stage. I had gone to the best primary schools, which helped me when I enrolled in the best secondary schools. Those were supposed to prepare me for the best colleges, and graduating those would allow me to conquer the world. At least, I assumed that was the plan.

I had very little life outside of my incessant studies; I was simply too busy to socialize. A typical day of school didn't end until nightfall, due to my various

sports and clubs and such. I would then go home, eat dinner, do my homework, and go to bed, all so I could get just enough sleep to repeat the process.

My parents wanted me to start dating; I was a respectable student, with respectable grades and a respectable upbringing, so of course I needed a respectable girlfriend as well. However, I barely had time for my studies and teams as it was. There simply wasn't room for anything more. Besides, no one deserved to become just another one of my countless obligations.

I should have felt fortunate to be in my position; I wasn't in the low district, and I wasn't in the wilds. Still, I sometimes resented just how smothered I was. I was not an actual person, and I did not make actual choices. I was a product, something they would mold and forge into the next great Noble. I never partied. I never really lived at all. I wasn't even sure I knew how. I was a complete square, even down to the fact that I called it that. Did normal people still use that word for it? Probably not, but what would I know?

~

One day, I decided that I couldn't abstain from life any longer. It wasn't that I wanted to rebel permanently. I didn't want to drop out of school, or quit any of my teams, or do anything like that. I just wanted one small taste of the city's nightlife. I couldn't stand not knowing what I was missing.

If I explored the city, then maybe my curiosity would finally go away. The fact that I had never had the chance was maddening. More than the actual experience itself, I just wanted the feeling that I was missing out to subside. I wanted to stop looking out my window, fantasizing about what could be out there, and just do my homework. If I knew, then maybe I could stop wondering.

Sneaking out had been easy enough, because no one had expected it. My parents had never had to lock my windows, guard the doors, or otherwise do anything at all to prevent my escape. Why would they? I had never tried to escape.

Never before had I left the house without permission. My own reservations usually stopped me before anyone else had to, and they very nearly did so again. As I walked farther from the house, every step I took grew more painful than the last. I had never been so afraid. What was I doing? Had I gone insane? I was supposed to be in bed. I didn't have permission for this!

Yes, that was the problem. I didn't have my parents' permission to sneak out without their permission. Perhaps I needed to ask them if I could leave without asking. I sighed. I was hopeless.

No, I had to do this. If I admitted defeat and went back inside, knowing that even my own conscience was against me, then... well, I wasn't sure what I

would do, but I hated the thought that there truly was no escape, not even from myself.

It helped when I couldn't see my house anymore, and I had to decide where to go next. No one else had to decide; I did. It was my decision. Where did I, Marcus Noble, wish to go?

The grocery store? I knew where that was. It wasn't exactly the most exotic part of the city's nightlife, of course, but even the fact that I could go there excited me. I had never been there before without Mother taking me. I would always tell her when I needed something, and she would look at her schedule, pick a date, and take me. This time, though, I could go there right at that very moment, on a whim. I could just decide to go that way, and be off.

It wasn't just the grocery store. What about the school? I had no reason to be there at that hour, but nothing stopped me from going anyway, if I wanted to. That also applied to the library, and the bank, and any number of other places I used to consider ordinary.

Perhaps I could even explore. I could just wander, walk around unknown parts of the city, and find who knew what.

I was no longer afraid. How could I be? I was free. I could go anywhere. I could do anything.



"I just need to know what's going on," I said.

I wasn't used to speaking to Rook as his superior. Like everyone else in the tribe, he was older than I was. Unlike everyone else, he was also much, much bigger. I was thin even before I had become afflicted, while he remained muscular even afterward. It was quite easy to feel small in his presence.

With only the stars for illumination, Rook's black-feathered figure was even darker. I was only able to see him because of his size, his white blindfold, and my night vision. I wished I knew whether that made him less intimidating, or more.

His mysteriousness itself worried me further. Who was he, really? It was hard to get any information about him. He never talked about himself willingly, and the first edict kept me from prying. I knew that his real name was Orrin Sebastian, at least. I also knew that he was the son of Neil Sebastian, which explained why Sir Coral hated him. I didn't know anything that would help me understand him, though.

Yet there I was, trying to sort out his feud with Girard.

"There are clearly some deep issues between you two," I added. "If I'm to resolve them, I need to know what they are. I tried to ask Girard, but he was no help at all. I need at least one of you to tell me what's going on...." I sighed. "Please."

Rook took a slow inhale, as if preparing for some elaborate speech. I knew his answer would be brief and terse, though. It always was. That inhale was just his way of stalling.

"I don't know what to say."

As I suspected.

"You never do," I said.

"No, I suppose not." If my remark affected him at all, he didn't show it.

I needed to draw some sort of response from him. Would Girard's accusation work, I wondered?

"Girard claims that you're a manipulator," I tried. "The word he used for you was 'poisonous.'"

"Do you believe him?"

"I'm reserving judgment, for now." I shifted weight from one leg to the other. "I need to learn more about you two, first."

"I see."

I simply could not imagine Rook as evil. He just wasn't aggressive enough. He made me nervous, sure, but who or what in the wilds didn't? It would have been easy for him to overpower me. He could have lifted and thrown me in the air, had he wanted to. He had never taken that opportunity, though. I doubted that he ever would. He was too quiet. Too withdrawn. Too inert. Too much of a follower.

Still, Girard and Sir Coral didn't get along with him. I had to resolve that.

"Why is it so hard for you to talk to me?" I asked.

Rook was quiet, at least for a short while. "Things I say can be... misinterpreted," he finally answered.

"Are you referring to Girard?" I cast a glance back toward the campsite. I did just admit that Girard had called him a poisonous manipulator, after all.

He, of course, said nothing.

"I can see why you would be cautious," I said. I folded my arms, changed my mind, and unfolded them again. "Girard is badmouthing you either way. If you respond, then it turns into more of a fight. Fanning the flames. You choose not to do that."

He remained silent.

"Still," I continued, "I need to understand this. It's my job to keep us all

together. I need to know what I'm up against."

Rook took a deep breath.

"Girard accused me of something," he said. "Something terrible."

I perked my ears. "Like what?"

"It doesn't matter. I am inn—... that is, his accusation is untrue. That is all I will say."

Rook's story confirmed what already I knew from Girard, but it told me nothing new. Still, at least he tried. "Thank you, I guess."

"What will you do with us?" he asked.

"Well...." His question surprised me. I didn't really know how to respond. How much was safe to tell him? I shifted my weight again. "Girard is working on building a case against you. I told him to behave until it's ready. I consider you in good standing until he can prove otherwise."

"Then why the questioning?"

I squirmed. Wasn't I supposed to be the one interviewing him?

"I still want to understand this," I said. "Maybe his accusation is legitimate. Maybe it isn't. Maybe it's just a chain of perceived slights. Once someone has already developed a grudge, it's easy to see everything else as an attack. What happened between you two to start this, though? Why is he looking for the bad in you now?"

There was a very long silence.

"In truth...." he finally began.

"Yes?"

"I don't know."

I flattened my ears. This was hopeless. "I see. Thank you, Rook. That will be all."

"I'm sorry."

I didn't respond. He held out his hands. I shook my head, sighed, and led him back to the camp.



I should have known that my parents would catch me. I knew that they wouldn't suspect anything, since I had never tried to sneak out before. I was right, but I had forgotten how inexperienced I was. As poor guards as they were, I was an even poorer criminal, and so my capture had been inevitable.

They were, of course, furious. I had no explanation or excuse for them. I

didn't even have one for myself.

"How could someone like you be this stupid?" Father screamed. It was a good question.

"I... I said I was sorry, all right? I was just curious, is all. I just had to know —"

"You had to know nothing!" He pounded his fist on the table, and I jumped. "When I was mayor, did I let curiosity lead me to tamper with our militia, or our economy, or anything delicate? Did I ever launch another war just to see what would happen? You're a Noble, for God's sake! Think before you act!"

"You could have been killed out there," Mother added. "The city is in shambles. You didn't go to the low district, did you?"

"No, Mother."

"Well, it hardly matters. This whole city is probably like that by now, anyway."

I winced. Then why had she asked?

"King has had plenty of time to ruin the city," Father said. "The only people left out there are his victims and his minions. One group is poor enough to attack you out of sheer desperation. I shouldn't have to explain the danger of the other, unless you're even more clueless than I thought."

"Why do you think we try so hard to protect you?" Mother added. "Do you think we keep you secluded just for fun? That we have nothing better to do than imprison you? You know better than that, don't you? I hope you're not regressing. Do I need to start changing diapers for you again? Is that where this is leading?"

"Mother, no! I just wanted...."

I thought about it, and then decided not to finish that sentence. I had already tried every excuse I knew, and each one had only invited further screaming. I had reached the point where I knew I had failed them, and nothing I could say would help, so I simply had to absorb their wrath.

Father grabbed my muzzle. It not only kept me silent, but also gave him complete control over my head. He used his grip to pull my face upwards, which forced my eyes to meet his. It had been years since he was angry enough to do that.

"As hopeless as the city is today," he said, forcing me to see his scowl, "we gave you a way out. We sheltered you, protected you from the streets. We gave you a good education, a proper upbringing...." He finally let me go. He knew that I wouldn't look away. I knew better than that. "We gave you every tool you'd ever need and more, all so you could avoid ending up in the low district, and you threw them all away!"

"It was just one time!" My raised voice was mostly from panic, rather than from any desire to argue.

"There is no 'just one time' for someone like you, Marcus. Success demands perfection. High-profile figures always attract scrutiny. The world won't let you pretend this never happened."

He paused, and for a moment, I saw what looked like pure malice in his eyes.

"You need to be taught that actions have consequences," he said.

I could almost feel my blood and organs pooling around my feet. He had stopped screaming, and his voice was quiet, but that only made me more afraid.

"You want to see the city?" he asked, barely above a whisper.

My ears flattened. I whimpered.

"You'd rather roam the streets than stay in this house?"

No. He wouldn't.

"Well, then, by all means."

No!

He walked toward the front door, opened it, and held it open. He then turned and glared at me.

"Get out."

"What? Vincent, he's..." Mother tried in vain to protest. He didn't interrupt her, but he didn't have to. She knew his decision was final.

"I... I don't want to go out anymore." I tried not to cry. I was supposed to be too old for that. "Please don't make me."

"You are temporarily banished from this house." Father completely ignored my plea.

Wait.

"Temporarily?"

He nodded. "You will spend the next two full days outside. That's long enough to face the question of how to sustain yourself, but short enough not to starve if it you can't. Ample time to think about what you've done. When you return, I trust that you will have had your fill of the streets, and that this won't happen again."

"But... what about the danger?" Mother started to move between Father and me, but stopped when Father glared again.

"Avoid associating with anyone suspicious," he said. "Learn to hide. You were the one who wanted this, after all. Do I make myself clear?"

My ears flattened. "Y-yes, sir." My eyes shot open as a realization suddenly hit me. "Wait. The track meet is in two days, isn't it? You're supposed to take... I mean... it's a big meet, I can't just...."

"Let your team down? Especially with no warning?" Father finished for me. "Well, I imagine you'll get in quite severe trouble for missing it, then, won't you?"

"But what about... I have homework, too. You can't—"

"Actions have consequences, Marcus."

My heart sunk, as did my head.

"Yes, sir."

~

Thus, I found myself on the streets once more. I no longer wanted to be outside. I had no idea how to survive for two days. I didn't know where to go for food, or restrooms, or anything. I couldn't even ask for help, since I couldn't trust anyone.

Worse, I would miss that meet and who knew how many assignments, something I had never done before. They would want to know why my flawless record had suddenly failed, and I would have no explanation. What could I tell them? The truth? That I got caught sneaking out, so I was homeless for two days?

I tried to look up, as though the sky could somehow solve my problems, only to remember that there wasn't one. Nothing was visible through the dome. Nothing was ever visible through the dome.

I sighed, and looked down at a random street. I hadn't seen that one before. Where did it lead?

Wait. No. That urge was what had gotten me into trouble in the first place.

Still....

My parents' wrath had temporarily erased my curiosity, but once I was outside again, I realized that I effectively had their permission to explore. Staying in my front yard wouldn't lift the punishment, after all. I almost had to go somewhere. Why shouldn't I look around? Why shouldn't I seize the opportunity?

Yes, that was what it was. It was Father's idea, after all. He had practically set me free!

I looked up again, this time in triumph. This time, I really could go anywhere!

My sense of triumph failed to match the dome's bleak nothingness. Why had I bothered to look up?

Wait. That was it.

I could leave the city.

I would return, of course. It would be a short visit. I just had to find a DLY

suit. I wasn't sure how or where one acquired them, but they had to be somewhere. Maybe I could ask a Hunter at one of the exits. At any rate, once I had one, I would take a quick peek outside, and then come back. I would be gone just long enough to satisfy my curiosity.

Once I had the idea, I knew I had to do it. It would never leave me alone if I didn't. It was my only chance. I couldn't just waste my two days' exile doing nothing, and then go back to my dull and sheltered life. What would I do if I never had this chance again? How would I live with the regret, knowing that I could have seen the sky?

No. I would take the opportunity while I still had it. I would see the world beyond the miserable dome. Then, I would finally be at peace.



"Crown's Pass," I repeated to myself, and fidgeted.

Scout tried to nod. The shivering obscured the gesture. The nights had been growing colder, to be sure. I doubted that anyone at our meeting was actually comfortable, me least of all.

Still, talking at night at least meant that Scout was able to come. If the others had been awake, then Rook would have been alone with Sir Coral and Girard. Scout would never have allowed that. I didn't like sneaking around, but if it meant Scout could make it, then so be it.

"Crown's Pass was one of the secessionists' strongholds during the war," Celine said, and then pressed against Scout. That was one way to keep warm, I supposed.

"I forget, but... wasn't that where Sir Coral had that one battle? The big one that made him famous?" Scout asked.

"Yes," Celine answered.

"That's right. Thanks. Anyway, that's going to be the next city. We're getting close, now. We should be able to see it in another day, and maybe enter it in two, depending on our speed."

"Do the Hunters still patrol this far north?" I asked.

"According to Rook, yes," Scout said. "Supposedly, they watch the main roads all the way to Roc's Nest, but their wilderness patrols start to thin out around Garreton."

I folded my arms and shifted my weight. "I was hoping we'd be out of their range by now. Oh, well. We'll just have to get through quickly, then."

"The longer we remain in Hunter territory...." Doctor Signey started, but then chose not to finish that sentence.

"Can we keep up a faster pace, though?" Celine asked.

"We won't push beyond our limits," Scout answered. "We'll just go as quickly as we can, considering what we can actually do. Just like always."

That reminded me of something. "Celine," I asked. "How are you holding up?"

"What do you mean?" Her tail bristled, and she reached down to smooth it out.

I closed my eyes for a moment. This again? I was already nervous enough as it was, even without her help.

"Doctor Signey examined you a few days ago," I said, before I opened my eyes again. "I didn't want to pry, but since this affects my planning of the tribe's pace...."

Scout kept close to Celine and turned around, so that he could place himself directly between us. I sighed.

"Well...." Celine exchanged glances with Scout, and then Doctor Signey, before she finally looked at me. "All right. But... can you tell him, Doctor? I...." She gave Scout's hand a squeeze.

"Of course." Doctor Signey opened his folder of notes.

I guessed from their reactions that I would not like their news.

"I must remind you, though," Doctor Signey said, "that I lack access to a laboratory, and that I cannot declare anything with certainty without the proper tests. In these conditions, a diagnosis is speculative, at best." He avoided eye contact with me. He already knew what I would say about his usual disclaimer.

"However," he continued, "given our surroundings, DLY is likely. Specifically, as unlikely as it seems, Lady Coral appears to have contracted a form that began with fevers."

"Fevers?" I asked. I knew that DLY affected everyone differently. Girard and I had lost weight. Sir Coral had gained his cough. Rook had gone blind. Still, a strain starting with fevers was a new one, at least to me.

Doctor Signey nodded. "DLY-induced fevers are fairly common, though usually only as the final and fatal symptom, after other symptoms manifest but fail to kill the subject. Rook might develop them later, for example. You might eventually see them, as well, if you survive your emaciation. However, this is because you are previously established cases. It is less common for fevers to appear as the first symptom."

"Less common, and yet, here we are," I said.

Celine hung her head.

"Unfortunately, yes." Doctor Signey looked at Celine, who was doing her best not to listen to him. He then turned back to me. "She had a moderate fever when I examined her, which explained the other symptoms—the fatigue, the dizziness, and so on. She has successfully recovered for now, though if my diagnosis is correct, then I fear that her fevers will likely recur, return, and worsen, eventually to the point of death. Regrettably, I cannot predict how much time she has remaining."

"Are you sure it isn't something else?" I asked. "If DLY fevers as an initial symptom are so rare...."

"It is possible, but not probable." Doctor Signey shook his head. "Many of the others almost indisputably have contracted DLY. Given its contagiousness, the common wisdom is that the entire tribe is already carrying it, and merely waiting to see how its symptoms will manifest. Other diseases still exist, of course, but given Lady Coral's exposure, DLY remains the likeliest explanation for her symptoms."

Scout and Celine held each other tightly. Celine pressed her head against Scout's chest. Both of them closed their eyes. Neither said anything.

I felt completely powerless. I couldn't do anything for either of them. I couldn't protect her from Doctor Signey's diagnosis. I couldn't save her, or anyone else, from DLY. "I'm sorry," I said. The words seemed useless, somehow. Was that really the best I could do?

"No, it's... it was inevitable," Celine said. "I mean, we all get it at some point, right?" She pressed her back against Scout's chest. Scout held her from behind.

She was obviously trying to convince herself. Convincing me was a distant secondary goal. Still, she was right. With her diagnosis, five of the seven remaining members of the tribe had symptomatic DLY. Of those, four had symptoms that could eventually kill them. Even if they didn't, everyone who survived long enough would get the fevers. Death was ultimately unavoidable. We were all just stealing as much time as we could.

"Do we need to stop, then?" As the tribe's leader, I could at least offer her that much.

"I'm fine for now," she said. "In fact, we should probably keep moving, while we still can. Right now, we're in Hunter territory, but I'm well enough to travel. None of us want to be here when I'm not."

"We'd take care of you either way," Scout said.

"I know, and I thank you, but I don't like that. Holding everyone else back because of me is bad enough, but putting them in danger?"

"If anyone falls ill, we rest," I said. Keeper Edward's directive had been

clear. I was not about to abandon it. I hated the thought of holding still, but even I couldn't force anyone with a fever to march.

"And until then?" she asked.

"Until then," I answered, "you may have a point."

Celine nodded. Scout squeezed her hand, but said nothing.

"To Crown's Pass, then?" Doctor Signey asked.

"And beyond, if our luck holds," I said.



"Girard?" I asked, though my breathing was still ragged.

No response. Neither my calling him nor my panting had disturbed him at all.

"Hey, Girard." I grabbed his shoulder and shook him.

"Uh... what...?" Girard slowly rolled over, and then sprawled. "What do you want?"

"Time to take watch."

"Already?" he asked, as though he had any way of knowing the time.

"Yeah. My shift's over. Your turn."

"Oh, fine."

Girard embellished the process of waking up. He made it as slow, drawn-out, and theatrical as he possibly could. He sighed and crawled out of his bedroll. He arched his back and stretched each limb individually. He produced the widest yawn I had ever seen. He then snapped his jaws shut again, loudly enough to make me jump. Finally, he gave a sudden, violent rattling of his head, which made me wince just to watch.

"You going to bed, then?" he asked. He had either ignored or been oblivious to my reactions.

"Eventually," I said.

A pause. Then, he asked, "Do you want to stargaze a bit, first?"

"Do I want to what?"

Had I heard him correctly? He must have shaken his head even harder than I had suspected. I had lost my love for nature ages ago. Everyone in the tribe knew that, with his apparent exception. Had he forgotten how long it had been?

Still, I did want to speak to him. Perhaps I could work on his issues with Rook. If I could at least get a better understanding of them, it would be worth the effort.

Moreover, the last time I wanted to speak to him, he had been considerate enough to keep up with my constant movement. Perhaps I owed him the favor of trying again, on his terms.

"Sure. Thank you." I shifted my weight between legs. A part of me already regretted my decision.

Girard smiled, grabbed some blankets, and left. I took a deep breath, steeled myself, and followed him.

~

We stopped at the top of a small hill. It wasn't a long walk; we still had to remain close enough to see the others, should anything go wrong.

We wrapped ourselves up, laid down on our backs, and looked up toward the night sky. The night was clear and cloudless, and the stars were almost overpowering. Each star was but a single point of light, but the sheer number of them lit up the sky. There was enough starlight to bathe the ground, and even the trees and hills were easy to see. I wished I could have loved that view.

I hadn't yet caught my breath from before, which Girard noticed. "You're panting," he said.

"A little. It was worse earlier."

"Something the matter?"

"No. I was just jogging. Thank you for the concern, though."

There was a brief pause. Girard was either processing what I had just said, or giving me a questioning look. If it was the latter, then I didn't see it, since I was still watching the sky.

"Jogging? You?" he finally asked.

My fur started to bristle, even beneath my blanket. "Yes?"

"Trying to lose weight or something?"

I looked at him. "Very funny."

"No, seriously. You know you're kind of... um...."

"I know." I looked back toward the sky again, as though it would help me escape his interrogation. "I have been over this with Doctor Signey, you know."

"Really? And he's all right with you doing it?"

I was glad that the blanket kept him from seeing my balled fists. "Of course not. He knows it's the only way I can relax, though."

"Even though you're getting skinnier and everything?"

Girard scratched his neck. I didn't see it, because I wasn't watching him, but I heard it. In the stillness of the night, any sound he made was obvious.

"My entire metabolism is out of control," I said. "Too much exercise is bad, yes. However, there is also a lot of anxiety, which I need to work off somehow."

"Oh. I didn't mean to pry, then. Sorry."

I blinked. I suddenly realized what I was doing. Girard was being pleasant, perhaps for the first time I could remember. In return, I was being short and testy with him. Questioning my exercise habits was a sore subject, yes, but that didn't excuse my behavior. What was wrong with me?

"It's all right," I said. "I'm sorry. It's just... overwhelming, sometimes. Do you ever get that?"

Girard shook his head. "But you do?" he asked.

"Yeah." I sighed. "I get this... I don't know. This constant buildup of energy, I guess. More than I know what to do with. I haven't slept well since I left the city. Running helps with that, at least a little. It's about the only thing that does."

"Ah. I guess I can see that." He thought about it, and then asked, "How long have you been doing it?"

"What, running? I've been a runner since before I even left the city. Track team in my school and everything." I smiled, and puffed out my chest a little. The blanket nullified the gesture. "I stopped for a while when I came out here. The stress is getting bad, so I'm starting again."

Running had always helped me clear my mind, even back then. Every time I had been in a big race, I had only needed to worry about running it. The rest of my problems always returned once I had finished, of course. It was temporary relief, at best. Still, I had always cherished those few, fleeting, precious moments in which life was simple.

There was a long pause after that. It was as though Girard were searching for something to reveal. I had just told him something about myself, after all. Perhaps he wanted to return the favor.

"I never really liked stargazing before Keeper Edward got me into it," he finally said.

"Really?"

"Well, it seemed boring to just sit here and watch the sky." He shrugged. "I mean, how long do we do this? Are we waiting for something to happen? We're not even doing anything."

I knew that feeling all too well.

"But Keeper Edward liked it," he continued. "It was all he ever did. When he wasn't leading us, he was always staring at the sunrise, or the sunset, or the stars. So for me, the sky is... well, it's how I remember him, I guess."

"Is that so?" I smiled. "That's actually kind of sweet."

"You think so? Thanks." He smiled as well. I tried not to mind his baring his fangs like that. I knew it wasn't intentional.

"It's the opposite for me." I looked up at the sky again, though I wasn't sure

why. "I used to really like the scenery. It was the reason I came out here in the first place. I had never seen the sky before. I always wanted to. Then... well...."

"It's not as fun anymore when you're afflicted?"

"Yeah."

I felt the sudden need to wrap myself more tightly. Girard had to have been colder than I was, but it didn't matter.

"My father kicked me out of the house for a few days," I said. "I thought that, while I was away from home anyway, I might as well see the sky. I only wanted to spend one night outside, though. Just one. If nothing had gone wrong, then I would have gone back home. Everything would have been fine. Instead, I woke up, and 'Surprise! Your suit malfunctioned. You're afflicted, and you have to stay out here, now.' Once that one night became forever, the sky wasn't really on my mind anymore."

Girard nodded. "Yeah. It's hard at first. I mean, it's still hard, but it was even harder at first. I didn't get into nature until way after I met Keeper Edward. Before that, I was just trying to survive. And failing."

"Yeah."

I suddenly felt silly complaining about my affliction to Girard, of all people. At least Scout and Sir Coral had discovered me almost immediately. They had found me sleeping. They had seen my suit status indicator's red glow. They had realized I was afflicted before I had even woken up. Without them, I'd have walked back to the city, oblivious. The Hunters would have shot me at the door. I'd have died before I ever had a chance. Instead, Scout and Sir Coral had woken and warned me. They had brought me back to the tribe. They had even comforted me. I never struggled with isolation or starvation, as Girard had.

I changed the subject back to the stars.

"Once I joined the tribe, I was able to enjoy the sky more," I said. "At least at first. Then my DLY got worse. I couldn't hold still anymore. It's that anxiety buildup. I can't just sit here. I get a vague notion that I should be... I don't know. Doing something."

"I, um... I don't mean to make you do this, if you don't want to."

"No, it's fine." I squirmed. My seat was growing less comfortable by the moment. "I used to like it, after all. The only thing that changed is me."

"That's too bad."

"Yeah." I continued to fight with my blanket and shift in my seat. Neither had anything to do with my discomfort. I did both anyway. "Keeper Edward always told me that I worried too much. That's easy to say, but he left me so much to manage. I have to worry about leading us. I don't have time to look back, anymore. I'm too worried about the future to remember his kindness, or

compassion, or anything like that. I'm too busy and distracted to look at the sky. He never was, but I am. When I think about that, I feel like I've already failed."

"I try to take it all together, myself." Girard sat up. Even under his blanket, it was clear that he was hugging his knees to his chest. "Like, there's him personally, and there's everything he stood for, and both are important. I loved everything about him."

I raised a brow. "Everything?"

"Well... yeah, fine, we did disagree on a couple things."

"The edicts."

"He was too accepting, you know. And so are you, for keeping them." He looked directly at me. I suddenly felt even colder than before. "You let trouble in, and you don't do anything to stop it. My job now would be so much easier if it wasn't for...."

He caught himself, and stopped.

"O-on the other hand," he said, "I can tell we're not going to agree on that, so never mind. I mean, it's a nice night, you know? I don't want to fight."

Girard always wanted to fight. What was happening to him? Then again, I knew better than to complain. If anything, I wished it would happen more often.

"Very well, then," I said. "I appreciate that."

I yawned. Between the jogging, staying up late, and worrying, something had finally managed to make me tired. That was good.

"Going to bed?" he asked.

"Yeah. I guess so. Have a good watch." I stood up.

"Who goes after me, again?"

"Doctor Signey." I started to walk back toward the camp, but stopped after a few moments. I turned and looked over my shoulder. "Oh, and Girard...."

"Yeah?"

"This was nice. Thank you."

Girard must have been just as surprised by my reaction; he didn't respond immediately. I was just about to start walking again, when I finally heard him.

"You're welcome."

I smiled. Perhaps there was hope for the tribe after all.

~

I returned to the campsite, and found my bedroll. Getting a decent sleep was as unlikely as ever, but I was at least tired enough to try. The tribe was to enter Crown's Pass in a few days. I needed whatever rest I could get.

The night had certainly surprised me. Usually, Girard's attitude was one of my biggest obstacles. His aggression complicated things even more than Rook's

secrecy did. I was not aware that he had a pleasant side.

Unless, of course, it had all been some sort of ploy to gain favor with me. Girard knew that I still needed to find a successor. He also knew that, if he wanted me to do anything about Rook, he had to have me on his side.

I groaned and rolled over. Sleep proved elusive, as usual. Why was everything always so stressful?



Abandoned cities always made me uncomfortable. The incessant rain surrounding Crown's Pass didn't help.

Was I in any more danger than usual? I wasn't sure. The cities had their advantages and disadvantages in that regard. Access to the main roads meant that Hunter patrols were more likely. However, the abandoned buildings provided near-limitless hiding places. It was impossible for a routine patrol to check every building, let alone every floor, let alone every room in an entire city. The wilderness did not provide such a vast sea of cover. However, the wilderness had fewer Hunters in the first place.

In theory, I supposed that it balanced out. Still, I never felt more dread than when I was in a city, especially during a storm.

Naturally, Celine had relapsed in Crown's Pass, and the tribe had needed to stop and rest.

~

We took shelter in an old commercial building of some sort. At least, I guessed it had been a commercial building at one point, judging by how tall it was. Ten or fifteen floors, at first glance. Grey concrete exterior, still mostly there, though time and weather had eroded some parts. Some of the windows were in better shape than others were. It wasn't pretty, overall, but it did keep us out of the rain.

Girard wanted to get to a higher floor, but the elevator hadn't worked in years, and Celine wasn't in any condition to take the stairs. Even on the ground, though, we were drier and more hidden than we were on the streets.

Of course, we were still sitting and waiting in one place, and that one place happened to be the middle of a rainy, abandoned city. It didn't take very long for me to get nervous.

Still, what could we do? We had to wait. We had to rest. Celine slept, with

the hope that she would feel better once she woke up. I envied her. The rest of us stood around, guarding her and each other, in a grand attempt to pass time.

"Hey, I found a trap door," Girard said, breaking the silence. His voice was louder than I would have liked, for several reasons.

I didn't say anything, but I looked down. Underneath the tattered remains of the carpet, there was a hidden door carved into the decaying wooden floor.

"Escape tunnel," Rook said. His voice was even quieter than usual.

"Why would an office building need an escape tunnel?" Scout asked.

"We're in Crown's Pass," Sir Coral answered. He coughed, and took a drink from his water flask. "This was a major separatist stronghold, and these tunnels were always a nuisance. They lead east, to the base of the gorge. The separatists would slip away, enter the gorge without being seen on the streets, and then disappear into the hills on the other side."

As fascinating as the history lesson was, I had to excuse myself. Standing around was insufferable. I needed something to do. I felt bad for not helping the others guard Celine. However, the watching and waiting were more than I could bear.

I decided to go up to the roof and look for Hunters. That was a useful job, too. We needed to make sure it was clear when we moved out, after all. Getting that task out of the way would save time, help the tribe, and keep me active.

~

The roof was more open and exposed than I would have liked, and not just because of the rain. Actually, while I didn't like being soaked, I preferred any condition that decreased visibility. The clouds obscured the rooftop view. Good. I didn't want to reveal myself any more than I had to.

I sniffed the air, as though I were some sort of master tracker. I did have the snout for it, but I had no idea how to interpret the information I received. What would a Hunter smell like, exactly? They were always in their suits. I could tell that there were no other afflicted in the area, at least, but that wasn't nearly as important. I needed to track Hunters, and I had no idea how.

No. I had wasted more than enough time on that. I stopped sniffing, and took out my binoculars, instead. If there were any Hunters in the area, I would have to spot them, preferably before they spotted me.

I didn't see any at first, and I didn't want to stay outside for much longer. I was about ready to decide that there were no—

My ears flattened at the noise. At first, I thought it was thunder. The gentle rain hadn't yet produced any lightning, but I didn't want to believe it was anything else. I especially didn't want to believe it was a gunshot. Of course,

once I saw the exploded brick corner of the roof, and the cloud of dust rising from it even through the rain, I knew.

Where had that come from? I hadn't seen any—

No. Think later. No time.

I dove back inside. I heard another shot. I thought I felt something fly past my tail, but I wasn't hurt. I didn't think I was, anyway. I would check later.

I flew down the stairs.

~

"Hunters!" I shouted, just as I burst into the room with the others. I was cold and dripping, but it didn't matter.

Everyone jumped at my intrusion, but no one actually grasped the warning at first. Several of them looked annoyed by the noise. Perhaps they were worried that I would wake Celine. However, it only took an instant for them to understand. Each looked more horrified than the last when they did.

Sir Coral was the first to speak. "I heard what sounded like—"

"Yes!" I would worry about the politeness of interrupting him later. "They shot at me!"

"Are you all right?" Doctor Signey asked.

"I think so, but..."

I flattened my ears. At that moment, I faced the worst realization since my DLY suit had malfunctioned.

"Rook," I said.

"Yes?" Rook did his best to face toward me.

"They shot at me. They saw me. They know I'm here, now. How... how bad is that?"

Rook was slow to answer. I couldn't tell whether he was thinking about my question, or about how to phrase his answer.

"Hunters kill afflicted," he finally said. "They never stop. They are relentless."

"So they're...." I swallowed. I didn't want to admit it, but I had to. There was no time for denial. "They're after me, now, aren't they?"

Another pause.

"Yes," Rook said.

"Then it's hopeless. We can't outrun them. Oh, God, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I've killed us all!"

I tried and completely failed to keep calm. Scout gently shook Celine's shoulder. He succeeded in waking her up, though I wasn't sure what good it would do.

"If we can't run, then we fight!" Girard said.

"We can't." Scout shook his head. "Second edict debates aside, we're in no position to try. What do we do when they storm the building? They have weapons. We don't."

Girard didn't respond to Scout. Instead, he cast the most hateful look I had ever seen toward Rook.

"The tunnel," Rook said, oblivious to Girard's reaction.

The tunnel! Of course! Perhaps there were some advantages to Crown's Pass, after all.

"Do the other Hunters know about the tunnels?" I asked.

"It's...." Rook actually got one word out before his usual pause that time. "Hard to say. They should, but many have forgotten."

"Well, it's a chance, at least." I paced. I had to throw a plan together before we ran out of time. "Scout, let's say we escape out the gorge and into the hills. Is there a way back to our normal path later?"

Scout took even longer to respond than Rook usually did. That surprised me. That wasn't like him. He was our navigator. He was supposed to know the path. The entire migration had been along his route, after all.

I stopped pacing, and twitched an ear. "Scout? Where can we go after we get through the hills?"

No answer.

"Scout!"

"Hold on!" Scout tilted his head, and looked around the room. "If we go through the... um...." His eyes widened and the rest of his expression fell. "Where... where are we, again?"

I blinked. Was he serious? "Crown's Pass. Don't you remember? You're the one who brought us here!"

"Crown's... Pass." Scout raised his head, and almost jumped. "Crown's Pass! Right! Um... yes, there's a trail that goes north from the hills. It's the long way around, and it will take a few days, but it works."

"Then there's hope, yet." Celine stood up. Scout helped her to her feet.

"Maybe." I had the information I needed, but I still needed to put it all together. "They're still after me. As long as I'm with you, they'll...."

I froze. Suddenly, I had it.

"Wait. If I—"

"Absolutely not. That is completely out of the question." Doctor Signey cut me off, and scowled.

"It's the only way!"

"Wait, what are you thinking, exactly?" Scout asked.

"If the Hunters know we're here, they'll track us down," I said. "If they don't, and they don't know to look for us, then we can sneak away before they notice."

"But they already saw you," Girard said.

"Yes. They saw me. Not you."

The entire room went silent.

"Leader Noble, you cannot possibly—"

"You can get out through the tunnel." I interrupted and ignored Doctor Signey's objection. "You can make it. I'll run a distraction—"

"Are you out of your mind? They'll kill you!" Celine grabbed my shoulder.

"If I go with you, they'll kill us all." I wriggled out of her grasp. "I'll try to escape them. Maybe I'll lose them completely, and once they give up, I'll meet up with you again. If I don't, then... well, at least I'm not taking you with me."

I looked out the window. I didn't see anything yet, but I knew that they would appear at any moment.

"Doctor Signey," I said.

"Yes?"

"Can you lead the tribe out of here? Scout can guide you, of course." I was somehow less sure of that than I should have been.

Doctor Signey raised a brow. "Are you choosing me as...?"

I wished I had had more time to make a more formal speech. I knew that the decision was as an emergency appointment at best. If I failed to return, it could lead to a succession crisis. However, my biggest concern was getting someone to lead them out of Crown's Pass. If they survived, then they could deal with politics later.

"Yes," I said. "Know this, though." I looked at each member of the tribe, one by one. "I promise you, all of you, that I will not rest until I have escaped. I will keep going until I escape the Hunters, and make it back to you. I won't stop until I see you again. You have my word."

They reluctantly accepted my proposal. They didn't like it, of course, but they didn't have a choice; no one had time to think of anything better. I gave my pack to Doctor Signey and said some quick farewells. A few of them cried. I almost did, too. The tribe then descended into the tunnel, and I closed the trap door behind them. Finally, I exited the building through its front door.

~

Even with my DLY, I had never accepted the thought of dying. It was always beyond my understanding, to the point that I had started to doubt its very existence. I had always subconsciously altered my expectations of reality, just to avoid considering it.

As I left that building, I truly believed that I would be fine. I believed that there were no Hunters, and that the entire scare was for nothing. Alternatively, if there were any Hunters, I believed that I could escape them. I believed in any number of outcomes, except the one in which they killed me. That one could never happen. If it did, then I would be dead, and that just wasn't possible. There was no such thing.

It had never been my intention to sacrifice myself. Most of what I had said was automatic. It just seemed like the right thing to say. It was as natural as a "you're welcome" after a "thank you." I never actually meant to die. How could I?

I had to succeed, though. I had an obligation to the others. Whether I had meant what I said or not, they had accepted it and ran into the tunnels on my word. They had entrusted me with their very lives. I couldn't fail them.

I finally understood my parents' expectations of me. I had needed to become afflicted to see it, but there it was. I had a mission, and I had to fulfill it. That was all. That was what I did. It was who I was. It was my role in life. I was Marcus Noble, son of Vincent Noble, grandson of Thomas Noble. Duty was always right there, in the name I carried.

Father had once told me that actions had consequences. Perhaps my actions could save the tribe.

I ran.

~

I kept running for as long as I was able to run. I ran straight north, through the rain. I didn't stop. To stop was to die.

My plan would work. I knew it would. My inability to comprehend death didn't just affect my expectations of success; it also inflated my sense of my own abilities. I wasn't just a scrawny, underweight wolf who happened to enjoy jogging as a hobby. I was more than that. My smallness and my love of running were superpowers. I could outrun bullets. I was much too thin to even see, let alone shoot. I was an untraceable blur. They couldn't possibly—

My arm exploded.

I screamed.

The sudden pain snapped me out of my delusions of invincibility. In an instant, I went from feeling fine, to feeling pain in my arm, to feeling nothing at all.

The shock was enough to throw me off my balance. It interrupted my running stride, and my foot fell awkwardly. The rain-slicked ruin that had once been a street held little traction, and I slipped. I completely failed to stabilize

myself. My leg went out from under me, and I flew forward. I couldn't move my arm to catch myself, and I landed hard, mostly on my own muzzle.

I screamed again.

My nose split and bled. My front fangs hurt. My arm was still there, at least, but I couldn't move it. I couldn't feel it, either. Not below where they had shot me.

They shot me! That wasn't supposed to happen!

No. I couldn't let it end like this. I had a tribe to save.

My arm was useless, but I only needed my legs to run. I forced myself up, and I took off again.

I made it about six steps before my leg exploded. I fell again, and my stomach burst open on the way down.

I wasn't sure how or whether I could get back up again. The pain alone was crippling, but that wasn't my biggest problem. They had taken my leg. I needed that leg.

I was no doctor, but the leg shot must have hit some sort of artery. Between that, the stomach wound, and even my snout, I was losing blood. A lot of it. Quickly.

I wanted to give up, but I couldn't. Not with the tribe counting on me. I had to stay focused. Stay alert. Stay conscious.

I couldn't get up, so I had to crawl. I only had one good arm and one good leg, so I could only crawl half as fast. No matter. I couldn't let that stop me.

I reached out with my good arm, and pulled. I dragged myself forward a little.

I reached out and pulled myself forward again. It was harder than the first time had been.

I reached out and pulled a third time, but I was no longer sure that I had actually moved. I couldn't judge distance, or even feel myself on the ground anymore. I felt a general sense of cold and wetness from the rain, but I no longer felt the individual raindrops hitting me. Dragging my body felt like trying to lift an impossibly heavy weight. Everything was getting....

Everything was getting....

I couldn't concentrate anymore. I felt sleepy. The feeling was strong, stronger than anything I had ever known. I had spent my entire life being nervous, and therefore, sleepless. I had struggled with the stress of school and familial expectations. I had struggled with the permanent anxiety from my DLY. I had stolen small amounts of sleep whenever I could, but I had never felt pure, whole, unobstructed tiredness before. At that moment, on that street, that feeling finally made itself known to me.

For the first time in my life, I did not feel restless. I felt at ease. I wanted to cast my cares away, in a way I had never done before. I wanted to sleep, in a way I had never slept before.

The cold rain receded, and I felt warm, intensely warm, but not hot. Hot would have been uncomfortable. The sensation of warmth I felt was powerful, but it was still comforting. I wanted to bask in that warmth forever.

I tried to look around, but there was nothing to see. The entire scene from a few moments ago had disappeared. I was no longer lying on the ground, because there was no longer a ground on which to lie. I had no body, and there were no Hunters or buildings. Nothing existed but the warm, comforting light, and... and....

Wait, was that....

Keeper Edward?

I thought I saw a shape that could have been his, though perception was different from what I knew. It was more that I saw a figure, and even without recognizing any features whatsoever, I somehow instinctively knew who it was.

I smiled. What could be more right than a restful sleep, in this warmth, with the Keeper watching over me?

Wait.

No.

This wasn't real. Keeper Edward was dead. I was in Crown's Pass, fleeing from Hunters. I had promised the tribe I would make it back to them.

I couldn't sleep. I couldn't rest. I had given them my word.

I tried to run, but navigating whatever world I was in was almost impossible. I thought that I should run back toward my body, but I couldn't tell where it was. Then I thought how silly that notion was; I had been in my body the whole time, because the vision wasn't real.

I didn't know how to escape the sensation, but I still tried. I willed myself to wake up. I had to, for their sake.

I slowly felt the light and warmth recede. Was it working?

No.

I had hoped that I would wake up back in reality, in Crown's Pass again. Instead, my perception faded to black instead of white. I felt my body again, felt the pain of the wounds, but I couldn't move at all. I felt unnaturally cold, much colder than even the rain would have explained.

I had to keep running, though. Even if running was physically impossible, I had to find a way. The tribe depended on me. For them, I would run all the way to the end—of the city, of the world, of my life, of everything. I had sworn that I would.

That was my last conscious thought. That thought was my only remaining companion when my world became darkness. It was what I clung to as I plunged straight ahead, into the icy unknown.

In the end, the darkness never took me. It never had to; fearing the light, I ran directly into it.

Chapter Four



Terminal Disease

I gave the slab five rhythmic taps with a gloved claw tip, more to aid my own thinking than to serve any actual purpose.

"Beginning examination," I said into my suit's recorder. "Subject is a deceased inhabitant of the wilds, presumably afflicted with DLY. Examiner is Cameron Signey, working alone."

It was uncommon to receive a cadaver for examination. Hunters usually incinerated the dead, regardless of whether they had slain them or merely discovered the bodies. The Hunters even exhumed and cremated bodies that other afflicted had buried. They believed in cleansing the world with fire, and for that reason, convincing them to leave anything for our group was nearly impossible.

I knew before I even began that the subject would be useless, because all of the subjects we received always were. I should have been grateful for the opportunity to perform an examination, given the rarity with which the Hunters honored our requests at all. Instead, as frustrating as it was to lack subjects, I found it even worse to have them. I sighed, and forced myself to go through the procedure, even if only to pretend.

"Subject appears to be a relatively young female," I recorded. "Identity unknown. Exact age unknown. Exact species unknown. The Hunter who turned her over to us claimed that she was, and I quote, 'Some sort of rat, I think.' Cause of death: shot by Hunters. They were... not gentle with her. Excessive damage to the body prevents visual confirmation of even basic details. Genetic examination will be necessary to determine exact species and approximate age."

Once again, the Hunters had given us a mangled carcass. They truly possessed the grace and consideration of non-sapient housecats—particularly, the ones that left their kills on their owners' doorsteps as "gifts." The Hunters, like the housecats before them, had thoughtfully presented me with a headless rodent.

"Even without acquiring an exact weight, the subject appears visually malnourished. Whether this is a product of DLY, or merely of poor diet and living in the wilds, is unknown."

The entire examination was pointless. Given how little was left of her, I couldn't even determine whether she had suffered from DLY at all, let alone how and where it had progressed. Once again, I had equipped a hazard suit and navigated two sets of airlocks, as if I had been preparing to venture into deep space, only to discover leftover scraps of nothing useful.

"There are no other obvious external symptoms of DLY. Cranial study is... not possible."

Why had the King administration even bothered establishing our outpost? I remembered their stated reasons, of course, but those had proven to be lies. There were grand lists of theoretical advantages, declarations of what we could do with more direct wilds access, and promises of what it could mean for the study of DLY, but none of them had ever come true. For all of the outpost's neglected features and ignored capabilities, we might as well have gone home. We undoubtedly could have accomplished just as much nothing inside the city.

If only we could have captured, or even invited a subject for research. To track the progression of DLY, we needed to observe it as it happened, on a living patient. Instead of cobbling together guesses after death, we needed to study the effects directly. We could have helped the afflicted, as well. We had an outpost, far from the city, where it was safe. We could have given them food, shelter, and sanctuary in exchange for their cooperation. We could have given them everything they needed to ease their passing, so long as they let us observe it.

Alas, even though Doctor Meyers privately agreed with me, it was heretical to suggest such a thing to the city administration.

Even after years of study, DLY remained elusive and mysterious. For all we tried, there was still so much that we had yet to learn. How and why had it mutated between the first and second outbreaks? How could one disease have such varied symptoms among multiple patients? Was there any sort of link or pattern that dictated the symptoms? Age? Gender? Species? Heredity? Alternatively, was it possible for DLY to disregard all of those factors? Were the symptoms truly random?

Our latest subject provided insight into nothing. I had questions regarding the effects of DLY on the brain, but I was not even able to pursue those. A high-powered rifle round had ensured that.

"Doctor Meyers to Doctor Signey. Please report."

The voice in my suit's communicator startled me out of my contemplation, and back into awareness. Ah, there she was. Perhaps the day could yet prove to be a good one, despite its disappointing start.

"Doctor Signey to Doctor Meyers. I am currently performing an examination in the specimen room, though I am having no success whatsoever."

"Another unusable subject?"

"Regrettably."

"Shall I prepare another subject request, then, and ask for one with less damage?"

What would that accomplish? The city already had a pile of such requests

from her, and I doubted that adding one more would change anything. They had never given us what we had sought, and I doubted that they ever would. For as worthy a goal as researching DLY should have been, I had my doubts that they acknowledged our outpost at all, or at least any more than their absolute minimum obligation.

"Yes, please," I said.

Even knowing in advance that the measure would fail, it was important to navigate the proper channels. If the Hunters truly were looking for excuses to spite us, then failing to submit the official forms would give them one.

"Very well," she said. "I shall turn it in with my logs."

"You have my thanks."

"And you mine. However, I was actually looking for your assistance."

"Excuse me?"

I very much doubted that the renowned Evelyn Meyers required my expertise, since she had so much more of her own. She was, by a significant margin, the greatest researcher in our outpost.

"I am almost done with my report," she said, "and I would like someone to look over it. You've worked at my side longer than anyone else has, so I trust you to know what to examine."

"Understood and accepted. I shall cancel this examination and meet you immediately."

The thought of working alongside Doctor Meyers always made my tail wag, which, of course, sounded ridiculous as it thumped uselessly against the confines of my suit. I could only hope that the communicator's microphone failed to capture that.

"I look forward to seeing you," she said. "Thank you."

Working in the specimen room, with cumbersome suits and unusable cadavers, frequently put my mind in a dark place. When work became too frustrating, I typically sought refuge by pondering conspiracies. When I had found myself unable to examine the subject, it was easy to believe that the Hunters' destruction had been deliberate. When I thought back on the countless times it had happened, it was easy to see a pattern of sabotage.

Perhaps the city actually opposed us. Why would they oppose us? Perhaps they did not actually want us to cure DLY. Why would they not want that? Perhaps the whispers of DLY being some sort of weapon were true, and the King administration had contributed to its origin. Perhaps Doctors Dorter, Logan, and Yeates had not actually discovered the disease that bore their names. Perhaps they had invented it.

Perhaps.

However....

Once Doctor Meyers had called, the frustration and paranoia lessened, and the conspiracies melted away. With her words, I knew that my fortune had improved. She looked forward to seeing me. Nothing else was relevant. So long as she was there, all was right with the world.

She had revived the feeling of importance in my work, and the belief that my experiments and studies could accomplish something. When I thought of her, even efforts that I knew would fail, such as her report, suddenly seemed worthwhile. I knew that the city authorities would not deign to read it; they never did. However, she had the power to make me believe that, somehow, her next attempt could be different.

I returned to my log, but only briefly. "Examination abruptly and immediately cancelled due to outside circumstances," I said. "That concludes this report. Cameron Signey, signing off."

~

I was still in the outer airlock, and had just concluded the elaborate ritual of decontamination and suit removal, when the first of the explosions rendered me unconscious.



"If it is all right with the rest of the tribe," I said, "I wish to speak in remembrance of Marcus Noble, our fallen leader."

Scout leaned forward and opened his mouth, as if to stop me, but then hesitated. There was anger in his eyes, but there was also a distant, desperate hope. He did not want to believe that Leader Noble had perished, and he did not want me to believe it, either. If he allowed me to speak in Leader Noble's memory, it would be tantamount to giving up on him.

Lady Coral gently held Scout's wrist. In contrast to him, her look was devoid of anything but sadness. She knew.

Leader Noble was dead. Few wanted to admit it, and those who had acknowledged it still hesitated to speak it aloud. However, the sounds we had heard during our escape were unmistakable.

A gunshot. Leader Noble had screamed, twice. Two more gunshots. Silence.

If the Hunters had felled him at all, then they would have closed in, finished him off, and incinerated the body. As Rook had stated in Crown's Pass, and as I

knew from my personal dealings with them, they were quite thorough in that regard.

Furthermore, the rain had turned the hills outside the city into mud, which had preserved our tracks too well for us to remain elusive. The very fact that we had escaped meant that Rook was correct; the other Hunters had to have forgotten about the escape tunnels, assumed Leader Noble was alone, killed him, and failed to investigate further.

As Leader Noble would never reunite with the tribe, his position and duties fell to me. Did I keep my previous title despite assuming the tribe's leadership, as Keeper Edward had? Was I still Doctor Signey? Alternatively, had I become Leader Signey, instead?

The more I considered it, the less I knew which title I liked or deserved less.

The sun was setting as I began my speech, just as it had been during our gathering for Keeper Edward. We were even able to find another wooded clearing, if only for our protection. However, that was the point at which similarities between the two memorials ended.

Each member of the tribe had spoken for Keeper Edward in turn, but I alone spoke for Leader Noble. Most of the others either had too little to say, or were in too much shock to be able to say it. When Girard was unable to speak during Keeper Edward's gathering, he had turned to me for assistance. For the task of remembering Leader Noble, I provided such assistance to the entire tribe.

"He was a selfless man," I said. "Even before his affliction, he spent his entire life meeting demands that others placed upon him. Outside the city, he braved isolation and the loss of his family, as well as DLY and Hunters. He could have allowed the pressure to destroy him, or lived his final days lazily, or perhaps excessively, in pursuit of selfish, shortsighted pleasures. Instead, he lived them with a sense of duty. He carried every burden that fell upon him, including that of leadership."

The others were sitting in a half-circle, facing me as I spoke. Rook sat to my far left, perfectly still, and neither moved nor made any sort of expression. Scout sat to Rook's immediate left—my right—and after him came Lady Coral. They clung to each other in a futile attempt to assuage their guilt. Sir Coral came after his daughter, and struggled to suppress remarks about her cuddling with Scout, though the irritation in his gaze was obvious. Finally, Girard shifted in his seat and occasionally glared at the others, particularly Scout and Rook.

"Mortality is always a lamentable yet unavoidable fact of life," I continued, "but it is especially so in the wilds, wherein we have all faced death from the very beginning. However, despite its hardship, Leader Noble was able to flourish in this environment."

There was an unspoken undercurrent of tension within the tribe. Officially, none of the others spoke because they were all too shocked, grief-stricken, or otherwise emotional to do so. This notion was certainly true, and it was just as certainly a factor. However, there was also the matter of the factions. With Rook and Scout on one side, Girard and Sir Coral on the other, and both sides vying for control of Lady Coral, I had somehow become the only remaining neutral figure in the tribe. I alone could speak without starting a confrontation.

"He possessed as much maturity, seriousness, and diligence here as he did in the city. If anything, from the time he m-m-m... ah, excuse me."

I grieved for my fallen friend and leader, but I had not believed myself too emotional to speak. I was unsure why I had tripped over my own words, but it was unexpected and unusual.

"From the time he met, and eventually assumed leadership of the tribe," I tried again, "he actually grew."

That was better. Strange.

"It is my hope that no one here today ever forgets his actions. Without him, we would not be standing where we are now. It is doubtful that we would have reached Crown's Pass, and it is certain that we would not have progressed beyond it. From this moment onward, every step and every breath of air that we take, every meal that we eat, and every day that we live, we owe to the memory of Leader Marcus Noble."

I paused, and then added a small and quick "I thank you all." That was that, I supposed. It was short, but if it meant avoiding an incident, then so be it.

The gathering had been civil, but that was mostly due to the others' silence. No one had wanted to fight during the funeral, and thus, everyone had left his or her objections unspoken. However, I knew that those objections still existed, and that they would eventually make themselves known.

Thanks to Leader Noble's sacrifice, the tribe had successfully escaped the rain-slicked ruins of Crown's Pass, and our journey continued. However, each of us knew that a larger storm remained on the horizon, and that our paths led directly into it.



I cleared my throat. "Leader Noble?"

I found him atop a small hill, gazing toward the horizon. Abandoned buildings to the north marked the beginning of Crown's Pass. Rainclouds

covered the town, as well as the hills to its east, but the skies were otherwise clear. I would have guessed that he was contemplating our route through the ruins, but for the fact that he was not actually facing north. He was looking west, toward the open evening sky.

"I keep telling you, you can call me 'Marcus.'" He did not turn to face me.

"I am aware, and I thank you for that. However, I am more comfortable with the formality."

"The sun is setting," Leader Noble observed, in an apparent attempt to ignore the subject of his title.

He was correct. The sun edged closer to the horizon, its last light of the day coloring the sky a brilliant orange. However, Leader Noble paying attention to that was decidedly odd.

"I thought that your anxiety prohibited you from enjoying nature," I said.

"It does." He squirmed in his seat, as if I had reminded him. "It's hard, but I'm working on it."

"Why is that?"

"Why am I bothering to try again, you mean? Well, I had an interesting conversation with Girard. It got me thinking... I don't know."

He looked to the side, and drummed his claw tips in sequence against the ground. After a few moments, he let out a loud exhale through his nose, and then stood up.

"No, I still can't do it," he said. "I'm trying, though. Maybe I'll catch the sunset tomorrow, assuming we make it through Crown's Pass. Anyway, what can I do for you?"

"Oh, of course." In my surprise at having witnessed Leader Noble in that state, I had almost forgotten the original purpose of my visit. "I have finished examining the tribe, per your request."

"You mean as far as whether we're clear to keep going?"

"Indeed."

"And...?" He cast a nervous glance toward the city ruins, but quickly looked away.

"As always, it is hard to say with absolute certainty in these conditions. Without access to the proper tests, I can only—"

Leader Noble did not raise a vocal interruption, but his exasperated glare was sufficient to stop me.

I tucked my ears back for a moment. "Well, the usual warnings apply," I said, in a sudden hurry to move on.

Leader Noble gave a sharp exhale, but said nothing.

"At any rate," I continued, "it is my opinion that the tribe is clear to travel."

Lady Coral and her father concern me in scenarios involving all-out running, such as having to flee from Hunters if we encounter any. However, at our regular pace, their strength should hold. Everyone else seems healthy, or as close to healthy as one can expect in these circumstances. They are able to move, at least."

Leader Noble closed his eyes, and twitched one ear. "So you think Celine really is feeling better? She's not just trying to be brave and put on a show?"

"I believe that she has temporarily improved, but a future relapse is likely. Unfortunately, I cannot predict when it will occur. All I can say is that she is feeling better for now."

"I see." He stroked the underside of his jaw. "I guess we'll enter Crown's Pass tomorrow morning, then. Thank you."

"You are most welcome." I smiled.

"Doctor Signey?" His eyes opened, and he looked directly at me.

My smile faded. "Yes?"

"Why do you always give me that warning speech?"

"The disclaimer about the inaccuracy of my diagnoses?"

He nodded.

"Well, it is...." I paused, and thought. His question was sudden and surprising, and I had no answer at first. "It is true, is it not? They are speculative at best, especially without access to—"

"The tests, your lab, yes. So you keep saying."

"Is that a problem?" Had I somehow offended Leader Noble? I failed to imagine him getting upset over my warnings, of all things.

"Why do you doubt yourself so much?" he asked.

"Why do I... excuse me?"

"It's the same thing we both do when addressing each other. We've always urged each other to drop the formalities, but we've never agreed."

Leader Noble. Doctor Signey. Marcus. Cameron. He was correct; we had each invited the other to use our given names, and we had each refused the other's invitation.

"I am a creature of protocol," I said. "Moreover, it is respectful. You are our leader, and one should address you as such."

"You were doing it before I became the leader, though. Before I even had a title, you just made one up for me. Besides, if respect and protocol are your reasons, I could say the same thing about you, Doctor."

I cringed. Presumably, Leader Noble saw that cringe, sensed that he had found some sort of weakness, and targeted it.

"Are you uncomfortable with your title?" he asked.

"It is somewhat misleading," I answered, quietly. "It implies a level of capability that exceeds reality."

"How so?"

I flattened my ears. "I am not lying when I warn that my diagnoses are guesswork, at best. DLY is chaotic and difficult enough to predict under ideal conditions, let alone in the wilds. If someone falls ill at this point, is it from DLY? Numerous other diseases can cause the same observed symptoms. Without the tests, how can one ever be certain?"

"Doctor Signey—"

"Cameron," I corrected. "Please."

"Doctor." Leader Noble folded his arms and stared directly at me, as if daring me to defy him. "You do your best. You certainly do better than anyone else could."

"You, along with the rest of the tribe, believe that I do. That is precisely the problem."

"Doctor Sig—"

"Cameron."

Why did that title bother me to that extent? He had only meant it as a gesture of respect, just as I referred to him as Leader Noble for that same reason. I felt that addressing him as "Marcus" was beneath what he deserved, and he likely felt the same way about "Cameron" for me. Why, then, was I so upset with it?

"I hold the tribe's expectations," I said. "I am apparently Doctor Signey, after all." My voice grew increasingly quiet and low, until I had all but uttered the title under my breath. "However, I am not a diagnostician. I am, or was, merely a researcher."

That had to be it, if only because it was the only thought I could process. All others were frightening, confusing messes.

"I was more a scientist than I was a medical practitioner," I continued. "I suppose that my knowledge helps the tribe to a certain extent, but in the end, I fear that my diagnoses are only marginally more useful than nothing."

"You don't think they're helpful?" Leader Noble quirked a brow.

"I doubt that they reveal anything that an untrained eye could not. In the case of Lady Coral, for example, did it truly require a doctor, or a researcher, to notice an obvious fever?"

Leader Noble's ears flattened. I could tell that he wanted to dispel my doubts, but his hesitancy gave him away.

"Well, you could tell that it was from DLY," he finally offered. It was his turn to speak with a quiet, subdued voice.

"Speculation." I glanced upward, wearily. "My work has taught me how

DLY fevers progress. If she is suffering from DLY, then I can make a rough prediction about how she will fare, and when she will die. That is all. I cannot even diagnose her with absolute certainty, and even if I am correct, I cannot treat her."

"And you think anyone else can?" Leader Noble folded his arms and stared, as if my doubts had offended him. "This isn't just you. We're all afflicted. We're all doing the best we can."

"Perhaps, but the tribe sees me as something more than that. I am now, as you said, merely a member of the tribe trying his best. However, when the others hear the word 'doctor,' they appear to adopt the false belief that I can help them."

Leader Noble took a step backward, keeping an intent gaze on me, as if I had just slapped him.

"No one expects you to cure them, Doctor—"

"Cameron!"

I did not normally raise my voice in anger against anyone, least of all my friend and leader. Why was the subject of my title that sensitive?

"Furthermore," I said, "you seem to believe in my fictitious abilities, as well. Why else would you have me examine the tribe? Do you believe that I can see anything that you cannot? You appear to have forgotten that I am a medical researcher, not a medic. If I was, then I could have...."

I froze. That was it. Suddenly, I understood everything.

"...saved...."

I swallowed. I felt my throat tighten, and wished for water. My breathing became more desperate, as if someone had depressurized and emptied the room of air, even though we were outside.

"Evelyn," Leader Noble finished for me.

"Doctor Meyers," I corrected.

Leader Noble backed away, and I averted my gaze. Neither of us said a word.

I had expected our exchange to be brief and uncomplicated. I had notes and files to update, and he had to plan the tribe's movement through Crown's Pass. Since we were both busy, I had anticipated a short meeting, with little significance to either of us. I had expected to present my findings and leave, so that I could return to my work, and he to his.

Instead, I had turned on myself. I was unsure whether Leader Noble had goaded me, or merely awoken something that was always there, preexisting but dormant until that moment. I knew only that I had attempted to tear myself to pieces. I had even attacked Leader Noble for attempting to stop me. Finally, when I had destroyed enough of my own outer shell, I had looked into my

exposed core, and I had found her.

Her death mocked and belittled me. It reduced me to nothing. How could I ever save anyone else, when I had been unable to save her?

"I am not a healer," I said, barely above a whisper. It was a poor excuse, and I did not know to whom I was giving it.

I had to look at her photograph again.

As always, it was in the back of my folder of notes and documents, behind my ancient collection of speculation regarding DLY and the brain. I had always kept the photograph near me, but hidden. That obfuscation was a necessary protection, since the memories were normally too strong to face. Burying the photograph kept me safe.

However, there were moments in which I wanted those memories to overpower me. Sometimes, I wanted to lose myself in the past. I kept the photograph for those times, when I chose reminiscing over reality.

My hand wasn't as steady as I had believed it to be. Perhaps the argument with Leader Noble had rendered me overly emotional. Perhaps the examinations had exhausted me. Perhaps it was simply the wind, even though I had not observed any wind at that moment. Whatever the cause, my grip failed me, and moments after I retrieved the photograph, it flew from my hand.

I yelled. My instinctive reaction was to overreach for it, which only made me drop the rest of the folder. Pages scattered everywhere, and I yelled again.

A part of me knew that there was no danger. There were no cliffs or rivers, and despite my otherwise unexplained clumsiness, there was no wind. The only rain I saw was near the horizon, and far from where I stood. There was nothing to threaten any of my documents. None scattered very far, and none would meet a fate worse than getting slightly dirty.

I knew that, and yet, I spent a few moments in a blind panic. I scrambled, and I threw myself down upon the pile, as if anything I failed to save that instant would disappear forever. That thought only heightened my panic. I could not accept those losses. I could not lose my research before we reached the northern city. I could not lose Doctor Meyers again.

Leader Noble recovered the photograph while I collected everything else. The files' placement was haphazard, and no longer retained any sort of order, but at least nothing was missing. I could sort everything again later. The important matter was the photograph, which completed the collection once more.

"Thank y-you," I said, with some difficulty. Clearly, I was not as calm as I needed to be.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and successfully retrieved the photograph on my second attempt.

There. There she was.

As faded and worn as the photograph was, her image remained vibrant in my mind. So long as I looked at that picture, Evelyn Meyers still lived. Conversely, when I closed my eyes, she died again. The image of her final moments had seared itself into my memory, as permanent as the image of life I held in my hand.

I looked at the photograph and saw her subtle smile, faint enough to be difficult to notice, but powerful enough to reward those who did. I closed my eyes and saw that face twisted in agony. I opened my eyes and saw her dazzling scales, capturing the light even through the photograph's worn condition. I closed my eyes and saw those scales charred, bruised, and covered in blood.

I opened my eyes, and I heard her voice from all the times we had conversed. We had discussed any number of subjects, from our studies and theories, to our grievances with our superiors, to simply getting to know one another.

I closed my eyes, and I heard her pained, fading voice from our final conversation. She had pleaded with me, told me the question of who had planted those bombs was irrelevant, and insisted that the important matter was that I escaped. She had informed me that the explosions had breached the outpost's hull, and that she and I were afflicted. She had begged me to flee before Hunters arrived and killed me. She had confessed that she would be unable to join me, as the falling rubble had pinned, buried, and mortally wounded her.

When Evelyn Meyers was trapped and dying, I was unable to intervene. She could do nothing except wait for Hunters to finish her off, and I could do nothing but run away, and leave her to her fate.

"I could do nothing to help her."

I had not realized that I had spoken aloud, until Leader Noble placed his hand on my shoulder. Startled out of my recollection, I opened my eyes again.

"I am a medical researcher," I said, quietly. "I have the qualifications and degrees to affirm that. However, I am no doctor. Not when I am powerless to do anything except run and hide."

I could bear the memories no longer. I put the photograph away. Her image, full of the life I had failed to save, could not haunt me quite as easily from inside the folder.

We sat in silence for a short while. I remained crouched on the ground, my eyes affixed to a random page in my notes. Pretending to read it was an adequate distraction, if nothing else. Leader Noble kept his hand on my shoulder.

"I know what it's like to have everyone expect greatness from you," he finally offered.

I had to give a small laugh at that. "Yes, I suppose you would, Leader."

He shook his head, but smiled. "The important thing is that you're doing fine. Even if you can't cure DLY, studying it is important, too. So is submitting your findings to someone. Isn't that why we're going to the northern city?"

I looked at my notes. They were not just memories and mementos. They contained everything I had learned from my former station, and from my time spent observing the tribe. If we could deliver them to the northern city, then they would become our legacy, provide some small measure of hope for a breakthrough in DLY research, and possibly lead to an outside investigation into the King administration. It was unlikely, but it was possible, and as long as that possibility existed....

"Y-you are absolutely correct, of course." I rose to my feet, and returned his smile. "Furthermore, you handle the challenges of the wilds better than I do, and at less than half my age. It is no wonder that you are our leader."

Leader Noble shook his head. "Each of us merely does what he or she can. That includes me. And you."

"Is that enough, though?"

"Enough to be worth a try." He finally removed his hand from my shoulder, and turned north, toward the ruins. "Tomorrow, Crown's Pass. Eventually, the northern city. What do you think? Can we do it?"

I weighed what I knew of the tribe's health against the remaining distance. "Perhaps. It is difficult to say with certainty, of course, but... perhaps. I do know that, for my part, I shall strive to do my best."

Leader Noble smiled. "We all will, Doctor."

I winced, and felt an urge to correct him again. Instead, I thought about it, and ultimately said nothing. I allowed his words to pass unchallenged, if only that once.



I held my own shoulder, my hand where Leader Noble's had once been. He was gone, of course, but the memory persisted.

I should have known that I was unwell. The entire tribe had long since accepted the reality of DLY exposure, and even its ostensibly healthy members knew that sickness was inevitable. The only variables were what matter of symptoms one would face, and when. Knowing that, I should not have overlooked the tremors in my hands and voice. It was obvious in retrospect that

they were unnatural.

Perhaps it was simple denial. Perhaps I had not considered the possibility that my symptoms had arrived, because I simply had not wanted to consider it.

Unfortunately, the symptoms had kept appearing. There was the periodic shaking of my hands, and the occasional difficulty speaking. There was also my collapse. As we had fled Crown's Pass, we had climbed a steep hill, one that was still slick and muddy from the rain. At that moment, when I had needed my strength and stability the most, it had failed. That, paired with the tremors, was almost impossible to overlook. My denial was strong enough to overlook any one symptom, but it wasn't strong enough to disregard all of them.

The only reason that I was able to accept what had happened, rather than face the same guilt that consumed Lady Coral and Scout, was that my collapse had not affected the tribe's escape. We had lost Leader Noble, and Lady Coral and Rook had received several cuts and bruises, but the tribe still had managed to elude the Hunters. For that, I had Scout's assistance to thank.

Scout. Of course. Significant as the appearance of my condition was, I needed to update his file, first. It was near the back of my folder, and I mentally ticked off the other files as I passed them. Coral, Coral, Drake, Edward, Noble, Sebastian, Signey... Warner, there it was. Scott Warner, better known as Scout.

I searched for a pencil while I considered what to write. Since Scout's recent memory lapse—

"Why are we still doing this, again?"

Girard's complaint roused me from my concentration. I had thought that the uncomfortable silence covering dinner would persist, that our conversation had concluded, and that I was free to resume my work. Apparently, I had underestimated Girard's willingness to resurrect arguments.

"Doing what?" I asked, despite the fact that I already knew.

"This migration." Girard folded his arms. "Specifically, how we're going about it. It seemed like a good idea at first, sure, but not anymore. Two of us have died already! What's it take to prove we're not going to make it?"

"And what would you have us do instead?" I did not put down my files, but I gave him a stern look over the top of them. "You know very well that we must persist. Our previous tragedies only prove the necessity of our migration. We can-n-n...."

Curse those speech issues.

"We can't stay here," Scout finished on my behalf.

"Well, yeah, I never said to stay. But we can't keep going like this!" Girard pounded his fist against his own knee, as if it were a table. "It's a doomed mission, and you know it."

"Anything we do is a doomed mission," Lady Coral said.

Girard snorted. "That's not what I meant. If you really want to make the northern city, fine, but this isn't how you do it."

"Excuse me...?" Sir Coral managed to ask, despite his strained voice.

"I'll admit, the plan sounded nice enough when Keeper Edward said it." Girard paused, thought, and then decided to stand up. "Anything we do involves wandering around the wilds until we all die, so try for the northern city, and if we don't make it, oh, well. We try because, well, why not? It sounded great, at first."

"And not now? What's the problem, exactly?" Scout asked.

"Yes," I added, "I fail to understand what changed to make the—"

"It's real, now!" Girard took a step and leaned forward. He extended his arms, his palms facing the sky. "Maybe it was a good plan before we started, when we didn't know how it would turn out, but now we do. We can't just keep going and hoping nothing bad happens, because something bad has already happened. Twice. How many more times will it take before we can call it? We have our answer, now. We know that this way isn't going to work."

"We have not failed yet," I said, though my voice was quiet. I would have questioned whether he had heard me, were it not for his glare.

"Furthermore, if we have, then what do you suggest?" Sir Coral asked.

Girard gave a rather unsettling grin. "Go faster, of course."

"Out of the question," Lady Coral said.

Girard spun to face Lady Coral, who shrunk back and withdrew. Scout leaned forward and raised his arm in front of her, as if attempting to create a shield. Girard rolled his eyes.

"Why?" Girard asked. "Staying here isn't helping. We need to escape the Hunters, don't we? We're running out of leaders."

"No one said anything about staying." Lady Coral leaned forward again, though she remained behind Scout's arm. "We're still migrating. It's just that we can't push too hard. We're already going as fast as we can. Even as it stands, three of us needed help just to make it up that hill, and that was after we had all rested. What if we had been overworked and exhausted at the time?"

"I'm afraid my daughter is right." Sir Coral failed to suppress a cough, but was able to limit it to one. He took a drink from his flask, regardless. "Escape is important, but so is the quality of the end of our lives."

"Don't you get it?" Girard asked, undeterred. "What we have right now isn't quality. This isn't anything to look back on and be happy about. We're always running from Hunters. Every day, someone's DLY gets worse. Last time they spotted us, everyone could escape on their own. This time, half the tribe couldn't.

How many of us will be able to make it next time?"

"You mean to reach the northern city before it is too late, then?" I disagreed with his conclusion, though I at least understood its basis.

"I'm saying we need to get there while we still can. What if we wait too long, and then we don't even know where to go anymore? How long will Scout still remember the way?"

Scout looked as if he had received a sharp blow to the abdomen. His eyes widened, and he sputtered. "I... that's...."

That's enough, Girard." Lady Coral gently lowered Scout's arm, and returned his gesture by raising hers front of him.

"What?" Girard folded his arms. "Look, I know it's not a nice thing to say, but let's be honest. We were counting on Scout to get us out of Crown's Pass, and he just blanked out. You saw him. I know you like him and all, but can we really trust him to guide us anymore?"

"Girard." Rook's voice was even and quiet, but the fact that he spoke at all, let alone without his usual pause, was notable.

"Oh, ho. Finally found something that gets a response from you, huh?" Girard grinned.

"Girard, please." His remarks were growing excessively personal, so I intervened.

Alas, it was too late to spare Scout. He stared into his own lap and slouched back, until he was sitting at a fraction of his already short height, as if attempting to shrink away into nothingness. Lady Coral pressed against him, to little effect.

"I... I'm... I'm working on making maps," Scout said, without raising his head to look at anyone. "In case... in case I ever... can't...."

Rook touched Scout to establish his position, and then placed a hand on his shoulder. Scout closed his eyes, held Rook's hand, and sighed. The gesture lasted until Lady Coral wrapped her arm around Scout, at which point Rook retracted his hand.

The entire tribe was silent. Girard shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He had crossed a line, hurt Scout, and inadvertently brought a moment of awkward unity, as everyone else observed the damage and backed down.

It was the perfect time to act. I had no desire to see anyone in the tribe suffer, but once the moment had occurred, I saw an opportunity to end the debate while everyone was conciliatory.

"I believe that this discussion... has become somewhat heated." I paused to consider my phrasing, but also to ensure that I spoke carefully, in case my speech issue asserted itself again. I had one chance to forge an agreement, and no desire to botch it.

"None of us can guarantee our lasting presence or strength," I continued. "Any day, any of our conditions could worsen, and any of us could fall victim to the Hunters. Precautions and checks against the unforeseen are always wise. However, as long as he is able to guide us, I have faith in Scout."

For the most part, no one's behavior changed from what it had been moments before. Scout continued to search futilely for comfort in Lady Coral's embrace. Girard stared at the ground, unconvinced, but at too much of a disadvantage to argue any further. Sir Coral carefully watched Scout. Rook failed to display any visible reaction to anything. I took the silence as a cautiously positive sign. No one objected to my attempt to calm the situation, at least, and I was therefore free to continue.

"It is true that our health is declining," I said. "It is also true that, so long as we remain here, we remain in danger. This simultaneously places a minimum and maximum speed on our travels. It is obviously unwise to linger where Hunters patrol, but we cannot exceed our own limits in our attempt to flee. Therefore, I am inclined to maintain our current pace."

There. I had issued a ruling, and with any luck, I had resolved a conflict. The others mumbled halfhearted acceptance, which I considered adequate closure. My work was far from over, of course, but I would savor any victory I could find.

"Now, if this discussion has concluded," I said, "then I would like to set up camp, and prepare to resume our migration in the morning. Is there anyone who feels unfit to travel at this point?"

"I'm all right for now," Lady Coral said. She finally released Scout.

"I'm good. And that includes still knowing the way, thank you." Scout glared at Girard.

Girard rolled his eyes, and then turned to me and said, "Never better."

Sir Coral suppressed a cough with some water. "I'm all right," he said.

Once the others had all spoken, Rook quietly added, "I'm fine."

I smiled. "Very well, then. I thank you all."

My smile was superficial. Inside, I worried. That was one fight averted, or at least delayed, but more would come. It was my duty to hold the tribe together, but my grip was shaky and tentative, even without the tremors.



"What about this one?" Scout held up the leaf he had picked.

"I, ah... one moment, please."

I searched my pack, found Keeper Edward's guidebook, and attempted to compare its illustrations to what Scout had found. I was unable to find the exact match, but I at least narrowed it down to certain groups.

"I believe... I believe it should be safe, yes. Assuming that my identification is correct, at least."

Scout looked at me, then at the leaf, and then at me again. He regarded both sights with equal suspicion. "Maybe we shouldn't risk it," he mumbled. He placed the leaf back in the bush, as if attempting to undo his having picked it.

I flattened my ears and dipped my head. I wanted to be offended, but I knew the wisdom of avoiding unnecessary risks. "Yes, perhaps that is for the best," I admitted.

If only Lady Coral could have joined us. Her plant knowledge was by far the best in the tribe, and she could have identified everything with ease. Moreover, I suspected that Scout would have enjoyed her company, as well. Unfortunately, she was busy fishing and cooking with her father, Girard, and Rook.

Having all of the others perform both tasks sequentially was woefully inefficient, but pairing them off was an impossible logic puzzle. Scout refused to leave Rook alone with Girard or Sir Coral, both of whom refused to leave Lady Coral alone with Rook. For her part, Lady Coral refused to be alone with Girard, and Scout joined in her objection. The list of inappropriate pairings seemed endless, and in the face of that much rampant mistrust, I had given up. Thus, I had ordered all of them do everything as one large group.

They were undoubtedly too busy worrying about each other to work quickly, but that was all right; it gave me ample time to gather materials with Scout.

"I think we have enough plants, anyway," Scout said, and gestured toward my half-full bag. "There aren't a lot around here, especially this time of year. That's a pretty good haul, really."

I nodded. "Likewise, I believe that we now have sufficient firewood."

Unlike the comparatively rare plants, loose sticks and small pieces of wood were available in staggering abundance. However, we had carrying capacities to consider. We had gathered more than enough for the evening's fire, and for another fire the next morning, and for an additional reserve, if necessary. Beyond that, we were merely overburdening ourselves.

"Should we head back?" Scout asked.

"Possibly. I doubt the others will have finished, though. Do you have a way to pass the time?"

Scout opened his mouth, paused, and closed it again. He glanced to his side, at the ground.

"I could work on my maps," he said.

The effect of the mapmaking task on Scout's morale was obvious, and understandable. I wished desperately that I could have spared him from that task, and from its cruel reminder of his condition. He knew why he had to transcribe his knowledge to paper, and that knowledge nearly destroyed him. I tucked my ears, but said nothing. As much as I wanted to relieve him of his suffering, I knew that the maps were an unfortunate necessity.

"How goes your progress with those?" I asked, while inwardly cursing myself.

"Good," he answered. He avoided eye contact.

After checking our supplies, we returned to the campsite in awkward silence.

~

As I had expected, we reached the campsite first. The other group was undoubtedly still at the river. The area's scarcity must have delayed them in catching their fill. If there were any conflicts at all, then those delays would only intensify.

At that moment, though, my primary concern was Scout. Since we had returned, he had developed a keen interest in the ground, and had yet to speak.

"I am sorry," I said.

"For what?" He finally looked up at me, though it appeared to take some effort.

"For the task you m-m-m... must face." It was an inconvenient time for my speech to falter, though I doubted the existence of a convenient one. I supposed that it illustrated how I struggled with DLY as well, but it was not my preferred means of consoling him. "I can imagine how difficult it must be," I added.

"Yeah." He looked away again. He sighed, and retrieved his incomplete maps and a pencil from his pack.

I started to place the firewood we had gathered. Since I expected a long wait for the others, I believed that I had time to boil some water, and work on the plants we had found. If only I could find a way to salvage the conversation—

"I guess the news itself isn't so bad," Scout miraculously offered, just as I was contemplating admitting defeat. "I mean, it is, but... if the memory thing was my only problem, I could deal with it. The people attacking me are what make it tough. Rook has it worse, of course, but still."

"Are you referring to Girard?"

Scout winced, and started to turn his attention toward his maps, as if Girard's very name were a threat.

"Him and Sir Coral," he said. He started to draw in a patch of trees, but then stopped again and set his pencil down. "And that's the weird thing. Why's Sir Coral involved in all of this, anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I get why he wouldn't trust me. I ran with the Plague, did Roc's Nest trips, all that. That's behind me, but I guess he thinks it isn't. He thinks I'm still a criminal, and that's all I'll ever be, or something."

It was true that the Plague's record was far from clean, especially at their height. They smuggled drugs to the northern city via Roc's Nest, and they violently defended their territory, as all low district street gangs did. Under Mayor Noble, they had been a menace to the district.

However, they were the least overtly aggressive of the three low district gangs, and they treated the communities they ruled with some measure of respect. Under Mayor King, they had become the least of all potential evils, including King's police and government services. As rough as the Plague may have been, few in the district regarded their eventual decline as a good thing.

I had long since accepted Scout's background; considering his circumstances, there were far worse affiliations he could have held. However, I had less at stake than Sir Coral did.

"I'm not just some violent criminal, of course," Scout continued. "I'm not the one breaking the first edict by suggesting that, either. But... fine, he doesn't trust me. Whatever. But he's running with Girard! That's what I don't get. I mean, you want to talk about a violent criminal?"

Tempted as I was to agree, I could not take sides in arguments, nor could I disparage anyone. My goal as leader was to keep the tribe together, after all.

"In Sir Coral's defense," I said, "Girard is not courting his daughter."

Scout opened his mouth, paused, and then closed it again. He cast an uncomfortable look to the side, and then picked up his pencil.

"He's trying to get Rook banished, you know." Scout continued the conversation, but no longer looked at me. He spoke to his maps.

"Who, Girard, or Sir Coral?" I asked.

"Both, probably. I mean, Rook's an ex-Hunter and his dad's a famous traitor, so of course Sir Coral hates him. But I meant Girard."

"Ah." That cleared up the ambiguity, I supposed, but not the overall mystery. "Do you know why Girard would want to act against Rook?"

"Do you?"

I had not expected him to turn the question back to me, let alone to do so with that much suddenness. He paused his drawing and stared at me, and his entire body tensed. Had I broached some manner of sensitive subject?

"I do not know the precise details, no," I admitted. "Leader Noble complained about that very issue, actually. Neither party was willing to tell him about their quarrels, which m-m-m... made it difficult for him to resolve them."

As soon as Scout had learned how little I actually knew, he relaxed again. "Well, I don't know how it started," he said. "Rook told me about this latest accusation, but I don't think he even knows—"

He stopped when he noticed my interested stare.

"What?" he asked. "Don't look at me like—oh. The accusation? No. Rook swore me to secrecy on that. I would, but... I can't. I promised. Sorry." He started drawing again, and halfheartedly muttered something about how, with his luck, he would probably forget everything Rook had told him anyway.

I tucked my ears back. I was growing as desperate for answers as Leader Noble had been, and I wished that Scout were more willing to reveal them. However, if Rook had only told Scout in confidence, then I did ultimately have to respect their privacies.

I looked at the pot as the fire heated it, and wished the others would return soon. I was ready to end my private conversation with Scout, and to receive the others' help with the dinner preparations. Working with boiling water required steadier hands than my own, and I did not intend to interrupt Scout's drawing.

Properly unraveling the mystery of Girard and Rook would take time. It was no secret that Girard was plotting a move against Rook, but no one was willing to discuss the nature of his accusation. Rook had secretly confided in Scout, but that did almost nothing to explain the mystery to anyone else. Was I capable of piecing together the clues, discovering the accusation, and coaxing the truth out of them? Eventually, yes. I believed that I could solve the puzzle, given enough time.

However, time was a luxury of whose quantity I was unsure. Investigating the accusation was a long process, and one that could ultimately prove irrelevant. There was a more important matter, which was that time wasted chasing the truth empowered Girard. It distracted me, and while I dealt with the distraction, it gave him time to design and prepare for his next move.

Leader Noble had unwittingly exacerbated the problem by burying it. He had allowed Girard the freedom to plot, and had promised to welcome a hearing of the eventual accusation, in exchange for Girard's good behavior in the interim. Leader Noble's plan had established a grudging peace in the short term, but it had offered no actual resolution, and it had set the tribe up for future devastation.

I had my own plan, and it took the exact opposite approach. It was drastic, and I had no guarantee that it would work. However, even a small chance of success was better than the alternative, and such was the best I could provide.

I had neither time nor room to hesitate. Every day that passed without intervention made the situation worse. I had to make my move that night, after dinner. I was Leader Signey, and I could not be afraid to act. If my plan was to succeed, I had to strike before Girard was ready.



The others looked at me with a certain degree of curiosity, eager to know what I was about to do. Slow as they had been with their fishing, they had at least succeeded, and dinner had been relatively pleasant and uneventful. I regretted that it was my duty to shatter that peace.

I cleared my throat.

"Up until now," I said, "it has been an unspoken, yet well-known fact that certain members of this tribe have had... conflicts with one another." As always, my pause was primarily to avoid an oncoming stutter, though I did not mind the unintentional added emphasis.

"These conflicts have existed since long before I assumed leadership," I continued. "Leader Noble also struggled with them. To a certain extent, even Keeper Edward did."

When I had presented the others with their piles of stones, they had looked upon me with confusion and concern. I already regretted my actions even before they happened, and I still wished for the existence of any other alternative. Alas, if I wanted to save the tribe, then my only choice was to follow the plan.

"We cannot survive so long as we keep burying these issues," I said. "If we are to remain together, then we must address them directly."

"And that's what the rocks are for?" Lady Coral gave me a strange look. "This isn't going to turn violent, I hope...."

"Oh, goodness, no." I literally shuddered at the thought. "No, they are merely for the system I have devised for anonymous voting. It is somewhat primitive, and I apologize for that, but—"

"Wait." It was Scout's turn to give me a look. "Voting?"

I nodded, and silently swallowed. This was it.

"We are going to consider measures to banish people from this tribe," I said.

The others' reactions were immediate and obvious. Had I been in a closed hall, in front of a large audience, then I would have seen the room degenerate into chaos. That we were outside lessened the effect, as did the fact that there were only six of us, but the sentiment was the same.

"Everyone, please." Large audience or small, I still had to maintain order.

"Who are we kicking out, exactly?" Girard asked.

"Possibly no one, depending on how the voting turns out," I said. "We shall consider everyone, though."

Lady Coral's tail bristled. "Everyone?"

"Yes. Every single member of the tribe shall face the motion of exile, including me."

"Why?" she asked. "The conflicts you're talking about... if you mean what I think you do, then those don't involve everyone."

"I am aware. However, this is the only way to ensure fairness. Those who lack enemies should have little to fear from this, and by including them, we avoid singling out anyone."

"I know we have a lot to work out now, but...." Sir Coral shook his head, and drank from his water flask. "If we're going to vote on anything, I would have expected to discuss the future of the tribe. The migration, the edicts, our leadership, and so on. We have more legitimate issues to resolve, don't we?"

"In due time," I said. "Before we can address who shall lead us in the future, how quickly and in which direction we should move, or any of our other concerns, should we not first establish who even remains in this tribe? Otherwise, we risk empowering those whom the remaining tribe's actions should not concern. Surely you do not wish to cede influence to outsiders."

Sir Coral and Girard exchanged glances, as did Lady Coral and Scout. Rook sat perfectly still and faced forward.

I explained my voting mechanism to the others, though not without apologies for its makeshift design, as well as for my occasional speech failures. I had given each of them a collection of large and small stones. I had also included a blindfold for everyone except Rook, who already had his own. One at a time, each member of the tribe would step forward, and the others would all cast their votes. They would place a stone in the center of the gathering, or, given their blindfolding, a rough approximation of the center. A large stone meant support for the person in question—that he or she should stay—while a small stone signified a vote for banishment.

"Exile requires at least three out of five votes," I concluded, "and each vote has to be clear, decisive, and unambiguous. Failure to vote at all will not count. If anyone is to leave the tribe, it will require at least three small stones. Do I make myself clear?"

There was no response. I interpreted the silence as evidence of surprise; perhaps I had dumbfounded the others.

"Good." I forced a smile, pained as I was beneath it. I was not particularly

fond of the procedure, either, but I had to press on. "In that case, let us begin with Lady Coral."

"What? Why her? What did she ever—"

Sir Coral rose to face me, as if I had somehow insulted his daughter's honor, but moved too quickly for his own good. Having overexerted himself, he fell into a sudden coughing fit. Lady Coral rushed to his side, placed her hands on his shoulders, and eased him back down into his seat. She then gave me a pained look, as if to ask why I had done this to him.

It was not my proudest moment.

"To my immediate knowledge, she has done no wrong," I said. "In fact, even though the voting is supposed to remain anonymous, I freely admit that I intend to vote for her retention. I have no quarrel with her."

Sir Coral ceased his coughing and looked up at me. "Then why...?"

"Again, it is m-m-m...." Blast it. "Merely a measure of fairness." There. "I want everyone to face this. All who remain should know that they do so openly, with the consent and affirmation the tribe. There shall be no exceptions."

"It's all right," Lady Coral said. "I'm, um...." She stood, and attempted to smooth out her tail, to absolutely no effect. She gave up after the second stroke, and clasped her hands behind her back. She swallowed. "I'm ready."

Some of her obvious nervousness transferred to me, but for the most part, I was confident. I had chosen Lady Coral to face the voting first, because I believed that it was impossible for her to lose. She only needed three votes to remain, meaning that she only needed two others after my own. Barring a betrayal of unfathomable proportions, Sir Coral and Scout would provide those. Therefore, even if one assumed the worst from Girard and Rook—and her particular case, I did not—then she was still almost assuredly safe.

Every member of the tribe, including her, wore his or her blindfold, and the voting began. She gave the signal, and sounds of people moving and placing stones filled the area. When all was silent once more, she asked if everyone had finished, and we confirmed that we had. The blindfolds came off, and the tribe viewed the results.

Their placement was somewhat haphazard, but their presence was unmistakable; there were five large stones at or near the center of the group. As I had hoped, the tribe had unanimously reaffirmed their support of her.

"The motion to banish Lady Coral fails, by a vote of zero to five." I smiled at her. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," she said, and took her seat once more. Her tail slowly started to return to normal.

I cleared the stones away, in preparation for the next round. I hoped that,

once the others had seen an example of the process, it would become easier to handle the subsequent motions.

"In the interest of fairness," I said, "I myself shall go next."

My hands started to shake, which made tying the blindfold again difficult. Nervousness played a role in my sudden trembling, but only a small one. I was almost certain that Scout and Lady Coral supported me, and of the remaining three, it seemed probable that at least one would vote in my favor. No, my shaking was either from worrying over nothing, or DLY.

I instructed the others to begin, and heard only silence at first. Perhaps they were weighing their decisions, or perhaps not. I could see nothing.

Finally, I heard the sounds of walking, and of placing stones, and then of more walking. When all was silent again, I confirmed that they had finished, and then removed my blindfold.

Just as before, there were five stones at or near the center, and all were large. I knew that I had never been in danger of exile, but having the support of the entire tribe was an unexpected comfort.

"The motion to banish me fails, by a vote of zero to five," I said. I smiled, and added, "I thank you all."

I called Sir Coral to face his measure next, and he was the third to pass with unanimous support. Of course, I knew that he was safe; after my support, he only needed that of his daughter and Girard. He did not respond vocally to the confirmation, possibly because of his cough, but he did smile.

I wanted to believe that the procedure was going well so far, but I could not allow myself to grow complacent. I had deliberately started with the least controversial members of the tribe, to ease the others into the process. Those were the easy votes. The introductory phase had concluded, and the more difficult portion remained.

Scout went next, and he became the first to have a vote cast against him. I still knew even before the reveal that he was safe, since my support meant that he only needed Lady Coral and Rook. The stones only confirmed what I already knew. Still, it concerned me that he did not enjoy the same absolute, unquestioned approval that those before him did. Who was the one person who wanted to banish Scout? I had two theories, but as soon as I started to puzzle it out, I changed my mind and stopped. The entire point of my system was to provide anonymity, after all. It was not my place to speculate. I could only move on.

Rook was next, and for the first time in the entire procedure, I was truly afraid. I most likely should not have been, since he would be safe so long as my math checked out, and the voting fell the way I predicted it would. On top of my

support, he had the obvious support of Scout, but he also had equally obvious opposition from Sir Coral and Girard. With my stated intention not to count missing votes, Rook could only lose if Lady Coral specifically voted to banish him. I saw that outcome as phenomenally unlikely, but it was still a greater risk than I would have preferred.

Fortunately, my concerns proved unnecessary; the measure to banish Rook failed by a vote of two to three. Lady Coral had to have specifically voted for his retention, then. That was a welcome surprise. Had she proven indecisive or intimidated, and failed to vote at all, it still would have been enough to spare him. She had not needed to cast a vote in his favor. However, I was glad that she had. I found it strangely encouraging that she chose so clearly, even when it likely pitted her against her father.

When Girard saw the results, he scowled, and raised one of the spare stones from his pile. He held it steady, as if attempting to crush it in his hand, or contemplating whether to throw it. Scout kept a very careful eye on him, which only seemed to agitate him further. Just as I began to fear a potential standoff, though, Girard backed down, and dropped his stone with an infuriated sigh.

Rook himself sat still, and failed to display a visible reaction to anything. He opened his beak, as if to thank those who had voted for his retention. However, he instead paused, changed his mind, and silently closed it again.

"Finally," I said, with a feigned smile, "we shall conclude with Girard."

Girard snorted.

I lowered my blindfold, waited for his signal, and placed my stone. I heard the sound of others doing the same, and then silence.

Girard gave the signal to end the procedure, and we each removed our blindfolds.

The decisive moment had arrived.

I had not anticipated what I saw. I doubted that anyone had, with perhaps one single anonymous exception.

"Two large stones... and two small," I counted aloud.

I looked around, in case I had overlooked one. Had someone simply missed when attempting to place his or her stone? It was possible, since no one had been able to see. However, it was not the case. There were no other stones anywhere in the vicinity, excluding the others' personal piles.

The others all looked at me. No one said a word.

"Banishment can-n-n... cannot happen without three decisive votes," I finally said. My surprise had shaken me, and on the subject of shaking, my speech troubles had returned. I fought through them, though. I had to. I had to regain control of the situation. Fortunately, I had the foresight to have created the

rule for missing votes. "Therefore, with two votes in favor, two votes in opposition, and one abstention, the motion to banish Girard fails."

Girard eyed everyone surrounding him with suspicion. I assumed that he was attempting to circumvent my system for anonymity, and puzzle out how each member had voted, and thus, who had dared oppose him.

I needed to distract him, quickly.

"With that, I believe this gathering has concluded," I said. "All six motions have failed, and every member of the tribe shall remain. I thank you all for your participation."

"Wait. Hold on." Girard stood, and walked directly up to me. He was holding another stone. "If no one's going anywhere, then what was the point of all that?"

"Establishing that fact is significant in and of itself." I took a step backward, eluding Girard, and looked at everyone else. "It proves that each of us belongs here. Despite any disagreements that any of us may have with one another, we have just officially confirmed that we are still a united tribe. I do hope that you remember this in the days to come."

I smiled, and unlike my previous forced attempts, my smile was genuine. I needed only to maintain that sentiment, and to conclude the gathering as quickly as I could, and all would be well.

Of course, I knew that was untrue. I also needed to remain careful. My work had not yet concluded. Far from it, in fact. I had dissipated some of the darkness surrounding the tribe, but I had not yet completely dispelled it.

"Now, we should conclude our business here and move on. Remember," I said, emphasizing the point as much as I could, "that we act as one."

I was unsure whether that statement was actually true, but for the sake of the migration, it had to be. I would make it so, or die trying.



Lady Coral and I were alone. It was understandable; a few days after the voting, she had developed another fever, and had therefore come to me. Scout was absent because he had worried about leaving Rook unattended, or in the sole company of Sir Coral and Girard, and Lady Coral had understood and yielded to his concern. Everyone else was absent because she deserved her privacy as a patient.

I could not cure her, of course. I could only detect and discuss her

symptoms, and I ensured that she knew that. The best I could offer was to keep her cool. I had removed her from the midday sun, found some meager shade in the barren plains through which we traveled, and treated her with a wetted cloth, but I could do little else.

Minimal and useless as my attention was, though, she did seem to appreciate it. Perhaps she simply wanted someone to whom she could talk. If so, then I could at least provide my company, and I did so gladly.

"How much longer...?" she asked, quietly.

In the days since she had contracted her latest fever, she had overcome the mild delirium, but the struggle with her other symptoms continued. She was able to make eye contact with me, though it pained her to hold her eyes open for long. She spoke coherently, but any strength or volume in her voice had yet to reappear. Her words were as lucid as they were faint.

"I do not know," I said.

I applied the cloth to her forehead again, completely unsure what she meant by her question. How much longer until Scout arrived? How much longer would the symptoms of that particular fever last? How much longer would she remain healthy after conquering it, before she developed another one? How much longer before she could travel again? How much longer was the journey before we reached Garreton, let alone Gilded Bend, Roc's Nest, or the northern city? How much longer could I hold the tribe together? How much longer did she have to live?

There was no need to ask for clarification, though. I had countless theories about what her question could have meant, but they all had the same answer: I did not know.

"Doctor Signey... I'm sorry."

"Excuse me?" I asked. "For what?"

"I don't mean to slow anyone down." She groaned, and closed her eyes again.

I shook my head. "This is not something you can control. Everyone understands that, and no one faults you for it."

Her symptoms were more rapid and aggressive than the others' were. Many in the tribe had been ill for longer than she had, but the intensity of her fevers had quickly made her the sickest. No one could blame her for that, though. Her condition was a consequence of misfortune, not of misdeed.

Scout had even suggested that, if she felt so strongly about the tribe stopping on her behalf, Rook could carry her during the marches. Sir Coral was not comfortable with the idea, of course, and Girard had strongly objected. Still, Scout had made his point just by extending the offer. The tribe was willing to

accommodate her.

"Lady Coral, tell me something, if you please."

"Yes...?"

"You collapsed during our escape from Crown's Pass, yes?"

She groaned, but did not respond otherwise. She knew that she did not have to. She had fallen as the tribe was climbing the mud-slicked gorge; everyone had seen it.

"Do you think that, had that not occurred, the tribe would have been better off?" I asked.

She wordlessly attempted to look at me. It was difficult for her, not because of fatigue, but because opening her eyes burned them. She took several moments to think, and then finally spoke.

"Well, I guess... Rook wouldn't have had to—"

"Lady Coral."

She gave a slight wince, but said nothing. She closed her eyes again.

"It would not have made a difference," I said. I removed the cloth from her forehead, wrung it out, and remoistened it with a fresh supply of water.

"Why not?" She asked.

"You were not the only person to have fallen that day. Your father's strength also failed, as did mine."

I had been perfectly healthy, or at least asymptomatic, until I had attempted to climb that hill. I should have been providing assistance to the others during the escape, but instead, I had required it from them.

"All of us are unwell," I continued. "Providing support for each—oh!"

I had attempted another gentle application of the cloth, but I had lost control of my hand to an ill-timed tremble, and I had accidentally driven the cloth into her forehead. She winced, and gave an obviously pained yelp.

"I am so sorry," I said. "Please, forgive m-m-m... forgive me."

Admittedly, I had wanted to convey the notion that the tribe suffered together. However, I would have preferred a less violent means of illustration.

"It's all right," she said. I was unsure how much of her subsequent groan was my fault.

"As I was saying, a few days ago, we unanimously reaffirmed your presence." I had to speak slowly, and choose my words carefully, lest my anxiety rob me of speech again. It was not unlike walking along an icy path, in that I had to proceed cautiously in order to avoid stumbling. "Everyone had the opportunity to cast you out, and no one did. Not one person."

She gave a faint, weak smile. "Thank you. But...." Her smile faded as soon as it had appeared. "Doctor Signey, why did you do that...?"

"What, the voting?"

She nodded, or at least she closed her eyes and bowed her head, though she did not quite have the strength to raise it again.

Could I confide in her? I was certain that she deserved to know, but I was unsure how much I should reveal to anyone. I struggled with the decision, but I ultimately decided to trust her.

"It was to keep the tribe together," I said.

She said nothing. Perhaps she did not understand, or perhaps she was still incapacitated.

"I expected everyone to remain here," I continued. "Though, admittedly, the tallies were close enough to worry me in some cases."

"To prove that everyone belongs here?" she asked, after a pause.

I smiled. "Precisely."

"Then... I'm sorry."

She did not elaborate, and I doubted that she had strength to, even if I had asked. Fortunately, I had no need. She had to have been referring to her actions during the proceedings. She must have voted to banish someone, unaware that I had intended for every measure to fail.

"It is quite all right," I said. "It was a calculated risk."

I had done all that I could with the cloth, so I wrung it out and re-moistened it one final time, draped it over her forehead, and left it there.

"But why...?" she asked.

"It was because of Leader Noble." I briefly closed my eyes. "He chose to bury the dispute between Girard and Rook, which gave it time to grow and mature. By contrast, I had to intervene before the problem worsened. With any luck, this will erase some of Girard's momentum."

"Wait."

Lady Coral slowly sat up, and some measure of strength in her voice started to return. She ignored the cloth falling off her forehead. Those were good signs, though I still urged caution and prevented her from moving too quickly.

"If Girard is the problem," she asked, "then why not just get rid of him?"

"Regrettably, it is n-n-n... not that simple." I sighed, more at my own speech failure than at the situation, and reminded myself once again to slow down. "There is no clean, surgical way to remove anyone from the tribe at this point. Everyone has friends and allies, which have turned into factions. I cannot move against Girard without affecting Sir Coral, which affects you. Nor can I move against Rook without affecting Scout, which also affects you."

Lady Coral slumped backward, as if my words had drained her strength again. I belatedly realized the implication of what I had said. For a few

moments, we were both silent.

"You're saying I have to choose between Father and Scout, aren't you?" she finally asked.

I had no immediate answer for her. It was an unpleasant scenario, but I had to consider the possibility.

"N-n-n... not if this works," I answered, after some thought and a false start.

"Will it...?" She sounded weaker again.

"I hope so." I wished that I had a better answer for her than that, but I was not in a position to deliver potentially false promises. "I believe that I have done what was best for the tribe. We must now wait, and see whether even the best is enough. Think of it as performing an untested, experimental surgery on a dying patient. It is risky, and there is no guarantee of success, but it is the only treatment option that we have."

"I thought you said you weren't a surgeon." As weak and tired as her fever had left her, she cracked a weary smile at me.

Whatever the mood may have been, I had to chuckle at her remark. Clever. That she was lucid enough to say it was another positive sign.

"I'm not. It is merely an analogy." I returned her smile, and then slowly rose. "Now, we can continue the migration when you recover. For now, you rest, while I return to the others. Is there anything else you need, before I go?"

"My father. And Scout."

"Of course."

I made my way back to the rest of the tribe.

~

Had I done the right thing? I had attempted to force the premature exposure of Girard's scheme, in hopes that it would wither and die from lack of development. However, I might have instead goaded him into taking action, before his opportunity disappeared. I had cornered him, but creatures were often at their most dangerous when cornered. His reaction would determine whether I had saved the tribe, or destroyed it.

Ultimately, I had done what I could for the tribe. Meager as it was, so long as they counted on either Doctor Signey or Leader Signey, then they at least deserved that much.

Chapter Five



Flames

"You sent for us?" Father came to me, and Scout followed close behind. Even though I had told Doctor Signey to send them, I somehow hadn't expected them to come so quickly.

"Yes. Thank you," I said.

"How are you feeling?" Scout asked.

I stretched, in a vain attempt to relieve my muscle cramps. The ground was never a comfortable place to rest, and my soreness only made it worse, though the pile of blankets did help.

"A little better," I said, "though probably not for long."

With great effort, I managed to sit up. Scout knelt down and took my hand in both of his. Father stood over us, watching.

"Celine," Scout said.

"I'm fading faster than the others are." I knew that he wanted to keep me from saying such things, but it was true, and we both had to accept that.

He swallowed, and then asked, "Is there anything we can do?"

I supposed that I could have asked for comfort, but I didn't want to lean on anyone. The thought of dying scared me, and I didn't want to face it without support. However, such a request would have been selfish. I was not the only person who had to face DLY. Father had long been struggling with his breathing and coughing, Scout had his memory troubles, and the others all had their problems, too. Who was I to ask them to give me anything? They were just as sick and scared as I was.

"No," I said. I looked for something suitably brave and mature to add, and settled on, "I'm just sorry to be leaving you so soon."

Scout shook his head. "We knew going into this that, unless Hunters got us both at the same time, one of us would eventually have to lose the other. And we decided it was worth it. The only thing that's changed since we said that is my memory, and even that is... still all right, at least for now."

Father hadn't said anything since he had arrived. I looked up at him, and he looked away. Whether the pain on his face came from watching his daughter die, or from seeing her with Scout, was hard to say.

"Father?" I asked.

He coughed. "Celine?"

"Now that I think about it, there is something I want."

His eyes drifted between the two of us. "Yes, dear?"

I took Scout's other hand in mine, joining both sets. I looked at him, and

immediately started to fall into his gaze. Tempting as it was, though, I had to pull my eyes away, and turn back toward Father.

"Peace," I said.

Father coughed again. "Excuse me?"

"I can't waste time dancing around some forbidden romance. Not anymore." I lowered my head, and tucked my ears back. "Carrying on a secret love, worrying about what you'll say if you catch us... it's silly. I'm not going to live long enough to deal with that."

"Celine...!" Scout immediately objected, but quieted when I squeezed his hands. It was true, and he knew it.

"You want me to bless your relationship." Father closed his eyes.

I took a breath and held it for a moment. I tried to overlook the way my worry was developing into nausea. I even tried to ignore the bristling of my tail, despite the fever making every move more sensitive and painful.

"Yes," I answered, barely above a whisper. I swallowed, and the throat pain immediately made me wish I hadn't. "You always wanted me to be honest, didn't you? I'm not hiding anything. Here we are. Please accept that."

Father rubbed his chin. His tail slashed back and forth in thought. He kept watching Scout, who kept his grip on my hands. For a while, no one spoke.

"You truly are a Coral," Father finally said.

I winced at first, but then suppressed it. If it meant that he was happy with me, then it was worth it.

"Then, you'll do it?" Scout asked.

"I didn't say that." Whatever gradual half-smile Father had built disappeared in an instant. "I'll... consider it, though," he added. "This is no small thing you ask."

"I know," I said.

Father watched us for another moment, and then turned his head to look off into the distance. "I have things to attend to. I shall leave you two alone."

My response of "Father?" and Scout's "Sir Coral?" overlapped perfectly.

Father shook his head, and then drank from his water flask. "This is bigger than just you two. There are factions to consider, among other things. It is a complicated situation. I am sorry, Celine. I wish that I could give you the answer you want. Know that I am proud of you, though, and that I am sorry for your condition. And Scout...."

"Yes?"

Father narrowed his gaze for a moment, then changed his mind and relaxed it again. "Take care of her until I return."

Scout looked at me, then back at Father, and nodded. "Y-yes, sir."

Father left, and Scout and I looked at each other, neither of us sure what to think.



I coughed. As the wreckage of the car continued to burn, the smoke made it harder and harder to breathe. If I could get out and get away, I would be all right. If I could get out....

"Celine?" Dad shouted from somewhere outside.

"Dad!" I coughed again.

"Celine! Hold on!" He pulled the ruined door open, and then reached in and grabbed my shoulders. "Can you move?" He started to pull even before I had a chance to answer.

"I... I think so." Nothing was crushing me, at least. "I just—"

He pulled me out before I could finish that thought. The next thing I knew, I was on the ground next to the car, looking up at the panicked face of my father.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Can you stand? Is anything broken?"

"I'm all right." To prove it, I stood up, though I did need his help. I took a few deep breaths as I rose. Air!

"Good. Then we need to run."

"What about Mom?"

"I'll come back for her. Come on!"

He draped my arm behind his head and over his shoulders, supporting my weight so we could move out together. I wasn't that hurt, but everything was fuzzy, and it was hard to focus. The situation was strange and made no sense to me, and because of that, nothing felt real. Was I dreaming? I didn't understand. I just clung to Dad, and did what he said.

~

We walked north, though I wasn't sure how I knew that in my state. Perhaps it was a defense mechanism. Perhaps the little details, such as directions, were easier to understand and contemplate than the crash was. Perhaps it was easier to think about grains of sand than beaches.

We walked a suspiciously long distance before we finally stopped. When we did, I could see trees and hills in all directions, but I couldn't see the crash site anymore. I still saw the dome of the city to the distant south, but the wilderness covered almost everything between that dome and us. Should Dad have taken

me that far away, if he still had to go back?

"Celine." Without another word, he suddenly pulled me into a hug. That hug turned into a more intense, almost desperate squeeze, as though he were afraid to let me go. That was strange. The crisis still wasn't over, was it? He always waited until it was over to do things like that.

"Dad? What about Mom?"

He took several breaths before he answered. That pause told me everything before he even needed to.

"I'm sorry. She's... she... didn't survive."

I knew that he would say something like that; if the news had been good, he wouldn't have had that much trouble delivering it. Still, I couldn't make myself believe him.

"How do you know that?" I asked. "You said you were going to go back for her."

He broke the hug, but kept his hands on my shoulders. He backed up just enough to be able to make eye contact. "I checked on her before I found you," he said. "I tried to pull her out, but... she was already gone."

"You said you were going to go back for her!" I repeated, this time in a shout, as though my volume could somehow change reality. I only realized after I had said it how immature it was. I was a Coral. I was supposed to be better than that.

"I'm... I'm sorry, Dad," I added.

He let go of my shoulders and took a step back, as though I had struck him. He recovered quickly, but I still saw that flash of his pain in his eyes. I looked away in shame.

"Father, dear," he said, after a long pause.

"Father." I, too, was quiet at first. "I'm sorry, Father."

He returned one hand to my shoulder, and placed the other under my chin. He gently and carefully raised my head, and we looked at each other again.

"Celine. I would never lie to you maliciously. Corals don't do that. You know that."

"I know."

"I said what I did merely to save your life. We had to escape, and I had no time to explain the situation. I needed to save this conversation until after you were out of harm's way. Now, I'm telling you the truth. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Father." I didn't, really, but I knew better than to argue. "But why did we have to escape? Are the mayor's men still after you?"

"Hunters."

Same thing, really, though when he phrased it like that, I finally understood

what he meant. The crash left us stranded in the wilds. Outside. Exposed.

In one moment, I had been riding in the car with my family. In the next, Mother was gone, and Father and I were afflicted outcasts. How had that happened? How could I have lost everything so suddenly?

There was only one explanation.

"Father, did King do this?"

Father closed his eyes, and bowed his head. "Most likely."

We returned to silence, and held each other again. I tried not to cry, but it was a struggle.

"Celine." Father was the first to speak again. "I need you to do something for me."

I swallowed. "What is it?"

"I'm going back." He looked at the southern sky. "I need to... I need to bury your mother. You need to stay here and keep watch."

"What? You're leaving me?"

I wanted him to stay. I didn't want to be alone. I couldn't beg, though; it was beneath me, and emotional appeals never worked on him, anyway. Fortunately, questioning his plan on an intellectual level was easy enough to do, since I didn't understand it at all.

"What am I to watch for?" I asked.

"Hunters," he said. "We're afflicted, now. Furthermore, if King did this, then he'll likely send them to finish the job."

"If that's true, then is it safe to go back?"

"Of course not. I shouldn't be doing this, really. It's... impractical."

"Then—"

"Because I can't just leave her like that." His tail sliced through the air behind him, but he was otherwise still.

"I... all right." My agreement was mostly just resignation; he had made up his mind, and therefore, I couldn't stop him.

"I need you to stay here," he repeated. "I'll hurry, but if something goes wrong, I need you to carry on. Stay hidden, but vigilant. Watch for Hunters."

"But how would—?"

Father turned toward me, and his gaze narrowed. I stopped talking.

I had several questions about his task. If the Hunters came to crash site, how would I even notice, with how far to the north of it I was? If they approached the site from the city, and thus, from the south, how could I see them first? Even if I actually did see something, how was I supposed to alert him from that far away?

However, those questions died the instant I saw his icy stare. That was when I knew.

It was a cover story. The point wasn't to make me a useful lookout. The point was to keep me away from the site, while Father returned alone. The point was to keep me from seeing what he would do. The look he gave me was one I knew all too well, that he reserved for when he wanted me to stop questioning, stop looking for holes, and just accept his story.

"N-never mind," I said. "Come back soon."

"Good girl." He patted my head. I splayed my ears. He gave a sad smile, and whispered, "Be brave." Then, he was gone.

~

I didn't like the idea of Father returning to the crash site. If the Hunters were coming, then he was needlessly putting himself in danger. I didn't want to be alone in the wilds. I already had trouble believing that I was afflicted, and that Mom was gone. I couldn't lose Dad, too.

Mother. Father.

Either way.

Speaking of Father, what was he really—?

No. That part was none of my business.

I hated everything about the situation. I didn't want him to go back, but I didn't like any of the alternatives, either. I didn't want him to leave Mother to the Hunters, but I didn't want him to bury her. I wanted him to bring her back, alive and well, so we could get back in our still-pristine and functional car, finish driving to the northern city, and be fine, happy, disease-free, and safe from King.

It took all the strength I had not to cry. Mother was dead. Father and I were as good as dead. Afflicted. Condemned to die out in the wilds. Starvation, exposure, disease, Hunters...! I buried my face in my hands and....

No.

No, I couldn't cry. I had a job to do. If I cried, it would be a distraction. I wouldn't be able to see anyone coming. I had to stay strong. I couldn't let Father down. He had seen war. He knew how to stay composed, even in the worst conditions. He had instilled that same value in me. As much as I hated it, I was a Coral. I had a duty to perform.

Even if that duty wasn't real.

I found some cover, hid myself, and started looking around in all directions. Fake mission or not, I would keep looking until I found something, or until Father returned.

~

I woke up before I even realized I had slept. Everything I had absorbed and

endured had finally become too much, and I supposed that despair had turned into fatigue at some point. I couldn't have been out for long, though; the sun had barely moved since the last time I had checked. I had just dozed off for a few moments, apparently.

Still, even that was a dereliction of duty, and so I gasped and jolted back to awareness. No! No sleep! I wasn't sleeping! I was keeping watch!

There was a figure in the distance, approaching from the south. My heart and stomach both sank. Had someone crept up on me in my sleep? Had I failed the one simple task Father had given me? However, my panic ceased when I looked closer, and I realized who it was.

"Father!"

I ran to him, unable to wait for him to approach me. I wore myself out running that fast for that long, but I didn't care. I had to reach him, at any cost. When I did, I threw myself into another close hug. I buried my head in his chest, and sobbed.

I wasn't sure why I was crying. Nothing new had happened since the last time I had seen him. For at least some of that time, I hadn't even been awake. Perhaps it was everything I had been repressing since the crash, everything I had buried in order to appear strong, finally catching up to me.

"Dad...!"

"Celine." He wrapped his arms around me, but otherwise held still. In contrast to my sobbing, he still maintained a firm grip on his composure. He was cool, perhaps even cold. He waited for what felt like a long time, and then whispered, "Let's go."

It was only then that I realized the strangeness of his timing. Even after accounting for my short sleep, he hadn't been gone nearly long enough to bury Mother. Digging a grave, even a shallow one, would have taken much longer than that.

Were the Hunters already there when he had arrived? Had he needed to change or abandon his plan because of them? Could he have been planning something else entirely?

Even in the days that followed, he never told me what had happened at the crash site. Several times, I thought about confronting him, but I never did. I knew that he was a soldier at heart, even if he had retired, and that he had learned to make pragmatic decisions in dire situations. Whatever he had done, he must have needed to do, for his sake, my sake, or both.

I never asked him what had really happened that day, because deep down, I never actually wanted to know.



I wasn't sure I could face Father at that moment.

I still had too much to take in. The tribe had lost Keeper Edward only a few days before, and I had fallen sick shortly afterward. Father and I were supposed to be cooking, and Doctor Signey and Girard were supposed to be fishing, but Father had decided to trade places at the last moment. He had wanted to discuss something important with Girard, and he had wanted Doctor Signey to examine me. Unfortunately, Doctor Signey had found nothing but bad news to deliver, which had made it difficult to focus on anything else afterward. I could only think about my diagnosis.

Dinner had been awkward. Even with Scout there, I hadn't been able to participate in the conversation. I had mostly stayed quiet, and focused on my own thoughts.

After the meal, Father had wanted to speak to me. I wasn't sure what he wanted, but I knew that I was already sick and sad, and I could only hope that I wasn't in trouble as well. I wasn't sure how much more grief I could handle.

I didn't have much of a choice, though. After dinner, Scout had claimed that Rook seemed lonely—though I honestly wasn't sure how he could tell—and had asked me if I would allow them some time together. How was I supposed to answer that? No? Even though I desperately wanted Scout's company, it would have been a selfish request to make, and one that would have hurt both of them. No, I had to let him go. Meanwhile, Doctor Signey had gone off to update his files, and Marcus and Girard had left to discuss something in private. That left Father, and my choices were to either talk to him, or spend the evening completely and utterly alone.

~

Father sat down next to me. Facing the same direction allowed us to look at the ground, rather than each other.

"Celine," he said. It was how he usually opened conversations with me. It was an acknowledgment, and a sort of greeting.

"Father," I answered in kind.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Slowly better, at least for now. About as well as one can expect, anyway."

I waited to see if that was enough of an answer to satisfy him. He remained

perfectly silent. It was not.

"Father?"

"Yes?"

"I haven't told anyone else what's wrong with me, yet. Right now, Doctor Signey and I are the only ones who know."

"Your secret is safe with me."

"Thank you." I tried to smile, but it didn't last. As soon as my thoughts returned to my condition, my face fell again. "Doctor Signey told me I probably have recurring DLY fevers." I flattened my ears. "He says I'll get weak spells like this, as each fever comes. I'll get over this one, but there will be more, and they'll keep getting worse, until my body burns itself to death."

Neither of us said anything for what felt like a long time. Father eventually broke the silence, but it must have taken some effort.

"I'm so sorry," he said.

"It's... it isn't anything you're not facing yourself, I guess. Or that everyone here won't face at some point." That thought wasn't nearly as comforting as I had wanted it to be.

"Yes, but...." Father shook his head. "You know I never wanted this for you."

"I know." I looked away. "I'm sorry. I don't really want to talk about this right now."

"Very well. I understand."

Someday, I would accept my fate, and discuss it with him. At that moment, though, I didn't have the strength. As much as I loved Dad—Father! As much as I loved Father, I just couldn't meet his standards of dignity, formality, and honor befitting the great Sir Coral's daughter. Not at that moment.

I needed someone who would let me set my name aside. I needed someone who would let me drop the brave act, if only for a moment. I needed someone who would let me cry. I needed Scout.

"I had a very interesting talk with Girard," Father said.

"Oh?"

My tail bristled. I should have been grateful for the subject change, but nothing good could come from Father's chosen alternative. The very thought of Girard made my fur stand on end. Furthermore, Father's tone was one he normally used when he wanted information. Was he after something?

"Yes." He coughed. "I don't want to say too much, but there is something he left me wondering."

I swallowed.

"Celine, are you seeing anyone?"

Wait. Of all the things... that?

"Excuse me?"

"Answer the question." His gaze narrowed. Apparently, he was serious.

"Well..."

I hadn't officially told him yet. The only person I ever told was Keeper Edward, and even that was in confidence, because I had needed his advice. I had never told Father, because I was afraid of how he would react. I was a proper young woman with a proper upbringing, and Scout... wasn't. Father undoubtedly would have preferred someone like Marcus, so he must have hated my choice.

However, even without an official confession, I had thought Father already knew. Scout and I were always at each other's side, and Father was always there to glare at us, as though he were trying to keep us from getting too affectionate. What did he think our relationship was like, if not that?

"Celine?"

"Yes. I am. Scout." If he wanted me to make it official, then so be it. I hoped his reaction would not too bad, though I feared it would be.

"I see." Father closed his eyes, and stroked the underside of his chin. "I don't approve, you know."

"I didn't think you would." My fur bristled again, which hurt due to my overall soreness.

"Of course. Well, I thank you for telling me, at least." He opened his eyes again, and gave a small smile. "Actually, I already knew that. I just wanted to see if you would be honest with me."

A test? He had been testing me? I wasn't sure I liked... no. If I had passed the test, then the hope remained that I could escape without an argument. I had no desire to fight him when I didn't have to, especially when I was sick. Fine, then. He had tested me and I had passed, if that was what it took to make him happy.

"Of course," I said. "I had to be. I'm a Coral."

"Good girl." He patted me on my leg.

I groaned. If he questioned me, I would blame it on the muscle aches from the fever.

"Scout is a good person in general," Father said. "He is agreeable and pleasant, and he doesn't slack on his duties. I consider him a good associate, perhaps even a friend. However, he is completely unsuited for you."

"Why?"

"You know exactly why." His gaze narrowed.

I winced. "His past?" That, again? "That shouldn't matter, should it? He has as much of a new beginning under the first edict as we do, and he's been perfect

for as long as I've known him."

"Perfect?" Father raised a brow. "He means well, I'll give you that, but he's brash. Temperamental. He doesn't back down from confrontations, even when he reasonably should. Pair that with his past, and think. Is it not reasonable for a father to fear for his daughter's safety?"

"You think he's going to hurt me?" It burned to open my eyes, especially to open them wide, but it was an instinctive reaction.

"Look at all the fights he gets into with Girard," he said. "Granted, Girard provokes him, but still—"

"He's protecting me!" I didn't have the energy for that outburst. As soon as I made it, my head swam. I had to fight through the daze just to finish my point. "He... only attacks Girard when Girard attacks me, or Rook."

"And you're all right with living under his protection?"

"I have a right to be comfortable, Father."

"You also have the potential for so much more than that."

I sighed. "I know what you're thinking, and stop it. I'm not weak, I'm not some helpless damsel, and I'm not stupid. Scout respects me. I wouldn't stay with him if he didn't." I was snippier than I should have been, perhaps, but I was tired of arguing over that particular subject.

Father said nothing, but his fur bristled. A part of me knew that that was a sign to back down; I had crossed a line, and angered him. Another part wanted to respond with indignation. How dare he get angry, just because I had made my choice? Did he not think I knew what I was doing?

If we were still in the city, I could have understood Father's position. Maybe he didn't think that Scout fit my plans for the future—no, that Scout didn't fit Father's plans for my future. Maybe Father didn't want Scout siring the next great generation of Corals. However, that wasn't going to happen, anyway. Not anymore. Not in the wilds.

If I had been feeling better, and had a clearer head, I would have been able to restrain myself. I knew that Father wasn't my enemy, and that I shouldn't have treated him as such. However, he had tried to scold me when I was sick, dizzy, and devastated. I was in precisely the wrong mood to accept his criticism.

"What does it matter?" I asked, with a huff. "We're all going to die anyway, aren't we?"

"What does it—?"

Father balled his fists and took a deep breath, attempting to restrain himself again. Instead, he pushed himself too hard, and triggered a coughing fit.

I wasn't sure what to do at first, but I eventually tried to place my hand on him, to hold him steady while he fought it. Instead, he swung his arm as mine

approached, as though my hand were an irritating insect to shoo away. I backed off, and he eventually recovered on his own.

"The entire tribe is migrating," he said, once he could. "Every day, we march. We are all dying in one form or another, yet we continue to flee from Hunters, and work our way toward the northern city. Do you know why?"

I looked at him, but didn't say anything.

"Because," he continued, "even now, even out here, we're fighting for something. There is enough life left out here to be worth the effort, and so long as that remains true, I will not have my daughter giving up on me. Did I not teach you to be strong, to face whatever opposes you, and to fight for what you deserve?"

"I thought that's what I was doing."

Father opened his mouth, but no words came out. His fur bristled and he balled his fists again, but he held still. After a few deep but ragged breaths, he closed his eyes, and stood up.

"Very well. If that is your belief." He turned, and started to walk away.

"Father?"

"I am going to get some sleep. Good night, Celine." He kept walking.

"Father!"

He stopped for a moment, but did not look back.

"I am sorry about your condition," he said.

With that, he left, and I was alone.



The ruins of Garreton loomed ominously to the north, but the wilderness was otherwise as empty as the skies were. Little more than the occasional small tree, hill, or cloud appeared in view, which only made the empty city that much more striking in contrast.

Whatever Girard wanted, I wished it could have waited. I didn't like having the city ahead of us while he spoke. I wanted to be done with it, first, and to have its intimidating presence behind me. Still, as much as I hated it, I couldn't deny the wisdom in acting before entering a city. Not after what had happened in Crown's Pass.

I had no idea what to expect. I wasn't sure anyone did. Girard had mostly kept to himself ever since the voting, which was fine with me. Just as I had grown used to his quiet and secluded paranoia, though, he had suddenly declared

that he had a major announcement. I was surprised when he had gathered us, and more than a little worried, but also curious.

"Good, good." He paced in circles, head down, arms folded behind his back, while we each found improvised seats wherever we could.

Suddenly, he stopped, raised his head, and looked at whichever member of the tribe he was facing, which happened to be Scout. He scowled, spun around, and his gaze found me on his second try. I shrunk back a little.

"This is kind of hard for me," he said. "I'm a little nervous. Sorry."

He paced away from us, and cleared his throat. He looked up at the sky and cleared his throat again. Then a third time. "You see...." He stopped, looked down, and sighed. "No, that's not right. Sorry."

Scout tilted his head. "Is... is everything—"

"I'm fine!" Girard faced Scout with a glare, which slowly gave way to a twisted grin. "Yes, that will do." He cleared his throat a fourth time. "Now, then!"

Everyone except Rook looked around in confusion.

"This tribe," Girard said, "has had tragedy after tragedy. We lost our leader, and then, well, we lost our leader again. Disease, Hunters, this migration, sometimes even finding food is tough. Our navigator is losing his mind. It's just one problem after another, really."

Scout glared at Girard.

"Some of it is only natural, of course. The wilds aren't supposed to be easy. But not all of it. Some of this is sabotage."

"Sabotage?" Doctor Signey asked. "What are you suggesting, precisely?"

"Exactly what it sounds like." Girard leaned forward. He stood on his toes for a moment, and then dropped back down to his heels. "Some of our problems are deliberate. Someone here is working against us. Someone here is a traitor."

"A traitor." Scout half-closed his eyes. I couldn't blame him; I wasn't impressed, either.

"Yes, 'a traitor.'" Girard openly mocked Scout's tone, and then grinned. "Luckily for you, I know just who it is."

"Let me guess—"

"Rook," Girard said, ignoring Scout. "Stand up."

Rook held still at first, as if considering the order. No one said anything.

"I said stand up!" Girard bared his fangs, an image that alarmed everyone except its intended target.

Rook stood up.

"That's better." Girard walked right up to Rook, and then turned to face the rest of us. "You see, Rook has been working against us this whole time. He sold

us out to the Hunters. More than once, even. And he even murdered our leaders."

"Both of them?" Father asked. "You told me some portions of this theory before, but—"

"Yes, both of them. The chain goes all the way back to Keeper Edward, but Marc was the latest victim. This tribe has been falling apart ever since they died, and Rook is the one behind it. He's been working on getting us all, one at a time."

"Now wait just a—"

"Are you really—?"

Scout and I tripped over each other's responses. I nodded, and deferred to him.

"You can't be serious," Scout tried again. "And you think I'm the one losing my mind?"

Girard froze for a moment, and then slowly turned. "What did you say, mammal...?"

"Girard, Scout, please," Doctor Signey said. "That is a long and serious list of charges. Girard, perhaps you could calm down, and en-n-n... enlighten us as to—"

"I'm perfectly calm!" Girard clapped his hands together, loudly.

"—as to how you reached those conclusions."

"Gladly." Girard snorted. "You see, I had a lot of time to think about this. I didn't want to say anything until I had a good case. I was going to keep thinking about it, trying to figure it out, but while I was working on how he killed Keeper Edward, he killed Marc. We just can't afford to wait any longer."

Girard turned toward Rook.

"You can sit down, now," he said.

Rook sat.

"We shall consider the m-m-m... the merits of your accusations in time," Doctor Signey said. "Perhaps, for now, you should start at the beginning. Why do you believe that Rook is working with the Hunters?"

"Well, he is one," Girard said. "Everyone knows that."

"Was," Scout said. "He was one."

"Wrong. He still is."

"Even though he's afflicted?" I asked.

"Yes!" Girard pounded his fist into his open hand. "Think about it. What do the afflicted do? What are we doing right now?"

There was a long pause. Everyone wondered whether Girard was being rhetorical, or he actually wanted us to answer that.

"Hiding!" he said, just as we were about to start guessing. "The Hunters are

out to kill us, so we hide. They can't kill us if they can't find us. It's the same reason the Keepers can't preach to us. We hide from anyone with a suit."

"You're saying that Rook became afflicted to infiltrate the tribe?" Father asked.

"Pretty much. Rook's mission is to kill us all, but he couldn't do it if we were hiding from him. Just like Keeper Edward gave up his suit to create the tribe, Rook gave up his to destroy it."

"Do the Hunters really need to sacrifice themselves to kill us?" I asked. "Even if what you say is true, Rook couldn't just go back when his mission is over. He's afflicted, now, too. He'd have to die with the rest of us. Is one random group of wanderers that important to him? Are we that important to the other Hunters?"

Girard stopped, and looked at the sky. He was quiet for a few moments. Suddenly, his eyes lit up, and he grinned.

"Yes, we are," he said.

"How so?" Father asked.

"Our migration. We have, or had, some very important people with us, who have all angered King. People like me, Jon, Cam, and even Marc. And we're on our way to the northern city, with these big, important documents about King and about DLY. You don't think he'd want to stop that?"

"If he even knew about them." I gave a single contemplative tail-swish. "This tribe formed over time, and mostly by accident. Father and I didn't set out to be a part of this. We survived a crash, and roamed the wilds until we happened to find you. Most of us have similar stories."

"It is likely that many of our individual afflictions are King's doing," Father added, with a drink from his water flask. "However, it is much less likely that he anticipated any of us surviving, let alone joining together. How would he know our movements out here?"

"He has a spy, of course."

"One that joined the tribe last?" Scout asked.

Girard glared at Scout for a few moments, but then broke into a smile. "Maybe he was following Cam."

Doctor Signey blinked. "M-m-m... me?"

"Well, you were second to last," Girard said. "And you're the researcher, and the one with the files."

"Even if that's true," I asked, "How would Rook get information to the other Hunters?"

"Maybe he's leaving messages in our trail?" Girard shrugged. "Maybe they worked out some sort of footprint code. Who knows? He has his ways, I'm sure."

Scout rolled his eyes.

"Anyway," Girard continued, "it's Rook's mission to kill us all and stop the migration. That's why he started with Keeper Edward and Marc. He wanted to kill our leaders, and then watch the rest of us fall apart without them."

"How would he have managed that?" I didn't want to hear any more of Girard's deranged logic, but I couldn't just let that accusation pass without further explanation. "You keep saying he killed them. How?"

"Well, he probably wanted the other Hunters to do it. He's still working for them, after all. That's why we saw that one on the roof, just a few days before Keeper Edward died. Rook was leading them to us! But since that didn't work, he probably took his gun and he did it himself—"

"Impossible," I said.

"—or he had one of his followers do it." Girard scowled at me.

"Girard." Father scowled back at him, on my behalf.

"Anyway," Girard continued, ignoring the rebuke, "he tried the same trick in Crown's Pass. He led us into a trap, then called the Hunters on us. They caught us in that building, with nowhere to run. I wanted to fight, but Scout said we didn't have any weapons. Rook has a gun—the same gun that killed Keeper Edward—but everyone seemed to forget that. Rook played along, and pretended we were unarmed, because he wanted us to die instead. And we only got out of that one because Marc sacrificed himself."

Girard gave a triumphant, if not downright menacing grin. "See, Rook? I told you I'd expose your lies. I told you that, no matter how much you tried to cover it up, I'd figure you out. What do you have to say, now?"

All eyes turned to Rook, who, as usual, was completely silent.

"Nothing! You see? Here is our traitor!" Girard raised his fists and shouted toward the sky.

"Rook," Scout said softly, and held Rook's hand in his. "Come on, you need to stand up for yourself. I know you don't want to, I know we've been over this, but you need to say something."

"What...." Rook started, paused, and then started again. "What do you want me to say?"

"Answer the charges," I said. At first, I wasn't sure whether I was intruding on a private conversation. However, it was just too important not to intervene. "If you didn't do it, then tell us. Is it true? Is any of what Girard says true?"

"No." Rook spat the word out immediately, without his usual pause.

"Liar!" Girard shouted.

"That's enough, Girard." Scout stood up. "You had your turn. I get a chance to defend him, now."

I thought, and hesitated. I knew what the right thing to do was, but I was nervous. My tail bristled, and I swallowed.

No. I had to do it. Rook's fate depended on it.

I stood up.

"I'll help," I said.

"Celine? What are you doing?" Father coughed, and then looked up at me. I tried as hard as I could to ignore him.

"Two on one, huh? That's not fair." Girard's grin disappeared.

"Please allow them a proper defense," Doctor Signey said.

"Thank you." I walked forward. Together, Scout and I faced the others.

"And thank you, Celine," Scout said.

I smiled, and took his hand in mine.

Scout's returned smile was brief. Moments later, his face fell. He cleared his throat, inhaled, and held his breath for a moment. He squeezed my hand, as though attempting to draw strength from it.

"A-anyway," he said, "remember that Rook didn't lead us into Crown's Pass. I did."

"You're his follower. Same thing, really."

Scout gave a sharp exhale, but otherwise ignored Girard's comment.

"Besides," Scout continued, "if Rook wanted to use Crown's Pass as an ambush, his tactics were all wrong. He warned us that Hunters were still around, rather than trying to make us think it was safe. He wanted us to be alert."

"Oh, sure, now your memory works."

"Girard!" My exclamation was almost a shout. Rook and Doctor Signey had a quieter version of the same reaction, while Scout and Father were silent.

Girard snorted.

"Furthermore," I added, "Rook personally saved my life during the escape. Why would he do that, if his secret goal was to kill us all?"

"Well, he had to." Girard folded his arms. "He thinks in the long term, you see. I'm sure he wanted to leave you there, but it would have looked bad for him if he did."

I shook my head. "He threw himself down a hill he couldn't even see. I had to guide him back up. No one was expecting him to do that, and, if he had said he couldn't, everyone except you would have believed him. How bad would it have looked for him, really?"

"You're missing the point." Girard scowled. "It still makes him look good to rescue you, and that helps his cover. Suddenly, he's the big hero and everyone trusts him. Sure, he's out to kill us all someday, but... well, let's be honest. You're not doing so good. He probably knew you were going to die anyway, and

—"

"We're all going to die anyway!" Scout balled his fists and took a step toward Girard. I quickly grabbed him and pulled him back.

"Scout's right," I said, and then let him go. "We are all afflicted. If waiting for us to die on our own were good enough, then Rook wouldn't even need to be here. None of the Hunters would. If killing us prematurely is that important, enough to be worth him sacrificing himself to carry it out, then he's not very good at his mission. He had a perfect chance to let me die, one that almost no one would have questioned. Instead, he went to absurd lengths to save me."

"Because you're one of his followers, of course. He needs you to carry out his will."

"Girard." Father scowled, and placed his hands on either side of his seat, threatening to stand up.

"Why would she follow someone who's out to kill us?" Scout asked, before Girard could react to Father. "And the same goes for me, now that I think about it. Why would I do that, either?"

"Because... because you think he'll let you live if you join him? He won't, of course. He'll just save you for last, after he's done using you."

"Using us?" Scout asked.

"To kill Keeper Edward!" Girard thumped the ground with his tail.

"Rook didn't kill Keeper Edward," I said. "He didn't have anyone else do it, either."

"You're lying." Girard took a step toward me, and I took a step backward.

"No. It really was a Hunter." I closed my eyes, and stepped forward again. My tail bristled as the scene replayed itself in my head. "It... it was early morning. I had watch. No one else was up yet, except him. He had climbed a hill. He was at the very top... he wanted to see the sunrise, I guess. I was just about to climb up and ask him something, when... he just...."

I felt Scout's hand on my shoulder. I swallowed.

"It was instant," I continued. "He just... his head just... it was out of nowhere. He fell before I even heard the sound. It must have been a far-off sharpshooter. I woke everyone up, and we ran."

"You can't prove that!" Girard took another step.

"Do you have a better explanation?" I asked, and then immediately regretted asking.

"Well, it's clear from all this that you're in with Rook, now." There was that twisted grin of his again. "I tried to stop him, tried to keep him from corrupting

you, but I guess I failed. Sorry, Jon. Anyway, let's think. You're one of Rook's followers, and you were conveniently alone with Keeper Edward when he died, which means—"

"That's enough." Father finally stood.

"Don't try to stop me. Not when I'm this close." Girard turned to face Father, and his grin disappeared. "We've been over this. Don't let the fact that she's your daughter blind you. The truth is right there, Jon!"

"That's 'Sir Coral' to you, Girard."

Father stood still, unmoving. I took a timid, hesitant step toward him, as if making sure it would be all right. Nothing happened, so I took another, and then finally walked toward him. The two of us stood together against Girard.

Three, once Scout got over his own hesitation and joined us.

Girard's gaze darted around in a sudden panic. He desperately wanted Father to turn on us, but instead, the three of us remained together. Father's silent betrayal—or lack thereof—caused Girard to reel.

"No... not you, too. No!" Girard clutched his head, as though in pain, and dropped to his knees. "No, no, no!" He pounded the ground with both fists, and then rose to his feet again. "Keeper Edward's murderer is right there!" He pointed at Rook, and his entire arm shook. "I won't get this far, only for you to win now! I won't... I won't! No!"

Rook said nothing.

"Shut up," Girard said. "Stop it... I said stop! I...."

Girard fell to his knees again. He buried his face in his hands, and his body convulsed, once. Just as suddenly, though, he threw his head upward again, and gave a loud, feral roar.

He was on his feet in an instant, and he started to sprint toward Rook.

Rook stood perfectly still, either oblivious to Girard's sudden charge, or somehow able to ignore it. I wasn't sure how either was possible, but despite my disbelief, it was as though Girard were attacking a statue.

Almost no one was able to react in time. Girard was so fast, and his attack so surprising, that we could only stand, frozen. Most of us only realized what had happened after it was already over.

Scout alone was able to act. Just as Girard sprinted toward Rook, Scout sprinted toward Girard. They met in the middle, with a violent collision.

Physically, they were almost an even match. Scout was naturally small, but Girard has lost most of his size and strength to DLY. Girard was much, much taller, but both were equally light. Thus, they bounced off each other, and both stumbled, each struggling to regain his balance.

The blow forced Girard to turn his attention from Rook to Scout, but there

was no less hatred in his gaze when he did.

I worried about how rough those two would get, and how far they would go in all-out combat. Girard was a former cage fighter, and had been aggressive for as long as I had known him. Scout was a former Plague member, and undoubtedly scrappy when he needed to be. He was normally friendly and gentle, and even shy and nervous in front of groups, but he would never tolerate Girard attacking his friends.

Oh, God. They were going to kill each other.

They quickly regained their footing, and then each started to pace sideways, attempting to circle around the other. Girard emitted a low, rumbling growl. Everyone else, including Rook, stood and shifted uncomfortably, but was otherwise unable to decide what to do.

Girard made the first move. He started to run. He raised his arms, ready to grapple with Scout when they met. He opened his jaws, ready to bite.

Scout countered by going low. He ran forward, dipped beneath and to the side of Girard's arms, and slipped past him, but not before chopping at his knees.

Girard was running at full speed, and was unable to stop himself. Scout's move took him off his feet in an instant. He tripped, flew forward, and landed hard on his snout.

Scout immediately took advantage of the opening. He jumped, and landed on his knees on top of Girard. Scout's fall drove his weight directly into Girard's back, but it also drove his knees directly into Girard's rock-hard back scales. Both of them cried out, and I couldn't tell which one had suffered more from that move. However, Scout had at least positioned himself on top of Girard, pinning him to the ground.

Girard squirmed and thrashed, but only for an instant.

Scout hit Girard on the back of the head. Girard's scales were too hard to let any serious damage through, but the gesture stunned him for a moment, which was all Scout needed to grab his injured snout.

Girard's eyes flashed wide, and his pupils shrunk to almost invisibly narrow slits. He squirmed again, to no avail. He threw an elbow upward, but Scout caught it with his free hand. Girard thrashed with his tail and threw his other elbow, but Scout had already adjusted his position to avoid those. Meanwhile, Scout had pinned him, forced his jaws closed, and held him firmly by the forearm and muzzle.

Scout pulled Girard's arm upward, behind his back, and then pushed it forward, forcing it well beyond the normal range of Girard's flexibility. Girard tried to scream, but Scout still held his jaws shut. Still, even muffled, Girard's cry grew louder as Scout wrenched his arm farther forward.

What was he doing? Was he trying to make Girard submit, to make the victory that much more decisive and inarguable? He already had Girard under control, didn't he? Why did he need to—

Wait. He was going to—

"No! Stop! That's enough! Let him go!" I ran toward them, and grabbed Scout's arm.

"Celine...?"

"Stop it, Scout! Don't hurt him!"

I didn't have any sympathy for Girard, but I didn't want the fight to escalate any further. It was over. No one needed anything dislocated or broken.

There was confusion in Scout's eyes. It wasn't a memory lapse, since he still knew and recognized me. No, it was more that he struggled to understand his immediate surroundings. It was as though I had awoken him from a dream, and he only slowly became aware of where he was in reality.

Then, he knew. He saw my concern, and Father's intense scowl. He heard Girard's pained whimpering. He realized what he was doing, and what he would have done, had I not stopped him.

"Oh, God, Celine, I'm—"

Girard took advantage of the distraction. With a sudden thrash, he shook Scout off his back. Scout's grip failed, and he fell backward, onto the ground. Girard, finally free, sprang to his feet.

He looked at me, and neither of us moved. His look was quizzical, and completely lacking in awareness. I had pulled Scout out of whatever world they had fallen into, but Girard was still inside it. He clutched his own shoulder in pain, but otherwise didn't respond to anything around him.

He growled again. I took a step back. He took a step forward.

Then, the rest of the tribe was upon us.

Seeing the threat, Scout got back up, and threw himself between Girard and me. Father rushed in, pushed Scout out of the way, and tried to keep all three of us apart. Doctor Signey rushed in, as well. Everyone shoved everyone, and everyone tried in vain to calm everyone else down. Eventually, Father and Doctor Signey herded Girard, Scout, Rook, and me into a large square, with each of us in separate corners and them in the middle, where they did all they could to keep us apart.

"I won't let it end like this!"

"Girard, cease this at once!"

"No!"

"Girard!"

Girard tried to ignore Doctor Signey's plea, but then suddenly froze anyway.

His eyes widened, and his slit pupils shrank again.

"Stop... no! Stop it!" he shouted.

Everyone except Girard was silent. Everyone except Rook looked at him.

"All of you!" His eyes flared again, and he started to pant. "Stop it! Stop laughing at me!"

"Girard, n-n-n... no one is—"

"I'll kill you, Rook!" Girard's cries cut off Doctor Signey's attempt to calm him down. "I swear I'll kill you!"

He screamed, and then ran, but not toward Rook. He ran away, in a direction vaguely toward Garreton, but mostly chosen at random. He kept running until he disappeared. The rest of us stood and watched him flee, too stunned to do anything else.

I looked back and forth between Scout, Rook, and the hills into which Girard had disappeared. Had he snapped, or was Rook as dangerous as he had claimed? Were the two mutually exclusive? Could Girard have been mad, but correct?

No. It wasn't possible. He had to have been wrong. Rook couldn't have been evil. Rook had saved my life.

Everyone looked at each other again. No one knew what to say, so we were all silent. No one knew what to do, so we all simply stood there. I clung to the memory of our escape from Crown's Pass, because it was all I had; it was the only coherent thought when all else was confusion.

No matter what Girard said, Rook had saved my life. If I knew nothing else, I at least knew that.



We had to escape.

I still couldn't believe that Marcus had left to run a distraction. What was he thinking? Was he trying to get himself killed?

I heard gunshots almost immediately after we came out of the tunnel, and on an intellectual level, I knew that Marcus was probably already dead. I had some trouble actually grasping and accepting that, but that struggle could wait. At that moment, there was no time to think of anything but ourselves, unless we wanted to join him.

The gorge marking the edge of Crown's Pass was deep, and the tunnel had led us into the very bottom of it. Behind us, a series of steep hills and sheer cliff

walls led back into the city. Ahead of us, another set of walls and hills led into the wilderness. Above us, the rain was unrelenting. At our feet, the gorge was already starting to flood. The far wall was a steep climb, but it was our only chance of escape. If we could make it over or around the hills, and slip back into the wilderness, then we could elude the Hunters.

There was some luck involved in that plan. The rain had turned the hillsides into mud, which, on top of making the climb even harder, made it completely impossible to disguise our tracks. We could hope the terrain on the other side was better, and that it would be easier to avoid leaving a trail, but that meant nothing unless we could make it there. To get that far, the Hunters had to be unaware of our existence, and their patrol had to miss the gorge entirely, at least long enough for us to make it through. We also had to hope there weren't more Hunters beyond the hills.

Overall, it was a risky, unsure gamble of a plan, with seemingly little chance of success. Little chance was better than no chance, though, and so it was the best option we had.

Furthermore, it was the plan for which Marcus had given his life. We had to make it work, for his sake.

Father was too weak for such a steep, slippery climb without assistance, so Girard paired up with and supported him. The rest of us managed until about halfway up the hill, when, despite his previous good health and lack of symptoms, Doctor Signey suddenly seized up and collapsed.

Scout had been leading Rook, but since Girard was already helping Father, I was struggling with a fever, and Rook couldn't see, Scout was the most able-bodied person available to help Doctor Signey. Thus, Scout and I traded places, and the task of guiding Rook fell to me.

It almost worked. It would have, had my fever not struck again.

The attack was so sudden, and the fever so strong, that I was only barely aware of what happened around me. I remembered resuming the climb next to Rook, and I remembered feeling faint. After that, it became difficult to remember anything. I barely even noticed that the steep, muddy hill had proven too much for me, and that I had fallen.

~

Rare as it was to thank my fevers for anything, they had at least dulled my awareness of the fall itself. My next conscious memory was of lying at rest, at the base of the hill, with various cuts, scrapes, bruises, and scratches all over my body. I had no recollection of how I had appeared there, or how the injuries had appeared on me.

The base of the gorge had turned into a shallow river. Cold, muddy water flowed past me in a small, yet pounding stream. It was nowhere near deep enough to carry me away, though; I guessed maybe twice ankle depth at most, but I couldn't make myself stand up to check. Still, at the very least, it was enough to make me even more drenched than I already was. Was that what had woken me up?

I was sore and in pain, but I was almost too delirious to notice. The aches were strong, but the fatigue was stronger. I was tired. I wanted to sleep.

I had no idea how long I stayed there, lacking the strength or willpower to do anything else. I wasn't even sure if I had actually slept, or if it just felt like I had. I couldn't have been out for as long as it seemed. I wouldn't have been able to rest for long with Hunters coming, after all. Furthermore, I risked drowning if I had dozed at all, in even a shallow stream. I wanted to sleep for days, and it almost felt like I had, but that would have been impossible.

Not that I was aware enough of my surroundings to know that. I only recognized incoherent shapes, vague sleepy sensations, and the feeling of water.

The next conscious thought I had was noticing a large, dark figure standing over me. I was sure that I knew him from somewhere, but I couldn't remember anything. It hurt to think. It hurt less to leave his identity unresolved. A stranger it was, then.

The figure nudged me with his foot. He then knelt down and felt around until he found my side. Finally, he moved his arms under me, and scooped me up. Huge as he was, he was gentle, and he cradled me like a newborn.

"Celine," he said, with an impossibly deep voice. "Are you all right?"

I groaned, more from the mental fog than the injuries. Celine... was that my name? Yes, I remembered. I was Celine, and he was....

"Rook?"

Something seemed wrong about his presence. I felt like it was strange that he was there, like there was some reason he shouldn't be, though I didn't know what it was.

Wait, yes, I did.

Rook was blind. How could he have made it all the way down the hill, found me, and rescued me, all by himself?

"Celine," he said again, before I could ask. Instead, he repeated his own question. "Are you all right? Can you walk?"

"I... don't know." Any movement seemed impossible to me, though that was due more to my tiredness than my injuries, which I hadn't even assessed yet. As far as I knew, my head hurt more than my body did.

"Listen," Rook said. "Stay calm. We will not die here. The others made it.

They are waiting for us. I will take you to them, but I need your help."

"My help...?"

"I can carry you up the hill, but I need a guide. Can you do that?"

"I think so." I was slowly starting to wake up, at least a little. "What do you want me to do?"

"Watch the ground. Point things out. Steer."

"Um, all right."

I looked down, to make sure that the ground was clear for him, and that was when I noticed the cuts. His blood was visible on his lower legs, even through the caked mud coating them. The wounds were even more obvious on his feet, since the stream had rinsed the mud and exposed them.

"You're hurt," I said.

Rook paused. I should have noticed that he had been speaking freely before, and how strange that was for him, but I had not yet been aware enough to make the connection. Even if he had randomly developed the will to talk, though, it had disappeared again the moment any attention had turned toward him.

"Minor scrapes," he finally said. "Your fall was worse."

I didn't respond. He might or might not have been telling the truth. I would examine myself more thoroughly once I had a clearer head, and we were out of danger.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"I... I think so," I said.

Without another word, Rook started walking.

~

With his size and strength, I always knew that he was capable of feats of strength, and that something like carrying me uphill was within his power. However, I never expected him to do it, nor did I expect to have to guide him when he did. It was surreal, even without the fever.

"The top of the hill is, um, slightly more to the left, I think."

Rook adjusted his direction. He had to guess how much more to the left 'slightly' was. "Like this?" he asked.

"I, um, I think so. Wait. Stop. Huge rock in front of your right foot... there, feel it?"

"Thank you."

The bottom of the hill had many rocks, thorns, and exposed roots, and I didn't have time to worry about anything except them. I was fortunate enough to have regained some awareness, but I still had almost no idea what I was doing. I didn't have any practice or experience guiding him, and a large part of me

wanted to worry about the prospect. Fortunately, I was too busy to be afraid; there was simply no room for fear in between all the hazards. Thus, I pressed on mindlessly, and by the time I was finally able to gather my thoughts, we had already covered the opening stretch.

We had made it through the worst of the hill's base, and had found a relatively clear path further upward. Once things had calmed down, I decided it was my chance to repeat my question from earlier.

"How did you find me, anyway?"

Rook said nothing at first. I knew he could hear me, since he had responded instantly to my directions, but he still took his time before he answered my question.

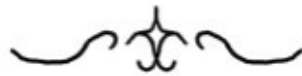
"Sound," he finally said.

"Why did you do it?"

He needed my help to make it back up the hill. Coming down alone must have been how he had injured himself. Why go through that much trouble and risk just to save me?

Another long pause from him, then, "I couldn't just leave you behind."

Was that all there was to it? I doubted it, but at the very least, it was all he wanted to say. It was clear that he did not want to talk about himself, or his involvement in my rescue, so I let it go. After I thanked him, the only other words we exchanged on that hill were navigating instructions.



Without Girard, there wasn't anyone left who wanted to convict Rook of anything. Neither Scout nor I believed the charges at all. Doctor Signey worried more about Girard's mental health than Rook's allegiances. Even Father, who had said only that he would consider all possibilities, admitted that Girard's case failed to prove anything to his satisfaction. Doctor Signey took our combined reactions as a "Not Guilty" verdict, mostly so that he could give the meeting some official closure.

Still, it was an awkward ending. Even though Rook's trial was a serious matter, the only thing anyone could think about was Girard.

No one knew where he had gone, and no one knew what to do. Was someone supposed to look for him? Were we supposed to leave him, instead? Could we move on without him? Could he find us later, if we did? Would he want to? Would we want him to? Was he still a part of the tribe?

Doctor Signey decided to leave Girard alone, but also to remain in the area. He ordered us to make camp where we stood. We would rest, have dinner, sleep there, and then pass through Garreton in the morning. If Girard came back before then, we would be waiting. If not....

With little else to do to pass the time, the tribe conversed between various sub-groups. Doctor Signey quickly became popular, as almost everyone wanted his thoughts on Girard's mental state. I eventually broke away from the others, to heed a random urge for some quiet solitude.

That was when I noticed Rook. He was sitting alone, in the same seat he had taken during his trial. Had he moved at all since then? Had the others left him there?

He looked lonely, or at least I thought he did. Admittedly, I had no idea why I thought that. He could have been anything from relieved, to seething, to meditating, to sleeping where he sat, for all I could tell through his blindfold. He could have been lonely, though. For some reason, I decided to go with that.

I didn't know where that idea had come from, but once I had it, I at least had to check. If it turned out to be true, then I had to help him. I owed it to him.

I walked toward his seat. He heard me approach, and snapped his attention toward me with a surprising quickness.

"Scout?" he asked.

"Um... no, it's me," I answered. I suddenly had second thoughts about approaching him. "Scout is with Father and Doctor Signey. Can I... should I go get him?"

"Celine." He had no answer other than my name at first, but he eventually added the rest. "No. I'm sorry. You are welcome, too." There was an awkward pause before he added, "Please... sit."

"It's all right, and thank you." I sat.

"No," he said. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Defending me." His answer came more quickly than I expected.

"Oh, it was nothing." I smiled, though he probably missed the gesture. "You saved me, too, remember?"

He didn't answer.

"There is something I'm curious about, though," I continued.

"Yes?"

"Why did you leave your defense up to us? You could have said something at any time, but... you didn't."

Rook exhaled. "I usually don't."

I knew that, of course, but.... "Why not?"

"It's my nature. I've always been like that. Ask Scout." He delivered his response quickly and perfectly, which meant that he had rehearsed it, like something from a play he had memorized. He had used that line before.

I should have let the matter drop. He clearly did not want to talk about it, and it seemed rude and confrontational to pry. I almost accepted his prepared answer and moved on. Almost. I would have, but the question was just too important.

"No," I said. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to come here just to go after you, but... Girard accused you of murder. Two murders, with more planned in the future. Working for the Hunters. Betraying the tribe to them. Repeatedly."

"I am aware."

"This isn't like being the quiet one in a room. This isn't just random conversation. Those were serious charges, and yet, you didn't even try to fight them."

Rook said nothing.

"Don't you ever defend yourself? Ever?"

He still didn't answer.

"Why?" I tried again.

"It... isn't worth it," he finally said.

"Excuse me?"

"I...." He hung his head. "I can't please Girard."

Was that it? Was that why he had shut down like that? Had Girard twisted everything Rook said or didn't say, everything he did or didn't do, to the point that Rook had just stopped trying?

"Well, Girard is...." I thought about it, and then shook my head. "He tends to believe the worst about everyone, and he can't handle being wrong. To him, everything is a lie covering up a conspiracy. It's not just you." At least, I didn't think it was.

Silence.

"I'm surprised he even accepts that you're really blind." I shrugged.

More silence.

"However," I continued, "letting him go completely unchallenged doesn't help you. You let his doubts swirl around you, just because you never try to stop them."

"Do you doubt me?"

I wasn't expecting him to turn the issue back toward me, especially since it wasn't my point. However, something had bothered me for a long time, and he had accidentally given me an opportunity to ask him.

"Well, there is one thing," I admitted.

"Yes?"

"Are you?"

A pause, then, "Excuse me?"

I inhaled, and held my breath for a moment. I knew my question was going to make things even more awkward, but I just had to know.

"Rook, are you really blind?"

He was quiet for a long time. He bowed his head, but otherwise didn't move. He finally answered me in a much quieter voice, as though I had cornered him.

"What do you believe?" he asked.

Perfect. It was just as I had suspected.

"What I believe," I said, with a smile that he didn't see, "is that you just proved my point about defending yourself."

Rook raised his head again, and tilted it very slightly, but did not convey his confusion verbally.

"Of course you're really blind," I continued. "You can prove it, too. Easily. All you would have to do is show me your eyes. If you don't want to do that, you could just remind me that I already saw them once before, at Keeper Edward's funeral. If even that is too much, you could just say 'yes,' and I would believe you. I'm not Girard."

He righted his head again, but still said nothing.

"Of all the whispers and the questions surrounding you," I said, "that had to be the mildest one you'll ever face. I just made it up to give you something easy. Yet... you didn't even fight that one. Not even that one. Why?"

"I've... I've always been like this. Ask Scout." There was his recitation again.

"But why? Scout might know that you've always been like this, but from what I can tell, even he doesn't know why. What happened to you to rob you of your will to fight?"

"I...." Rook spoke the first word of his response quickly enough, but stopped after that. "It's...." He tried again, but once again fell short. "It's... my nature," he finally answered. "I am sorry."

My ears flattened.

I wanted to know what he was hiding, and my curiosity had started innocently enough, but I felt increasingly guilty the harder I pressed him. I had approached him because I thought he needed the company, not because I thought he needed another interrogation.

"No, I'm the one who's sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to pressure you."

"It's all right."

"Maybe this was a mistake." I was suddenly grateful that he couldn't see my

puffed-out tail. "You just looked... I don't know. I thought maybe you didn't want to be alone, but if I'm bothering you—"

"No. Please. You... are still welcome here. Thank you... for your company."

I blinked. I was used to waiting for him to construct a response, even long after it was his turn to speak. I was not used to him even speaking on time, let alone interrupting me.

"I'm sorry... that I'm not more open," he added.

He really was lonely.

"No, it's all right," I said. "I just wanted to reach out to you, I guess."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'm sorry for going after you. It's just...." How to put it? "It's hard to get a clear picture of you from a distance. You've always been someone Scout knows better than I do. I have a vague impression of you, but I don't know how accurate it is. How could I, if I can never get close enough to check?"

"What is your impression?" He paused, and then added, "If it's all right to ask."

"It's fine. I'm probably wrong, anyway. Who knows? To me, though, you seem...." I stopped. I was quick to offer the polite formality of accepting his request, but much slower to think of an answer. I had a nebulous overall image of Rook, but condensing it into something concise and tangible was hard. I thought it out, though, and eventually came up with a single word: "Sad."

Rook didn't respond. He inhaled and opened his beak, as though he were about to say something, but his answer never came.

Whatever he was going to say vanished when we heard someone approaching, and not from the south, where the rest of the tribe was.

We both quickly turned north to face the sound. There, standing before us, was a humiliated, guilty-looking crocodile.

"Girard?" I asked aloud, mostly for Rook's benefit.

Girard's reply was quiet enough that I almost didn't hear him.

"Um... hi."



The tribe might have felt awkward while waiting around after Rook's trial, but it was nothing compared to dinner that evening. No one had any clue how to deal with Girard's presence. Not even Girard himself seemed to know how to

rejoin the tribe. Everyone kept his or her distance, and few tried to speak. For the most part, we ate in uncomfortable silence.

Whereas the Girard that had fled earlier had been wrathful, violent, and obsessed with the complete destruction of his enemies, the Girard that returned was quiet, shy, and apologetic. He claimed that he had been overwhelmed by the moment, and that he literally did not know what had come over him. He sounded ashamed of himself and his actions. Doctor Signey suggested the possibility of a DLY-induced mental disorder, and Girard wouldn't stop apologizing for what it had made him do. In theory, we had everything we needed to declare the matter closed, and move on.

Still, his attack was hard to forget, and there was a question of trust. Could we trust that he truly was sorry, and that he wouldn't do it again? Could he trust the tribe's judgment that Rook was innocent? If he said he accepted it, and that he wouldn't press the matter any further, could we trust him to be telling the truth? Most importantly, if Doctor Signey's diagnosis was correct, then could we trust Girard to recognize and control his outbursts?

As our leader, it was up to Doctor Signey to attempt to navigate everyone's suspicions, and mend the relationships that Girard had all but destroyed. Doctor Signey acknowledged how much Keeper Edward had meant to Girard, and said that he respected Girard's trying to save the tribe, and so on. However, he told Girard that he was mistaken, his accusation of Rook was false, and he had to accept that. No crime, no matter how heinous or evil, could ever justify attacking someone who didn't do it. Girard claimed he understood, and offered another awkward apology.

It was the last anyone spoke of the matter, or at all.

~

The tribe had gone to sleep shortly after dinner. After further awkwardness and some disagreements, they had hesitantly allowed Girard to have a watch shift. I didn't like leaving him in control while everyone else slept, and I wasn't the only one, but more watchers did reduce the overall burden on everyone else.

My shift came and went without any trouble, which was good. Between my fevers, everything that had happened that day, and the fact that we were to enter Garreton in the morning, I needed as much sleep as I could get. I just needed to get Girard to relieve me, and then I could finally put the day behind me, and rest.

I just needed to get Girard. That was all.

I sighed.

I walked over to him, and found him asleep in his bedroll. My entire body tensed.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe the awkward silence was still there to protect me. Maybe I could get him to get up and take over, and get away without him trying to talk to me.

Maybe.

"Um... G... Girard?"

No, that wouldn't work. He wouldn't have heard that even if he were awake.

I was being silly. He wasn't going to hurt me. I just had to wake him, and be done with it.

"Girard," I tried again.

No response. Did he need shaking, too? I really hoped that I wouldn't have to touch him.

"Girard!" I didn't want to wake up anyone else besides him, but if that was what it took....

"What...?" he finally answered. "What do you want?"

There. Finally.

"Your turn," I said.

"Huh?"

"For watch. I'm done, so I'm going to bed."

"Oh. Right."

He yawned, and then rattled his head. I cringed just from seeing him do that. Even he seemed to wince a little, though he recovered quickly enough.

I started to walk back toward my sleeping area, but he caught me with a question on my way out.

"Hey, uh, who goes after me, again? Your dad, I think?"

I stopped, though I really didn't want to. I didn't turn around. I tried in vain to smooth my tail, and hoped that he was still too groggy to notice.

"Yes, that's right," I said.

"Good man, your dad." Girard finally untangled himself from his mess of covers, stood up, and grunted. "Cold tonight."

We were migrating north while winter was setting in. What had he expected?

"Hey, um... Celine?"

Please, no. "Yes?"

"I'm really sorry."

"For what?" Against my better judgment, I finally turned and faced him.

"For earlier. You know, that whole... thing. I said that a lot during dinner, I know, but... well, I just wanted to say it again, I guess. Sorry."

"Um, thank you." I looked to the side. "Rook needs to hear that more than I do, but...."

"Yeah, I know, but you're probably not happy with me, ether. I mean, I did go after Scout a bit."

I quirked a brow. "A bit?"

"I said I'm sorry, all right?" He scowled, but then caught himself, and backed down. "Sorry. Look, I know I messed up. I'm just trying to make up for it."

"Well, I appreciate the attempt, at least. Thank you."

"Yeah, I tried, probably not good enough, I know." He sighed. "Sorry, I shouldn't get like this, it's just...." He paused, and tilted his head. "Can I tell you something? Normally I talk to your dad when I get like this, but he's asleep, and, uh...."

I didn't want to be awake, and I didn't want to spend time with Girard, but he was trying. Given his apparent remorse, it seemed rude to shut him down. I couldn't turn away someone who wanted to confide in me. Not even him. If he truly wanted to make amends, then I at least felt obligated to listen to him, if nothing else.

"All right," I said. I continued to look anywhere except at him.

"Thanks." He started to pace. "I just... I don't know. I feel like I'm a stranger to this tribe all the sudden. You know, the foreigner. The new guy no one is sure about." He stopped, faced me, and scowled. "And it's stupid, because I was here before any of you. I was the first! But now I'm the outsider. And then you have someone like Rook, who was the last person to join, but he just fits right in. What did he do? What did I do?"

Was he seriously asking why everyone had become leery around him? "Well, um, you kind of—"

"Yeah, I know." He shook his head. "But why would I do that? It doesn't make sense."

"Wait, are you asking me?" How could I have known what was going through his head?

"No, just thinking out loud. Sorry." He closed his eyes. He then wrapped one arm around his own waist, rested his other elbow on top of that, and rested his muzzle on top of his raised fist.

"See, snapping like that was the worst thing I could have done," he continued. "It pretty much destroyed my case. Now, I look like the crazy one, and he's the victim. I couldn't have been stupid enough to ruin everything like that, unless...."

"Um, Girard?" I still didn't want to face him, but I was running out of options.

"Quiet, I'm figuring this out." He opened his eyes again, though he didn't seem to be looking at anything in particular. He just stared forward, distantly.

"There's nothing to figure out, is there? You just randomly—"

"I said quiet." He scowled for a moment, but then his eyes widened. "Oh. Oh! I get it! Oh, ho. Yes. Well, Rook is clever. I'll give him that, at least."

"Girard, stop it." I honestly didn't want to know where his mind was going, or how his attacking us had become part of Rook's scheme.

"But I have to figure this out. Don't you see?"

I put my hands on my hips. "No, you don't. There isn't anything to figure out. There is no grand conspiracy, and if there was, you wouldn't be part of it."

"Are you sure? Think about it." There was that grin of his again.

"Girard—"

"Rook was always out to turn the tribe against me. Just when I almost had him, he finally did it. He tricked me into attacking him—"

"He was sitting still the entire time."

"Then he had Scout do it. Don't get technical. Anyway, he made me attack him, and now everyone hates me and likes him. Including you! Don't you see? Once again, he manipulated us all."

"No. Stop it."

"Well, of course you of all people wouldn't agree."

"Excuse me?"

"You were talking to Rook when I came back. I saw you. His influence must be spreading...."

Girard took a step toward me, and I instinctively took a step backward. I no longer cared whether he saw my tail.

"Girard, stop—"

"Shut up. You're with him, now, aren't you?"

He stepped toward me again, and I took two steps backward. How had he gone from so subdued and remorseful to so menacing, so quickly? I had thought that he was sincere in his remorse. I had thought that he really did regret his actions, and that he really did want to make things right. What happened?

"You almost had me, Celine. You and everyone. You almost had me convinced that Rook was innocent. That everything I believed was wrong. I even almost apologized to Rook for what I did to him. Me! To him! But I didn't, and that's why I'm suddenly so unwelcome in my own tribe. I'm the only one left who hasn't been converted yet!"

He kept trying to approach me, and I kept backing away.

"You must have been on Rook's side for a while, now," he said. "Tell me, was it in Crown's Pass that he finally got you? No, it must have been earlier. Right around when Keeper—"

"Rook saved my life!" I half-looked around. I wanted someone nearby I

could wake up, but I didn't want to take my eyes off Girard.

"It was a trick! It had to be!" He snarled.

"Everything is a trick to you! Are you saying he should have left me there, instead? What would you have done, if you were him?"

"I wouldn't have sold us to the Hunters in the first place!"

He charged at me. I screamed, and dodged to the side. He ran past me, aborted his charge, and spun around. He then slowed down, and started his deliberate pacing again. I started to back up in the opposite direction, after we had essentially traded places.

He laughed. "What's with you? I just want to talk."

"Stay away from me!"

"Why? You were the one who—"

"Enough!"

"Leave her alone!"

Girard and I both stopped when we heard the two voices, neither of which belonged to us. I should have recognized them instantly, but I was still in a panic, which made thinking and remembering things difficult. I eventually unfroze, though, and that was when I saw them.

"Scout! Father!"

They smiled. I ran toward them. I gave each a quick but powerful hug, and then positioned myself behind them.

"What's going on, Jon?" Girard asked. "What are you doing with... him?"

"Stand down," Father said. "You've tormented my daughter quite enough for one evening."

"I just wanted to talk—"

"I said stand down!"

Father raised his voice too much for his own good, and triggered a coughing fit. Girard's eyes lit up, and he took a step forward, but Scout and I kept him back with our glares. Once Father had recovered, Girard gave up, and stepped back again.

"Why aren't you two asleep?" Girard asked.

"You were making enough noise to wake me up." Scout gave a sharp exhale, which made his whiskers twitch. "I wasn't going to let anything happen to Celine, and I wanted to jump in and stop you myself, but...."

He paused, and he and Father exchanged glances. Father's gaze narrowed, and Scout's ears splayed.

"I decided to get Sir Coral, instead," Scout said, after clearing his throat.

"If it's all the same to you," Father added, as he looked at Girard with that same narrowed gaze, "I think I'll be taking over your shift, as well as my own."

"And if it isn't?" Girard folded his arms.

"Then I'll do it anyway. I'm taking watch now, Girard. Whether you stay up or go back to sleep is your business, but as far as official duty goes, consider yourself relieved."

Girard and Father exchanged glares for what felt like a long time. Girard eventually backed down, but not without a snort.

"Fine," he said. "It's too cold tonight, anyway."

He stormed his way past us, and returned to his nest of blankets. The rest of us quickly left the area, just to be farther from him.

~

"Are you all right?" Scout finally asked, once we were safe.

"I... I think so," I said.

It took me a long time to recover from what had happened. The crisis was over, but I still struggled to maintain normal breathing, and my fur had yet to go down.

As I slowly regained awareness, I eventually remembered who was watching me, and thus, my manners. I quickly cleared my throat, smoothed my tail, dusted off my pants, and bowed my head, ears splayed.

"Father," I said, without looking up.

"It's all right." He placed his hand under my chin, and slowly, gently lifted my head, until our eyes met. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" I asked.

"That attack, of course."

"Oh. No, it's not your fault." I smiled. "Thank you, if anything. You saved me."

"Thank Scout. He's the one who woke me." He returned the smile, but only for a moment. "It's not just that, though. It's... everything. I've been wrong about a lot of things, for a long time."

"Father, don't—"

"I know that your shift is over, and that you should be resting, especially after all you've been through. You've earned it. However, would you... would you do me the honor of a talk, first?"

It was a good question. I wanted to, but was it fair to Scout? I looked over at him.

"It's all right," he said. "I can go back to bed."

"Are you sure?"

Rather than answer vocally, Scout smiled, and walked toward me. He leaned in close, and my cheek fur flattened against his. He then stepped back, and our

eyes met. For the first time since Girard had made his accusation, I was at peace.
"I'll be fine. Good night, Celine. Love you."



Father wanted to talk in private, but after Girard's attack, it was more important than ever to guard the tribe. We sat down at the base of a small nearby hill. Father wanted to climb it, but between Keeper Edward's death and the incident at Crown's Pass, I never wanted to see a hilltop again. We could still see the others from the base, so it was good enough.

"How are you feeling?" Father asked, once we had taken our seats.

It was a fair question, and I had to stop and assess myself before I could answer.

"Still a little nervous," I said. "I should be tired. I've been awake long enough, certainly, and I do need to rest. I'm not, though. I'm too worried to be tired. What are we going to do about Girard?"

Father shook his head. "I wish I knew."

"This tribe doesn't feel safe anymore." I hugged my knees to my chest.

"The tribe was never safe, dear. Hunters, disease—"

"You know what I meant."

"Indeed." Father looked back toward the campsite, and sighed. "I agree, even. Girard has disrupted everything. I wish I knew what to do about him, but... I don't."

"You two are friends, though, aren't you? Or at least allies?" I tilted my head.

Father looked away. "We were. No, we still are, but his recent actions are unacceptable. My primary concern has always been you. You know that."

"So how is it you fell in with him, then?"

I had always loved Father, just as I had always hated Girard. I had never understood the two of them working together.

Father was quiet for a moment. He kept careful watch over the others as they slept, probably because it was easier to look at them than at me.

"He's... changed," he finally said. "The crocodile I befriended is not the same one that attacked you. Perhaps Keeper Edward was better at controlling him. Perhaps Doctor Signey is right, and he has some sort of worsening mental condition. I don't know."

"What was it like in the beginning, then?" Father and I had joined the tribe together, and I had been in it for as long as he had, but I couldn't remember

Girard ever having been pleasant.

"Well, he was always belligerent, of course, but never this bad. I initially supported him because he opposed Scout and Rook. He and I shared common enemies, which made us allies. He's taken it too far, though. Tonight proves that."

"What was wrong with Rook and Scout, exactly?"

"Scout was getting too close to my daughter for my comfort, of course." Father looked at me with a narrowed gaze, and I shrunk back. I had hoped for an easy resolution to that problem, but that hope quickly died.

"As for Rook," he continued, "we came from different worlds. I fought for our city during the war. I served with dignity, and when the war was over, I retired with full honors. Rook did not. He was the son of a traitor, and he grew up to become a Hunter, one of Mayor King's minions. Furthermore, he's a deserter, and is therefore as much of a traitor as his father was. He came from a dishonorable family, served a dishonorable group, and then slunk away dishonorably. How can I possibly respect him?"

I thought about that for a few moments. Father took advantage of the pause to drink from his water flask. That did not stop him from coughing as soon as he had finished.

"Maybe," I finally said. "But..." I tilted my head. "What if those last two points cancel each other out? Could he have deserted the Hunters because of how bad they were? What if he couldn't stomach what they were doing?"

Father looked at me with sudden interest. "Did he tell you that?"

I shook my head. "He didn't tell me anything. It was just a guess."

"Ah." Father turned away again, doing a poor job hiding his disappointment. "Not surprising, I suppose. Though even if it were true, it does not absolve his father."

His father. Of course. Neil Sebastian had fought for the city during the war, but not by choice. A separatist sympathizer living in a loyalist region, he had played along as best he could, until he could no longer bear it. He had ultimately refused to participate in the battle of Crown's Pass, and that refusal had earned him his notoriety.

Sebastian had committed treason by abandoning his post. Military law called for his execution, and it had fallen to Father, as his commanding officer, to carry out the sentence. Instead, Father had spared him, but ordered him discharged and arrested. The news of the battle and Sebastian's betrayal had spread, and Sebastian had quickly found himself hated.

Even though he had eventually completed his sentence and returned to society, he had found himself no job prospects, and the news that his wife had

left him. The only thing he had managed to keep was his son, Orrin, with whom he had eventually moved to the low district. He had avoided death, but his life had still essentially ended.

As Sir Coral's daughter, I had heard that story hundreds, if not thousands of times. Still, there was always one piece of it that I never understood.

"None of that was Rook's fault," I said.

Father closed his eyes, and was silent. He eventually let out a soft "Hmm," and then a cough.

Part of me wanted to ask Rook about his father, perhaps the next time we spoke. Another part of me worried that it was a bad idea, since I had been talking about him behind his back, and would be asking him about a potentially uncomfortable subject.

Of course, that assumed Rook and I would ever speak again at all. A part of me wondered about that, too. It wasn't as though my last attempt had gone particularly well.

"You have a point," Father admitted. "I should limit my judgment of Rook to his own desertion. Furthermore, I admit that I don't know the circumstances behind that. For all I know, your guess could be correct."

"About why he left, you mean?"

Father nodded. "Until tonight, I've never had to struggle with amoral colleagues or allies. My honor and duty were never on differing sides of an issue, and I've never faced the decision of whether to follow bad orders. Perhaps he has, and that was his answer. Or perhaps not." He turned to me. "What would you have done, dear?"

"Me?" I blinked. "I don't know. I'm not a soldier."

"No, but you are a Coral." He smiled.

I wished I could have shared in his pride, and returned his smile. Instead, I sighed. "I guess."

Father's expression fell. "You guess?"

"Well, it's just...." Long-buried emotions struggled to break free, but I struggled just as hard to keep them buried. "Never mind. I'm sorry."

"Celine...."

"Father?"

Celine."

Father's tone was stern for a moment, but he quickly backed down again. He tried again, more softly.

"Celine, I'm... I'm trying to do right by you. I know I can't save you from your disease, but I'm trying to watch over you as best I can, for as long as I can. As difficult as it has been, I've even reexamined everything I believed, just for

you. Please, talk to me. If I've wronged you in any way—"

"N-no, it's not that."

"Then what is it?"

I couldn't escape the question. The truth had to come out. Father had taught me to be honest, after all. I closed my eyes, took a breath, and braced myself.

"I'm just tired of the burden," I said.

Father said nothing, but watched me carefully. I tried to read his expression, but I failed. I had to continue blindly.

"You taught me to be brave and strong," I said. "Being a Coral means dignity and honor, strength and resolve, and so on. I've been trying to uphold it all, but it's tiring, sometimes."

"I see," Father finally responded. I expected him to be angry, or at least saddened, but I somehow didn't sense that from his reaction. If he thought any less of me at that moment, then he did an admirable job hiding it.

"I've always had to live up to my potential," I continued. "You think that I deserve the world, and you won't let me settle for anything less."

"Do you resent what I see in you?"

"No. I can't fault you for how you treat me, either. You want what's best for me, and I know that, and I thank you for it."

Father nodded, and gave a sad smile. "Yet you resent it."

I swallowed.

"It's... hard to be strong all the time," I admitted. "That's why I love Scout. He doesn't see me as a princess, and so I don't have to carry myself like one. I'm just me, and he takes care of me. I like that. A Coral shouldn't let someone else look after her, I know, but I like it. I do. I'm sorry."

"I see," Father said again. He closed his eyes and exhaled, drank again to avoid coughing, and then coughed anyway. My fur started to rise. Was he disappointed in me?

"I never asked for any of this," I said.

Father looked at me, and swallowed, but said nothing. I wanted to stop, before I hurt him even more, but I couldn't. Once I had started, it became impossible to contain.

"I was just a passenger in the car," I continued, almost against my will. "It... it wasn't even my election. I was just along for the ride. I miss Mom—Mother! Sorry! I miss when I was young, and you would protect me, and make everything right, even if I called you Dad...."

I sniffled. No. That wouldn't do. I took a deep breath. I had to calm down, and finish with grace befitting my name.

"That isn't very befitting of a Coral, though. I apologize." I bowed my head,

and splayed my ears.

Father turned away from me, and looked over the sleeping tribe. He didn't say a word. I knew that it was important to check on the others, especially with Girard there, but I also knew that he was stalling.

"So," he finally said. He stopped, and took another drink before he continued. "You love Scout because he fulfills this need? He gives you this casual care and protection you seek?"

I kept my head bowed. I closed my eyes, as though about to confess to a crime.

"Yes," I said.

Another pause. It was as though I were talking to Rook again, though I doubted either of them would have appreciated the comparison.

"I still don't trust Scout to treat you well," he said. "Especially not after what he did to Girard."

"He was just protecting—"

"I know." He silenced me with a glare, but he quickly changed his mind, and his expression softened again. He sighed. "Perhaps I misjudge him, and worry over nothing. I certainly hope that I do. Either way, though, you've made your choice." He shook his head. His voice was quiet, its slight wavering even quieter. "For all I know, you may be right."

I looked up at him. "Father...?"

He paused for a moment, but then smiled. "You've always told me the truth, even if you were afraid of what I would say. You stood up to Girard, even knowing that he was my ally. I disapproved of your choice in suitors, but you defied me, and found happiness in Scout. If nothing else, you certainly aren't afraid to seize what you want, are you?"

I allowed my tail to swish, though its fur had yet to go down. He placed his hand on my shoulder, and I placed my hand on his.

"You will always be my daughter, Celine. Even when we disagree. Especially when we disagree."

I sniffled, but then stifled it. I fought the tears, not because he expected me to, but because I wanted to. I wanted to give him better than that.

"I have kept you up with this, though, haven't I?" He looked at the tribe again.

I accepted his subject change. It was easier; the chance to sleep kept me from having to stay, and I wasn't sure how much longer I could maintain my composure.

"You have, but it's all right," I said.

"Perhaps, but I have two shifts and much to consider, and you need sleep."

He slowly stood, though it required me getting up first and helping him. "We'll ask the rest of the tribe about Girard in the morning. Until then, rest."

"Thank you...." I wasn't sure which title to use; was he still Father, or would he allow me to return to the informality of Dad? I couldn't decide, so I simply avoided using a title at all. "Thank you," I repeated, before we walked back to the others.



I felt awful. I had tried to get enough sleep to avoid that feeling, but it apparently hadn't helped. When I woke up, I was lightheaded, and it was hard to balance. I felt horribly cold, despite the new day being warmer than the previous night had been. I ached all over. Some of the soreness was from the shivering-induced muscle cramps, while the rest had no apparent cause.

Feeling my forehead confirmed what I had already guessed. Another fever.

It was hard to get up. The clear skies, allegedly warm sun, and even my fur failed to lessen my chill. I was eventually able to stand, but only because I had decided to take my blanket with me, even though it completely gave away my condition to the others. Naturally, my pathetic shuffling drew extra attention, and Father and Scout rushed to my aid when they saw me. I groaned.

I was the last person awake. The others had already finished eating, and Scout passed me some soup he had saved. I had missed breakfast, it seemed. That, or lunch. How late had I slept, exactly?

"Finally," Girard said.

I shut my eyes. Dealing with him was tiring enough, even when I was well.

"Girard, don't you dare—"

"Scout, stop. It's fine." I sighed. It really wasn't, but I just didn't want another fight.

Girard laughed. "Well, now that we're all here, I guess we can begin."

Oh, no. Another one of his meetings? What accusations would he make this time?

He cleared his throat. "So, uh, for those of you who missed it, there was kind of a thing last night. I told Jon I was going to apologize once everyone was here, so here we are. Um, sorry, Celine."

Doctor Signey looked at me, and Rook turned toward the direction of Scout, as though awaiting an explanation.

"That's not the fun part, though." Girard grinned.

"What?"

"Excuse me?"

"What are you—?"

"Now, now," Girard said, speaking over everyone else, "I know you don't want me to make a big scene again, but you'll like this one."

"Girard, what are you doing?" Father asked. "You said—"

"I said I'd apologize, and I did!" Girard cleared his throat. "Anyway, after the incident yesterday, and the... other incident yesterday, you're probably wondering how we can keep going like this. Well, it's simple. We can't. Therefore, I'm splitting the tribe."

"Splitting the—"

"What on—"

"Are you seriously—"

"You can't just do that!" Scout's was the first voice to rise above the other reactions.

"I f-f-f... fail to see what gives you such authority," Doctor Signey added.

"Oh, it's easy. In fact, not only can I do that; none of you can stop me. This is one of Rook's favorite tricks, you see. Watch."

Girard walked past the crowd, so that he alone stood between the tribe and Garreton. He then turned and faced us, his arms raised to his sides.

"As of right now," he said, "I am officially leaving this tribe."

He paused just long enough to let his statement register, and then raised his fists toward the sky.

"That's right! I quit!" He laughed. "What can you do? Tie me up? Keep me here against my will?"

"Believe me, we wouldn't dream of stopping you."

"Shut up, mouse." Girard stopped grinning and glared at Scout, but only for a moment. "Anyway, for my first act now that I'm alone, I'm forming my own tribe. Everyone except Rook can come. And if anyone wants to quit your tribe and join mine, then you can't stop them, either. You see?"

"Except that you're counting on us choosing to follow you," I said. "What if we don't want to?"

"Then you're idiots! Don't you get it? I'm saving you from him!"

"Girard, perhaps you should think this through—"

"I'm sick of thinking things through!" Girard refused to let Father calm him down. He pounded his fist into his own open hand. "I thought things through before, and while I was busy doing that, Rook killed our leader, killed our leader again, brainwashed everyone, sabotaged the tribe, and sold us all to the Hunters. I can't wait for him anymore!"

Doctor Signey sighed. "It is truly disheartening to observe Girard's behavior regressing. Nevertheless, he is correct about one thing: if he wishes to leave, and if anyone else wishes to follow him, then, regrettably, I can-n-n... cannot prevent that."

"I told you!" Girard cackled.

"Girard, please." Doctor Signey shook his head. "You may leave if you wish, but do try to be reasonable."

"And what do you suggest, exactly?" Girard folded his arms, and scowled.

"You are essentially asking us to choose between you and Rook," Father said. "Perhaps you can take turns trying to persuade us."

"You want to let Rook speak?" Girard's took a wide-eyed step backward. He trembled for an instant, but then caught himself, and laughed. "Fine. I'm trying to save you from him, but whatever. I tried to warn you."

"If you're so certain of this, then perhaps you can go first." It was Father's turn to fold his arms.

"I'd be happy to!" Girard opened his jaws and almost lunged, but then backed down. He looked embarrassed, but only for a moment. He quickly cleared his throat and moved on. "Um. Ahem. Anyway. Yeah. My tribe!"

The rest of us simply watched him.

"Aside from the obvious fact that Rook is evil," he said, "you should pick me because of where we're going from here. We need to get to the northern city, don't we? Nothing we do out here matters if we can't tell anyone, right? Isn't that why Cam is keeping all those files? But we stall, and we go slow, and we get sicker and slower by the day. My tribe is actually going to make it, because we're going to go a lot faster."

"Do you even know the way?" Scout asked.

"Do you?" Girard snapped back, and grinned as Scout sank in his seat. "Besides, you said you were working on maps, right? Like, plural? I can take one of the spares."

Scout gave a sharp exhale, but said nothing.

"Anyway," Girard continued, "Keeper Edward believed that, whatever we did, we should be able to look back and say we were alive. Well, we're going to prove it to the world, because we're going to take our stories to the northern city. That's why I really want Jon, Cam, and Scout to join me; you guys know stuff that would be extra useful in our report."

Excluding Rook, that was everyone except me. How flattering.

"Thank you, Girard," Doctor Signey said, trying in vain to stifle a sigh. "Rook, if y-y-y... you please?"

Rook slowly stood up, his first movement since the proceedings had begun.

He raised his head, paused, and then untied and removed his blindfold. Girard yelped and looked away, while the rest of us took in the rare, yet heartfelt sight of Rook's exposed and ruined eyes.

"I'm not...." Rook stopped, thought about it, and shook his head. "I'm not used to promoting my tribe. My tribe? Our leader is Doctor Signey."

"Not if he joins me." Girard grinned, but refused to look up.

"The choice is to either follow Girard or stay with you," Scout said. "Just work with that. Once we figure out who is still with us, then we'll figure out the leader, all right?"

Rook paused to think again, and then raised his head.

"I don't agree with Girard's direction," he said. "I think we should continue our regular pace. Either we will reach the northern city, or we won't. We should live as comfortably as we can along the way."

Rook put his blindfold back on. I blinked. Was that it? Was that all he had to say in support of his tribe? Apparently, it was; he remained standing, but said nothing further.

Girard finally stopped looking away. "That just proves my point," he said. "The same wandering around aimlessly before you die, or a bold new mission to reach the northern city. Who's with me?"

No one said anything at first. All of us exchanged glances, but none of us knew what to say or do. As the delay continued, Rook was silent and unmoving, but Girard grumbled and tapped his foot against the ground.

After thinking for as long as he could, Doctor Signey was the first to step forward.

"So, this is how it ends," he said. "Keeper Edward, I am truly sorry. Leader Noble, even more so. You trusted me, and I have failed you."

"You did everything you could," I whispered, though I wasn't sure he heard me.

"This is n-n-n... not an easy decision for me. I find Rook to be more amicable than Girard is, and I suspect that I would have an easier time with him. However, I need to press on."

Doctor Signey pulled out his folder. He looked at it for as long as he could stand, which was only for a moment. He then shut his eyes.

"I must take these files to the northern city," he continued. "Doctor Meyers told me to save them, and to deliver them to someone equipped to use them, if possible. They are all that remain of my old research team. They are all that remain of her. She would never forgive me if I were to travel this far, only to stop trying now. I can-n-n... cannot let her die in vain."

Girard grinned. Rook didn't react.

"Therefore, it is with a heavy heart and the utm-m-m... the utm-m-m...." He balled his fists and exhaled. "It is with the highest respect for Rook that I...." He swallowed. "Regrettably, I choose to ally with Girard." He quickly hung his head, and shut his eyes. "Please, forgive me."

"I understand," Rook said. His voice was quiet, and he offered no further response.

Doctor Signey walked toward Girard, like a prisoner approaching his execution site. Girard laughed.

"Until very recently," Father said, "I considered Rook to be as evil as Girard claims he is, and Girard to be a stalwart ally. However, certain recent events have caused me to question both of these judgments. Girard assaulted my daughter last night. It's a wonder I haven't yet killed him. If he expects me to overlook his assault entirely, then he is as thoughtless as he is arrogant."

Father took a drink, and ignored Girard's glare.

"Of course," he continued, "I am still a soldier, and I still have a mission. I look at the rest of you, especially my daughter, and I see victims of Mayor King's schemes. She never wanted this. I doubt that any of you did. If King is in any way responsible for any of this, then he must pay for what he has done."

Wait. No. He couldn't—

"Rook?"

"Yes?"

"I apologize," he said. "Not only for the decision I am about to make, but for many things, for as long as I've known you. I was wrong, and I am sorry. However...."

No. It wasn't possible.

"I am afraid that duty compels me to travel with Girard."

He wasn't serious. He couldn't have been.

"I must add what I know about King to the files. I must find someone in the northern city who will hear us. I must go."

Girard had stolen my father. That deranged brute had stolen my father!

"I understand," Rook repeated. It may or may not have been an automatic response.

Father joined Girard and Doctor Signey, while Rook remained alone.

I clenched my jaw hard enough to give myself another headache. This wasn't right. I didn't care if Girard's tribe was the one meant to reach the northern city. He couldn't attack Rook, fight Scout, threaten me, throw out false accusations, split the tribes to satisfy his own grudge, and still end up with everyone following him. It was bad enough that he had taken my father. I couldn't let him take anyone else. He couldn't behave like that and win.

I let my blanket drop to the ground, and stepped out of it. I winced, but forced myself to fight through the sudden chill, as well as the soreness and the headache. I couldn't let any of those distract me. I had to focus.

I stepped forward.

"Last night," I said, "I spoke with my Father about what it means to be a Coral. Unwavering duty toward the mission... that's certainly one approach. However, the most important thing is to know who I am, and what I want."

Father nodded, and kept his gaze on me, but said nothing.

"I'm not going to last much longer. I can feel it. Look at me. I feel awful today, and I expect to feel just as awful, if not worse, in the days to come. I... accept that." I swallowed. "However, if I'm going to die, I at least want to be comfortable, and free from conflict. I can't go on a strenuous fast-paced mission, and after what he did, I'll never follow Girard."

Girard scowled, while Father silently hung his head.

"This is going to cost me my father, and it may or may not cost me Scout, but...."

I faltered. For a moment, that price felt too heavy to pay. Father and Scout? Did I really want to go through with it, in that case? What if—

No. I had to. I knew what I wanted, and what I needed, and I had to claim it. Corals never let sacrifices stop them.

"Rook," I said. I looked at him, because it was easier than looking at my heartbroken father. "I... I would like to stay with you. That is, if you will have me."

Rook looked at me, or at least turned his head toward the sound I was making, but otherwise masked any obvious visible reaction.

"If that is what you wish," he finally said.

"Yes." I swallowed again, and it was suddenly difficult to find my voice. "It is. Thank you."

I retrieved my blanket and shuffled toward Rook, while Girard glared at both of us. Father turned his head, and shut his eyes.

"Well, that makes this easier for me, then." Scout was the last to step forward.

All eyes were instantly on him. Even Rook faced his general direction. Scout noticed this, and swallowed.

"S-Sir Coral," he said, "you've always been honorable and dignified, like I wish I could have been. Doctor Signey, you've been a good friend, and I've looked up to your wisdom as long as I've known you. Even Girard, I... admired your... passion. Sometimes."

Girard snorted.

"It's a brave thing you're doing," Scout continued, "and I wish you all the best. I hope you reach the northern city. I really do. But I can't leave Rook and Celine. I'm sure everyone knows that."

"We all know where we must go," Father said, barely above a whisper.

Scout walked toward us. I knew he couldn't have sided with Girard, but I had still tensed up with worry, which my aching body did not appreciate. Once his decision was official, though, that worry melted, and my world lit up. I wanted to run up to him and give him a tearful, sweeping hug. Instead, I had to settle for waiting for him to reach me, and then leaning on him. He held and supported me, while Rook stood in silence.

"With that, we have chosen our tribes." Doctor Signey's voice was unusually solemn. "I regret that it has come to this, but we m-m-m... we must—"

"Hey." Girard folded his arms. "You're with me, now. I'm the leader, remember?"

Doctor Signey winced, flattened his ears, and hung his head. He was silent for a while.

"Leader Drake," he finally said. "My apologies."

"Leader Drake!" Girard cackled.

"Girard, can you at least behave until we leave?" Father turned toward me, and then quickly looked away again. "This may be the last time we see each other alive."

"After what they put me through? Why should I?"

"Because I haven't given you a map yet." Scout smirked.

Girard's eyes widened, and he sputtered. "Why... why you—"

"Shut up." Scout faced Girard, but refused to look at him. Instead, he cast a sidelong glance at Father. "Sir Coral is right, which is why I'm not going to fight you, so just listen for a moment, all right?"

Girard glared, but said nothing.

"That's better."

Scout took a spare map out of his pack, and stepped forward. Girard looked at the map with an extremely narrow gaze, but then backed down. So long as Scout held the map, he held the power, and both of them knew it.

"I want your tribe to succeed," Scout said. "I want someone to deliver Doctor Signey's notes to the northern city. So, you be nice while we say our goodbyes, and I let you have this. Deal?"

Girard's gaze darted around to every other member of both tribes. Everyone except Rook stared right back at him.

He rolled his eyes in defeat. "Fine."

"Thank you." Scout extended the map, and Girard forcefully snatched it

away.

"We're leaving as soon as you're done," Girard said. "We're the tribe that's determined to get there on time, after all. Rook's tribe can stay here for, say, another day or so. We'll leave right now, before he can kill us in our sleep or something, and then we shouldn't run into each other again."

Girard walked away before he gave anyone a chance to answer, and left the remainder of his tribe with ours. He faced toward Garreton, away from us. He kept his arms folded, and his tail occasionally lashed through the air and against the ground.

I wanted to dismiss the proceedings as Girard being stupid, simply because it was too hard to process what had actually happened. We weren't really about to lose half of the tribe, were we? Supposedly, I had to say goodbye to Father and to Doctor Signey, because I would never see them again, but there was no way that was real.

Father started with Rook and Scout, and I wouldn't have known what to say to him, anyway. Therefore, I began by approaching Doctor Signey, who was standing alone, and looking at his old photo again.

"L-L-L... Lady Coral." He looked up, and quickly stuffed the photo back in his folder. He sounded remorseful, and slightly frightened, as though I had just caught him committing some sort of crime.

I swallowed. "Doctor Signey."

"Lady Coral, I... I am truly sorry. You and I both feared this day was coming, and I tried to prevent it. I failed you, as well. If only I had held us together—"

"No." I shook my head. "This wasn't your fault. I don't think anyone or anything could have stopped it."

"Keeper Edward could have."

"Stop it. You did everything you could. Girard is just... well...."

"I would prefer if you did not remind me."

Doctor Signey looked down and to his side. I wasn't sure how to break the sudden and awkward silence, so I just put my hand on his shoulder. His eyes widened a little, and then, for the first time since he had made his decision, he smiled.

"You chose well," he said.

"I did?"

He nodded. "You are in no condition to exert yourself. You need rest, and Rook's tribe suits you better in that regard." After a pause, his smile faded. "I envy you, you know."

"Are you going to be all right?"

He sighed. "I have my doubts, but I also have very little choice. Doctor Meyers is counting on me."

"You don't have to do this, you know."

He gently removed my hand from his shoulder. "Regrettably, I do."

"I don't understand, though." I flattened my ears. "I understand wanting to reach the northern city. I certainly understand wanting to stay with Father. It's just... why follow Girard? Why, after what he did? Can you really trust him to lead well?"

"In his condition? Of course not." Doctor Signey looked over his shoulder at Girard, and then back at me. He shook his head. "However, numbers favor us, at least for now. Together, Sir Coral and I can resist him. I would have preferred to keep the entire tribe together, but if this is how it m-m-m... must be, then the benefits of remaining with him outweigh the drawbacks, at least for now."

Logically, I could understand his position. Emotionally, it was much more difficult.

"I'll miss you," I said.

He gave me another sad smile. "Knowing you has been an honor, Lady Coral."

"And you as well, Doctor Signey."

"Cameron," he corrected.

"Celine," I responded.

I gave him a hug. As we held each other, I whispered, "Find the northern city, all right?"

"Live well," he whispered back.

We broke the hug, and I stepped back. Doctor Signey approached Rook and Scout, which left me alone with....

"Father."

"Celine."

Saying goodbye to Doctor Signey had been hard enough. I wasn't sure I had enough strength left for Father. I had to, though. It was my last chance.

"I-I'm sorry." I sniffled, and cursed myself.

He walked toward me, put his hands on my shoulders, and looked me directly in the eyes. It took all the strength I had to meet his gaze.

Neither of us said a word, because neither of us knew what to say. For a while, we just looked at each other. Hard as it was to look in his eyes, it was even harder to look away.

Finally, something overcame me. Maybe it was the grief of losing both of my parents. Maybe it was anger at Girard. Maybe it was despair at my affliction, and my fevers and eventual unavoidable death. Maybe it was just everything I

had ever repressed, everything I was supposed to have been too strong to feel, finally asserting itself. Whatever it was, it was as though a fragile, yet persistent barrier had finally broken. I closed the distance, pulled my dad into a tight hug, and sobbed.

"I'm sorry for everything," he whispered, as he ran his fingers through my hair. I barely heard him over my weeping. "Live well," he said, "and may Scout make you happy."

I stopped crying, though I was still panting and convulsing more than I was breathing. Had I heard him correctly?

"You deserve to live much better than this," he continued, "but at least I can give you this much. I'm sorry for having stood in your way. Do what you feel is best, as you always have."

"Are...." I sniffled, and tried again. "Are you sure? What about you, though?" I pulled back from the hug and met his gaze again, and then quickly regretted it.

"I'm a soldier," he said. "It's my job to give up things like peace and comfort, so that my family doesn't have to."

"Dad...."

I noticed the mistake moments too late, but for once, he didn't correct me. He merely gave me one more hug, and whispered a soft "Take care, dear. I will always love you."

We broke the hug, and parted. Father joined Doctor Signey, and the two of them walked toward Girard. I stumbled toward Rook and Scout, in a daze from the emotions as well as the fever.

We, the three members of Rook's tribe, stood and watched as the others left. Girard Drake, Doctor Cameron Signey, and my own father, Sir Jonathan Coral, marched toward Garreton, and out of our lives. They left, never to return.

Scout held me. I pressed my face against his neck, and wept again. I heard Scout sniffing as well, though he tried to comfort me first before he tended to himself.

Rook stood in silence, as he always did. He was as unmovable as the very mountains we had passed, or so it had seemed. I did see one difference, though. One small detail gave him away.

His blindfold was damp.

Chapter Six



To Endure

"No. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to come here just to go after you, but... Girard accused you of murder. Two murders, with more planned in the future. Working for the Hunters. Betraying the tribe to them. Repeatedly."

"I am aware."

"This isn't like being the quiet one in a room. This isn't just random conversation. Those were serious charges, and yet, you didn't even try to fight them."

It was a fair point, and one to which I had no reply.

"Don't you ever defend yourself? Ever?"

Celine had every right to want to know why I was so passive. I even agreed with her about how serious this situation was. If I couldn't even defend myself against murder charges, what could I do? I had no answer for her.

"Why?" she added, after I failed to respond.

I didn't want to say too much, but I had to give her something. The trick, as always, was to find a crumb of a response, something just barely large enough to satisfy the question.

"It... isn't worth it," I tried.

"Excuse me?"

No. Too small. That wouldn't do. I had to give more.

"I..." I hung my head. "I can't please Girard."

"Well, Girard is...." A pause. "He tends to believe the worst about everyone, and he can't handle being wrong. To him, everything is a lie covering up a conspiracy. It's not just you."

It was true. Girard would twist every word I said, and use them all to paint his sinister vision of me. Rook, the evil manipulative mastermind. Even when I resorted to silence, thinking my words couldn't poison the others' minds if I never spoke, he had merely taken that as another part of my plot. I could never please him. I could never please anyone. Thus, I withdrew.

However, Celine was right. If the others also received such treatment from him, then I had even less reason to speak out. My fate was not unique, and therefore, I had no right to complain.

Girard's treatment of Scout bothered me more, anyway. I was able live with what I received. I had a tolerance for it. I had earned whatever scorn Girard chose to throw at me. Scout hadn't, though. Scout was innocent.

Of course, we were not discussing Scout, even though we should have been. Against all logic, Celine had asked about me.

Celine was not the first person to ask why I never resisted. I never had an answer for any of them, even Scout, except that it was simply my nature. Every time the issue arose, my choices were to either repeat that line, or complain about my father, and the latter was obviously not an option. I hadn't left the city just to make excuses for my misdeeds, or to blame others for them.

Was I weak? Yes. I knew that. If I had been strong, then I wouldn't have abstained from the vote to banish Girard. I hadn't forgotten anything he had ever said to me, including his accusations that I had murdered our leaders, and I knew that he had already voted to banish me. More importantly, though, I hadn't forgotten anything he had ever said or done to Scout. I had long wished to save Scout from Girard, and I should have done so when the opportunity had presented itself.

Instead, I had faltered. As little desire as I had held for Girard to stay, I had been unable to bring myself to stand against him, either. Had I acted, I would have forever carried the knowledge of what I had done. I would have forever known that mine had been the final vote, and that I had been the one to cast him away, back into the wilds, alone. I carried too much weight on my conscience already, and I had no desire to add Girard's probable death to it. Thus, when the time to vote had arrived, I abstained, and he stayed.

Such was the way it was supposed to be, of course. Nothing could change my fate, and nothing could change my weakness. Even rescuing Celine had been an act of cowardice; I had simply wanted to avoid being responsible for another death. She certainly deserved to live, and I never regretted saving her, but I knew that it was impossible to avoid my punishment. I was no hero. I was something else entirely, and it was far, far too late to think that any deed could change that.

Perhaps that was the real reason I had spared Girard. If I had shown strength, I could have ended his abuse, but that wasn't supposed to happen. Scout didn't need that torment, but I did.

Furthermore, even if strength could have saved me from him, using strength to oppose him was a false path. My passivity was my strength. My true strength was the ability to accept my fate without complaint. Active, forceful strength—the ability to defy that fate—was a curse. I had it, regrettably, but I knew better than to use it. Father had taught me well in that regard.



I didn't want to face my father. I didn't even want to go home. Nothing good

ever happened when I went home. They had caught me, though, and they had made me face him. I had to tell him what had happened.

I hated our new low district apartment. It was small and dirty, and the combination of working and non-working lights left it perpetually dim. Even the very walls bore unexplained stains, holes that the insects had chewed, and the smell of old food wrappers and sadness. Only two types of people lived in such a place: people who had given up on life, and people on whom life had given up. It was better than being homeless, I guessed, but not by much.

It was even worse when I had to face Father.

"I hear that you got in a fight today, Orrin."

I swallowed. I wished I was anywhere in the world except that room.

"Yes, sir."

"Why?" Father looked at me with a scowl, but also with a small tilt of his head.

"I... I saw a kid, and I wanted to play with him, but he wouldn't let me. He was just playing with marbles, alone. I wanted to join in, but he said no. He called me a gang member. I'm not! You know I'm not!"

"And so you attacked him?"

The way he looked at me when he asked that scared me. The already tiny walls felt even smaller around me. I tried to ignore them, but I couldn't.

"I...." I took a deep breath. "Yes, sir. Something just... I don't know. I don't have any friends here, not since we moved, and I wanted to be his friend, and he wouldn't let me. I just got so mad!"

"How did the fight go?" he asked.

"What?"

"Who won, or was there a winner? What was the resolution?"

I had expected him to react to my confession, but he hadn't. He had just moved right along in his questioning.

"Well, um, I guess I won? I knocked him down, and I, um...." I swallowed. "I stole his marbles. I don't know why. I don't really even want them for anything. I can't do anything with them by myself. I guess I just wanted to punish him."

"And did it make you feel better?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"I see." Father's tone remained flat. "Orrin, there's something I have to show you."

Father rose from his seat. Standing up, he towered over me. People had told me I was a big kid for my age, which was probably how I had won that fight, but I was nothing compared to him. He was gigantic, and in that tiny apartment, it

felt like he alone took up most of the room. Even though he had never done anything to me except yell, just standing there was enough to scare me.

"Something that I hoped you would never have to see," he continued. He looked down at me, and I swallowed again. "But alas."

The punch to the stomach came so instantly, he had connected before I had even realized he had swung. It easily sucked all the wind out of me, and replaced it with more pain than I had ever felt before, and a strong urge to throw up.

Hunching over was a mistake. He took advantage of the opening, and hit the back of my neck. I dropped to the ground.

What was he doing? Why? He had never—

He gave a running kick to my ribs, powerful enough to lift me off the ground. I dropped back down on my side. Another kick, this time to the chest, forcefully rolled me onto my back.

"Tell me, Orrin...."

He grabbed my shirt with both hands and lifted me up. He held me perpendicular to the ground, even as he raised me up to his shoulders. He then dropped me, and I landed hard on my back, losing my breath again.

"How does it feel to be small and powerless?" he asked.

He stopped his assault, but he planted one foot on my chest, keeping me down. He kept just enough weight on that leg to make it hard to breathe.

I could think of nothing but pain and terror, and I could only respond in frightened whimpering.

"Tell me how it feels!" His voice was almost loud enough to count as another attack. He placed more weight on his foot, and I thought for sure that he would crush me to death. I screamed as best I could with no air.

Some disgruntled neighbor banged on the far wall, probably wanting us to stop being so noisy. I was in such a panic that I actually obeyed, and stopped screaming. I didn't want to be in any more trouble.

"Tell me!" Father roared.

I whimpered. I had no idea what he wanted to hear, but I had to say something. I was afraid he would press down harder until I did. Wait. Was that it?

"Afraid?" I tried.

"Afraid." Father paused, and turned the word over in his head. He finally took his foot off my chest. I gasped and coughed, and he mercifully ignored me. "Afraid. Yes."

Approval? He had stopped attacking me, at least. I slowly got to my feet, still coughing.

The respite did not last very long.

He had let me up because he was busy searching for something. While I was busy trying to catch my breath, he found it. He suddenly brandished his baton, the one he had somehow managed to keep from his military days.

"You are afraid," he said. "Frightened. Powerless. It's not a good feeling, is it?"

"N-no, sir."

"What's even worse, though, is the way that violence destroys logic. Observe...."

My eyes widened at that last word, but even with that fraction of a moment of warning, he was still too quick for me. He grabbed my throat in one massive hand. His other held the baton, raised and ready to strike.

"What is two plus two?" he asked.

He squeezed my throat before I could answer. I started to choke.

It was all I could do to keep breathing, let alone actually answer his question. I wanted to say anything I could to make him stop, but I didn't know what he wanted to hear.

"F-four?" I guessed.

That was apparently the wrong answer.

He hit my head with the baton. It couldn't have been hard by his standards; he probably would have killed me if he had actually tried. Still, even a "soft" blow from him flooded my senses with overpowering pain, until it was the only sensation that my mind registered at all. It was as if a bomb had gone off, and left me unable to see, hear, or think.

His other hand was still choking me. He lifted me up, using my throat as a handle. He slammed me hard against the wall, and then held me there. His hold on my throat was the only thing supporting my weight.

"Eleven." Father looked into my eyes, and scowled. "Two plus two is eleven. Say it!"

I wanted to say it, I really did, but I could only make pitiful, empty gasps. The blow to my head made me weak and dizzy, and it was harder and harder to get air.

"Say it!"

He hit me with the baton again, and once again, my entire world exploded in pain.

I somehow realized that he had dropped me, and that I couldn't even yelp or scream properly. I fell to the ground, nowhere near able to stand.

I started to gasp and cough. I honestly thought I would die, or at least pass out, but instead, I very slowly started to return to awareness.

Wait, no. I didn't have time do anything slowly. I had to give him what he

wanted, before he hit me again.

"E, eleven," I croaked, surprised that I had managed to remember that.

"Good." Father kept his gaze narrow, but smiled. "Say it again. From the beginning, this time."

I knew I had to answer as quickly as possible, difficult as it was. "T-two plus two... is eleven," I said, forcing every word. I tried not to cry, since it was already hard enough to breathe as it was, but I just couldn't hold it back.

Father looked at me, and held his gaze for a few moments. He didn't move. I didn't dare guess what could have been running through his mind.

"No," he finally said. "Two plus two is four. Everyone knows that. That isn't an opinion. That is a hard, objective truth. Why would you say that it's eleven?"

I gasped, or at least, I tried to gasp. I had no idea what was a right or wrong answer anymore. "You... you told me to...." If I could have backed away, I would have, but I was on the ground, and already against the wall.

"I told you to? What authority do I have to defy such a basic fact?"

"Um...."

My throat burned. I was hyperventilating from fear, and trying and failing not to cry, all while still dizzy from the blows and the gasping for air. It was a uniquely painful mixture.

"You see," he continued, "this is how violence destroys reason. If I declare that two plus two is eleven, I am simply wrong. However, I can force you to agree with me, and to join me in being wrong. I can become right, just because I have bigger muscles and a weapon. You will say anything I want, even if it's wrong, as long as I can beat it out of you. Is this the way the world should work? Is it just? Is it fair?"

"No, sir," I said. I then immediately hoped I hadn't said something to anger him again.

"No, it's not."

All right. Good. As long as I hadn't—

He picked me up and lifted me off the ground, and I almost screamed. Instead of attacking me again, though, he set me down on our makeshift couch.

"Strength is dangerous," he said. "You have now seen what it can do, and you only experienced a minor beating. I've seen war, Orrin. I've seen people suffer and die, in a place where there was no reason, no right, no wrong. The strong rewrote the truth, and who won had nothing to do with who deserved to win. Do you think that's what I want for you?"

"No, sir."

"That kid you beat probably felt like how you are feeling now. Is that what you wanted?"

I sunk into the seat. I swallowed, and realized too late that swallowing still hurt. "No, sir."

"You're big and strong for your age. You got that from me, and for that, I am sorry. People are going to see you as tough, and you must work even harder to avoid that. You are to uphold reason, and getting into fights is the opposite of reason. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"The world is cold and cruel, but resisting with force only makes it colder and crueler. Don't fight it. Never fight it. Even if you win, it proves nothing."

"I-I won't, sir." I sniffled. It still wasn't a good time, with my throat burning and all, but I couldn't help it.

"Good." Father took a few steps backward, making it clear that I was finally free. He then looked down at me and sighed. "I've done something terrible," he said. "I had to show this to you, but you may never forgive me for it. I'm sorry. I promise you, I will never be violent again. However, you must make me that same promise."

"Yes, sir. I will. I do. I promise." After his demonstration, it was the easiest promise I ever made.



I remained in my seat, hands folded in my lap, head bowed. I neither moved nor spoke. I heard someone—Scout—pacing in slow back-and-forth lines directly in front of me. Idle sniffing from what must have been Celine came from my right.

Scout's pacing stopped. "Celine?" he asked.

I heard nothing at first, then a small and faint "yes?"

"Are you all right?"

Silence.

"I'm sorry," Scout added.

"Don't be," Celine said. "Yes, it's awful, but it's not your fault."

She was right; the blame was mine. The tribe had fractured because Girard and I had failed to cooperate. I wanted to apologize, but I didn't want to intrude on their conversation, so erred on the side of saying nothing.

"I know it's not," Scout said. "It's just... you know. I'm just saying I'm sorry, I guess. This whole thing isn't fair. I'm sorry you have to go through it. You shouldn't have to."

"Thank you."

More silence, except for Scout's resumed pacing. Eventually, Celine spoke up again.

"I'm happy that you're still with me, at least," she said. "You and Rook."

"Thank you." My response was quiet, and mostly automatic.

Scout's pacing stopped again. "Well, of course. I had to be. I'm not as brave as you."

"Not brave? Scout, you stood up to Girard!"

"Please don't remind me."

"Well... yes, you went too far. Still, by standing up at all, you probably saved Rook's life."

It was entirely possible. Girard would have been upon me, had Scout not interrupted his charge. Should I speak up and agree, or should I continue to stay out of—

"Maybe," Scout said.

Oh. All right, then. I continued not to intrude.

"It's just...." Scout sighed. "I don't know. Fighting is one thing, but then the tribe split, and there was the matter of who to join. For me, the choice was easy. I mean, I like your father and Doctor Signey a lot, and I do want to get to the northern city, but I'm never going to leave either of you. Ever. But it wasn't that simple for you, was it?"

"That was deliberate." Footsteps. The location of her voice was changing... ah, Celine was moving toward Scout. "Father had already chosen Girard, and I knew I was going against him. You hadn't chosen yet, and I didn't know whose side you would join. Still, I couldn't just follow whatever group had my loved ones in it. I had to make a stand for what I wanted, what I actually believed in, even if it cost me. It's... part of the name I carry."

"So, instead of deciding between me and your father, you decided between Rook and Girard, regardless of what it would cost. Like I said, you're braver than me." Something muffled Scout's voice, as if he were speaking from behind something. Was he hugging Celine? "Your name isn't why I love you, and you know it, but it still says something that you did that. I mean, I just followed you and Rook. I didn't make a stand like you did. I'm sure Sir Coral is proud of you."

"Thank you...." Celine's response was quiet.

I heard nothing for a few long moments after that. They had stopped talking, and had apparently stopped moving. I assumed that they must have been quietly enjoying each other's embrace.

I liked Celine, and I especially liked Scout. I was grateful for their company, but also more than that. When Girard had made his accusation, they had both

defended me. When Girard had attacked me, Scout had saved me. When the tribes had split, the two of them had chosen me. In Celine's case, she had even chosen me over her own father. I had to express my appreciation, somehow. I had to tell them how much their support meant to me.

However, at the same time, I didn't want to turn the conversation toward me. They were already complete with each other, and did not need my involvement. To insert myself between them would have been—

"Rook?" Scout asked.

I clenched my beak. "Yes?"

"You've been awfully quiet since the others left."

I didn't want to answer that. The sooner he stopped talking to me, the sooner he could get back to being happy with her. How best to evade his attention?

"That isn't unusual for me," I tried.

"I know, but... are you all right? This has been a rough day, you know."

"I'm fine." My reply was automatic and thoughtless. "Thank you, though," I added.

"Is something on your mind?" Celine asked.

I panicked. My first instinct, as always, was to try to avoid the question. It wasn't that I was holding any sort of dark secret; if anything, they probably would have liked to hear how appreciative I was. No, I just didn't want to force myself into the conversation. It was their moment, not mine.

Celine had asked, though. Was it still intruding if she had asked? Perhaps she deserved an answer.

"You two stood by me," I said, after some hesitation. "You defended me. You chose me. I'm just... thankful."

No immediate response from either of them. Was their silence good? Were they smiling? Perhaps they weren't. Perhaps they were horrified. Perhaps I had offended them. Should I continue, or had I already said too much?

"I know I'm not very talkative." I decided to continue, but I did so under the assumption that I had misspoken, and that I needed to explain and correct my mistake. "I also know that Girard invited Scout, and that he had already recruited Sir Coral. You both could have gone with them, but—"

Suddenly, I felt a hug. No, two hugs. A group hug? I had absolutely no idea how to respond to that.

"Come on, Rook," Scout said. "You've known me since before we even ended up out here, and Celine already chose you by the time it was my turn. I could never leave either of you, even if it had been for a good reason. For Girard, though? Girard? Honestly." He patted my back.

"I'm not going to say it was easy for me," Celine said. "It wasn't. I'm getting

sicker, though, and it's getting harder for me to travel quickly. You promised a relaxed pace, which is what I need. You also seem nice enough—Scout vouches for you, anyway—and you saved my life. By contrast, Girard...." I felt her shiver. "No. I had to choose you."

Words eluded me even more than they usually did. I had to say something. I had to tell them what their support meant to me, somehow. How could I express that?

Before I could decide, the hug broke. Both of them stepped back, and I felt nothing once more. Never mind, then, I supposed.

"So, what next?" Scout asked. "No one wanted this to happen, obviously, but... well, here we are. What do we do now?"

"We do what we've always done," I said. "We carry on." In contrast to how stuck I had been before, I was able to find that answer almost immediately.

"We live the best we can," Celine added. "We move forward a little along the way, and fall whenever and wherever we happen to fall. Anyone who wanted more than that went with Girard."

I nodded. No one said anything further.



"We need to talk, Orrin."

"Vanessa?"

I looked up just as my wife entered the guest bedroom. A crow, like me, and presumably attractive; a few others had expressed envy after I had married her, at least. She was wearing a long dress, which she normally reserved for formal occasions, but I did not have very long to process that observation.

She crossed the room in a hurry, and suddenly, she was sitting on the bed right next to me. She had obviously been crying, and had only stopped just before she came to me, but she was trying to hide that fact. I respected her wishes, and didn't say anything.

"You know why, don't you?" she asked.

She looked at me. I made myself meet her gaze. I at least owed her that much.

"I can guess," I said.

"Then guess. I want to hear it from you. I... I want to believe you understand."

I sighed, but not because I objected; she was right, after all. It was solely due

to the difficulty of the task. I was never one to talk about our emotions or issues.

Then again, that was the problem.

"You think I'm distant," I said. "You want a more intimate connection with me, and you feel like you're not getting one. You feel alone." I didn't need to ask her whether my guess was accurate. I knew.

She hung her head. "I tried giving you space," she said. "You know, in case that would help. I tried waiting. I tried everything! I even gave you your own room, and look how that turned out."

She waved a hand, gesturing to the walls around us. It was true; the guest bedroom was supposed to have been mine. She had allowed me to decorate it in whatever manner I wished, but I had never had sufficient inspiration to accept her offer. I never knew what to do with it, aside from keeping it clean and dusted. It was serviceable, adequate, and completely blank, much like a cheap hotel room, or a high-class prison cell.

"I thought letting you have your own private sanctuary would help, but it just gave you another thing to maintain. Everything I try, you just... treat it like another chore!"

"I'm sorry. If you want, I can—"

"I'm not trying to give you more orders, Orrin!" She looked up, but not at me. She glared straight forward, at absolutely nothing. Apparently not finding whatever it was she sought, she balled her fists, and huffed.

"How am I supposed to feel?" she asked. "What does it mean when you take everything I do, good or bad, and just... keep going, like I'm just another burden to bear?"

"I don't see you that way, though." Not specifically, and no more than anything else, at least, though I didn't say that part aloud. "You've always tried to help me, and I thank you for that."

"Then why isn't it working?" She squeezed her eyes shut. Her breathing became ragged, and I continued to ignore it. "I... I can't bring you out of this. The therapy did nothing, either. Working out almost helped. You clearly got your physique, and you actually seemed to like it at first. The enjoyment didn't last, though. It never does."

"Vanessa—"

"I just want to feel like you actually love me, Orrin. Is that so much to ask?"

"Of course not. You deserve nothing less." I placed my hand on her knee, though I wasn't sure what I was trying to accomplish.

"But you don't, do you?" she asked.

"Excuse me?"

"You don't love me."

I swallowed, but said nothing.

"Do you?" She pulled my hand away, and stared directly at me. Her composure cracked, and a tear matted her feathers. "Orrin...?"

A normal husband would have had the right answer, and he would have had it without a moment of hesitation. He would have meant that answer with all his heart. However, I found myself incapable of either feat.

"Of... course I do," I lied.

She stared directly into my eyes, desperately searching for something to support my claim, something that would allow her to believe me. After a pause, she looked away.

"No. You don't."

"Why not?" I should have sounded indignant, but the strongest emotion I could summon was curiosity. "Why wouldn't I love you? Why would I choose anyone else over you?"

She shook her head. "It's not that. If I thought you were being unfaithful, I'd have said so. No, I don't think you love anyone else, either. I don't think you can. You're not capable of love. Not like this."

I blinked, but said nothing in response. The right answer would have been to reject her accusation, to defend myself, perhaps even to take offense at the insinuation. I should have believed that I was more than capable, and that she was wrong to say otherwise.

I should have, but I didn't. No matter how long or hard I thought about it, I couldn't find a way to disprove her theory.

"Why did you marry me, anyway?" she asked.

"Because... because I love you," I tried again.

She gave a sharp exhale. "The truth, Orrin."

"The truth...."

I looked away. I looked at the carpet, the walls, anything but her.

How much of the truth could she accept? I didn't want to destroy her; she had been crying enough already. However, she had me cornered. I wished for any other option, but after she had rejected everything else, the truth was all I had left.

"Obligation, perhaps."

I knew that was the wrong thing to say, even before I saw her reaction. I knew even without looking that her eyes had widened, and that her beak had fallen open in silent shock, as if to gasp. "You liked me," I added. "Father always pressured me about what an ideal couple we were. His last wish was to see us married. I thought—"

"Don't... don't put me together with him!"

I winced. "I wasn't trying to. I'm sorry."

"So this was all for him, then?"

"No. Only half. You were interested in me, too. I thought that, if I married you, it would honor him while giving you what you wanted."

"But this isn't what I wanted! What does marriage even mean, if you always shut me out like this? I don't even know who you are. All I wanted was for you to just... let me in!"

"You are in."

I raised my arms, opened my hands, and looked up. I gestured all around the guest room, at its bare walls, its lack of furnishing beyond the basic essentials, its empty appearance.

"I'm not hiding anything," I said. "I have never kept secrets from you. I let you in a long time ago. You gave me this room to express myself, and this is what happened. You wanted to see my innermost self, and you can. You are. Here it is. It is not my fault that there is nothing here to see."

"Yes, it is!" She planted her hands at her sides, pushed herself off the bed, spun around, and stood over me. "This is why we have a problem! You and your stupid—"

She froze. She stopped speaking, and stared at me in wide-eyed, open-beaked horror, as if I were a ghost.

"Oh, no," she said. "No, no, no."

"Vanessa?" I tilted my head.

She didn't respond. Instead, she wordlessly sunk back into her seat on the bed, and buried her face in her hands. She convulsed, and wept.

I experimentally moved a hand toward her shoulder, but she spun and swatted it away. She hit my arm hard enough to sting, and I almost grunted in pain, but was able to suppress the reaction.

"I-I'm sorry," she said, between sobs. "I was about to... I had to stop myself before... before I did something bad."

"Excuse me?"

"I wanted to... for a moment, there, I wanted to say something horrible, like mocking your father's death or something. Just some cheap insult like that. Or maybe just pull your feathers, or slap you, or...."

At first, I almost asked why she would want to do such a thing. The more I thought about it, though, the surer I was that I already knew.

"Just to make me react?" I asked.

She closed her eyes, swallowed, and gave a very small nod. "I thought that, if you blew up at me, at least you would finally be passionate about something."

Silence. I had no reaction, but not for a lack of trying. I searched for words,

and failed. What could I have said?

"You've never been anything but courteous to me," she continued, shakily. "You've always treated me with kindness and respect, but... you're my husband, not my coworker. Politeness isn't good enough."

I desperately wanted to say something to make her feel better. Whether I truly loved her or not, I at least liked her, and I didn't want her to be in pain. I couldn't stop it, though. I could do nothing but sit in silence as she cried, all because of me. Not only was I powerless to comfort her; I was the very reason she suffered.

If only I could have loved her. Clearly, it was what she wanted. I would have given it to her, if I were able. I would have given anything else to anyone else, just for the ability to give Vanessa my love. Then, I could have ended her pain. Then, I could have made her happy.

As much as I tried, though, I was unable to give her something I simply didn't have. Why? Why could I not make myself feel anything for her?

"I've always loved you, even now," she said. "That's why I haven't left. I... I thought that if I waited long enough, you'd come out of this, and maybe you'd love me when you did. A part of me still thinks that. Still hopes it. I just...."

She suddenly pressed against my side, buried her head, and threw her arms around me. I returned the hug, though I was much less certain of my own motions. The hug I gave her was impersonal, like that of a distant stranger attempting to sympathize. A husband who truly cared for his wife could have done better. Alas, I only had so much comfort I could offer, as much as that fact pained both of us.

"I'm just tired of feeling like your widow," she added.

"Vanessa...."

I expected her to cut me off after I said her name, but she didn't. I even paused, and awaited her words, but none came. Instead, she was silent, except for the soft, muted weeping against my chest. I wanted to keep talking, but I couldn't; I had no words for her, either. I had assumed that she didn't want to listen to me, and when she proved me wrong, only then did I realize that I had nothing to say.



Scout handled almost all of the duties that evening. Celine was still feverish, but since we had agreed not to enter Garreton until morning, she was at least

able to rest. Scout had left to catch the fish, gather the plants, and collect the wood for the fire. My job was to stay with Celine, and watch over her while we both awaited his return.

"How are you feeling now?" I asked. I was no expert at conversations, but since it was my only duty, I had to try.

"A little better." she said. "I don't like not being able to help with the gathering, though."

I didn't respond. I was well familiar with that feeling, of course. Even though she lacked the energy to assist Scout with the gathering, she could still help with the plant identification, cooking, and whatever else when he returned. I couldn't even do that.

Not that it mattered, of course. The conversation was about Celine, not me.

"It is nice that he goes out of his way for me," she added. "I just wish he didn't have to."

I had the same wish, but at the same time, I knew Scout well enough to know better.

"I don't think he minds taking care of you," I said.

"You don't?"

I shook my head. "He's not resentful. He's loyal. He lives for those around him. Always has."

"I guess I'm lucky to have him, then. Well, lucky by afflicted standards, anyway."

"Indeed." Anyone would have been fortunate to be with Scout, under any circumstances. Even in the wilds, his presence was always uplifting. "He must love you very much."

"I must what, now?"

I had apparently distracted myself with my thoughts, and failed to hear his approach.

"Scout! Welcome back," Celine said.

~

Either Scout had chosen a heavily populated fishing spot, or he had been particularly fortunate. According to Celine, the haul he bore when he returned was massive. After so many nights with meager available fishing, even more meager success acquiring it, and six people clamoring for what little we could find, our small group had, by our standards, a large feast.

Scout and Celine had done most of the cooking. They had been able to find a few small tasks for me, such as stirring the plants as they boiled, but they were only giving me something to do as a courtesy. I hadn't saved them any effort

with my help. If anything, they had spent even more energy babysitting me. They could have easily come out ahead by doing everything themselves.

"This has been a weird night," Scout said, once he had finished and served our food.

"You did well, though," Celine replied.

"With the fishing? Yeah, I guess. Thanks. But... still, it's weird with it being just us now. We have to figure out how to do everything all over again. Like, how are we going to handle watch tonight?"

A fair question. I paused to think, only for Celine to answer first.

"Well, having fewer people means longer shifts," she said. "Can we handle that?"

"Doubtful," I finally added. "If all three of us were taking shifts, then maybe. But we're not."

"What do you mean?" Scout asked. After thinking about it, he added, "Oh."

"Hey, I'm well enough that I can still do my share," Celine said.

"No, you're not." A pause, possibly for Scout to squeeze her hand, or something. "You're not over your fever, yet. And you could just as easily get worse as better. I'm glad you're feeling good enough to offer, but no, you need to rest."

"I can take watch," I said. "That is, if you think it would work."

Scout sighed. "I'd take you up on that, if I thought it would, but... no. Thanks, though."

I resisted the urge to hang my head. "Very well," I said.

"You're not taking the entire night, Scout." Celine struggled to hide her annoyance at the mere suggestion.

"Perhaps we should simply abandon the practice of taking watch," I said.

"Completely?" Scout and Celine's responses were simultaneous.

I gave a small nod. "Hunters drive along the main roads all the way to Roc's Nest, but their wilderness patrols start to fade between Crown's Pass and Garreton. We've come a long way. We should be safe, now."

"You think so?" Scout rustled with something. His map, perhaps.

"Mostly," I admitted. "Another ambush is not impossible. Nothing is impossible. However, we are at least out of their usual range."

Silence.

"Well, it does make sense," Scout finally said. More rustling, as if he were putting the map away. "Girard's tribe is the one that cares more about making it, after all. Let's say we all go to sleep, and no one has watch. Worst case, something gets us all while we're sleeping. Oh, well. Our goal was just to live well before we die, right?"

"You're sure about the Hunters, though?" Celine asked. "What about that increase they were planning? Are they still doing that?"

"Yes," I answered. "They are. That is only to increase their presence in their usual range, though. They don't intend to expand it."

"That's good to know," Celine said. "Thank you."

"It is nothing." I took another bite of fish.

"No," Scout said, "I think she's right. I mean, we'd have stuck with you anyway, but knowing that you have really useful Hunter knowledge, too? Girard is missing out."

I stopped eating, and froze. I wanted to bask in the glow of the kind words, especially coming from him, but I was nowhere near vain enough to do so. "Girard wouldn't have believed me," I finally offered, hoping to change the subject.

"Girard wouldn't believe anything coming from you, but that's his problem." Scout put his hand on my shoulder. "Hey, don't let it get you down, all right? Girard is crazy."

Scout had a point. I knew that I had never been able to win with Girard. A part of me wanted to agree with Scout, but the rest wanted to search for a way to escape the subject. To my surprise, though, I couldn't think of a reason to deny his kindness. It was a habit, of course, but it had no justification. Girard was gone. Scout and Celine supported me. What reason did I have to reject the compliment?

"You're... right." My answer was unsteady at first, as I was venturing into wholly unfamiliar territory. In a fit of unexplained and unexpected boldness, I added, "If anything, he would have found a way to blame me for the increase."

I silently panicked as soon as the words had left my beak. What had I been thinking? I had opened myself, and left myself vulnerable to their response. I had no way of knowing what that response would be. I had only intended to make a sarcastic remark at Girard's expense—a joke—but would they take it that way?

I heard nothing, and interpreted the silence as proof that I had failed, that my remark had either gone too far or simply fallen flat. Then, to my surprise, the silence ended, and there was quiet laughter.

"Yeah," Scout said, after a chuckle. "Probably. Like I said, he's crazy."

He had accepted it. Scout had accepted my remark. Agreed with it, even. I hadn't expected him to—

"Rook?" Celine asked.

I struggled not to wince. "Yes?"

"Out of curiosity, what did cause the increase?"

My thought process worked in two phases. First, I thought of the actual answer to her question. That phase was immediate and easy; I knew that one. I was even there when they had announced it. The trickier matter was deciding how much information to share. My first instinct was to remain guarded, to give as little of an answer as possible. However, once again, I failed to understand why. Why was it a secret? I saw no reason not to tell her the whole truth.

Having decided, I worked up as much courage as I could, and I spoke.

"Garbage disposal."

Silence. I would have to explain, of course.

"The wilds are a convenient way to make people disappear," I said. "People get into accidents out here, and breach their suits, and then they're afflicted and they have to die. No one asks questions. Thus, Mayor King sends his enemies here. Sometimes, though, they escape into the wilds rather than dying immediately. When too many of them are out there, the Hunters get nervous and purge the area."

"What kind of people are they looking for?" Scout asked.

"Father, most likely," Celine answered. Her voice was quiet.

"Or Doctor Signey, maybe?" Scout said.

"Or me." I paused, and then added, "I am sorry."

More silence.

"At least both tribes are out of their range, though, right?" Scout finally asked.

"If we stay off the main roads, then yes," I said.

"Why didn't you mention any of this before?" Celine asked.

A fair question, but a difficult one. I thought carefully, and inhaled.

"I didn't want to accuse or blame anyone. The Hunters are no one's fault." A thought flew around in my head, and against my better judgment, I let it escape. "Furthermore, if I had said they were here for Sir Coral, I doubt Girard would have taken it well."

Scout inhaled sharply. "Yeah, good point."

Good point, he said. I had offered another remark about Girard, and Scout had called it a good point. Once again, I had said something that I should have kept to myself, and it had somehow worked.

Our group was clearly different from how the larger tribe had been, and that scared me. Scout and Celine were friendly and open, and they treated me well. I even caught myself starting to like it. That wasn't supposed to happen. As pleasant as it was, it wasn't right, wasn't fair. How could I bask in warmth I hadn't earned, and didn't deserve? How could I accept their kindness, or any kindness, after everything I had done?



Vanessa,

I hope this letter finds you well. That would make one of us, at least.

Soon, I will leave the city forever, and live out the rest of my days in the wilds. After much thought, I have decided that it is my only remaining option.

I never should have joined the Hunters. As a child, I promised my father that I would never be violent. I saw what the war had done to him. I knew that he never would have wanted military life for me. I should have heeded his warning. If I had remained a civilian, then none of this would have happened.

I mostly joined because I thought we needed their support. The Hunters live well, better than any other group in the city. King gives them everything they could ever want and more, just to ensure their loyalty and protection. They say that one can find success, and climb from the low district all the way to unimaginable wealth, simply by advancing through the Hunters' ranks. It's not that I'm greedy; I don't need the money. I just thought that we did. I thought that they held the key to a better life, for both of us.

I also believed that I could put my father behind me. Perhaps my perpetual gloom comes from clinging too tightly to him, his legacy, and his teachings. He never would have wanted me to become a Hunter, but he is dead, and I thought that meant that he couldn't control my life anymore.

I became a Hunter against everything he raised me to believe. It was a desperate measure, but after seeing our marriage in ruins, I was desperate. I thought that, if I succeeded in rejecting his path and finding my own, I could break the spell I've been under for so long. Then, I would find the ability to love you, as you have always loved me. I would earn the lavish wages of a Hunter, and we would live off them, together. The Hunters were supposed to give us luxury, and give me the ability to enjoy that luxury with you.

It didn't work out that way, of course. I'm sorry.

Basic training was easy enough. I have physical strength to spare, something of a gift for accuracy, and I've always been able to follow orders. I did well. My instructor gave me the name "Rook," and I accepted it. I accepted everything. I was the talented but passive one, the person who just quietly performed everything asked of him. The one who never spoke, and therefore, never complained. I avoided causing scenes, and I did well, usually at or near the top of my class.

Accepting things was never the hard part, or the problem. Following orders was easy. Had the rest of my career been like my training, I'd have excelled, and perhaps even grown to enjoy it. Unfortunately, I had too much skill to stay in training forever, and I started to face promotion. They started to pull me away from the meaningless target practice drills, and deeper into the realm of what the Hunters really were. One day, they punished my success by putting me on a real patrol.

~

We were in the wilds for a long time, remaining hidden in a thin forest, waiting for someone to walk by. A trap. We had waited almost the entire day, with no activity at all. With the exception of our instructor communicating over his radio, all was quiet. I had hoped that boredom would be the worst obstacle we faced, but instead, just as I had thought I might escape the patrol without incident, something happened.

We saw her in the distance. She never saw us.

A single, solitary figure. No suit. Afflicted. Mouse. Female. Young. Thin. She was picking flowers. She looked sad, but focused and serene in her task, as if gathering enough flowers could make her feel better.

I was the first person to see her, but I said nothing. I even made sure to look away, to keep sweeping with my binoculars. I wanted to avoid calling the others' attention toward her direction. Perhaps I could give her time to disappear again, before—

Another recruit saw her, as well, and he announced it.

Our instructor cheered, and chose me to take the shot.

I swallowed.

I wanted to throw the shot away. I considered aiming just close enough to look like I tried, but not close enough to hit. If I alerted her with the near miss, then she could run. However, my marksmanship was exemplary, and, as much as I didn't want to admit it, it was a simple shot. She was sitting, still, distracted, and oblivious. She could not have been an easier target. No, it would never work; I couldn't miss unless it was clearly deliberate, and my instructor knew it.

Furthermore, even if I could have spared her with my first shot, and allowed her to flee, that only would have forced the entire unit to chase her down. It almost seemed better to give her the mercy of a quick, clean kill, rather than forcing her to run for her life, only to kill her anyway.

The instructor watched me carefully. He awaited my move.

I had to act. I didn't want to, but the instructor was watching. Even freezing or doing nothing would have been insubordination.

I whispered a silent apology, and inhaled.

I took the shot.

It was a direct hit. The mouse girl's head exploded, and her body slumped to the ground, lifeless.

She was dead. She was dead because I had killed her.

I shut down. I wanted to scream, to sob, to vomit, to faint, but instead, I deadened every emotional impulse over which I had any control whatsoever. The less I existed in the real world, the less I felt. The more I withdrew into my own head, the easier the situation became.

My instructor congratulated me, and then said something about collecting the body later, to give it to a research outpost, or something. I tried my best not to listen.

Suppressing everything else had made it easier to hide my reactions. They had already considered me the quiet one, so I gave them what they expected. My instructor couldn't see my face through my DLY suit, and thus, he believed that I was still his good little soldier. I was able to remain beneath their suspicion. As long as I avoided acting out, no one would ever know.

I knew, though. I knew what I had done. My head spun, and wasn't sure how much longer I could ward off the nausea. I had taken a life. I had promised Father I would never commit an act of violence, and I had broken my promise. He had wanted me to avoid so much as fighting, and I had killed someone.

A mouse, no less.

Scout.

I knew she wasn't Scout, but how much of a difference would it have made? What would I have done, if it had been him? Would I have killed him, too?

Scout. He was once my best friend. My only friend. After I had married and moved out of the low district, though, I hadn't seen him again. He had always been kind to me, and I had repaid that kindness by vanishing. I had lost contact with him, and then, when he wasn't looking, I had joined the Hunters and shot a mouse. What would he have said, if he had seen what I had become?

I added him to the ever-growing list of people I had failed.

Another recruit started to shift around in visible nervousness. The instructor pressed him, and he stammered, and then admitted to being uncomfortable with the kill. He sympathized with the mouse girl.

I held still, almost to the point of not breathing, and didn't say a word. I hid every thought that the other recruit had openly expressed. I even lied when the instructor asked if I sympathized with her, too. I let my fellow recruit say everything I didn't dare say, while I stood by, unhelping.

My instructor replied with a threat. Legally, any breach or failure in one's

suit meant instant affliction. Legally, affliction meant instant death. The instructor advised us to consider the implications of this. Accidents in the wilds, as well as subsequent mandated executions, had a way of happening to disrespectful trainees who angered their superiors. We all had to be careful, lest he take permanent action, and then invent suit malfunctions to justify himself in the subsequent paperwork.

I knew, at that moment, how unfit I was to handle life as a Hunter. I had let the easy training and drills fool me. I had deluded myself into believing that Father was wrong, that everything he had told me had been false, that it had all been a twisted reflection of his own failure. At that moment, I saw the truth. I realized then that Father had always been right about everything.

Furthermore, I understood that what I had done was routine to the Hunters. It wasn't enough that I had killed one person. There would be more. The Hunters would make me break my promise again, and again, every day I served with them.

I finally understood why Father had fled his service in disgrace. It was my turn to do the same.

~

Therefore, I am writing this letter to you. I shall forever remain sorry that it has come to this.

I can't just leave the Hunters. I have seen too much. They are Mayor King's personal army, and they are omnipresent. If I make them my enemy, then nowhere in the city would be safe, for either of us.

I cannot stay with you. If I did, then they would come for both of us. I have turned on Mayor King, and I expect merciless retaliation. My only option is to disappear first.

I cannot take you with me, either. I have nowhere to go. As a Hunter, I can get through the checkpoint and leave the city, but I cannot make it much farther. The journey to the northern city is too long for my suit to hold, and they won't let me in once I become afflicted. I will have no other destination except the grave, and I would never wish that on you.

That is why I have decided to vanish into the wilds, alone. I will remove my suit, and live and die as one of the afflicted. Why not? I let Father down. I let you down. I let the other recruit in my unit down. I let Scout down. Even without the Hunter threat, I have nowhere left to turn. How can I face anyone anymore? How can I live anymore?

I will end my life in the wilds, and the mouse girl will have her revenge. I shall continue to act loyal to my unit until I get a chance, and then I shall sneak

away. I will leave my rifle, most of my possessions, and this letter. I will take only my suit, my sidearm, and a certain small personal memento.

I am also leaving behind my old name. I hate my new name; every time I hear it, it reminds me of how far I've fallen. It is fitting, though. Loathsome, but deserved. I cannot hide from its reality, even if I want to. I am no longer Orrin Sebastian. Orrin never would have done the things that I have done. I have betrayed everything Orrin ever believed. I am Rook, the killer.

I have run away from everything and everyone. The penalty for my weakness and cowardice is death by DLY, and I accept that. Since I can't bear the burden of my life in the city, I shall instead bear the burden of my death in the wilds. I have made a new promise to myself: I will accept whatever happens to me after I remove my suit. After all, it is nothing less than what I have earned. This promise, unlike my last one, I will keep. I couldn't persevere before, but I will now.

I am sorry for all the pain I have caused you, both before this decision, and because of it. You have always deserved someone better, but you wanted me, instead. I am sorry that I was never able to grant your wish. I hope that you can move on, and find happiness without me. I'm sorry that you never could find it with me.

I wish you nothing but the best, always.

Signed,

Rook



"Hey, Celine, look out!"

I heard a splash. What was Scout—laughter? Before I understood what was happening, I heard Celine give a startled yelp, but then burst into laughter as well.

"You little brat!" she said.

Another splash.

Playing. They were playing. I supposed I should have expected it; the journey through Garreton had been uneventful, but long, and had come just after the tribes had split. Scout and Celine had earned their fun, after all that had happened to them.

"Hey, Rook! Actually, no, never mind. That would be mean."

"I can still hear you."

"Yeah, but... well, all right, if you say so."

Of all the ways I could have answered Scout's aborted challenge, mine proved to be a poor choice.

I heard a splash, and then instantly felt cold water hitting my face and chest. I blinked, not that it changed anything. I held my arms outstretched, my feathers dripping.

Silence. Scout and Celine must have been waiting for my reaction, so that they could determine whether it was all right to laugh. In all fairness, I wasn't sure what to make of the attack, either.

I lowered my arms back into the small lake, and thought. Unusual as their silliness was, they had been having fun, and Scout had unofficially brought me into it. I didn't want to insert myself where I was unwelcome, and wasn't sure I deserved such merriment anyway, but Scout had invited me. I couldn't decline his invitation.

I allowed the corner of my beak to curl upward, in the faintest of smiles. So be it, then. Something about the company of Scout and Celine made me more impulsive, and I decided to give into that terrifying yet alluring urge again.

I didn't have Scout's speed, but I had size and strength. I gathered as much water as I could, gave a mock war cry, and hurled a massive wave in his direction.

At least, I assumed it was his direction. I heard Celine laughing, and could tell where she was from that, but Scout was silent, and therefore invisible.

I realized moments too late what had likely occurred.

"That wasn't even close, was it?" I asked.

"Nope."

Scout's answer came from directly behind me. I spun around just in time to catch another large splash, and gave a loud and shrill caw in response.

"Well played," I admitted, over Scout and Celine's laughter.

"All right, all right, I'm done now. I'm sorry." Scout chuckled.

"Don't be. That was...." Fun? "Interesting."

"You're really opening up, aren't you?" Celine asked.

"Excuse me?"

"Now, now, don't scare him," Scout said.

"Yeah, you're right. Still, this is nice." Celine paused, and then yawned.

"Are you all right?" Scout asked.

"Just tired, is all. Coming off a fever... or between two of them. You know. Either way."

"Is there anything we can do?" Scout sloshed his way toward Celine.

"You're already helping just by letting me rest when I need it. Thank you."

"Well, we're in Rook's tribe," Scout said. "We're not worried about speed."

"Thank you for staying with me," I added. I then wondered whether I should have.

I heard a dull, halfhearted splash coming from Celine's direction, as if she had batted at the water without any particular target. "Anyway, I'm going to lie down for a bit. We'll see if a nap helps, I guess. Meanwhile, you two have fun."

Celine rose out of the water and walked to shore, with no apparent corrections or adjustments to her stride for modesty. Of course, Scout presumably had privileges with her, and I couldn't have stolen glimpses even if I had wanted to, so she had nothing to fear in that regard. Once she was out of the water, I heard her picking up her clothing, and then I heard nothing.

"So, um," Scout said, "I really am sorry about that. I hope I didn't go too far or anything."

"It's all right." I belatedly realized how that sounded, and added, "It really is. I enjoyed it."

He put his hand on my shoulder. "You know, you still have your moments and all, but I think Celine is right about you."

"I'm...." I held my breath. Why was it so hard to admit? "I'm experimenting. Trying to say things, instead of just thinking them. Joining in that game just now. I don't know why, but I just... wanted to try."

"Well, keep it up. I kind of like it. I mean, I've known you how long, now? But I've never seen you like this, and that's too bad. I know it's hard to find happiness out here, even harder than it was in the city, but... whatever we can get, you deserve it, too."

I doubted that. Life in the wilds was hard, its only reward was death, and that was what I deserved. Not happiness.

Even my name was something through which I silently suffered. If Scout knew that he was punishing me, reminding me of my crime every time he called me "Rook," then he certainly would have stopped. For as long as I had known him, he had always been gentle, compassionate, and caring. He would never have agreed to call me something that punished me. He would never knowingly hurt me. That was why I had made sure that he never knew.

Yet....

Scout and Celine had found happiness, even in the wilds. My first instinct was to consider it justice, their reward for being better than I was. The longer I spent with them, though, the more I wondered. Could I have been wrong? Was it possible for me to obtain what they had?

Scout had been with the Plague during their turf wars, and supposedly, that was how he had become a target, and how he had ended up in the wilds. He had

very likely been involved in the gang violence, at least on some level. He had probably hurt people, too. Somehow, though, it never diminished the sweetness and tenderness I had always known. He had struggled with, then left behind and moved on from his past, and earned the love of Celine as his reward.

His reward. I punished myself for my past, but he had defeated his, enough to earn a reward for it.

Could I do the same? Did the first edict apply to me, too?

I wanted to ask him, but at the same time, I didn't. I had no idea how to approach the subject, and I feared that, if he saw my struggles, he might ask about what I had done to cause them.

"Anyway," he said, "I guess I'm done here." He understood that I had been too lost in thought to respond, and started to leave the water.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"For what?" He stopped walking.

I hadn't expected his question. I was sorry for... not answering him? No, it wasn't the first time I had failed to respond to something. For my past? I hadn't even told him about it. What else could it have been?

"I don't know," I admitted.

"Well, then, don't worry about it." Scout chuckled, and resumed his walking. "Hey, Rook. Today was a good day, all right?"

I struggled to mask my wince. He didn't know that calling me that contradicted his assertion, of course.

Was it fair? I started to wonder.

Scout and I had near-opposite approaches to life in the wilds. He didn't punish himself the way I did. Was my way a mistake? Was his? No, he couldn't have been wrong. Not Scout. Never Scout. Therefore, the error had to have been mine.

The logic was simple enough, but the implication terrified me. If I was wrong, then what could I do? If I had made a mistake, had the time finally come to end it?

"Scout, about my name... maybe you should—"

"Hey, you. Sorry to keep you waiting."

Scout had stepped out of the lake, and was talking to Celine. I had taken so long to think that he had left, and when I had finally tried to speak, I had lacked the courage to raise my voice above a whisper. Obviously, he hadn't heard my ineffectual mumbling from the shore.

I accepted that. It was my fault for being unable to speak up, after all. I decided to back down, and allow him and Celine their moment. I could talk to him about my name later.

"So, I figured we could move out tomorrow, after—oh, are you asleep already? Sorry." His last word was quieter than the rest had been.

Silence. I returned to my bathing.

"Um... Celine?"

More silence.

"Celine?"

I started to rise up out of the lake, just in case—

"Rook, come here! Quick! Something's wrong!"



I should have been the one out there. I should have been the one looking for supplies, for anything in the wilderness that could serve as improvised medicine, while Scout stayed with Celine. What would he say if her condition worsened while he was away? What would he do if he didn't get to see her again? It wasn't fair that he had to leave while I stayed. It should have been the other way around.

Of course, that was impossible. How could I have searched for anything?

I had failed again. After failing my father, Vanessa, my fellow recruits, Scout, and the mouse girl, I had thought that I could run away from my own life, but not even fleeing the city had ended my string of failures.

I had been unable to coexist with Sir Coral and Girard, and I had been unable to prevent the collapse of the tribe. Without my sight, I had been unable to keep watch, or to catch or cook food. I had been unable to move Celine by myself; I had carried her to an improvised shelter, out of the sun, but Scout had needed to find and lead me to it. Once settled in, I hadn't even been able to let Scout stay with Celine, because I was unable to look for supplies.

It was hard to believe that, despite all those failures, I had almost had the audacity to tell Scout about my name. What had I been thinking? Had I truly believed that my punishment was over? It was never over. So long as I continued to be useless, and so long as the mouse I killed continued to be dead, I would always be Rook. How dare I attempt to escape my fate, after I had made a promise to accept it?

Footsteps. Rapid ones. Scout was approaching, at a full sprint.

He almost tripped over Celine and collided with me. He only barely managed to stop in time, and once he did, he quickly fell to his knees.

"Celine! I... there's... looked... out there... couldn't...."

I passed a bowl of water over to Scout, who snatched it away and gulped it down between pants.

"Sorry," he said, as he struggled to catch his breath. "There's... there's nothing out there. Anywhere. Just water, but we have that already." A few more pants, then, "How is she?"

I placed my hand on her forehead. "No change," I reported. "She's burning up. And...." I struggled to decide how delicate I should be in telling him. "Not coherent."

"Scout...?" Celine asked. Her voice was quiet, faint.

"Celine!" I heard Scout drop something on the ground—presumably the water bowl. Then, subtle movement. I guessed that he had taken her hands in his.

"Scout...?" she asked again.

"I'm here," he answered.

"Scout...?" Another question, as if she hadn't heard him. She then added, "Father...?"

I placed my hand on Scout's shoulder. The gesture was clumsier than I would have liked, as my first guess at his location was almost, but not quite accurate. I wasn't sure what I expected to accomplish, but I was equally unsure what else I could do. He placed his hand on top of mine, and I allowed that contact to last longer than I should have. I had to pull away, though, even if I didn't want to. As much as I appreciated his returning of the gesture, Celine needed him more than I did.

I felt my way around the ground, and found the water bowl Scout had dropped. I picked it up, and started to apply it to Celine. She wasn't lucid enough to drink, but perhaps cooling her would ease the pain, if only a little. I needed some sort of cloth... my blindfold. Of course. I removed my blindfold, soaked it, and placed it over her forehead.

I was completely silent. Scout said little except for futile attempts to reach out to Celine, who continued to alternate between calling for him and for her father.

I took my blindfold off her head, and prepared to re-soak it, when I heard her move. More movement, rustling—a struggle? Oh. She had tried to sit up, but Scout held her down, kept her from moving too quickly.

"S... Scout." Celine briefly sounded calmer, happier. More at peace. Perhaps, in that moment, she had finally seen him.

Celine took one final breath, held it for a few moments, and then slowly exhaled. She settled back down to the ground, and was still.

Silence.

Then, eventually, Scout started to cry.



Scout and I spent the rest of the day burying Celine. Compared to the gathering the tribe had held for Keeper Edward, or even the one for Marcus, Celine's was a small affair, as Scout and I were the only ones left to remember her. We spoke in her honor, and we consoled each other. We could do little else.

As unfair as it was after all he had been through, Scout had to make that evening's dinner almost entirely by himself. I offered my assistance wherever I could, but it quickly became obvious that I couldn't help him.

I wanted to say I was sorry, but I refrained, because I knew how that conversation would have gone. I'd have apologized for being useless, he'd have insisted it was fine, and at that point, we would have been focusing on me. No, any feelings of inadequacy I had, I held in silence, for Celine's sake.

~

After another night with no watch, I awoke to a strange sense of isolation. I couldn't explain why, especially without being able to see my surroundings, but something felt different, somehow. I reached to my side, and fumbled around for my blindfold. I didn't find it. I continued to feel around the ground, completely in vain. It was absolutely nowhere. Odd.

"Scout?" I asked.

No response. Also odd.

He had to have woken up and left already; I didn't hear his breathing, and a quick feel around the ground near me turned up nothing.

I wanted to believe that he was cooking breakfast, but I couldn't hear a fire. I couldn't hear any sound at all, actually. Was he out catching food, then?

That strange sensation returned. Something was wrong. I sat up.

It wasn't just that Scout's bedroll was empty. Like my blindfold, it was missing entirely. So was mine. Even the ground itself lacked the dust and rocks I usually felt. It was solid, but smooth and featureless, like polished stone. I was on some sort of blank surface.

I couldn't see anything, but I was used to that. More troubling was that I couldn't hear anything, either. My sense of touch still worked, or I at least thought it did, but there was nothing to feel.

"Scout?" I asked again. I noticed then that I couldn't even hear my own voice. "Scout!" I normally didn't raise my voice, but I needed to know where he

was, and I needed to prove that I could still hear. Both efforts failed. My shout didn't even reach myself, let alone anyone else.

I briefly considered standing, but decided to stay on my hands and knees, instead. I needed to find something, anything that could explain what was happening.

I tried to feel around the area, but it was another wasted effort. Nothing, still.

I crawled forward, stumbling and feeling, hoping for an identifiable object or texture that never came. Even my sense of "forward" was questionable in the void, as was my sense of how much time I had spent searching.

If only I could understand what had—

"Rook...?"

Never before had I been so overjoyed to hear that detestable name.

"Scout," I forced out, barely above a whisper. I had needed to cry out with everything I had, but my voice had betrayed me.

"Rook." His voice came with volume, but was faint, as if shouting from far away. Had he actually heard me? Could I have been that fortunate?

I spun my head around, trying to find him, to no avail. His voice was louder, as if growing closer, but the exact location eluded me. It seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, and I found it impossible to track.

Suddenly, I was on my side. Had I fallen? I felt strangely groggy.

Movement. My entire body shook. No, something shook my body. Whatever it was shook me even through my bedroll, which had reappeared as if I had never left it.

"Rook!"

Suddenly, I knew exactly where Scout was. He was right next to me. He must have been the one shaking me.

"Rook, are you all right?"

"Scout...?" My voice seemed to have returned. "Scout. What happened?"

"You were calling out for me. I didn't want to wake you or anything, but you sounded... disturbed, like you were having a nightmare or something. Was I wrong? I'm sorry if I was."

Wake me? A nightmare? Was that what it had been? The waking and dreaming worlds were equally dark to me, so it was difficult to tell that I had switched between them. I did finally realize what had happened, but only after noticing that things existed again. I felt the ground, including the rocks. I felt my bedroll and my blindfold. I heard Scout. Therefore, I was awake.

"No, that was fine. Thank you. I'm sorry to make you—"

"Shh. It's all right." Scout anticipated my reaction, and cut it off. For all I tried to keep hidden from him in some ways, he already knew me much too well

in others.



"So, after all this, here we are. Just you and me again, I guess."

I stopped walking. I had no idea what to say to that, especially the day after Celine had died.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"To keep traveling?" Scout returned my question with his own. It wasn't at all what I had meant, but I didn't challenge him. If he wanted to evade the harder issue, I respected that. "Mostly. I mean, what else can we do?"

"I'm sorry." My words meant absolutely nothing and we both knew it, but they were all I had.

"It's fine."

I didn't believe him, but I didn't press the matter. We started walking again.

"The good news is we're almost to Garreton," he said. "After we get through there, there's nothing but wilderness between us and Gilded Bend, so we can...."

I tried not to react, but based on the way he abruptly stopped talking, he must have seen me.

"What? What did I say? That was right, wasn't it?"

I said nothing.

"Wasn't it...?" he repeated.

I didn't want to tell him, but I had to answer him, and I couldn't lie.

"Scout, we left Garreton two days ago. We're now between Garreton and Gilded Bend."

"We are? No, we're not. Are we?" He did a poor job masking the panic in his voice. Another pause, before he darkly added, "Oh."

He had sounded so proud when he had remembered the cities' names, and I hated myself for bringing his accomplishment crashing down. I'd have held his shoulder, if he hadn't already been holding my hands.

"We're in trouble," he said. He tightened his grip.

"We'll be fine."

"No, I should have known that. I mean, the tribes split up the day before we entered Garreton. Celine got sick and... well, we lost Celine the day after we left it. Those aren't minor, forgettable events, but apparently I can't even remember them."

"You just did."

"After being corrected."

"That means the memory is still there, doesn't it?"

"Well, yeah, I guess." He gave a sharp exhale. "Things don't disappear completely, or at least, not that I know of. Not yet, anyway. They just get harder to find, like looking for your keys in a room that keeps getting messier."

He continued to hold my hands in his. It was his way of leading me as we walked. Neither of us had anything to add, so we traveled in awkward silence.

~

Eventually, he pushed my hands backwards, guiding me to stop. It was just a simple directional gesture, but I had always admired how gentle he was with it. I stopped.

"Hey," he said.

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you about this morning?"

My entire body tensed. I accidentally clenched his hands, which gave away my discomfort.

"What do you mean?" I asked, as if I didn't already know.

"Well, I figured you must have been having a bad dream or something, but you were calling for me, specifically. So, now I'm curious."

Of course.

"You don't have to say anything if you don't want, though," he added.

"It's not that." I couldn't have said no to him, even if I had wanted to. Not to him. "I just don't want to burden you. You've been through enough already. You don't need my problems on top of—"

"Rook."

I attempted not to move, except for the slightest brief clench of my beak. "Yes?"

"It's all right. I'm here for you, too, remember?"

He was already holding my hands, so it was easy for him to add a soft squeeze, presumably just to accentuate his point. I managed not to say or do anything, but it took all the energy I had to suppress my reactions. Did he just... what could that... was I imagining...?

"Besides," he mercifully continued, "I want to hear you out. Honestly, at this point, your problems would be a welcome distraction from mine."

"Very well," I said. If it was what he wanted, then I had to tell him. I would never turn him down, especially not when I had a rare opportunity to help.

"In my dream," I began, "I was alone."

~

I told him everything. We had moved to sitting positions before I had finished, and remained in them even after. Scout remained close, but he was no longer touching me. I had planted my feet flat on the ground, and wrapped my arms around myself. Just thinking about the dream again made me curl up, and pull my legs more tightly against my chest.

"So, that's why you were calling me," Scout said, after a pause.

"Yes," I answered, quietly. "I... I was afraid you were gone." I almost admitted that the thought of losing Scout terrified me, even more than being alone in general did. Fortunately, I caught myself.

"It reminded me just how much I can't do," I continued. "I'm used to getting by on most things, but only with assistance. I'm helpless without you."

I silently panicked at how that had sounded. I had meant "you" in the plural form, as in when the tribe was still together, not—

"No, you're not," Scout said. "Besides, you're not alone yet. Nothing lasts long in the wilds, of course; I mean, we just...." He swallowed. "But... you know I'm here for you now, at for least as long as I can be."

I shook my head. "You shouldn't have to be. I should be the one helping you. I'm sorry to make you—"

Scout didn't say anything, but he put a hand on my shoulder. I instantly stopped.

I struggled to find a response. I waited for Scout to say something, but he never did. He just kept his hand there, for as long as I needed.

"Thank you," I finally offered, though it was barely above a whisper.

"Any time," he said.

"So... what now?" I asked. "Do we keep wandering the wilds, until there's no one left?"

"Not wander," he answered. "We're still heading toward the northern city." A pause, then, "It is the northern city, right?"

"Yes."

"Good." He pulled his hand away, and his voice came from higher—oh, he had stood up.

He was right, of course. We were still going there, even if at a more relaxed pace. We weren't rushing there to fulfill any sort of critical mission; that was Girard's job. We were heading there slowly, mostly just because we had nothing better to do. We were still heading there, though. The tribes differed in their speed and purpose, but not in their ultimate destination.

"Anyway, we'll just keep moving," Scout said, "and, you know, maybe try to find some happiness along the way."

"Happiness...." I repeated the word, testing how it felt as I turned it over in my head. "Can we find it out here?" I hadn't even been able to find it in the city.

Silence, as Scout considered his answer. Then, "I think we came pretty close, once."

I felt Scout's hands take mine, a gesture that sent my mind reeling again, at least until I heard him say, "Come on, let's go." Leading. He was leading me. Of course. I stood up, and started to follow.

I really needed to work on controlling that reaction. I didn't dare imagine what Scout would say if he knew. I still let him take my hands, of course, even knowing that I enjoyed it much more than I should have. I still followed him wherever he led me. I had to keep silent, though. He didn't know just how dear to me he had become, and I prayed that he never would.

Chapter Seven



Loyalty

"It is my honor to present to you: our city's war hero and next Mayor. Our savior, then and now. Please welcome Sir Jonathan Coral!"

The crowd cheered at Vincent Noble's words, and that cheering continued long after he had stepped aside. I approached the podium, cleared my throat, thanked the crowd, and waited for the cheering to die down. It was a surprisingly long wait.

I hadn't expected the applause to last that long, nor had I expected the crowd to be so large. The hotel's dining hall had reached capacity, and then some. My staff had actually started to turn people away, since we didn't want the room to become overcrowded. We couldn't risk causing an incident. Mayor King was looking for any excuse to shut us down, and as much as I wanted to include all of my supporters, we simply couldn't afford to give the mayor his chance.

The former mayor had been overly generous and optimistic with his introduction. I certainly did my part for the city during the war, but "hero?" "Savior?" Furthermore, I hadn't won the election yet, and it was far from certain that I would, or even that I could. Still, whether I was everything Noble claimed or not, and whether I could unseat King or not, someone had to try.

Mayor King had spent years solidifying his administration's power, both in the official sector and in the criminal underworld. He had built the Hunters up to what they were, and his alliance with the Hunter General had rendered him almost invincible. Since he saw his victories as inevitable, and since the elections were seldom legitimate anyway, he scarcely even felt the need to campaign anymore. There were posters that read "Mayor King" and literally nothing else, but those were more of a reminder or a threat, as in "Mayor King is always here and always watching," than they were any sort of polite request for a vote. King was too unstoppable to need support.

Still, the audience deserved hope, and I would give it to them.

"Thank you," I said, after the applause had finally calmed enough for me to speak. "I want to thank former Mayor Noble for his support. Even with pressure from Mayor King, even with the safety concerns, and even after having to put his wife and son in hiding, he would not let me face this battle alone."

The applause returned, and I had to wait for it to die down again.

"I also want to thank every person here for supporting my campaign," I eventually continued. "King has pressured you, too, with everything from his criminal minions to his police force. However, you have consistently refused to surrender. You have all supported me from the beginning, and you are all here

tonight. Even now, I can still look around the city, and see places where you tore down those 'Mayor King' posters, and put 'Mayor Coral' ones in their place. When King tried to intimidate you, you responded with bravery, because you have had enough of his intimidation."

The crowd roared. The applause was not only louder, but also longer. I smiled, and waited for my turn to speak again.

"It's true that these are difficult times," I said. "Mayor King rules by fear, and it's easy to see how and why it works. When he can send his criminal muscle to shake you down, and have his police look the other way, or even make up charges and arrest you, then submitting to him is just a way to survive. He's kept the low district the way it is on purpose, as a warning. He wants us to know that if we don't surrender, we end up there."

There was a small, murmured response from the crowd. It was necessary to illustrate the problem, of course, but I was making them nervous. I had to bring them back.

"Rulers throughout history have tried this approach countless times, but it has never lasted forever. Sometimes it has lasted years, but 'years' are not 'forever.' There is always an end, a point at which it finally and inevitably fails. There is a time when intimidation no longer stops the downtrodden. There is a time when the rulers have taken too much, and the people will not give any more. There is a time when fear finally gives way to valor. That time is now!"

Wild applause, perhaps the longest and loudest I had received yet. "No more being afraid!" a woodrat in the crowd shouted.

"This is why we must rethink King's approach to the afflicted. For too long, he has used the dome to preserve his power. He formed the Hunters to cleanse the wilds, but he now uses them as his personal security and enforcers. To what end? What about their fight against DLY? Is it even working? We don't know, because he has consistently refused to re-test the outside air. He's afraid of change!"

Judging by their reaction, the crowd appreciated the image of King struggling with fear, rather than instilling it.

"He's afraid, because the moment he performs that study, his entire system collapses. If the outside world is no longer as deadly as he claims, then we no longer need the dome, and this city is free. If it is still that deadly, then that would only prove that he has failed, that years of exterminating civilians has done nothing to stop the disease, and that we need a new solution."

Many in the crowd had lost friends and loved ones to DLY, or to the ensuing executions. They had wondered, and doubted, and many had given up hope. Could anyone ever reunite the inside and outside worlds? Of course, I shared the

stage with Vincent Noble, who had proved during his tenure that seemingly impossible reconciliations could happen. I dared to dream of a world without the dome, and the crowd soon shared that dream.

"Either way, the Hunters are as antiquated as they are cruel. As mayor, I will take every resource King has spent on the Hunters, and redirect it toward finding a cure for DLY. I will end this unfair, unjust, unconscionable, and unwinnable war we have been waging against our own people!"

The crowd roared. I was glad that they had accepted my vision so enthusiastically. I had to have them excited before I made my next point, as I had the regrettable task of bringing them down again.

"The question, of course, is whether we can do it. Mayor King is powerful. He is a man who controls the crime on our streets, the justice system that pretends to fight it, and everything in between. He will not go down easily, or without a fight. My advisors have warned me that, just by running against him, I am placing my life in danger."

As I predicted, the crowd fell silent.

"Like you, though, I have lived under his system for too long, and intimidation doesn't work on me anymore. I am no stranger to heading into dangerous situations. I risked my life to fight for the city once before, and I'm happy to do so again. That's what earned me this nomination in the first place, and for that, I thank you."

More applause, though it was still quiet.

"If my advisors' fears come to pass, and if something happens to me during this campaign, then let this be the start of a movement. Candidates come and go, but what we start here tonight continues and extends beyond me. We stand united against his tyranny, and that is something that he cannot change, no matter what group he targets. He will soon learn that he cannot thwart a cause, he cannot stop a dream, and he cannot kill an idea!"

I basked in the wild cheering for a moment, and then added a quick "I thank you all" before I stepped away from the podium.



"That is my story," I concluded. I then took another drink from my flask, not because I was thirsty, but because I had been speaking. The slightest throat irritation was liable to trigger another coughing fit, and I had to be careful. It had grown increasingly difficult to manage my water supply, especially when away

from a source for too long, but sharing my tale with the others was worth the risk.

The three of us sat on the ground, around the fire that served as our only source of light, warmth, and food preparation. We couldn't spread out very far, due to the improvised hanging blanket walls. Not that keeping our fires hidden from outside eyes was ever unwise, of course, but it was somewhat crowded inside the shelter.

"S-s-s... so, he did n-n-n... did n-n-n... did not appreciate your challenge," Doctor Signey forced out.

Doctor Signey's stuttering and trembling, like my coughing, had steadily been growing worse. He had also been dealing with intermittent fevers, much like those that Celine had. The fevers had drained his strength, which had made it harder for him to overcome the stutter. He was usually too tired to fight it, and thus, it occurred more frequently.

"Well, yeah. You don't threaten King and live." Girard kept his arms folded, and stared at the fire rather than at either of us.

Girard's weight loss had intensified, and his appearance had eventually reminded me of the late Marcus Noble. Girard had grown far too small for his clothing, and since he hated to wear his absurdly oversized garments for long, he had taken to going shirtless as often as he could. Of course, with no fur, no body fat, and facing winter in the north, his state of dress provided its own set of problems. He truly had grown too thin for anyone's comfort, even his own.

"King struck back very shortly after that." I eyed my water flask, considered having another drink, and ultimately decided against it. I had to pace myself. "I received word that he planned to murder me and my family. I tried to take them to the northern city, at least until the threat passed. Instead, a car bomb went off along the way, which killed my wife and left—"

I coughed once, then again, and then several more times. Each cough actually increased the urge to cough again, with no apparent end. It seemed that not having extra water had been the incorrect choice, and I quickly rectified that mistake.

"—and left... and left us stranded out here," I finally managed, after a sip.

"You didn't actually think you'd get away with it, did you?" Girard asked.

"I had to try," I answered. I drank some more water, as I didn't want to take chances with my throat again. "It was the only way to challenge his system."

"His s-s-s... system?" Doctor Signey asked.

"There's more to the King administration than just King," I said. "I know that there are countless theories about the Hunter General, but mine is that he is easily as powerful as King is. King uses DLY as an excuse to give Hunters

anything they want. That's why their allegiance with the Hunter General is absolute, and you cannot challenge one without drawing the wrath of the other."

"So, what, you'd have to kill them both at the same time, or something?" Girard asked.

I shook my head. "Something as drastic as that would only create a power vacuum, which would lead to aspirants, which would lead to war. No, barring military intervention from the northern city, the only way to beat either of them is to reform the entire system. Elect a new mayor, defund the Hunters, stop suppressing DLY research, and so on."

"Do y-y-y... do you really believe that the m-m-m... the m-m-m... mayor is s-s-s...." Doctor Signey huffed, closed his eyes, and clasped his hands together. He clutched one fist within the other, squeezing his own hand as if to relieve stress through it. "That... the mayor... is... deliberately... suppressing... research?"

"Absolutely," I said. "It's the basis for his entire power structure. Without DLY, he loses the dome. More importantly, he loses his pact with the Hunters."

Doctor Signey thought for a few moments. "That w-w-w... would explain the explosion."

"Wrong." Girard fidgeted, shifting what little weight he still had back and forth. "DLY helps, sure, but his real power is on the criminal side. He's a mob boss who's also the mayor. He can make the police ignore his guys and arrest their rivals. That's what makes him untouchable, remember?"

"Yes, but you're missing the point." I took another drink, which emptied my flask. Blast. "He turns to the Hunters first on all matters, from law enforcement to personal security. Without the war on DLY, he loses his justification for them, and thus, he loses his personal army. Now, excuse me for a moment."

I anticipated Girard's question of where I was going, and held up my flask before he could say anything. He opened his mouth, saw the flask, and quietly closed it again. I stood up, and passed through the blanket wall.

~

The stars were bright, and the stream was very close to the campfire. Even through the woods and the darkness, the sound of the stream alone made it easy to find. Getting back would be the trickier part, of course, but night vision was a specialty of my species.

It was a very quiet night, and the stream moved in a gentle, almost lazy flow. For the first time since I had joined Girard's tribe, the world seemed calm and tranquil. I wished that I could have enjoyed it, but instead, the serenity only brought back painful memories of what I had lost.

Celine. The last time I had seen a night that beautiful, it was with Celine, just after Scout and I had rescued her from Girard's assault. After the intensity of that standoff, the subsequent calm had been even more striking. In that peace, Celine had shared everything that had bothered her, everything she had wanted, and everything I had done wrong in her name. I cherished that confession. I wished that I could have stayed with her, and watched her find what happiness she could before her end. Instead, that night together had been our last.

I sighed, and said a few quick words for her. I wasn't as religious as Keeper Edward had been, but I at least thought of her, and hoped that she was doing well.

I had to be brief, though; I still had to fill my flask and return to the camp, before the others started to worry.

"So after the fight, my manager hands me this drink, right? He says it's the—oh, hi." Girard flashed me a rather unsettling grin when I returned. "Took you long enough," he added.

I briefly considered and rejected several impolite and ultimately unhelpful responses. My goal was not to fight him, after all. I eventually settled on, "Sorry."

"Anyway," Girard continued, "we're still gathering everyone's stories. So you tried to run against King, I was in one of his fighting rings, and Cam tried a bit too hard to cure DLY. That's good. The more stuff like this we gather, the more we have against him."

"Fair enough." With my freshly refilled flask at my side, I rejoined the tight circle around the fire.

"Is there an-n-n... anyone else?" Doctor Signey asked.

Girard quirked a brow. "Does it look like there's anyone else? They're all either dead or with Rook."

Doctor Signey shook his head, among various other limbs. "I m-m-m... meant that if there w-w-w... if there w-w-w... w-w-w...." He closed his eyes, balled his fists, and sighed.

"He meant that we might still have their stories." As literally irritating as it was for me to speak, Doctor Signey had problems of his own, and I wanted to assist him if I could.

"Thank y-y-y... you," Doctor Signey said.

"I don't know. Is anyone else worth getting?" Girard folded his arms. "I mean, Keeper Edward chose to leave the city, too late to ask Marc, Celine was with you, and I'm not including Rook."

"Scout?" I offered.

Girard snorted.

"Yes, I know, but I do know his background, at least. First edict or no, I don't let people near my daughter before learning about them." I smiled, and took another drink. "He was a drug runner for the Plague, you see. Did a lot of smuggling to and from the northern city, via dead drops in Crown's Pass and Roc's Nest."

"Well, yeah, everyone knew that." Girard folded his arms. "The important thing is how he got afflicted, and whether King had anything to do with it."

"I was getting to that." I narrowed my gaze at Girard, but then changed my mind; continuing the story was more productive than arguing would have been. "King was the one who broke the gangs' stalemate, you see."

Suddenly, I had Girard's attention again.

"His mob wanted a winner between the three," I continued, and then took another drink. "They saw the drug trade, decided it was profitable, and wanted in. They wanted to pick a gang and endorse them, which meant extra mob muscle, selective police crackdowns on their rivals, and so on. They'd have enough influence to take over the entire district, and thus, completely corner the drug trade. In exchange, the mob would get a huge cut of the profits."

"And the dogs and birds took the offer?" Girard asked.

"Yes." The canines encompassed more than just dogs, of course, but I didn't want to get technical. "The stalemate ended the moment those two gangs merged. Joining forces gave them an advantage anyway, and then King started helping them on top of that. The Plague never stood a chance."

"And Scout was a v-v-v... victim of this?" Doctor Signey asked.

I nodded. "A bomb went off in his car during a Roc's Nest run, and left him out here. Somewhat like what happened to my family, but... for different reasons, obviously." I drank, and then coughed anyway.

"Is it certain that the m-m-m... the m-m-m...." Doctor Signey closed his eyes and sighed. "That... the... mayor... was... involved?"

"Not to the extent that we could prove it in court, no," I said. "Scout only knows that half his car blew up during a run, so he survived but became afflicted. However, the Alliance and Plague were at war, and the Alliance had support from groups that have support from King. It is not unreasonable to suspect a connection."

"Is that all?" Girard asked.

"What do you mean, 'is that all?' If we're speculating about King's involvement in what happened to my family, or to Doctor Signey's colleagues, then Scout's tale is just as feasible. You said to include everything we could think of, didn't you?"

Doctor Signey smiled, and started to write, though he struggled to hold his

hand steady.

"I don't like it," Girard said. "We can't trust Scout's story. He's too close to Rook."

I sighed. I had tried to avoid the argument for as long as I could, but it was inevitable.

"Girard," I said. "I know you hate Rook. That's why we're in our own tribe. You got your wish. Still, you can't exclude information just because it came from Scout."

"He chose to stay with Rook, and anything that came from Rook is evil!" Girard threw himself onto his feet, as though I had somehow challenged his honor with my impudence. I could understand not trusting the former Hunter and his traitorous father; I had struggled with those points as well. However, he was taking the concept a bit far. 'Evil?'

"We're better off without his lies," Girard continued, apparently not interested in any sort of rebuttal. "He's a Hunter. He admits he was, and I say he still is. He killed two of us already, or maybe you've forgotten?"

Oh, God. Not this again.

"Anything he told us was just his cover story," Girard said. "Polluting the notes with his lies would only ruin what we've got. We've worked too hard, come too far to let... let...."

Girard stopped. He stared at the fire, looking more indignant and offended with each passing moment, as though its crackling had somehow rudely interrupted him. At least, that was the only guess I had that explained his behavior.

Without warning, he let out a loud roar, tore down one of the blanket walls, and gave the fire a vicious kick. Most of its pieces went through the opening, but some missed and bounced randomly off the remaining walls. He himself was fine; his foot only connected with the flames for an instant, and even without shoes, his scales provided more than enough protection. Doctor Signey and I were not as fortunate, though, and we had to hit the ground to avoid the flaming projectiles. Girard showed no concern whatsoever. He didn't even help as we scrambled to tend to the blankets, to make sure they wouldn't catch fire.

"Letting him be included!" Girard finished. He had spat out the word "him" as though it were a profanity. He referred to Rook in a tone that suggested a demonic figure, a beast so vile that Girard dared not even speak his name.

He stood over the remains of the fire, silent except for his ragged breathing. He only unclenched his fists after several forced deep breaths.

"I'm... sorry," he finally said. "Let's not think about him. We got away from him, remember? We're beyond him."

"Girard—"

"I need to be alone for a while. You two should sleep. We've got a long walk tomorrow. And... um... I'm sorry."

With that, he took a still-burning stick with him and walked away.

Doctor Signey and I looked at each other, neither of us sure how to interpret what had just transpired. Then, since Doctor Signey struggled with movement and mobility more than I did, I decided to clean up for him. I gathered up the scattered remnants of the fire in silence. Only when my task was complete, and I had reassembled them all where the initial campfire had been, did I speak.

"I don't know about him," I said.

"It is l-l-l... looking rather grim, unfortunately." Doctor Signey attempted to shake his head.

"What's your take on him, at this point?" I asked.

He looked toward where Girard had disappeared, and then toward me. "W-w-w... well, do keep in m-m-m... mind that I cannot undertake the n-n-n... necessary tests—"

"Yes, I know."

"W-w-w... w-w-w... well, it seems as though his m-m-m... his m-m-m... as though his m-m-m... blast it!" He balled his fists.

"It's all right. Take your time."

I smiled. Girard tended to lose his patience when Doctor Signey struggled to speak, but Girard was no longer present, and I didn't mind the delays. At the very least, I had my own disease-induced issues, and thus, very little room to judge anyone else for theirs. I only hoped that my reassurance would help him.

Doctor Signey returned the smile, and continued. He told me, after several failed attempts, that he believed Girard's mental state was deteriorating, at a rate comparable to that of his physique.

"What about the different... modes?" I struggled to think of what word to use, just as I had struggled with the remnants of the fire. 'Modes' was close enough, I supposed. "He switches between peaceful and aggressive. He'll have an outburst, and then apologize, and then have another one."

With more great effort, Doctor Signey eventually managed to convey that he agreed. He believed that Girard's aggressive moments were a separate kind of madness, distinct from the rest of his personality. Between the traveling, our disagreements with him, possible frustration with his own condition, and any number of other things, he was not lacking in reasons to be cranky. However, his mood swings suggested that his worst eruptions were different, that they were beyond his control, and that he regretted them whenever he could.

"DLY isn't easy to live with," I admitted. "Of course, neither is Girard."

Doctor Signey laughed. "Yes, I s-s-s... suppose that is true."

"What are we going to do with him?"

Doctor Signey, still struggling to force his words out, reminded me that our mission required superior numbers. No, Girard was not a well-liked leader. He was tyrannical, he was growing increasingly insane, and he had assaulted my daughter before his tribe had even formed. However, we had to stick together. Three people had a better chance of survival than two did.

Before I came to the wilds, I had done my best to turn my campaign into a movement. I had wanted that spirit of revolution to remain, even if something happened to me. There were still good men in the city, such as Vincent Noble, or Keeper Bartholomew of the low district, and they could fight for the city in my stead. Perhaps, if we could convince the northern city to aid them, and if we could submit Doctor Signey's findings....

We had to keep going. Doctor Signey had his DLY research, Girard had his familiarity with King's criminal empire, I had my experience with running against him, and none of it would amount to anything unless we told someone.



There was strength in numbers. By staying together, it was more likely that one of us would make it.

I kept that thought in mind, and repeated it to myself as I marched. I used it to find the will to keep going.

There was strength in numbers....

I took another step.

One of us would make it....

And another.

Strength in numbers....

I took another drink from my flask, even though it was dangerously low again. How much longer until we could stop? Even if we couldn't rest, I at least needed to refill.

"Girard, w-w-w... we n-n-n... need...." Doctor Signey attempted to speak through his panting, to no avail.

I cringed when I saw him. Keeping one's fur groomed in the wilderness was almost impossible anyway, but Doctor Signey's exhausted, almost incoherent expression only made him look that much more disheveled. He barely had the strength to carry his own notes, let alone his supplies and equipment. His

laboratory coat was barely recognizable as ever having been white, and was useless against the cold, which meant that his scraggly fur was the only protection he had.

"Girard, this is too much!" I said on Doctor Signey's behalf.

I was in no better condition than Doctor Signey was. I had decided to revert to my full military uniform, partly because I wanted something more useful and practical, but mostly just to send a message to Girard. However, I had grown older and sicker since I had last worn it, and it barely fit me anymore.

"Leader Drake!" Girard shouted back.

Even Girard looked awful. He was shirtless again, and as gaunt as ever. His pants only stayed on because his tail supported them, and because of a cloth strip that served as a makeshift belt. Beyond that, he wore nothing but backpacks and his own scales. He probably could have come up with an arrangement with his blankets, but like me with my uniform, I suspected that he was trying to prove some sort of point. Either way, and even without fur, his emaciation and state of dress solidified his bedraggled appearance.

"L-l-l..." Doctor Signey attempted, in vain.

"Shut up!" Girard spun around and glared at both of us. "I know what you're going to say, and the answer is no. We're not stopping!"

He had to have been even more exhausted than we were; he was cold-blooded, and he had neither clothing nor insulation to protect him. He visibly stumbled, and almost fell after having spun around too fast. However, he refused to accept his own weakness, just as stubbornly and angrily as he had refused to accept ours.

"Girard—Leader Drake," I said, correcting myself, "this is absurd. Yes, this is the faster tribe, and that's why we're here. However, if we continue to work to the point of collapse, that doesn't help our mission. We won't reach the northern city if we fall along the way. This is a death march!"

"Is that so?" Girard looked at me, then at Doctor Signey, then at me again. "Tell me, where are we right now?"

"I wouldn't know. You have the map." Provoking an argument with Girard was not my goal, but I did not attempt to avoid it, either. It provided welcome relief from the endless marching, at least.

Girard snorted. "Cute. Try this, then: look around, and tell me what you see."

I looked around, as ordered. We were standing in a mostly featureless plain. There were small patches of weeds and such, but almost nothing else. In the distance, I could see mountains, or at least large hills in several directions. However, our current position was comparatively flat. The skies were clear, and

all was quiet. Not even feral birds or insects broke the silence, as the winter and the area's scarce vegetation had driven them away. It felt like a desert, but for the fact that it was neither hot nor sandy.

"I see... nothing," I admitted.

"Mm-hmm. And what did you see a few nights ago, when we were talking about King?"

What was Girard getting at? "Well, back then, there were trees—far from the thickest forest I've ever seen, but at least some—and a river?"

"That's right. Very good."

I clenched my jaw. I was old enough to have been Girard's father. He didn't have to speak to me as though he were mine.

"So," he continued, "you want to stop in the middle of day, and completely waste this time we could spend making progress, which is stupid if you ever want to reach the northern city. Not only that, you want to stop in the middle of this... this... nothing, with no water, no shelter, no cover or protection from Hunters... nothing! Why? Give me one good reason."

"Because the alternative is to keep marching, and I'm not sure that's even possible anymore." I folded my arms. "Doctor Signey can barely stand. I've nearly reached that point, as well. So have you."

"I'm fine!" Girard's eyes opened wide, and his pupils shrank. He then grinned. "Besides, you still need water, don't you?"

I twitched an ear, stung. "Yes, but... we wouldn't be in this predicament if we had followed the river, rather than wandering off into this wasteland. It could have taken us at least to Gilded Bend, if not farther. I don't even need the map to know that much."

"The river twists and turns. If we were staying on it, we'd be going almost straight east right now, then north and back west." Girard turned and took a few steps forward—toward the north, his intended destination. "Instead of going around in a half-circle, we're taking a shortcut. If you're telling the truth about how weak you are, then every day counts, right? And this saves several of them."

"But—"

"We're not stopping in the middle of nowhere." Girard clasped his hands behind his back, and continued to face away from us. "Now, come on. We've wasted enough time standing here as it is."

I sighed, which turned into a cough. If we had access to the river, I'd have fought harder to force Girard to rest. Unfortunately, he was right about the location; it did us no good to wait around in a barren wasteland. I needed water.

Girard started walking again. I turned toward Doctor Signey, who had been

sitting on the dusty ground while he could.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

Doctor Signey tried and failed to say something in response. After giving up, he simply nodded.

"Come on. I'll—"

I paid the price for all the coughing I had suppressed; the fit was severe when it finally happened. It felt like my lungs were attempting to escape, and I couldn't stop them, especially not without water to soothe or lessen the attack. The pain in my throat quickly forced me to the ground, at which point Doctor Signey put his hand on my back. I appreciated the sentiment, but it didn't help. Neither of us could do anything of use until I recovered.

"I'll help you," I finally forced out, though I had long since ruined the moment with that display. Had I looked or sounded like I was capable of helping anyone? Still, I proceeded with the gesture anyway. I stood up, and extended a hand toward Doctor Signey. He grabbed my arm and pulled himself up. I could feel his trembling while he was holding me, and see it even after he eased his grip, but at least he was on his feet again.

"Y-y-y... you are v-v-v... v-v-v...."

Doctor Signey closed his eyes and sighed. He then opened them again, smiled, and hugged me. A wag of his tail served as his answer. I turned so we had our arms on each other's shoulders. As long as we helped each other walk, and as long as we took and gave support as needed, then perhaps life in Girard's tribe was manageable.

"We don't have all day, you two!"

Then again, perhaps not.



Gilded Bend was one of the countless towns that DLY had erased. Its worn and neglected structures still stood, but they stood alone, as the only remaining evidence that life had ever existed there. Not even corpses remained; DLY was a slow death, so the former residents had time to clean up after themselves. Most of them had either evacuated or buried each other years ago, and the Hunters had long since incinerated the rest. Nothing remained except empty buildings and silence, which gave the entire city the unnerving feel of a quiet catacomb.

We decided to stop in the farthest building we could find. We all agreed that being near the central roads was too risky, and Girard believed that an isolated

location would protect us from Rook. I highly doubted that Rook's tribe was in the area, let alone that it was nearly as dangerous as Girard claimed, but I chose not to challenge him.

If one could overcome the general uneasiness of staying in an empty, ruined city, as well as any misgivings about breaking into someone's old long-abandoned home, then Gilded Bend did have its advantages. As ramshackle as the house we found may have been, it at least meant shelter and a place to hide.

The house was near where the river had finally rejoined our path, so we had water and fish. We still needed a campfire to cook what we caught, but for the first time since before we had entered the wilds, we could dine at an actual table with a set of chairs. The beds were old, dusty, and mostly broken, but were still a welcome improvement over sleeping on the ground outside.

However, the house was dark, even compared to the thickest of wilderness. The roof and walls blocked what little light the night sky offered, and creating any light of our own was difficult and dangerous. There hadn't been any manner of electricity in the ruins for years, and even though we could make torches, we had to be careful about who saw them.

Our protection mostly relied on stealth. We didn't know if Hunters patrolled as far north as we were, but if they did, then we were counting on their not being thorough in their investigation. They wouldn't search every single random building in an entire city, at least not without cause. Thus, our goal was to avoid giving them that cause. We couldn't make it apparent that anyone was home.

Naturally, after dinner, Girard claimed what we suspected was the master bedroom, and disappeared into it. He wanted us to leave him alone. We were more than happy to oblige.

Doctor Signey and I shared the other bedroom, which appeared to have belonged to the former inhabitants' children. There were two beds in the same room. It was dark, but I could see some small toys near Doctor Signey's bed. On my side, the non-ruined parts of the walls bore rather adolescent-looking astronomy-themed wallpaper, along with what appeared to be posters of once-famous bands. Celine used to have a similar room, back when she was—

No. Stop that. Focus on the mission.

I used some of my water to extinguish my torch, and climbed onto the bed. I brushed it as much as I could, but it didn't make a difference. I had to be mindful of dust in my condition, and the bed still had too much of it to be safe. I made do with my own bedroll, placed on top of the actual bed. It was unconventional, and finding an appropriate position was a struggle, as I was apparently taller than the bed's previous owner had been.

"Doctor Signey?" I asked.

His light was still burning, though he kept most of it hidden beneath his blankets. He was using the light to work on his notes.

"Y-y-y... yes?" he answered.

I actually had no idea what I wanted to discuss. I supposed that I simply wanted to call him because I could. We were alone, and thus, I had a rare opportunity to speak privately with him. About what, I wasn't sure yet.

"How are you holding up?" Ah, that would have to do, at least to start.

"My condition is being somewhat an-n-n... n-n-n... an-n-n...." He pounded his fist into his bed, and then sighed. "Irritating. My apologies."

"It's all right. We have time, now. We made it, we're here, we're resting, and Girard is in the other room."

"I suppose." Even though he tried to hide his torch, there was still enough light for me to see his smile. "I thank you," he added.

Doctor Signey explained, as he continued to struggle with his speech, that his trembling had been growing worse, as had his fevers, and the combination had made it particularly difficult for him earlier. He also thanked me again for trying to stop Girard, or Leader Drake, as Doctor Signey submitted to calling him, even in private.

"Think nothing of it," I replied. "We need to look out for each other, after all."

Doctor Signey smiled again, but only briefly. He then admitted to being in a great deal of discomfort. The fever had made his entire body sensitive and sore, and that sensitivity had made the trembling itself painful. He struggled with muscle cramps, especially in his legs. He hoped that resting would help, and that he would feel better in the morning. If not, then he would continue to have trouble walking. He then apologized, and said that he would have preferred to avoid being a burden, even without the threat of Leader Drake.

"Doctor Signey—"

"Cameron," he corrected.

I thought about it, but then shook my head. "No."

"Excuse m-m-m... me?"

"If it were simply for the sake of familiarity, then I would accept that, yes. You're not just a doctor; you're my friend. However, I can tell that this is a self-confidence matter, and I refuse to diminish you. You get enough of that from Girard."

Doctor Signey opened his mouth, but said nothing.

"You keep denying yourself credit," I continued. "You're not powerless. You're our best hope for stopping King and curing DLY, and you have been from the moment you first escaped your lab."

Upon hearing the mention of his lab, he looked down and away, and tucked his ears against the sides of his head. "M-m-m... my lab...."

I winced. "I'm sorry." Stupid! I was trying to bolster his spirits, not drag them even lower by reminding him of his deceased colleagues. Evelyn Meyers was not a distraction he needed at that moment.

He looked up at me again, and perked his ears forward. "It is n-n-n... not your fault."

I thought about the sentiment for a moment, and then smiled. "Perhaps, but it's not yours, either."

Were it not for his trembling, Doctor Signey would have frozen still. His body continued to shake, but he made no actual voluntary movements, aside from a few surprised blinks. After another long pause, he looked at his notes, then back to me, and then nodded.

"You are... correct, of course," he said.

He put his notes back in his folder, and used his own water flask to extinguish his torch, leaving the room in complete darkness.

"I thank y-y-y... thank you, Sir Coral." His voice came from his side of the room, though I could no longer see him. "For everything."



As daylight poured in through the cracked window, details of the room became clearer. The remnants of the wallpaper and posters were more plainly obvious, as were the scattered piles of decrepit toys. There were also dusty children's books and board games, and a decaying stuffed animal near Doctor Signey's bed.

I stretched, which did little to undo the aches from my too-small bed, and then coughed. I quickly reached for my water. My flask was low, but there was still enough to soothe my throat, at least until I could refill. I was grateful that I hadn't consumed it all the previous evening.

I looked at Doctor Signey. Should I wake him? He needed his rest, but I wanted to check on him, to make sure that his condition hadn't worsened during the night.

Actually, Girard would likely come for us once he grew tired of waiting, anyway. At least, if I roused Doctor Signey, it would be gentler than Girard's approach.

"Doctor?"

No response. I wasn't sure how heavily he normally slept, but I supposed that my first attempt might have been too quiet.

"Doctor Signey?" I tried again. I also climbed out of my bedroll, so that I could approach him.

When I was close enough to see him, I gasped.

He was on his side, and he held his own body in a tightly curled ball, with his arms clutching his legs. Every muscle was taut, and even his matted fur stood on end. His whole body shook as though he suffered from an intense chill, even though—as a quick feeling of his forehead confirmed—he was burning up. His eyes were wide, his stare distant, unfocused, terrified. His ears were flat against his head. His muzzle was open, his tongue spilled out, his breathing frantic and shallow.

"Oh, God." I took a step back, and my own eyes widened almost enough to match his. I normally kept my composure under pressure, but seeing him in that state threw me, at least for a moment. "I'll... I'll get Girard," I said, once I had acclimated.

"N-n-n... n-n-n... no!" Doctor Signey called, after I had already started to leave. The shivering and hyperventilating must have made it even harder to speak, but he had forced the word out through sheer determination.

"Oh. Um, all right. Sorry." I ran back to his side.

I looked around for something I could do to help, saw his water flask, and handed it to him. He grabbed the flask and drank, desperately. After taking several clumsy gulps, he handed the flask back to me, and resumed his rapid panting.

His gaze flew around the room, and his ears briefly perked when he looked at his notes. He tried to speak, and after that failed, he tried to point at them. Even that gesture wasn't easy to interpret, as he was either unwilling or unable to extend his arms. He simply turned his wrist to do it, instead. I understood, though, and I took the notes and offered them to him.

He snatched the folder from my hand. He then found the pencil he had kept inside it, took a blank page, and started to scrawl. He had to force his arms away from his chest to write, and doing so elicited a pained whimper.

"Doctor Signey...?"

He continued to write in his panic, and I continued not to understand what was happening to him. Was he pouring his energy into his writing, causing overexertion elsewhere? Were the other effects already happening anyway, motivating him to act with what little time he had left? It was hard to tell which one had caused the other.

Either way, though, he scribbled with all of his frantic, wide-eyed might,

while his body slowly shut down around him. His limbs locked up again, and he clearly felt the increased difficulty in writing, but he forced himself to continue. His body's shaking intensified, and he let out a feral whine from the pain, but he persisted.

"Doctor Signey! Stay with me!" I placed my hands on the side of his bed, which accomplished nothing.

He stopped breathing. He kept making the motions, or at least I thought I saw his chest rise and fall. However, the gesture was futile, and he received no air from it. Still, he barely slowed down. He was determined to make use of that one last breath.

"Doctor!"

He worked to get everything he could onto that page, before unconsciousness finally claimed him. As valiantly as he struggled, though, it was simply impossible to last forever. Not without air. He slowed down, swayed a little, and ultimately succumbed to the delayed but inevitable result of his attack. He dropped the pencil and paper onto the bed, and completely collapsed onto his side. His trembling slowed, then ceased. The non-functional breathing motion lessened in its frequency. Then, for the first time since before the tribes had split, Cameron Signey stopped moving.

I cried out again, and tried my best to revive him. I quickly felt for a pulse, but found none. I attempted chest compressions, but I was only kidding myself. What did I hope to accomplish, exactly? I didn't have the strength to do that. Not at my age, and not in my state.

Alas, it was beyond my power. I bowed my head, and closed my eyes. I waited for a few moments, as if expecting to wake up, or for some random miracle to occur, but the stillness and silence confirmed the reality of what I already knew.

He was gone.

I was alone.

I had lost my friend and ally, and it had fallen to me, and me alone, to keep Girard in check.

Girard. Of course. As much as I dreaded talking to him, he would have to know what had happened. We would have to make arrangements.

It was difficult to remain strong. I wanted nothing more than to drop to my knees, plant my head at the side of Doctor Signey's bed, and weep. I couldn't, though. Not yet. I had to press on. As much as I wanted to stop, I still had work I needed to do, first.

I picked up his folder, and started to gather his scattered notes. I wanted to see his final message, the one for which he had given his life. However, the

writing was barely readable; his apparent panic attack had reduced most of it to frantic scribbles.

As I kept studying the notes, though, I did manage to make out a few random words. What I found mostly pertained to what he had experienced. 'Fever.' 'Cramps.' 'Seized.' 'Breath.' 'Lungs.' 'Heart.' I realized that he had transcribed a final self-examination, perhaps in the hope that future researchers might make use of it.

Aside from his final medical notes, the rest of the folder contained some personal journals, and a few sketches of a figure I recognized as Doctor Meyers. I never knew that Doctor Signey had held an interest in drawing. Was that what he had been working on the previous evening?

There was also one final scrawled note, written during his fatal attack. Due to his large and haphazard writing, it took up an entire page despite its brevity. It read:

EM
I tried
Sorry
Love you
CS

I closed Doctor Signey's eyes, and then mine. I tried to give the closest I could to a smile, difficult as it was. "Be at peace," I said. "You did fine."

With that, I opened my eyes again, turned around, and walked away. I braced myself for the task of informing Girard.



"I never asked for any of this."

The starry sky was clear and beautiful, and strangely quiet and serene after Girard's assault, but that was of secondary importance. My daughter had commanded my full attention.

She paused, as if trying to find the words. "I was just a passenger in the car," she finally added. "It... it wasn't even my election. I was just along for the ride. I miss Mom—Mother! Sorry! I miss when I was young, and you would protect me, and make everything right, even if I called you Dad...."

I had been completely unaware. I understood the sentiment, of course; all

adults longed for the days when their lives were simpler. However, I hadn't realized that she had suffered for that long, or to that extent. I had always been determined to overcome whatever obstacles arose. Had I erred in assuming that she was like me?

"That isn't very befitting of a Coral, though. I apologize."

She bowed her head to me. Sarcasm? Mockery? No, she meant it. She really did want to appease me, even at that moment. After her confession, I wasn't sure whether her sincerity made me feel better or worse.

I looked over the others as they slept, and I thought. If nothing else, her words explained her actions. If that was how she felt, then much of what she had done suddenly made more sense.

"So," I began, though I had to take another drink before I continued. "You love Scout because he fulfills this need? He gives you this casual care and protection you seek?" I still needed the official confirmation, of course.

She kept her head low, and closed her eyes.

"Yes."

I had suspected as much. In truth, I should have known sooner, perhaps even from the moment she had chosen Scout over Marcus. Leader Noble had been proper and well mannered, and had earned my full support. Scout hadn't, but Celine chose him anyway. What else could her choice have meant?

"I still don't trust Scout to treat you well," I said. "Especially not after what he did to Girard."

"He was just protecting—"

"I know." I had little desire to have that argument again. Wait, no. That was the wrong reaction. I needed to be gentler with her. I sighed. "Perhaps I misjudge him, and worry over nothing. I certainly hope that I do. Either way, though, you've made your choice." I shook my head, and finally admitted what I had feared since their relationship had begun. "For all I know, you may be right."

She looked up at me. At that moment, her eyes were more beautiful than anything the sky could have offered.

"Father...?"

I swallowed. How could I have been so wrong?



I found Girard sitting in the dining room, and my fur bristled.

He was sitting in Doctor Signey's seat. It was where my fallen friend had

eaten his last meal. Did Girard not understand the significance of that?

No, he couldn't have; I hadn't told him, yet.

Once again, daylight made everything clearer and easier to see, from the dusty wooden table to Girard and his increasingly bony figure. He had clasped his hands and intertwined his fingers, as if in prayer, though his fidgeting suggested impatience more than it did reverence. As always, his mental state was as questionable as his physical state was. The table, despite its years of abandonment and neglect, appeared to have remained healthier than its occupant did.

When Girard heard my approach, he snapped his gaze toward me, and I instantly regretted being there.

"Took you long enough," he said.

"Not now, Girard."

"Leader Drake."

"I said not now." I pulled a chair opposite him, and collapsed into it.

"What's your problem? And where's Cam?"

I looked down at the table, rather than risk making eye contact with him.

"Dead."

"What?" He leaned back. "Are you serious? You're not serious."

Before I could respond, he jumped up, and trotted off toward the children's bedroom. I remained at the table and kept my gaze on the hallway, and the door through which he had just disappeared.

He wasn't in the room long before he ran out again, his eyes wide.

"Oh, God! You're serious!"

I gave him an exasperated stare, but said nothing. He saw my look, snorted, and returned to the dining area.

"So, uh...." He averted his gaze, and looked down at the table.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Where are his notes?"

I quirked a brow. One ear briefly twitched. That was his primary concern?

"I didn't see them in the room," he continued. His tactlessness went unchallenged mostly because I was too weary to argue.

I sighed, and held up the folder. I knew he wouldn't believe me unless I showed it to him. "I have them right—"

Girard quickly plucked the folder from my hand. He had the advantage of surprise, and by the time I had so much as raised my fur, the notes were already in his possession.

"Hey—!"

My tone was more forceful than it should have been, and the ensuing wear

on my throat made me cough.

I reached for my water flask, but it wasn't there. Only then did I remember that it was in the bedroom, on the small stand by what had been my bed. Between Doctor Signey's passing and the idea of confronting Girard, I had forgotten to take it with me when I had left.

"Sorry, but I didn't want you getting any ideas," Girard said. "This is my tribe."

With no means of soothing my throat, my first cough triggered dozens more. I didn't even have the strength to respond to Girard; I was too busy struggling with my own lungs. It was an all-out coughing fit, one that I knew I wouldn't be able to contain without assistance. I needed to retrieve that flask.

One problem at a time. I stumbled toward the bedroom.

~

Naturally, the notes were gone when I returned. In my efforts to find my flask, drink from it, stop coughing, catch my breath, and return to the table, I had given Girard more than enough time to hide them.

I didn't even bother to ask where they were, as I already knew he wouldn't tell me. I had neither the dexterity nor the questionable background for skilled pickpocketing, which ruled that option out. If he had stored them in his pack, then maybe... no. Given his increasing paranoia, he would never allow any unmonitored access to his personal belongings, not even in his sleep.

"You are the lowest...." I allowed myself to trail off, but I maintained my scowl.

"What did you say?" His glare matched mine.

After a few moments, I reconsidered. Doctor Signey had just passed, and with him went all of my power over Girard. Suddenly, I no longer outnumbered him. Furthermore, I had no doubt that if I made him angry, then he would leave me behind. As much as I longed to be free of him, I had to think of the mission. We had to succeed, which meant that we had to stay together, which meant that I had to submit to him.

"Nothing," I said. I sat back down.

"That's what I thought," Girard grinned.

"You do realize," I added, "that we're going to have to stay here at least another day, now."

"What? Why?"

I clenched my jaw. Due to my newfound lack of power, I had to choose my response with care.

"Because we have to bury Doctor Signey," I said. "We lack the proper tools,

and we're both frail. We'll probably need an entire day just to make the grave, and that's assuming the soil remains soft all the way down."

"First off, I'm not frail." Girard placed his hands on his hips, which made him look even scrawnier than he had ever looked before. "Second, no. No way. We're not wasting that kind of time."

"You're not suggesting that we just leave him here?"

Girard didn't respond immediately. Instead, he scooted back and stood up. He turned around, and looked out a nearby window at the northern horizon.

"How many times do I have to repeat myself?" he asked. "We're the fast tribe. It's our job to reach the end before we all die. We already lost Cam. If anything, shouldn't that make you want to go faster?"

"But we need to—"

"We need to get to the northern city!" Girard spun to face me, while he pounded his fist against the windowsill. The resulting thump had very little force behind it; even I probably could have done better. However, the malice in his eyes made the gesture work. "You can pay all the tribute you want, but how much will that fancy grave help us later, if we run out of time? How much good it will do if we die before we make it? If you like Cam so much, then shouldn't you worry about delivering his notes?"

I pushed my chair back and stood up as well, mostly because I wanted to minimize Girard's height advantage. "We have to do something for him, though. We can't just—"

"No." Girard paused, and then gave a wicked smile. "Besides, you're the expert on taking care of the dead in a hurry, aren't you? Can't you just do that again?"

I sputtered. Did he just....

During the war, out on the battlefields, it had occasionally been difficult to distinguish injury and unconsciousness from death. Many soldiers had lived in fear of mistaking the two, and of others burying them alive. Even worse, they feared leaving their fellow men to the mercy of the enemy, should they have to retreat.

Because both were horrible and harshly undeserved ways to die, some of us had adopted the practice of "confirming" the fallen, or putting a bullet or a blade in their hearts before we left. The thought was to ensure that they were truly dead. If they were, then damaging their bodies any further wouldn't matter. If they weren't, then we were giving them quicker, cleaner, and more merciful ends than what they otherwise would have received. It was a sad, and somewhat macabre duty, yet ultimately necessary.

However, it was not a duty that I hoped to repeat. Yes, I had performed it on

several of my men during the war, but I had always hated it. Later, after the explosion had stranded us in the wilds, I had performed it on my own wife, but that had been even more painful. That Girard would even consider bringing that up again...!

I pounded the table, and sure enough, it was indeed more forceful than his windowsill effort had been. "You vile, loathsome—!" I left my hands on the table, and even leaned on them while I scowled. "I only did that because I had to! Hunters were coming, and I had to escape."

"What, and they aren't coming now?" He placed his hands on the opposite side of the table, and matched my leaning gesture. We glared at each other, unmoving, unblinking, until he finally continued. "We might be hidden, but they're always watching. And we're dying anyway, even without their help. What you did back then was because there was no time, right? What makes you think you have any more time now?"

I sputtered. I wasn't entirely sure whether it was because he had me, or because I was about to cough.

I opened my mouth, but no words came. The more I thought about it, the more I understood how weak my position was. Girard never cared about the unity of the group, and that had somehow given him control of it. He wouldn't hesitate to leave me behind if I refused. The only way I could stop him was through violence, and I doubted that I could win that fight. Even if I could, it was still counterproductive to the mission. The idea was to increase our chances by staying together, was it not? In that sense, Girard had the advantage, and I could only concede.

I backed away from the table. "Very well," I said, weakly, and with another drink from my flask.

I stood up, but kept my head down. I tucked my ears and averted my eyes. I didn't want to look at Girard. My duty was solemn, sorrowful, and regretful, and I neither needed nor wanted his twisted approval. I sighed, took my knife, and silently walked toward the bedroom.



Celine had never wanted to be one of the afflicted. She had never wanted the disease, the Hunters, or any of the friction with the other members of the tribe. She had never wanted to be a paragon of strength, as I had wanted her to be. All she had ever wanted was to live quietly and peacefully. However, because I had

dared to make a stand against King, he had taken that life from her.

That was why, even after the death of Doctor Signey, Girard and I had to stay together. King needed to face justice for creating the entire culture of DLY—the quarantine, the dome, the Hunters, everything.

King had cast my daughter into the wilds, and sentenced her to death, all because of me. I hadn't been able to prevent her from suffering, but I was able to prevent her from suffering in vain. Even if I couldn't make amends to her, I could at least avenge her.

I had used that thought to keep me going, even as the journey grew harder. When I had left Doctor Signey's body in Gilded Bend, I thought of Celine on the ground, writhing in pain and delusion from her fevers. When we had ventured away from the river again, I thought of her in our wrecked car, shocked and disoriented, asking me for her mother. When the weather had turned from clear skies to snow, and from snow to an intense blizzard, and when I had faced freezing winds stronger than I was, I thought of the life she could never have.

~

Roc's Nest was the final location on Scout's map. He had always made his drops there, and had never actually been to the northern city itself. However, further directions were unnecessary; the northern city was but a day away, possibly two if we took it slowly, though I knew we wouldn't. I probably could have seen the its dome from where I stood, were the blizzard not preventing me from seeing anything at all, and were it not night, with the expanse of Roc's Nest still in the way.

Once again, we found ourselves taking shelter in one of the countless abandoned buildings, though the weather had made us much less particular about which one. Girard no longer insisted on finding an actual house, with bedrooms, in a secluded and distant neighborhood, and so on. Instead, he chose the first building he saw with more than one story. His logic was that getting off the ground floor increased our protection. My logic was that I wanted to be out of the blizzard, and I was grateful not to waste time finding the perfect home.

Makeshift torchlight revealed a library. There were shelves everywhere on both stories, all full of meticulously sorted, categorized, and alphabetized books. All were dusty, and most bore damage from insects and feral rodents. However, like the building itself, they at least remained recognizable as what they once had been.

There were also a few open areas with tables and chairs, presumably to provide a place to sit and read, back when people had still lived in Roc's Nest. Girard and I used them to eat, instead. Anyone who would have objected had

evacuated or perished years ago.

The building was in pitiable condition, but it was better than being outside. The windows had long since cracked and broken, and with their increased exposure to the elements, the surrounding walls had rotted. The lack of insulation made the room bitterly cold, as there was almost no difference between the inside and outside air. It shielded us from the snowstorm, though, and the ventilation allowed us to use our torches.

We were in little better condition than the building was. I ached all over, and my fur was a soaked, drenched mess. Girard did not have the latter problem, but the cold impeded him more than ever. He was beneath a mountain of blankets, but it was still easy to see him shiver, stumble, and struggle to remain awake and aware of his surroundings. It was actually rather easy to relate, despite my mammalian advantage.

Still, at least for that night, we had found a relatively decent setup. We were cold, but technically inside, and safe from the snow. We had preserved some leftover fish from our last outing, which spared us from having to brave the storm again before morning. We had set up a stand for our torches, so that they could rest on the table, and the effect reminded me somewhat of a candlelit dinner. There was just enough light to allow us to see the food, each other, and the vague suggestion of the bookshelves surrounding us. For the fact that I was in a freezing room with Girard, it was actually almost cozy.

"Hey, Jon?" Girard asked with a slight slur.

"Yes?" My fur was too wet to bristle, and even if it wasn't, I was too tired to have the strength to raise it. It was not the first time Girard had called me that, and I doubted it would be the last. I therefore chose to overlook it.

He swallowed another bite of fish, and then looked at me with a grin. "We made it."

I raised a brow. "Almost," I eventually responded.

"Well... yeah. We're close, though. Roc's Nest, you know? I'm just saying... I don't know. Good job, I guess?"

As Girard's mental state had deteriorated, his conciliatory moments had become increasingly rare, but that also gave them a sense of power. They didn't happen as often, but when they did, they meant something. For a moment, even if only briefly, he became the old Girard, my good friend and confidant during the early days of the tribe. The time when Celine and I were—

No. Stop that.

"Thank you." I smiled.

"And...." Girard's expression fell again, and he started to stare at his own clasped hands. "I'm sorry about Cam. Um, I mean, Doctor Signey."

I closed my eyes, and my smile faded. What could I say in response to that? A part of me still hated Girard, but instead of dwelling on that, I decided to enjoy the brief truce. There would be ample time to hate him again later. I needed to savor the peace while I still could.

"You made your decision," I finally answered. I opened my eyes once more. "I disagreed with it, and I still do, but... I acknowledge your position, at least. Thank you."

He stared at the table. I could see the awkward shifting of his eyes, even in the torchlight. "So, um...." A pause. Then, when inspiration finally struck, he reached for his own water flask, and raised it with a hopeful smile. "To Roc's Nest?"

I raised my own flask. That, I could accept.

"To the northern city," I added.



I awoke naturally, which surprised me. Not that I minded, of course; the relentless marching and arguing with Girard had exhausted me, and I had long craved a chance to rest. However, even after the uncharacteristically peaceful evening in the abandoned library, I had not actually expected to get my wish. With his eagerness to press on, I thought for sure that he would have awoken me.

Had I slept too little? Was it still too early? No, that was impossible. Too much sunlight poured in through the missing windows. It had to have been at least midday.

That made it even stranger. Girard never let me sleep until midday.

The library, like the entire city, was completely silent. It made sense, I supposed; the ruins housed no other residents and almost no wildlife. If the winds had ceased, then there was nothing left to make noise. Girard and I could have been the only living creatures in the area, for all I knew. And on the subject of Girard, where was—

There he was.

He was occupying the same table we had used the previous evening, and he had spread Doctor Signey's files out in front of him, though his attention was not on them. He was staring directly at me, unmoving, unspeaking, scarcely even blinking. How long had he been watching me sleep?

Somehow, he looked even worse than he had when I'd last seen him, and that had been just the previous evening. He had a blanket draped over him, but

he wasn't wearing anything at all underneath it. It could have been a trick of the light, or of his pose, posture, or mental state, but it looked like his body had deteriorated even further overnight.

"Good... um...." I started to greet him, but I immediately paused, and had to look outside to check which word to use. "Morning?" I guessed.

No response. He just kept staring. His gaze was intensely suspicious, as if he feared I would steal something.

"Thank you for letting me sleep," I tried again.

"Anytime," he said. Ah, so he was alive. He held his gaze as he spoke, though, and even his short answer came in an eerie monotone.

I started to worry. Even if his behavior wasn't enough of a clue that something was wrong, his answer itself was a complete giveaway. He had never given his tribe any sort of leniency before. He wouldn't have worked Doctor Signey to death if "anytime" were true.

"We should probably head out soon," I said. "After we eat, at least." I crawled out of my bedroll, and started to put it away. I never thought I would be the one goading Girard into action, but I was growing less comfortable by the moment, and his staring wasn't helping. I wanted to leave, if only to escape the growing unease.

"No."

I blinked. "No? No eating?"

"No leaving."

I had no answer at first. What could I have said in response to that? I eventually forced out a quiet "What...?"

"I said we're not leaving!" Girard pounded both his fists against the table, and then pushed down, and used the momentum to stand up. His chair flew backward and to the floor in one rapid movement.

"Girard? What—"

He groaned and brought a hand to his own temple, his eyes finally closing as he winced and recoiled. Had he stood up too fast, perhaps? He started to sit back down, but then remembered that he had knocked his chair over. He looked at the fallen chair, thought for a few moments, and then took the still-upright seat next to him, instead.

"Sorry," he uttered. "I just...."

His one hand remained on his temple, while the other pulled the pile of notes closer to him. Once he had recovered from whatever had happened to him, he looked up at me with a glare.

"We're not going anywhere," he added.

"But... why?" I sensed this would be a long discussion, so I took the last of

my water. I just had to persevere until I convinced him to press on, I supposed. I took a seat opposite him at the table, and hoped to make the confrontation as quick as I could.

His stare became more wide-eyed and wild, and he used both hands to pull the pages toward himself. I sighed.

"Have you actually read these?" he asked.

"Not extensively," I admitted. "They were Doctor Signey's notes, and then yours."

Girard snorted.

"Why?" I asked. "Furthermore, can't this wait? We're little more than a day from the northern city. We're almost—"

His gaze narrowed, and I suddenly felt even colder than I already was.

"The plan has changed," he said. "We can't go to the northern city."

"We can't? Why not?"

"Because then they'll see these!" His eyes shot open, and he leaned over the pile, as if to cover it. He had seemingly little concern for the pages' order or alignment.

"Excuse me? Wasn't that the entire point of the migration?"

"I thought splitting the tribe would get him away from me." Girard's answer completely ignored my question. He relaxed his voice, but not his grip. "And it did, sort of. I mean, he's not here now, right?"

"Who, Rook? Is that what this is about?"

"But his influence is everywhere, turning everyone against me. Even when he's not here. Cam, and even you. I saw how nice you were being to him, even when you joined me. How you said you wanted to be in his tribe, but had to choose me because of the mission. I thought you were my friend!"

"I wanted to be with my daughter." Girard's insanity had also forced me to rethink my allegiances, yes, but I dared not admit that part.

"You're missing the point!" As Girard's eyes widened again, his slit pupils narrowed. "If Rook can get to you and Cam, then he can get to the people at the northern city, too. And what better way to do it than with these?"

"You're not seriously suggesting—"

"He wants to corrupt the northern city, just like he's corrupting you, and he's using these notes to do it. Don't you see? Why do you think he let us get away without a fight, even knowing we were delivering the notes? Because that's exactly what he wanted us to do! No, we have to keep them secret until we stop him."

"Stop him? What are you proposing, exactly?" I knew before I asked that I wanted no part of his plan, but the longer I kept him talking, the more time I had

to devise my own.

He didn't answer me immediately. Instead, he leaned toward the ground, and opened his pack. He tried to rummage through it with one hand, while the other still covered the notes, and his gaze remained firmly on me. His therefore searched through his belongings with one hand and no eyes. It was a somewhat awkward display, and one for which his eerie grin proved a poor fit.

Finally, he pulled out his boning knife, and I jumped in my seat. My mind started to race. My knife was in my pack, which was by my bedroll. I could probably make there it if I was quick, but if he chased me, then I wouldn't have a lot of time to react. Of course, even if I did have my knife, I wasn't sure what I would do with it. Could I beat Girard in a fight? He was weak and feeble from fatigue and disease, but so was I.

"It's funny," he said. "This whole time, no matter how much Rook and I hated each other, I never thought about fighting him. Isn't that weird? I mean, I used to be in the cages. All I ever did was fight. Why didn't I think of that out here? Was it just that he was keeping things civil?"

Did he actually want an answer? "Um—"

"No, of course he wasn't! He killed Keeper Edward!"

Girard was up in an instant, and his second chair fell next to the first. I stood as well, in case I needed to fight or flee.

"Rook stole Keeper Edward away from me," he said. "And then he killed Marc, too. So why did I never think to retaliate?"

He stuffed the notes into their folder in completely random order, and then he started to walk around the table, toward me. Even with his underweight frame and bare feet, the old wooden floor still creaked in response to his movement. I stepped backward, toward the window. He extended both arms and raised his shoulders, with the folder in one hand and his knife in the other. He did his best to shrug, and then quickly pulled the folder tight against his chest, while holding the knife out in front of him.

"Good people died because I didn't stop Rook," he said. "Every day I don't do something, his evil just keeps spreading. He poisoned the notes, and we almost helped him take over the northern city with them. We can't let these out until we stop him, and there's only one way to do that. It may be too late to save Keeper Edward, but I can at least have my revenge!"

"Doctor Signey was right about you. Your condition... you've completely fallen into madness!"

"Ah, so you have read them. I knew you were lying." He grinned. I didn't know what he was talking about, but I knew that denying the charge would get me nowhere, so I ignored it.

"So, what's your plan?" I asked, instead. "Wait for them? We don't know how far behind they are. We don't even know if they'll make it here, let alone when. They could already be dead. Are you really going to risk all the progress we've made, just to stay here for God knows how long, waiting for people who may never come?"

"They will come!" Girard slashed at the air in front of him. He wasn't aiming for me, but I jumped back anyway. "Rook will come. He wouldn't die that easily. Not that easily...."

He stopped, looked around the room, and spotted a very large opened book. It must have been some sort of dictionary or encyclopedia, judging by its massive size, and the way it rested open on a small pedestal, as if on display. He turned away from me and walked toward it, and started to pick it up. I had no idea what he was doing, but it gave me time to grab my knife.

I should have struck while he was distracted, but I hesitated. Until I knew his intentions, I didn't want to be the one to initiate violence. I had no problems defending myself, but I couldn't murder someone who hadn't assaulted me yet. Instead, I watched him, and tried as best I could to understand, or at least to wait for a signal to attack.

Lifting the book while carrying two other items proved cumbersome for him. He eventually slipped the folder underneath the book, just so he could carry them together in one arm. He grunted, as the book proved heavier to him than he had expected, but he persevered.

It would have been easier if he had closed the book first, but he was strangely careful not to. He kept it open and on the same page, no matter how much inconvenience it caused him. Even when the struggling caused his blanket to fall off, his nudity failed to deter him in any way, other than to provoke a quick hiss at the sudden cold.

"His evil is so strong that it destroyed my tribe, even when he wasn't here." Girard started advancing on me again. I tried not to back into a corner, but the large number of shelves made it difficult to evade him. "Were you his spies from the beginning?" he asked. "Or did you start out good, only to turn on me later? No, I'm not angry. It's not your fault. The evil is so thick that it's in the very air. I can feel it. Can't you? Of course you can; you've succumbed to it. No, I can't blame you for that. All I can do is release you."

"Release? Girard, what—"

Girard raised the book up to his snout, looked directly at me, and blew as hard as he could.

Years of dust were suddenly upon me. It would have been enough to bring anyone into a coughing fit, even if that person were perfectly healthy. In my

state, I was especially vulnerable to the plume.

I clutched at my own neck, and coughed more violently than I had ever coughed before. Then, I kept coughing. The fit was so powerful that my chest burned, and so incessant that I couldn't draw any air. Every time I tried, I coughed instead, and emptied my lungs again even before I had filled them. When I did find a rare opportunity to inhale, I only took in more dust, which made the coughing even worse.

I dropped to my knees, and my knife fell to the floor with a dull clatter. I had no air, no water, and no reprieve. The pain in my chest and throat was almost literally blinding, unless the vision loss was just from the choking.

I was coughing so violently, and struggling so intensely just to try to breathe, that I failed to pay any heed to my surroundings. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I heard the thumps as a large book and small folder hit the ground. An old wooden floor creaked as scaled feet pressed against it. Girard was approaching me, but in my asphyxiated haze, I failed to understand what that meant until it was too late.

He grabbed the fur on the back of my neck and pulled, which forced my head and torso upward, baring them to the knife he plunged deep into my chest.

I wanted to gasp, but couldn't. I ceased coughing, but I also ceased breathing. My body continued to convulse, as if attempting either action, but it accomplished nothing.

"I'm sorry," he said, quietly, from... somewhere. My senses faded and dulled, and I found it difficult to place his location. "It's hard putting old friends down, but... well, you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?"

He pulled the knife from my chest, as quickly and as violently as he had stuck it in. I felt something hot and wet, or at least I thought I did, though it was hard to tell since everything else was cold. I couldn't muster the control of my muscles to look down, or even to focus my vision.

"Shh. I knew you'd rather die than live under Rook's spell. It's all right. You're free."

I heard Girard step away from me, and I fell to the floor. I couldn't remember the last time I had breathed. I couldn't remember how.

"Sleep, now. Don't worry. Rook will pay for what he did to you."

I was dimly aware that I was lying on the ground, on the second story of an abandoned library in Roc's Nest, but even that awareness was fading. It grew harder to fight the darkness with each passing moment; there was just so much of it, and so little of me. As the last of my consciousness bled out onto the floor, the last thing I saw was the blurred figure of Girard, who picked up the folder and headed for the stairs.

Chapter Eight



Reason

People always said the low district streets were tough, but that was misleading. True, but misleading. The problem wasn't just the streets. The Flock, the Pack, and the Plague were always at war, and just staying inside wasn't good enough to avoid that. Everyone had an affiliation, even if they weren't actually fighting. They had to; everyone living there paid dues to whoever owned their particular turf. Because of that, the whole district was involved.

As a mouse, I obviously ran with the Plague. I was too young to fight, but I was at least part of their family. I knew they weren't perfectly moral, of course, but who in the district was? At least they kept the inside of their territory peaceful, and they looked after the kids like me.

Even with them, though, it was hard. I stayed deep in our territory, away from the front lines, but who knew when Flock or Pack would drive through and invade? I always had to be careful. The Plague bosses had warned me to look out for suspicious cars, for anything in Pack or Flock colors, and especially for any dogs, wolves, or birds. I always had to be alert.

I knew what happened when I wasn't careful. Just the day before, some big crow kid had said he wanted to play with me, then attacked me and stole my marbles when I had said no. I would not repeat that mistake.

Or, at least, that was what I had told myself, before I ran into him again.

~

I was walking home from class—well, that was what they called it, anyway—when I saw him. Same big crow as before. It hadn't even been a full day since he had jumped me, and there he was again. So he had come back, then.

He saw me, and started jogging toward me. I swallowed.

"What do you want?" I said. "I don't have anything else."

I had to hope that, if I yelled at him enough, he would get the hint and just go away. I didn't think I could outrun him, and I knew I couldn't take him in a fight. I had already tried that last time, and he had gotten me pretty good.

"No, it's not that. I'm... uh...." The crow fidgeted. He reached into his pocket, and just as I got ready to knock the gun away, he pulled out what actually turned out to be my marble sack. He was lucky. An older Plague would have seen him reach and shot him first, just in case. He had apparently missed the lesson about being careful on the streets.

"I'm sorry!" he said.

He thrust his hand toward me. He was so quick that I thought he was

punching me. I dodged, even though I didn't have to; he was still too far away to hit me. He just extended his arm and left it like that, though. And the marble sack was in his hand.

"I didn't mean to steal these," he added. "Well, I did, but I shouldn't have. It was wrong. Please take them back. I'm so sorry!"

His arm was shaking, and he was doing an awful job of trying not to shout. He must have gotten in some pretty big trouble for stealing them, for him to be acting like that.

"Please!" he just about screamed. Good God, what had happened to him?

I figured it was some sort of trick. Maybe he'd jump me again when I got close enough. Maybe it was a fake, a bag of rocks or something, and he was just getting my hopes up to tease me. What else could I expect from a low district bird?

Something about his attitude, though. He almost seemed more scared than I was.

Maybe....

I took a few small and careful steps toward him, so I could just reach the bag with my arm outstretched. He let go of it when I grabbed it. He had given it to me cleanly. No tricks so far.

I immediately jumped back again, and started to look through the sack. I looked back up every few moments, just to make sure he wasn't sneaking up on me. He wasn't. He just stood there. And the sack's contents were legitimate, too. The marbles were real, and they were mine, and they were all present. He hadn't even tried to sneak one out. Every single one was there.

"I'm so sorry!" he shouted again. "Please forgive me. Please!"

"All right, all right, calm down." If he kept making that kind of noise, he was going to attract attention. "What's this all about? You're really just giving these back?"

"Yes! I mean... yes. Sorry." He was a bit late, but at least he was trying, I guessed. "I shouldn't have stolen them. I was wrong. I'm sorry."

"So you keep saying." I was probably being a little hard on him. I just hadn't expected him to go track me down again, was all. Going to that kind of trouble, just to return stolen goods? In the low district? "Um... thank you?"

He smiled a bit, but otherwise he just stood there, watching, waiting to see what I would do, like he was suddenly under my control. What, was I supposed to feed and water him, too? He was so much bigger than me, he had to have been older, too. Why was he acting like the kid?

"Listen, um...." I scratched the back of my neck. I wasn't really good at making up with people. That skill didn't come up very often in the low district.

"I'm sorry, too," I tried. "I didn't think you'd show up here again, or give me my marbles back. That's nice, though. I guess... maybe... you're not so bad?"

His eyes lit up, and his smile grew. "Oh, thank you! Um, I mean... thank you." His feathers fluffed up a little, and he looked around nervously.

"You're not going to jump me again, though, right?" No matter how nice he was being, he was still huge, and he was still a bird. Even I knew to at least check.

He looked like I had just punched him in the stomach. He even took a step back. "No. Never."

"All right. I believe you," I said, though I wasn't sure why. It went against my better judgment, and most of what the Plague had raised me to believe. The Flock, just like the Pack, was the enemy. Not because we were out to destroy them, but because they were out to destroy us. We had to be careful. Even this bird had beaten and robbed me just the day before, hadn't he? Yet there he was, giving me my stuff back and trying to make it up to me.

Wait. I remembered what had caused our last meeting to turn bad. "You attacked me because I said you were with the Flock, right?"

He winced again. "Yeah." He then hung his head. "I'm really not, you know."

"I know." With his personality, he wouldn't have lasted a day on the streets, even among his own kind. "Well, I know now, anyway." I shook my head. "I'm sorry. I guess I shouldn't have assumed, but... well... you know how these streets are. Or maybe you don't?"

"I guess not." He tilted his head. "You are, though, right?"

"What, Flock? God, no. I'm not a bird." I cringed at the thought, then remembered who I was talking to. "Um, sorry."

He either missed the accidental insult or ignored it. "No, I mean, you're in a gang," he said.

"Oh. Well, yeah, I'm Plague. Junior member, anyway. They're grooming me for it." I beamed.

"But...." He tilted his head. "Aren't gangs... you know... bad? You seem nice, though."

"What?" I didn't even know what to say at first. What kind of a question was that? "You're new here, aren't you?" I finally managed.

He hung his head. "Kind of."

I shook my head. Kids. Even kids who were older than me. Especially kids who were older than me.

"Trust me," I said, "the Hunters are worse than any gang out here could ever be, and the police and schools and everything are all theirs. The Plague's pretty much the good guys around here."

"Oh...."

And just like that, he was all sad again. What could I do to cheer him up? More importantly, why was my first reaction to want to cheer him up? Why did I care how he felt?

"Name's Scout, by the way," I tried.

"Oh!" He quickly looked up again, and beamed. I didn't even need to look for a beak-smile; I could tell just from the way his eyes lit up. "I'm Orrin. Orrin Sebastian. Hi!"

"Scout Warner, then." Fair was fair, I guessed. "Wait. Sebastian? As in, Neil Sebastian's kid?"

His smile was instantly gone, and he looked away. "Yeah."

Well, that explained what he was doing in the low district, at least.

"Hey, it's all right. I don't have a great family, either. No one does, here. So, you know, at least you're not alone."

"Really?" He looked up at me again. "You don't, either?"

I shook my head. "Dad died in the war. I wasn't old enough to remember, and mom wasn't sober enough to notice. Still isn't."

"I'm sorry," he offered, lamely.

I almost blew it off with a shrug, and said something about how it wasn't a big deal. That was normally my first reaction, anyway. "Thank you," I said instead, on a whim. "It's not so bad, though. The Plague raised me. And they taught me better than what you'd get in Hunter schools, too."

He fidgeted, and said nothing. Fine, if he hated the Plague so much, then I wouldn't try to recruit him. It wasn't like they would have wanted someone that naive, anyway.

"I just wanted to be your friend." He did a bad job of keeping his voice steady. "I didn't want to get involved with gangs, or cause any trouble or anything. I didn't mean to fight you. It's just... lonely, you know? Or maybe you don't, since you have them...."

"Of course I know. That's why I have them." I blinked. Had I really just said that? I was supposed to know better than to confide anything to outsiders. What would the others say?

Maybe it was his cluelessness. When he had approached me, I had expected a brutally tough member of an opposing gang, back for revenge even though he had already won the first round. Instead, he was an unaffiliated older kid who knew nothing about the streets, and seemed to need me to explain everything. Maybe I found that cute, somehow.

"So, um, would you like to play with them?" he asked.

"What, the marbles?" I looked down at the sack. "Actually, to be honest, I

don't really know how. I mean, I guess there's a game or something, but I don't know the rules. Do you?"

"Not really."

"Well, then. Sorry." I laughed, and started to put the sack away. I reached for my pocket—

"But then, why do you collect them?" he asked.

I paused, thought about it, and shrugged. "They're pretty. And I don't have a lot out here. If these are mine, then at least something is."

I suddenly had my craziest idea yet. I looked down at the sack again. Should I...? Oh, why not. I opened up the sack, pulled the metal one out, and held out my hand. "Here."

He tilted his head. "What's this?"

"One of my spares. You can keep it."

He gasped. It wasn't just mild surprise; he actually gave a full, loud, all-out gasp. "You're giving it to me? Are you sure? I don't want my dad to think I stole it. And, um, don't you need it?"

"It's fine." I smiled. "That one's not even a real marble. It's just a ball bearing or something. I found it somewhere when I was just starting to collect them."

"But it's still yours, isn't it? You said you don't have a lot out here."

"I don't, but something tells me that neither do you."

He blinked, and opened his beak like he was going to say something, but he didn't.

"You have to take good care of it, though!" I pulled my hand back, and he jumped. "This was all I had at one point. I've got more now, so I don't need this one anymore, but still. Be careful with it."

He swallowed, nodded, and walked toward me. He was even more cautious about the approach than I had been.

"I will," he said. I believed him, because I saw the delicate, and almost loving way he held and looked at it, like that little metal ball was some sort of powerful magical thing. "Thank you. Thank you so much." He tucked it away in his pocket, secure and hidden.

"Anytime. Just stay away from the Flock, all right?"

Orrin recoiled. "No fighting. Ever again. I made a promise, you know."



"A little to the left, now."

I was standing on Rook's right side, so I had to lean into him to make him turn. Despite his size, he responded to the push instantly.

"Hazards?" He asked, referring to... something. Oh! Right. He meant rocks, roots, or anything else he could trip over. He always checked for those.

"Some." We were in a sort of rocky desert, so that was certainly a problem, but the bigger issue was the hills, since it was impossible to trust them. The covering of loose sand and rocks could always give way, after all. Especially for Rook, since he was so much heavier. We each had to be extra careful, especially going downhill. "Don't worry, though. I've got you."

He stopped, and for a moment, I thought I saw the corners of his beak rise up, if only just a little. It was very faint, very brief, and then gone. "Thank you," he said.

"Anytime." Well, as long as we were both still alive, anyway. "So how are you holding up, anyway? Careful, drop."

He didn't stop immediately. He took one too many steps, and almost fell. He did catch himself in time, but only barely. Was something distracting him? He usually paid better attention to my warnings than that.

He let me descend the hill first. It was a steep slope, but it wasn't a straight drop, and it wasn't very big. No taller than I was, at least. The ground seemed stable enough, too. When it was Rook's turn, he used his feet to feel his way down the hill. I was ready to catch him if he fell, but the ground held steady, and so did he.

"I'm all right," he finally said, after he established that he had reached the bottom, and that the ground ahead was level.

"You sure?" I really wanted to say something was different about him, but I had trouble remembering how he had been before, so I guessed I couldn't really make a comparison.

"Yes." He was as concise as ever, at least. Or, at least, I was pretty sure that was normal for him. "What about you?" he asked.

I sighed. It wasn't my favorite subject to discuss, but he did have a right to know.

"It's getting a little harder," I admitted. "Slowly, gradually, but... you know."

"Your memory?"

"Yeah. Careful, big rock." I gently pulled his hands to the right, and he turned just in time to avoid kicking it. "Anyway, names are the hardest, at this point."

I stopped walking. He sensed that, and he stopped as well. I let go of his hands, and I turned to face him.

"Like, I look at you, and I know exactly who you are," I said. "I always

have. I've known you since we were little. I mean, it's you. Who else could it be?" I smiled, but that smile only lasted a moment. "But... I can't remember your name, sometimes."

"What about now?"

Embarrassingly, he had caught me right when I was having trouble. I shut my eyes, and concentrated. I knew the answer, I was sure of it. "Orrin?" I opened my eyes again. Then, suddenly, I had it. "Rook! Sorry."

I thought I saw that small, faint hint of a smile again when I used his old name, but it was gone just as quickly as it had come. By contrast, if he reacted at all to the new one, then I missed it.

"That's all right," he finally said. "What about Celine?"

"Celine... yes." I tried to disguise my hesitancy as a thoughtful pause, like I was deciding what to say about her, instead of just trying to remember who he was talking about. Oh! The cat I had loved. I still saw her image, but I had apparently lost her name. Celine. Celine. Of course.

"I do everything I can to remember her." I closed my eyes, and there she was again. Or at least her face, anyway. "I miss her, you know."

"I know." Silence. His tone was as hard to read as the rest of him. "I'm sorry," he finally added.

"It's all right. It just means that, since it's down to us, we have to look after each other, you know?"

"Like the old days?"

I smiled, even though I hadn't expected to. I was still grieving over... over... Celine. I wasn't expecting the crow—Rook?—to make me feel better, but he kind of did.

"Sure. Like the old days," I said.



I coughed, gasped, and clawed my way out of the flaming wreckage. The good news was that I was mostly unhurt; whoever had rigged the car to blow had screwed up, and every seat went up except mine. There was probably another bomb there, too, but it just hadn't gone off. Of course, with everything on fire, that was extra incentive to get out of there before it did.

Alliance! It had to be. Ever since the Pack and Flock had merged, they outnumbered us nearly two to one, and that was before adding in help from the Hunters. With that kind of power, it wasn't surprising that they were going after

us. We had no way of stopping them anymore.

I coughed again as I hobbled away from the wreckage. I was sore all over, but at least nothing felt broken. As long as I got away, I'd probably heal up and be fine.

Wait. No, I wouldn't.

Once I was a safe distance from the car, I looked around. Clear skies. Clouds. The sun. It wasn't a ceiling with lights, and the air wasn't recycled. It was all real.

The wilds.

So, their bombs had killed me after all. They had just done it the slow way.

Another explosion suddenly rocked the already ruined car. This time, the driver's seat area went up in a fireball, and various pieces of car rained down around it. Even though I was far enough from the wreckage to be safe, the force of the blast still knocked me off my feet, especially since I was unprepared for just how loud it was.

"Whoa!" someone shouted. The fact that I wasn't alone was another surprise. Was I hearing things? My ears were ringing and I was a little dizzy, so I might have been.

No, it was real. Someone was standing off to my left, looking back and forth between me and the wreck. He was a mountain of a crocodile, tall and muscular. Aside from some pants that were clearly too small for him, he didn't have any clothing, which only made his monstrous physique even more obvious.

Seeing him triggered a rapid series of thoughts. First, my initial danger senses went off, since I was in the presence of a huge, powerful stranger. Then, I thought I might be all right, since he wasn't a Hunter. He had no suit, after all, and was therefore unprotected. Finally, I remembered that I wouldn't be all right, because I was unprotected, too.

"You all right?" the burly crocodile asked. He jogged toward me, which mercifully interrupted my own thoughts. "Good God, what happened here?"

"Alliance." I scowled. Even that word was disgusting. "And I'm all right, I think. Mostly. Aside from... you know."

The crocodile looked me over, and a wave of sudden understanding washed over him. "Oh, you're Plague? That would do it, I guess."

"You know what's going on in the low district?"

He folded his arms and grinned. It was strangely unsettling. "Used to live there. Now, granted, that was before the—"

"Actually," I deliberately interrupted him. I tried to ignore the look he gave me in return. "I want to hear more and all, but can we get moving, first? There's no way the Hunters wouldn't notice an explosion like that."

The crocodile instantly dropped his glare, and went back to the wide-eyed panic. "Oh! Right. Yeah. Good thinking. Let's go."

He ran off, and I followed him.

~

I hoped the crocodile knew where we were going, because I sure didn't. Was there anywhere we even could go? The city wasn't going to let us back in, obviously.

I did my best to walk, but I was still a bit dizzy, and I ached all over. I had stumbled through it as best I could, in a desperate attempt to not need the crocodile's help, but he ended up supporting me more than I would have liked.

We eventually entered a nearby forest. I would have preferred to get farther from the wreck, but I was still weak, and I didn't want him to carry me anymore. The cover from the trees would have to be enough, I guessed.

"Sorry about that," the crocodile said. "So, where were we?"

"The low district." I flopped to the ground as soon as he let me. Rest. Rest was good.

"Oh. Right." He sat down next to me, and gave me that creepy grin again. "Well, obviously that's not a good place for reptiles. If you're not one of the big three species, there aren't a lot of opportunities for you. The gangs all had affiliate members, I guess, but I didn't want to be a sidekick. I don't submit to anyone! So, I turned to the mob, instead."

I quirked a brow. "That works?"

He looked at me and blinked. He then looked at the surrounding wilderness and open air, then back to me again, like I had asked a stupid question.

"At first," he finally answered, bitterly. "But that's all behind me. I'm reformed, now!"

"Reformed? Out here?" I asked.

He grinned again, clearly proud of himself. "Yeah, I met this—"

He froze. His eyes shot open wide, like he had suddenly seen a Hunter. I quickly turned and looked behind me, but there was nothing there. Just dirt, brush, and trees. I turned around again, and realized he was actually looking at me.

His stare narrowed, and turned into a much more skeptical gaze. "I met this guy," he said carefully.

"Um, all right." I knew better than to question a burly crocodile with mob ties.

After a moment, he shook his head. "No, no, you're right," he said, even though I hadn't said anything. "It's just hard, is all."

"What, talking about your friend?" I tilted my head.

"Something like that. It's more... well... what's your name, anyway?"

Was he trying to change the subject? "Scout," I answered.

He gave a sad smile and a soft chuckle. "Thanks. Well, Scout—oh, I'm Girard, by the way."

"Pleased to—"

"Anyway," Girard continued, in a sudden hurry, "I was in pretty bad shape when I first came out here. But then, this Keeper found me. He saved me, and he's been looking after me ever since. That's his mission. He came here to help people like me...." He stopped, looked away, and sucked in air before he forced himself to continue. "And, um, you, too." His last sentence was much quieter than the others had been.

"You have a Keeper with you?" I asked. Somehow, Girard didn't strike me as the type. Then again, he did say he was reformed. Was that what his redemption was about? "I'm not very religious," I added, just in case.

"That's just the thing. Neither am I." Girard's eyes lit up, and his volume returned. "You don't have to be with him. He's just here to help, no matter what."

"Really?" I wasn't sure what I had expected Girard to say, but it wasn't that. "Sounds nice."

"Oh, yeah. It's like...." He looked up at the sky, and thought. "It's like a miracle, almost, only I don't believe in those, and he doesn't try to make me. It feels like one, sometimes, in a way, but it's like... I don't know. Something else. Do you get it?"

I just looked at him, and blinked a few times.

He gave a nervous chuckle. "Me, neither. Sorry. Anyway, he's great, and I love being with him. And, um, he's kind of forming a tribe, now. He wants to gather people stuck out here, like me and you. We all come together and take care of each other, or something. So, um, I guess I should invite you to join us. He did kind of tell me to, anyway." His voice got quieter and quieter with each word, until I almost didn't hear the last part.

"He did? How did he know I was here?"

"He didn't. We heard the explosion, and he sent me to go check it out. He said that if there were any survivors, I should bring them back. He's making dinner now, just in case."

"That's very generous of him."

"Yeah." He sighed.

I thought about the offer. I knew I would be hungry soon, and I didn't like my chances if I were by myself. I wouldn't know where or how to find food, shelter, or anything. Of course, something was obviously bothering Girard, and

that made me a little uncomfortable, too. Still, if I didn't accept his offer, then not only would I have to survive with no idea how, I would also be completely alone. No, if the Keeper was as nice as Girard had said, then the answer was clear.

"Sure. I think I'd like that. Thank you." I extended a hand.

"Great! I'll take you to him." Girard gave me a huge smile and handshake. He did a poor job hiding just how forced both gestures were.



"All right. We're getting close to...." I closed my eyes and concentrated. It was the one after Gilded Bend. I used to go there all the time, though I couldn't remember why. I knew the name, though. I knew it. And I knew that I knew it. It was right there.... "Roc's Nest! We're getting pretty close to Roc's Nest."

"Can you see it?" Orrin asked. Orrin, right? Wait, no, it was Rook. Why did I keep doing that?

A gentle snow was just starting to fall, so visibility wasn't perfect, but I could still see some buildings on the horizon. "Yes!" I said, with an eager flick of my tail. I almost pulled his hands before I calmed down. "Still a ways out, but we're getting close."

He stood in place, and hid any obvious reaction. He finally said, "That's good," but his voice was faint.

"Something bothering you?" It was hard for me to tell, since he was kind of always like that, but I had to check. Actually, I had a better idea. I decided to open up first, just in case it would make it easier for him to follow. "If it's Roc's Nest, you're not alone," I said. "Honestly, dead cities are kind of scary for me, too."

"They are?" he asked.

"Yeah." I looked at Roc's Nest again, then back at him. "There's just something about them. I don't know. They're quiet and empty and that's creepy."

I probably should have let go of his hands. It was how I guided him, but when we weren't moving, it wasn't necessary, and it was probably a little weird. We tended to start and stop a lot, though, and grabbing and letting go all the time was annoying. It was easier to just keep holding on, especially since he never seemed to mind.

"We don't have to enter if you don't want to," he finally said.

"It's all right." I flicked my tail, mostly from nervousness. "I've done it

before, and if anything, it should be easier now."

"Why is that?"

I smiled. "Because I'm not alone."

He hung his head. He wasn't really looking down, since he was never really looking at anything, but he at least lowered the angle of his beak. "Of course," he said, after another long pause. Aside from that, he didn't say or do anything else.

I tilted my head. "All right, now I know something's bothering you. Come on, what's wrong?"

"It's...." He raised his beak again, and exhaled. "A lot of things."

"I know, and you're usually slow to talk about stuff. You know I'm here, though."

"Yes, but you shouldn't have to be. You've already lost Celine, and—"

"Hey."

He paused. "Yes?"

"It's all right. I want to help."

He sighed. "I know. That means a lot to me. More than you know. That's the problem." He tensed up, and shook his head. "I'm sorry. Maybe someday."

I thought about it. I wanted to give him his space, but....

"No," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"Yeah, you need time, I know. But...." Difficult as it was, I tried to recall his recent behavior. "You've been acting weird for a long time, now. I wish I could remember how long, but... long. How much more time do you need, exactly? And do you really think that's a good idea out here? What if a Hunter gets me tonight, before you can say anything?"

He recoiled. Only a little, but I noticed. He had practiced hard to subdue that reaction, but I knew him.

"You're right," he finally said, though it was barely above a whisper. "You're right. We... we need to talk."

"Wait, what?" For how secretive he had been, a declaration like that surprised me, and also made me nervous. What was this about? Had I done something wrong?

I looked around for a place to sit. Pretty much everything had already been touched by the snow, so there were no dry seats anywhere. Oh, well. So be it, then. I slowly brought the crow down to sit on the ground, facing me.

I tried to back off once we were in place, since I thought that was what he wanted. Instead, he held my hands tight, and he wouldn't let me go.

We sat in silence for what felt like a very long time. I guessed he was thinking about what to say, or how to say it. He took several deep breaths, but

was otherwise slow to make any noise.

"I've always coped with things," he finally said. "Always, even before the wilds. I've had years of practice. I coped with moving to the low district, and then losing you when I moved back out. I coped with the hardships of the wilds, and everything Girard and Sir Coral threw at me. I have only ever failed to cope with something once, and that failure was what sent me here. Since then, I've taken and accepted everything that has happened to me, because I probably deserve it."

"Hey, now." I would have put my hands on his shoulder, but he was still holding them. I squeezed his instead, then. "Don't be too hard on yourself. We've been over that."

"Coping is all I've ever done," he continued, ignoring my response. "My entire life has been something I've merely handled. I've never had a dream to chase, or someone to love, or—"

"Wait. You were married, weren't you?" I wasn't sure what was more surprising; that his wife apparently didn't count as someone to love, or that had I remembered that he had one. Even before my memory issues had made everything even harder, he had almost never talked about her.

He stopped for a moment. "Yes," he finally admitted. "She was a good person. I respected her. Admired her. Even liked her. But I didn't love her." He shook his head. "I wanted to. It would have been so much easier for everyone that way. I'm sorry, both to her and to you, that I failed."

"Why me?" I tilted my head.

"Because...."

He squeezed my hands again, and then let them go. Once his hands were free, he untied and removed his blindfold, and placed it in his lap. With his eyes exposed, layers of emotion I had missed suddenly became obvious. Where I had once seen nothing at all, I suddenly saw sadness, pain, even heartbreak in his blind gaze.

I hadn't yet moved my hands, so he easily found and took them in his again. He tried to position himself like he was locking eyes with me, based on his best guess of where I was.

"Because," he said, "you were the one. All this time. I always wondered what became of you after I moved. I always missed you. I never stopped thinking about you. Vanessa said I wasn't capable of love, and I thought she was right, because I was never happy with her. I was never happy at all. However, I understand, now. It was always you. I... I love you."

I just sat there, frozen. I had no idea what to say or do. I didn't even know how I was supposed to feel, let alone how I was supposed to react. I was just

quiet. Stunned.

"I've put up with a lot of things," he continued. He never stopped squeezing my hands. He even traced his thumb over the top of one of them, in a sort of rubbing gesture. "Life in the wilds. Losing my sight. Girard and his accusations. I never cared what happened to me. I only cared when I had that dream, and I thought I had lost you. Lost the one I love."

Dream? What dream was he talking about? I thought back and... oh. Right. That one.

"I'm sorry," he said. He let go of me, and backed off. He hugged his knees to his chest, and curled into as tight a ball as someone his size could. "I said too much. I know. I never...."

He stopped, shut his eyes tight, and buried his beak between his knees. He took several deep but ragged breaths through his own feathers.

I wanted to say something. I wanted to help. He was tearing himself apart, and I wanted to stop him, to calm him down. I didn't know how, though. I didn't know what to say. I still didn't even know how to react to his confession.

"Hey, um, it's—"

"I never wanted to be a complication." He sniffled, which surprised me, because I hadn't seen him do that since back in the city, back when he was still Orrin, the scared kid who had just wanted a friend. "You had Celine, and I respected that. Even after she passed, I didn't want to take advantage of her absence. You already had love. I would only be intruding with mine."

He raised his beak and faced me again, once he was able to.

"I would have continued to love you from a distance, but..." He took another breath. His voice was getting quieter. "You're right. I can't lie, and I can't hide things from you. You wanted to know, and now you do. I'm sorry."

He started to put his blindfold back on, but even without it, it was obvious that he was shutting down again. He was transforming back into... into... not Orrin, the other one... Rook.

"I said too much," he finally repeated. After re-tying the blindfold, he stood up, and started to walk away.

"Hey. Hey!" I jumped up, and ran to him. I wasn't going to just let him wander off, especially since he wouldn't know where he was going without assistance. I grabbed him, and he stopped. "It's all right," I added.

I couldn't bear to see him like that. Even if I didn't know how to feel about him, I had to at least comfort him. I took his hands again.

"I know it's hard for you to open up," I said. My voice was low, even though we were alone. "You carry so much by yourself. You stay quiet, and you tuck all your problems away. I'm glad you finally let this one out, though. Thank you for

trusting me with it."

Of course, comforting him for the act of sharing was the easy part. The hard part was what he had shared. He loved me. Did I feel the same way? Could I?

"It's just... I'm afraid," I admitted. "You mentioned...."

I closed my eyes, and tried to disguise a sigh as a deep, thoughtful breath. Maybe if he thought I was pausing in contemplation, like he always did, then he wouldn't notice that I was trying to remember her name.

"Celine." I tried to say the name normally, without sounding too excited that I had gotten it. "You mentioned Celine, and I can't just pretend she isn't an important part of this. I don't want to let her go." I squeezed his hands, probably more for my comfort than his. "I don't want to forget her."

"I never wanted to replace her. That's why—"

"I know." I had to stop him before he attacked himself again. "But... I'm still glad you told me. I've always liked you. I don't know on what level, exactly—it's a lot to take in, you know?—but I'm happy we're still together."

He was quiet and still for a long time, but then he finally dipped his head a little. "Thank you," he said, though I almost didn't hear him.

"Anyway, let's keep going. We can talk more tonight, if you'd like. Or along the way. Or any time at all, really. You know I'm here, at least as long as I can be."

He nodded, but said nothing.

I looked toward the horizon, toward the distant ruins of... of... somewhere, and then looked along the ground from there to where we stood. I was looking for tripping hazards, but aside from the snow, things seemed pretty clear. I started to walk, started to lead him, but as I held his hands in mine again, a thought struck me.

"You... like this, don't you?"

I rubbed my thumb over the top of one of his hands, just to let him know what I was talking about. It had always been my way of leading him, but I suddenly wondered if he saw it as more than that.

He was quiet at first. "Yes," he eventually admitted.

I took even longer to think about my response than he did. A million thoughts raced through my head, and I didn't know the answers to any of them.

Then again, maybe I didn't have to, at least not yet.

I smiled. "Good. I'm glad."



"Here we are," I said, though I couldn't remember where exactly we were. I knew from the buildings that it had to be somewhere important, though. We didn't just pass through old dead cities every day.

"Roc's Nest," the crow said. "Then the northern city is just ahead."

The shin-deep snow crunched with every step either of us took. The snow fell calmly and silently, but there was still a lot of it. Trudging along the ground was cold and miserable. The crow had nothing but his own scales to protect his feet, but even those were probably better than my old, worn, and definitely not waterproof sneakers. We both had to have been suffering, though only I showed it.

Even the few white-covered buildings along the city's outskirts were creepy, let alone the larger masses of them deeper inside. I tried my best to keep going, but every step brought with it even more fear, uncertainty, and snow in my shoes than the one before.

I stopped without warning the crow, just to make him bump into me. Ever since he had told me how he felt about me, I had grown less afraid of doing things that involved touch. The way I saw it, he liked the contact, and I was happy to do anything that made a friend happy. At that moment, though, I was pretty sure that I needed the comfort, too.

"Why Roc's Nest?" I asked. It wasn't that I doubted our goal. I had just forgotten what it was.

He didn't seem like he was afraid of the ruins. I wondered how much of that was because he couldn't see them, how much was because he kept all his thoughts to himself, and how much was just my weirdness, being more nervous around something than a normal person should.

"We've already made it this far," he said. "We're only a few days away from the northern city, now. I thought that, if anything happened to the others, then we might as well try. If you'd rather go back, though, we can. It isn't our mission."

"Mission... the northern... oh! Right." As usual, it seemed obvious when it had finally come to me. How could I have forgotten something like that? "No, you're right. We can push through. It's cold and scary, but at least we're not alone, right?"

Some sort of small object crashed into the snow just behind us, and an instant later, a tall, green monster fell on the crow from above. Whatever the

creature had thrown had missed, but the creature itself hadn't. Startled, the crow let out a shrill caw that pierced the otherwise-quiet sky. He staggered backward, struggling to adjust for the creature's weight.

"Scout! What's happening?"

Even though the crow had shouted his question, it was hard for me to hear him over the creature's long, sustained scream. The creature locked its legs around behind the crow's back, sat on his shoulders, and started punching his head, shrieking all the while.

"Um...." I tried as hard as I could to overcome my startled daze, and figure out what was going on. Even though the crow mostly protected his head from his attacker's shots, I still had no time to blank out. Come on, think!

I squinted. The attacker wasn't a monster. As feral as he was acting, he was physically upright, with hands and feet and everything. More importantly, though, he looked familiar.

"It's...."

He was green and obviously reptilian—alligator? No, crocodile!—and even when bent over the crow's head, he looked dangerously skinny.

Wait. Thin crocodile....

"It's Girard!"

"Girard?" The crow grabbed Girard and lifted. Using nothing more than his own sheer strength, he overpowered Girard's leg-lock, detached him, and threw him forward and into the air. The arc was high enough for Girard to right himself, but powerful enough that his landing still wasn't exactly graceful. The snow broke his fall, a little.

The crocodile sprang to his feet and gave a feral roar, but then stumbled, closed his eyes, and brought a hand to his temple. His hesitation allowed me to get a better look at him, and I gasped.

Even if my memory hadn't failed, he still would have been almost impossible to recognize. He had wasted away to almost nothing. Even though he had already been small before, he wasn't even the same crocodile as that anymore. He was completely naked, and he carried himself like an actual wild animal. I used to think that... that... there was a wolf I once knew, what was his name? I used to think that the wolf was too skinny, but even he would have looked healthy next to the crocodile.

On top of looking downright skeletal, the crocodile was haggard and visibly deranged. Scaly hide hung off bones, with barely enough room in his figure for internal organs. There couldn't have been more to him than that. How was he still alive? Was he still alive? It was ridiculous to think that his undead corpse walked the land, of course, but it almost seemed easier to believe than the

alternative, that the body of the crocodile standing before us somehow still functioned.

"Girard. What are you doing?" The crow asked.

Girard—was that his name?—roared again. "You!" he shouted, which at least answered the question of whether he could still talk. "I knew you'd come! I knew it! I knew it!"

"Where are Sir Coral and Doctor Signey?" the crow asked.

"Ha! Your friends can't help you now, Rook. You'll suffer for what you did to them!"

"Excuse me?" The crow—Rook?—tilted his head.

"That's right." The crocodile grinned and puffed out his chest, which did absolutely nothing to make him look any bigger. "I know about your spies. I read the notes. I saw the way he described us. How he made it sound like you're normal, and I'm the crazy one. That's why I hid them, you see. Those notes are beyond your reach now. You can't poison the northern city!"

"And Sir Coral and Doctor Signey?" the crow repeated.

"Why are you asking me? You should know; you killed them. You killed everyone!" The crocodile managed to extend his arm and point at Rook, but only for a moment, like even the weight of his own limb was a struggle for him. "But I'll stop you. I'll end this myself. In Keeper Edward's name, I swear I'll kill you!"

"I never killed anyone in the tribe," the crow quietly said, "and I don't want to start now."

"Ha! What, you want to talk your way out of this? Is that it? You had your chance. We could have talked on that roof, but no. You're the one who wanted it to end like this."

The crow said nothing.

"Do you think I wanted this?" the crocodile asked. "Keeper Edward saved me when I was lost. He showed me nothing but kindness and love. He made something beautiful out here, and I was happy just to be a part of it. But no! Now he's dead, everyone is dead, and everything is in ruins, and it's all because of you."

The crow said nothing.

"You're just like your traitor of a father. All you ever do is poison things!"

The crow said nothing, and the crocodile roared.

"Say something, already! Don't you even care that I hate you?"

The crow took a slow inhale, paused, then wordlessly exhaled again. The crocodile roared again, louder.

"Speak, God damn you!"

"Hey!" I had let their argument go on longer than I should, and I had finally

heard enough. "He said he doesn't want to fight, so leave him alone."

I walked between them and faced the crocodile, with the crow behind me.

"Stay out of this, Scout." There was some concern in the crow's otherwise flat voice.

I didn't dare turn my back on the crocodile, so I didn't look at the crow fully, but I did turn my head as much as I could. "I don't want you getting hurt," I said. "He's gone wild. Who knows what he'll do?"

"If he's that dangerous, then I can't let you face him, either."

"But—"

The crocodile interrupted us with a cackle.

"Oh, I see," he said. He tilted his head, as if trying to examine the bond between me and the crow, rather than look at either of us individually. "That's what it takes, is it? If I want you to fight me, I just have to kill your boyfriend. Is that it?"

"You wouldn't dare." The crow started to walk forward, toward me.

"Why not?" The crocodile stepped forward as well. "You already killed everyone who ever meant anything to me. The way I see it, it's more than fair!"

The crocodile leapt into the air, in an attempt to pounce on me. The crow charged me as well, though, and he reached me first. The crow grabbed and threw me out of the way, and the crocodile landed on him.

I fell into the snow, but sprang up again as quickly as I could. By the time I did, the crocodile had placed himself on the crow's shoulders again. He was punching the crow, though not as hard or as often as he had been before. His attention appeared to be somewhere else. He shifted his legs around, and suddenly, I saw what he was up to. He was trying to pickpocket the crow with his toes.

The crocodile's foot retrieved the crow's gun from its holster, and then passed it up to his hand. He then clubbed the crow with the gun's handle, right where his beak met the rest of his face. The crow, stunned, staggered and almost fell. The crocodile seized the opening, detached, and dropped to the ground.

The crocodile ran behind the crow, toward some object that was barely sticking out of the snow. When had that appeared? He turned and stood between me and the object, so I couldn't see what it was when he pulled it up.

He turned again, and ran almost straight through the crow. He hunched over, either because he was trying to keep his items secret, or because he was having trouble carrying them. Either way, he ran low, and he took out the crow's legs, which sent the crow falling to the ground on his back. The crocodile then kept running, until he had almost disappeared behind the falling snow.

The crow got onto his hands and knees, then slowly stood up. He placed one

hand on his head, where the crocodile had struck him.

"Orrin!" I knew that was wrong, but I couldn't remember his other name. I could barely even remember that one. He knew what I meant, hopefully. "Are you all right?"

"This isn't over yet," he replied.

"He took your gun."

"I know. Hazards?"

"What? Oh, right. Um...." I looked around. "It's snowing harder, now. Still calm, but more is coming down. Um, I can't really see the ground. More snow than ice at this point, though, so footing should be solid enough. I think."

"Thank you. Now, go, hide." He faced toward where the crocodile had gone, and his voice was quiet.

"What? But you can't just—"

"I won't let him hurt you. Find cover. Go! Now!"

I faltered, but then nodded, and ran behind the nearest building I could see. It wasn't that I wanted to abandon him. I would have rather faced the crocodile myself while the crow hid, if anything. However, he wouldn't budge, and we couldn't just stand there and argue over who should go. Staying any longer would have only gotten us both killed. We both had to move, and I just had to hope that he would take cover after I did.

He didn't. Even after I had gotten in position behind my building, he stood there, perfectly still, in the middle the road. What was he doing?

"Orrin...?"

He didn't respond. He didn't try to leave the street, either. The only movements he made at all were lowering his head, breathing deeply, and clenching and unclenching his fists.

I peeked around the building's corner. The crocodile was further down the street. He had run in a straight line, just far enough to be at range. He had the gun pointed at the crow, but even using both arms, he struggled to keep it steady.

The crow never tried to move. Was he giving up? He wasn't just going to let the crocodile shoot him, was he?

"Thank you, Scout," the crow whispered.

No!

I started to run again.

"Orr—"

A loud explosion. A scream. Rapid, running footsteps.

The blast startled me enough to stop my running. I never even made it back into the street. Was I too late?

No. The crow had not fallen.

There had definitely been a gunshot, but the crow was still standing. Not just standing, he was running, like the gunshot had signified the start of a race. The scream had come from the crocodile, who was trying in vain to nurse a freshly burned hand. The gun was nowhere, apparently blown out of his hand when he had fired it. The crow had used the explosion and screams to locate the crocodile, and was charging toward him.

The crocodile plunged his hands into the snow. The crow kept running. The crocodile barely had time to stand again. The crow spread his arms out wide, and crashed into the crocodile.

The crow's momentum lifted, pushed, and carried the crocodile forward for several large strides, before they fell into some sort of tackle. The crow went down into the snow, beak first, trapping the crocodile beneath him. The two of them skidded for almost half their own body length, then finally came to a stop. A small pile of snow gathered over their heads, while more came down from the sky.

The crocodile squirmed and thrashed with all his limited strength, like his very life depended on being able to get free. He yelled, then roared, then yelled again. He raised his legs and kicked outward, at thin air. He arched his body. Nothing he tried helped him escape.

By contrast, the crow didn't move at all. He was silent and still.

"You... on the roof...." The crocodile almost stopped screaming long enough to speak, though it was halting, at best. "The gun... really was disabled."

The crow said nothing.

"You think that trick was pretty clever, don't you?" the crocodile asked. He started to pant through clenched jaws. "Well, mine was clever, too! Wouldn't you agree?"

The crocodile started to laugh. It was a small laugh at first, barely more than a chuckle, but it quickly grew, until it seemed like it was completely out of his control. He then started to alternate between cackling, screaming, and sobbing. He made any type of noise he could, as long as it was loud. It was like he had become an angry infant, trapped inside the impossibly withered body of an adult crocodile, which itself was still underneath the crow.

I thought I saw the crow start to shift and rise, but then stop and settle back down again. However, that was just the crocodile trying to move him. Why was the crow just letting him do that? Something wasn't right.

"How heavy... are you, anyway?" The crocodile forced his words out between wheezes. "No, that's impossible. I used to lift twice what you weigh! Three times! You think you can stop me? I'm Girard Drake! The Dragon!"

Girard—was that his name?—screamed again, and pressed upward. He

slowly, shakily, and awkwardly started to lift the crow.

"I'm... stronger... than... you!"

He drew out the word "you" and turned it into a long, sustained cry, which he held while he lifted. It took all the strength he had, but he managed to roll the crow to one side, and drop him into the snow.

Even after he was finally free, the crocodile spent a few more moments on his back, panting. Once he had recovered, though, he suddenly scrambled to his feet, then rolled the crow onto his back.

I gasped. Suddenly, I understood why the crow hadn't moved since he had fallen.

There was a large knife buried in the crow's chest.

That must have been what the crocodile had pulled from the snow. He had grabbed it while the crow was running toward him, and....

Oh, no. No, no, no. No!

I ran.

With another deranged laugh, the crocodile dropped to his knees and hovered over the crow's body. He yanked the knife out of the crow's chest. He held it over his head while glaring down, ready to stab the crow again.

With as loud a scream as I could manage, I interrupted him in the same way that the crow had attempted; I ran into him at a full sprint. Too focused on the crow to notice or stop me, the crocodile yelped and flew backward.

The crocodile landed on his side at first, but his own momentum rolled him onto his back. A frenzied mess of long and bony limbs thrashed about at random, before he somehow found his feet again.

Once he was up, though, he stopped. He held still and looked me over. I did the same.

"You." The crocodile's voice was low and quiet, but there was no less hatred in it. "You ruined my case against Rook, beat me in a fight, and tried to kill me. You humiliated me in front of the entire tribe. Do you know how much I've wanted to get even with you?"

I said nothing. I had no idea, but then again, I didn't remember doing anything he claimed I had done. Who was Rook?

"Your luck is over, mouse. How about it?" He gave me a sick, twisted grin. "No one is here to stop us, anymore. Just you and me, to the death."

To me, the fight was not about some ancient misunderstanding. I didn't care whether I was innocent or guilty, or whether I had forgotten his charges or he had made them up. I didn't care what his grudge against me was, or whether it was legitimate. Mine was. He had stabbed my dear friend and companion. That was enough for me.

Anger replaced fear. I didn't care about creepy ruins, or about the fact that he had a knife. I didn't care about what he could do to me. I cared about making him suffer.

I dipped into a fighting stance.

The crocodile laughed, then lunged. I dodged to the side. His jaws, easily his most powerful feature after everything else had wasted away, snapped at the air where I had just been standing. The sound they made was almost as loud as his roar.

"I knew I never should have told you about the tribe." The crocodile took a wild slash with his knife, but I was quicker, and I dodged again. "Things were fine when it was just him and me. I knew that if I let you in, you'd take him away from me. You and your bird!" He treated that last word like it was a curse. Then he charged me again.

I got away just in time to avoid another sickeningly loud chomp, but how much longer could I keep that up? What was my plan? Just keep dodging until he gave up? I had to fight back somehow, but with no weapon and very little time to think, the best I could do was throw a snowball at him. Maybe it would at least surprise him, and give me long enough to get to a safe distance.

It didn't. He charged again. I ran away. He chased me.

He was faster than me, and my lead wasn't very big, so I knew he would catch up to me. Still, I had just enough time to try something, first.

I stopped, turned around, and ran at him. I tried to go low, fast, and slightly to his side. If I could catch him by surprise, without enough time to react, then maybe I could take out his legs when we passed each other.

That was the plan, anyway.

Somehow, he saw it coming. In fact, just before we ran into each other, I swore I saw him grinning.

I extended and swung my arm, aiming for his legs. He knew exactly what I was trying, though, and he jumped over my arm like it was a hurdle. He leapt harmlessly over it, and right past me. He then flicked his tail as we passed, so I'd run right into it. Instead of me taking out his legs, I received a hard smack on the snout.

The tail-swat knocked my upper body back, even as my momentum kept carrying my lower half forward. My legs went out from under me, and I landed on my back. I might have skidded a little, but I was already too dizzy to tell. The snow cushioned my fall, at least, but that wasn't the problem.

I rolled over onto my stomach, and pushed against the ground. I had to—

Before I could get up, something large and heavy smashed into my left side, and threw me through the air again. I landed against a building. I was lying on

my right side, facing the crocodile, with my back against the wall.

I tried to stand again, and to my surprise, he just watched. I was moving slowly because my head and ribs both hurt, but he apparently wasn't in a hurry. Was he letting me get up?

No. He was letting me almost get up.

He waited until I was almost, but not quite standing, and then attacked again. He quickly spun around, and lashed his tail at me.

It smashed into my chest, which threw me against the wall. The impact sucked out what little air I had collected. I bounced off the wall, and went face down, snout-first back into the snow.

Was he toying with me? He could have easily stabbed me, but instead, he had let me rise only to knock me down again. Was he just trying to inflict pain with his tail, rather than a quick death with the knife?

He grabbed my shoulder, and pulled me up before I could possibly stand on my own. He grunted and strained against my weight, but he still managed to press me against the wall, take a step back, spin around, and lash with his tail again. I knew it was coming, but I didn't really have time to think of an effective counter. I raised my knee, and I made him hit that instead of his intended target, but smashing my knee hurt me more than it hurt his tail.

I barely even had time to scream. I bent over from the pain, but that just brought my head low, and he was already spinning again. Before I knew it, his tail slammed into my lower jaw. The impact busted my snout, drawing blood, and threw my head backward and to the side. I hit the wall, then fell face down into the snow again.

Crunching footsteps. Unsteady ones. The crocodile was moving, but not toward me. I pulled my face out of the snow, rubbed my eyes, and saw that he himself had stumbled and almost fallen. He had recovered, but his steps were shaky, and he had a hand against his temple.

Headache? Spun too fast, or too many times? Some sort of effect from the cold?

No matter. He had a weakness in his head. That was all I needed to know.

He came at me again, while I was still on the ground. I rolled out of the way, just as he bent down and stabbed the ground behind me. I reached back and grabbed his ankles, one in each hand. While he was still leaning over, I pulled his feet out from under him. He toppled forward, and hit the ground snout-first.

I rolled out of his way, got up, and hobbled away as quickly as I could with my injuries, while he flailed at random in the snow.

By the time he managed to get up again, I was on the other side of the street. Even then, he only got about halfway up, wobbled, and fell again. I suddenly

wished I could have attacked while he was open, but I was too far away, and I had my own light-headedness to worry about.

I squeezed my eyes shut as tightly as I could, then opened them again, in an attempt to clear my head. By contrast, the crocodile tried to shake his dizziness with a violent head-rattle, but then groaned, put both hands on his head, and fell down again.

He tried to surprise me with a sudden charge. He didn't return to a standing position; he got about halfway up again and then just ran from there, probably hoping to get me before I could react. It almost worked, but I was still far enough away to see him coming.

I quickly scooped up some snow and threw it in his face. I got him right in the eyes, and he roared.

The move didn't stop him, but it did distract him while I dodged to the side. While he aimlessly ran forward and snapped his jaws at nothing, I got behind him.

He paused for just a moment, like he was going to look for me, or at least try to get the snow out of his eyes. I didn't give him time for either.

I reared up and kicked his back. It wasn't very damaging; my soggy sneakers and meager strength did nothing against his scales. However, there was just enough force to jostle him, startle him, and make him drop his knife.

I quickly leapt backward. I had a plan and I needed room to pull it off, but more importantly, I didn't want to be behind him anymore. Once he knew I was there, he could counterattack with his tail, and I didn't want any more of that.

I was wrong. Instead of going for the counter first, he immediately dove for the knife. He was afraid I would try to take it, I guessed. That was fine. I didn't try to stop him. Instead, I just let him drop to the ground, on his belly, while I backed up some more.

There. He was down, and I had a running start.

I charged, limping a little but sprinting anyway, until I reached him again. When I did, I delivered the most vicious running kick to the head I could, like I was trying to outright knock his head off his shoulders. It was hard enough that I actually hurt my foot a little, but it was worth it.

His head whipped back hard enough to pull his body with him, and he fell and rolled onto his back. He didn't move after that. At all.

I walked toward him, with even more of a limp than before. I stepped on his wrist, and pried the knife out of his hand. He didn't try to stop me. His eyes were half-open and he was still breathing, but he didn't respond to anything.

I grinned. He was still down, stunned, and helpless, and I had the knife. He was mine. If toying and suffering were what he was after, then I would be happy

He snapped at my foot. I hadn't expected him to recover at all, let alone that quickly, and that surprise kept me from reacting in time. One moment, my foot was pressing on his wrist, and the next, it was in his jaws. I screamed, from the shock as much as the actual pain.

I tried to slash at his head and neck with the knife, but broad slices did nothing against him. His hide was just too tough for the blade to cut. It hung too loosely off his bones for me to get a good angle, and the thick scales easily absorbed anything that hit them.

Still holding my foot in his jaws, he squeezed, and bit down harder. His fangs pierced my shoe, then my foot itself. I screamed again.

He got greedy, though. He shook his head in order to twist my leg, and inflict even more pain. It definitely worked, but at a price. His head had clearly been bothering him even before my kick, and rattling it afterward had been a huge mistake.

As expected, he stopped, and groaned.

That was the opening I needed.

I dropped down with my free leg, driving my knee into his chest. I hit him with my good knee, the one that his tail hadn't smashed, but he was bony enough that hitting him hurt that one, too. Still, at least it hurt him more.

I brought the knife down again. Since wide slashes didn't work, I had to go for more tightly focused stabbing. I drove the blade into his shoulder and pushed, until I finally managed to pierce his scales.

He screamed, which disrupted his jaws' grip. I freed my foot, and pulled my leg away.

I was back in control, and I made sure he knew it.

I decided to punish his insolence with another stab. I pulled the knife out of his shoulder and brought it down to his stomach. I had to work to slip it between the rows of scales, but once I had pierced him, I didn't stop pushing until I felt bone on the other side. There.

His scream turned into a feral roar halfway through. I responded by moving the knife forward, lengthening the cut.

He thrashed, but more from the pain than from an attempt to resist. As long as I stayed over the center of his body, he didn't have enough strength to reach me with any stray limbs.

He was defenseless, and I wanted him to feel every moment of it. I could keep stabbing him all day, if I wanted to. And I really, really wanted to. His screaming was becoming a problem, though, so I had to be satisfied with what I had already done. I still wanted to torture him forever, but I had to finish the job

before anyone heard us.

Fine, then. Death it was. I grinned, waited until he tried to bite at me again, and quickly slipped the knife against his throat. I pushed the blade down just as he pushed his head up.

Silence. His eyes went wide. Neither of us moved. Both of us panted—him from terror, if I had to guess, and me because it was hard to breathe through a busted nose.

He slowly put his head back down. There was no blood on his throat. The knife had given him a scare, but it hadn't actually pierced him.

I should have stabbed his throat again, harder, to rectify that problem. All I had to do was break the hide, and he had given me more than enough of an opening. Just one more thrust....

My hand trembled.

His chest did its best to rise and fall underneath my weight, but he didn't fight back. He wasn't even squirming anymore.

I looked down at the knife. It already had plenty of blood from plenty of wounds on it. What was one more? My goal had been to kill him, and he certainly deserved it. And with my background, it wasn't like I was a stranger to killing. Still, I hesitated. Why?

Wait. Maybe that was it. Maybe my background was the problem. Maybe I hesitated because I had thought that life was behind me.

He leaned his head back, baring his throat. He shut his eyes, either to prepare himself, or just to shield them from the falling snow.

"Go on," he whispered. He made the sounds inside his snout, in order to limit how much he had to move his neck.

"What...?" My hand trembled again. The tip of the knife scratched his throat scales a little.

"Do it," he said. "End this."

"And if I don't?" I asked, more for the sake of hearing my options than anything else.

He growled, and suddenly snapped at me again. His throat pushed against the knife as he lunged forward. However, he wasn't strong enough to impale himself on it. He couldn't break his own scales. I had to do that for him.

He was probably just trying to scare me, so that I'd kill him to protect myself. That wild miss of a bite gave him away, though. He hadn't even aimed at me. His threat could never work like that. If anything, the attempt made me see just how sad and pathetic he was.

I sighed. I closed my eyes, and moved the knife away.

"Oh, come on!" he shouted, when he realized what I was doing, or more

importantly, what I wasn't doing.

"I hate you," I said, barely above a whisper. "I despise you, even, and I want you to die. But I can't do it. I can't kill you. Not like this."

"You already did!" he shouted again. "Those wounds you gave me, you think they're going to get better? You think they'll just heal up, and everything will be fine?" His breathing was rough and strained, like he was trying not to cry. "I need a doctor, or else I'm going to bleed to death, or get a fatal infection, or something. And guess what? There aren't any doctors out here. Not for us. Not anymore."

He tried to raise his chest and head, like he was doing a sit-up, but he couldn't do it. Every time his throat got close to the knife, I pulled it farther away, until he finally gave up and collapsed back into the snow.

"Don't you get it?" His breathing got faster and more frantic for a few moments, but then calmed down again. "It's over."

I said nothing.

He roared and snapped at me, and once again, he missed so widely that I knew wasn't even trying. Was he even able to lift his head with full strength anymore? Maybe that was the problem.

His chest heaved. He pressed the back of his head against the ground. He shut his eyes tight, which squeezed out a few tears. "Don't you dare leave me like this," he said.

I stabbed a deep hole into the snow, right next to his head, and then left the knife there.

"I won't do it," I repeated.

"I'm already dead either way! What am I supposed to do now?"

"That's your problem."

"This is just needless suffering!"

"Good."

I stood up, and limped away. I let the sad little crocodile go. He could get up again, if he wanted to. I wasn't stopping him. His stab wounds probably made it harder for him to try, but I didn't care.

I had already wasted too much time and energy on him, and I was tired of it. I was tired of him. After all the whining he had done, I had heard enough. There were bigger, more important concerns.

The crow.

How long had the crow been lying there? I should have been tending to him. I shouldn't have let the crocodile steal my attention. The crow was more important to me than the crocodile ever was.

My foot and both my knees were in agony, which made hobbling over to the

crow difficult. Difficult, but not impossible, so I did it. I made it to him, whatever it took, and I knelt down at his side. I would do anything for that crow.

"Hey," I said.

No response. I probably needed to use his name. What was it, again? I thought, and once again, I could only remember the old one. Once again, it would have to do.

"Hey, Orrin," I tried.

He was on his back, just as the crocodile had left him. He had not moved at all. A small layer of snow had even gathered on top of him. Blood from the stab wound soaked his chest, from his tank top to the feathers beneath, and stained the surrounding snow.

"Orrin," I tried again. "Come on, let's go. You're going to be all right. I'm... I'm sorry that took so long. I'm here, now, though. I'm here. Please...."

Having grown up in the low district, I knew a dead body when I saw one. I refused to believe it, though. It just couldn't be. Not him. I took off his blindfold, and looked for any sign of life in his eyes. I took his wrist, and felt for a pulse. I put my ear over his bloody chest, like there could still be a heartbeat in there somewhere.

Nothing. He was already gone. He probably had been for a while. It had probably been instant, right when the crocodile had first....

Oh, God.

Oh, God!

"Orrin!" I pressed my forehead against his chest. I got red snow on my face, but it didn't matter. I sobbed. I openly sobbed.

Footsteps, crunching in the snow behind me.

I wasn't stupid. I knew the crocodile would get up, and I knew he would probably kill me. I had let him up, let him live, and even left the knife right next to him. Of course he'd take his revenge when I had my back turned. I knew he would.

I just didn't care.

I walked right into his trap with open eyes, because it just wasn't worth avoiding. He wanted to kill me? Fine. I had already lost my cat, my crow, and my mind. What did I have left? What did I still have that was worth dodging his blade?

The footsteps grew closer, until they were right behind me, and then stopped. I didn't bother turning around. I knew what was coming.

Actually, no. There was one thing I had to do first.

With a sniffle, I raised my head, and brought it toward Orrin's. I kissed him, lightly. It was a very small, very quick kiss; my snout and his beak only met for

an instant, then I pulled away again.

It was a courtesy, mostly. I still didn't know how I felt about him, but I knew how he felt about me, and I knew what he wanted. After everything we had been through, he deserved that kiss.

"I would have been with you to the end," I whispered.

There. I was ready. I returned my head to Orrin's chest, and waited.

And waited.

When the end refused to come, I finally turned around, if only because I was curious what was taking so long.

The crocodile was standing over me, complete with a trail of blood from where I had left him, just like I had expected. He held his stomach with one hand, and raised the knife in the other, ready to strike, just like I had expected. The only thing I hadn't expected was the look on his face.

"What... what is this?" he asked. He lowered the knife, probably because he didn't have the strength to lift it any longer. "You and him...." He took a small step backward, his eyes wide.

"Yes...?" I wasn't sure what he was getting at.

"No!" he spat back, like he was trying to disagree with my one-word question. Like he was terrified of it. "No, Rook was evil. So are you. You're not supposed to... you're not capable of... of...."

He took another step backward. He dropped the knife. He dropped to his knees.

"You... you didn't... did you... love him?" he asked.

I had no idea how to answer that, so I didn't. The crocodile had already taken too much time away from Orrin. I wouldn't let him have any more. I just turned back around, and pressed my head against my fallen bird.

"I loved someone, once," the crocodile said. "He's gone, now, too."

My ears twitched. I wasn't sure what I had expected him to say, but it wasn't that. I turned around again, curious.

I saw the look in his eyes again, and suddenly, I knew. I understood him, just like he understood me. We were both shattered souls, left alone in the wilds after losing our dearest, most beloved companions.

He sunk lower, until he was sitting down in the snow. "I had no idea," he said.

For a little while, he was just as still as the crow. Finally, he looked at me. Tears ran down his cheeks, just as much as the blood flowed from his wounds.

"I thought...." He winced, and looked down at his stomach. "I thought that if I killed Rook, it would break the spell he had over you. Over everyone."

Rook? Rook... oh. Orrin. I hadn't known he had other names.

"You still love him, though," the crocodile continued. "Even now. Why? How?"

Was that a serious question? He was looking at me like it was. What could I say to that?

"You were wrong about him," I tried.

I wasn't sure how much contempt to add. He was the one who had murdered Orrin, but somehow, he didn't seem evil anymore. He was just sad. Broken. His mind was as sick as his body. Just like me.

"Maybe I'm not the one who's supposed to snap out of it, now," I added. "Maybe you are."

He blinked, opened his jaw, paused, blinked again, and closed it. He hung his head. "Maybe."

"So, what now?" I asked. For all the chances we had each had, neither of us had killed the other. Neither of us had been willing. What else could we do, though? What else was there, but death?

The crocodile's face lit up. He looked at me, his eyes as intense as I ever remembered seeing.

"The northern city," he said.

I blinked. "What?"

"The northern city! Don't you remember?"

"I...." I tried to think, but between my injuries and the crow's death, it was hard to focus. "I don't remember a lot of things," I admitted.

"The migration. Cam—Doctor Signey's notes. Think!" Either his pain had vanished, or he was too excited to let it slow him down anymore.

I kept thinking. Migration? Notes? Northern city?

Wait, something was familiar about all that....

Wait.

Yes. There it was. I searched for that memory, and I found it. Yes, I did remember, but—

"I still have the notes," he continued. "Not on me, of course, but they're safe. I stashed them away. I hid them. You've got to go get them, and take them to the northern city. It's only a day away, now. You have to!"

I looked down at the crow. I didn't want to forget him. I didn't want anyone else to forget him, either. If I could deliver the notes, then maybe I could keep the world from forgetting him. Maybe....

"They're in the Noble Bank building," he continued. "About four or five blocks straight ahead from here, on the left. Third floor, lounge, underneath a pile of furniture. You, um, might have to do some lifting. I thought I might destroy them if I went crazy again, so I buried them under as much heavy stuff

as I could, so I couldn't get to them again. Can you remember that?"

I clenched my jaw, then relaxed it again, and sighed. "I'll write it down," I admitted. "What about you?"

The crocodile shook his head, then stifled another wince. "Forget about me. Take the notes and go."

"You're not going to try and ambush me again?"

"In this condition?" He tried to laugh, but the pain immediately made him stop. "I'll be dead soon, don't you worry. Maybe that's for the best. I don't want to lose my mind again."

A million reactions swam through my head, and I had no idea which one to choose. I wanted to feel sadness at his imminent death, perhaps even guilt that I had caused it, but then again, I really didn't. I still wanted to kill him, and I regretted not doing so when I had the chance. I still couldn't do it, though, no matter how many more chances I may have had. I wanted to hate him, to condemn him, to forgive him, to beg forgiveness from him, to save his life, to take it, to prolong his suffering, to end it before he could—

"I'm tired," he said, before I could decide. "Mentally. I've seen too much, and I'm tired of it. And physically. I'm hungry, cold, and my head hurts. I'm sleepy. Maybe I'll... maybe I'll lie down for a while."

Tiredness. Was that why I couldn't figure out how I felt about him? Because I was too tired to want to deal with the question? He wasn't the only one who had been through a long journey, or who had lost people close to him. He wasn't the only one who was tired.

"Maybe," I said. In a way, I kind of envied him. His journey was over already, and he got to rest. I still had to deliver the notes, first. "Sleep well, I guess."

"Yeah." With great effort, he scooted over toward the nearest building, then collapsed against it. He still sat on the ground, in the snow, but he leaned his back and head against the wall. "It's fine. It's too late for us, anyway. It always was. We're afflicted. We never had a chance, you know? Even from the start. I guess it always had to end like this."

"You think so?" I asked. "But then, why did we fight so hard? Did any of it matter? For everything we did, we still can't change our stories, can we?"

"No. But we can tell them." He looked up at me. "Get the notes, Scout. Let the northern city know who we were, and what we saw. It's... it's the only way that any of this will mean anything."

I swallowed, then gave a small nod. The crocodile smiled. It was subdued, almost serene, at least compared to the twisted grins he had always flashed before.

"There's someone else I need to take care of, first, though." I looked down at the crow.

"Yeah," the crocodile said. "I'm sorry."

I didn't answer. I just lifted the crow and draped his arm over my shoulder, silent but for a small grunt at how heavy he was.

The crocodile's apology didn't come close to covering what he had done, but I doubted anything would. Nothing he could say or do would bring the crow back. All I could do was move forward. I would complete the crocodile's mission, then forget about the crocodile. Fortunately, forgetting things was my specialty.

I turned and left. I carried my fallen friend out of the city, and left my fallen enemy behind.



Breakfast was delicious. I wouldn't have expected such good food out in the wilds, but the combined efforts of the tribe had produced a glorious feast. We had a bounty of fish, fruits, a sort of salad of gathered plants, and even an improvised tea made from pine needles. The tribe really had figured out how to care for each other.

"How is everything?" Keeper Edward asked.

"Oh, it's fan...." He had caught me mid-bite, but I swallowed and answered him as soon as I could. "Excuse me. It's fantastic. Thank you."

"Oh, don't thank me." Keeper Edward chuckled. "It was a group effort."

"I would not have been able to gather vegetation without your guide," Doctor Signey said. "You were wise to have included it in your supplies."

"I just fished because it was my turn." Celine shrugged. "Nothing anyone else wouldn't have done."

"And my cooking is just doing what you taught me." Marcus looked around at everyone else, and smiled. "I mean, don't get me wrong. I'm glad it worked. I'm glad that everyone likes it. Thank you. I couldn't have done it without you, though."

Keeper Edward smiled at the sentiment. So did I, and I wasn't even the one he was talking to. Everyone did, really. Even Girard got into the moment, at least a little.

The weather was as pleasant as the food. The skies were clear, and the morning sun was warm, but not hot yet. Trees were available if anyone wanted

shade, but most of us were content to just bask in the sunrise. The seven of us sat around the remnants of the now-extinguished fire, and enjoyed our breakfast. There were no thoughts of sickness, or of Hunters. Even if it was just for that morning, or even just for that moment, life was temporarily good.

"Well, thanks to everyone, then, because this is great." I happily finished off my salad.

"Want some more?" Celine noticed how much I liked it, and offered me some of hers.

I blinked. "Um, are you sure? I don't want to take... I mean...."

Celine laughed. "Oh, shush. It's fine. I'm full, and something tells me that you're not."

"Well, I mean, if you say so...."

Celine smiled, and I flattened my ears. I looked to the side, and scratched the back of my neck. I needed to work on being less nervous around her, but I was just too afraid of saying something stupid.

"Hey!" Sir Coral shouted. I winced, thinking I was in trouble for eyeing his daughter again, but then he continued. "Someone's coming!"

"Wait, what?"

Everyone looked at Sir Coral, who was looking behind me. I turned around. There, standing at the top of the large hill behind me, was what seemed like an equally large crow.

"Excuse me," the crow said.

His voice was quiet and meek for how impossibly deep it was. He was in what looked like part of a Hunter uniform. He had a simple tank top and no shoes, but the pattern on the pants was unmistakable. No suit, though. He was just as afflicted as we were.

"Sorry," he continued. "I was just looking for food, but if I'm intruding...."

"Oh, that is fine. Welcome!" Keeper Edward spread his arms and smiled. "Come, join us."

"Keeper!" Girard hissed.

The crow's nod was surprisingly solemn. "Thank you." He made his way down the hill. He started to walk toward us, but stopped well short, and remained on the outer edge of the group. For how big he was, there was definitely some timidity to him. "I don't mean to—"

He froze when he saw me. He stared, blinked, and stared some more, and his eyes grew wider with each moment. I was almost about to ask what his problem was, but then I remembered who he reminded me of. No. It couldn't be. Could it?

"Scout?" he asked.

It could. It was. It was my turn to stare.

"Orrin?" I answered his question with my own.

Orrin winced. "Call me 'Rook,'" he mumbled, though I almost didn't hear him. "But yes," he added.

"You two know each other?" Girard asked.

"From a long time ago," I answered. "In the city. Even then, it was way back. It must have been...." I turned to Orrin—wait, no, Rook. "God, how old were we, anyway?"

"Not very," he said. "Scout. I want to say it's good to see you again, but...." He shook his head. "I didn't want you to be out here, too."

"I could say the same." Seeing my old friend again did put a smile on my face, though, even if the circumstances shouldn't have.

Sir Coral looked at Rook, and gave a slight tilt of his head. "You changed your name?" he asked, though I wasn't sure why it mattered to him. Curiosity, perhaps?

Rook took a deep breath, and hung his head. "Yes. I used to be Orrin Sebastian. No more."

"Sebastian? As in...?"

Rook closed his eyes. "Neil Sebastian's son. Yes."

"I see." Sir Coral folded his arms.

Rook took a step backward. "I make no excuses. My father and I have both done things I regret."

"Well, let's start with you, then." Girard looked him over. "Those aren't civilian pants."

Keeper Edward cleared his throat. "Now, now. First edict, Girard."

"He's not in the tribe!" Girard started, but he backed down when he saw the Keeper's unyielding look. He hunched forward, and dipped his head. "Sorry."

"He isn't yet, anyway," I said. "Though he certainly could be."

"You would allow that?" Rook asked.

"Of course!" I beamed.

"Well, that is the purpose of this tribe, is it not?" Keeper Edward smiled as well.

Sir Coral leaned over and whispered something to Girard. Girard looked at Rook, then back at Sir Coral, and nodded.

"I don't know." Girard glared at Rook.

"What's there not to know?" I glared at Girard.

"You don't think he's going to be a problem?" Girard asked.

I shook my head. "No more so than you."



I buried the crow outside of the ruins. There weren't a lot of trees around, but I only needed one. Of the few that were in sight, I picked what I thought was the prettiest one. It was small, no taller than I was, and had already lost its leaves to the winter. If we had been closer to a forest, I probably could have found a better one. I hoped my choice was good enough, but I worried it wasn't.

As more members of the tribe had died, there had been fewer people left to remember them. I was the only one there for the crow, which made having any sort of proper funeral pointless. I could make a speech for him, but who would hear me?

At least I could give him a burial, though. When I died, I wouldn't even have that.

Losing my cat had nearly destroyed me, but the crow had helped me. Physical help, since he had dug her grave, but also emotional help. He had comforted me, especially when I needed someone to talk to. How was I supposed to cope with losing him? I didn't have anyone to help me anymore.

Even the process of burying the crow proved how alone I was. I had struggled to drag him back out of the ruins, because he was so heavy. I had struggled to dig the hole, because I was small and weak and I lacked the proper tools. I had struggled to place his body in the hole, even though I knew he wasn't going to come back to life, because I still didn't want to give up on him. I had even struggled to fill the hole up again, because it was the last time I would ever see him. It meant that he was gone, and that I alone remained.

Even marking the grave had been tough, since details about him had been getting harder to remember. I didn't know anyone's name anymore, so I hadn't known what inscription to carve. After trying and failing to remember, I had eventually decided to go with "MY CROW." It was all I had room for on the small tree, and more importantly, it was all I knew.

I wanted him to have a proper funeral, but what could I do by myself? I tried making a speech, but it felt awkward and wrong because no one was there, and because I still couldn't get anything out without choking up anyway. I tried to gather my thoughts and leave them in my head, like some sort of private prayer, but sitting there in silence just didn't feel like it was enough. What more could I do, though? With no other options, I alternated between thinking, stumbling through lonely speeches, and sobbing.

"Do you... do you remember how we met?" I asked the inscription on the tree, like I somehow expected it to answer me. "We were in the city, I think."

I tried to piece together what I could remember. It was partly for his sake, and partly for mine. I had to make a speech worthy of him, but I also had to make sure I still had that memory. I didn't want to lose that one, too. Please, not that one.

"We were young," I tried. Were we? Yes, that seemed right. "And... we fought. You took something of mine, I think. But then, you gave it back?"

Oh, what was the use? I was giving him the worst eulogy ever. Once again, I had completely failed to honor someone I cared about. Once again, I had only managed to embarrass myself trying.

Wait. Once again? Had I done that before?

Probably, knowing me. I couldn't do anything right.

My pathetic speech wasn't helping anyone, and I was running out of time. Start to finish, the burial had taken the entire day. I probably shouldn't have done it. I was losing my memory faster without my crow there, like he had somehow been protecting me from the worst of it. It seemed like most of my memories had died with him. With how fast I was forgetting things, I might not have had an extra day to spare anymore. Rather than spending time at his grave, I really should have been....

Should have been....

What was I supposed to be doing, again?

I had written it down, I knew that much. I patted my pockets, and searched through my pack.

Ah, there it was. My note was short, but it was enough. Doctor Signey's files. The northern city. Right. Yeah.

I apologized to my crow and walked back toward the city. I tried to ignore the feeling that I was leaving something behind.



The setting sun didn't make the city any less creepy. I hated the ruins enough already, even at morning or midday. I never would have entered at night if I didn't have to, but I just didn't have any more time to wait. My mind was slowly shutting down, and I had to finish the mission while I still understood it.

Of course, that determination didn't make the abandoned streets seem any friendlier, especially since I didn't have my crow anymore. Good thing I wasn't

sleepy, I guessed. Not after all I had been through.

Nervous as I was, though, I hadn't expected what I saw just three blocks in.

Disturbed snow, with tracks, footprints, and impressions marring its surface. It looked like it had snowed recently, but not enough to hide whatever had happened. There was still blood everywhere, visible even through the thin white layer coating it.

A murder? Or maybe a fight that had turned into a murder?

There were footprints leaving the area in two directions. One set had a more solid track alongside it, like someone dragging something, perhaps. It went straight behind me, toward the wilderness, the exact place I had just come from. Odd.

The other set, which ran alongside a small trail of blood, led deeper into the ruins, toward—

I screamed.

There was a body in the snow, in a sitting position, propped up against a building. Male, crocodile, so thin that I thought that was how he had died, until I saw that someone had slashed his stomach open. There was a knife next to him, which must have been the murder weapon. A fine layer of snow coated what was left of him. Like the snow over the rest of the blood surrounding the scene, there was just enough to prove he had been there a while, but not enough to hide the sight of his frozen carcass.

There was something else under the snow, too, slightly farther away. I dug it out, and found a badly damaged gun. It looked like someone had tried to fire it through a jam, or something. No, more than just a jam. Someone had welded a metal ball bearing into the barrel, completely and permanently disabling it.

What had happened on that street? It looked like a fight that had turned deadly, but... why?

No matter. I had to flee, quickly.

I left the crocodile's body, but I took the knife and the ruined gun. The knife was for protection; I needed something in case the killer returned. The gun, I wasn't sure. It was useless as a weapon, and I knew that, but that wasn't why I took it. I even unloaded it and left the bullets behind, but I still kept the gun itself. I tucked it away in my back pocket, mostly because of a fragment of a memory I couldn't place. I just felt like it must have been important to someone, somehow.

The Noble Bank was farther ahead, and I sprinted toward it. I didn't even care about my hurt knees or ribs. The faster I ran, the faster I could get out of those God-forsaken ruins.



My entire body ached. I was still sore from the beating I had taken, and all the running hadn't helped. I felt like I was catching a fever, too. I was a little woozy, and my head hurt as much as my body did. I needed to rest. Rest my legs, rest my ribs, rest my head, rest everything, just rest. But I couldn't. Not yet.

Fortunately, my reminder to myself had worked, and I had already found and retrieved the notes. I had needed to move some heavy furniture to get at them, but other than that, they had been right where the reminder had said they'd be. There hadn't been any more obstacles, difficulties, or dangerous murderers to stop me, either. It was like the ruins had finally relented, and finally allowed me to just take the notes and leave.

Once I had made it north of that awful place, I built myself a small campfire, and sat down. I wasn't stopping for the night or anything. I didn't have the time. I still wasn't even eating or sleeping. I could worry about all that after I finished my job. I just needed a small break, was all. I just needed to catch my breath after all that running, warm myself a little, and maybe use the light to read the notes.

Medical profiles of people I didn't recognize, including, surprisingly, me. Research files on DLY. Personal accounts. Journals. Stories. Even a photo of someone else I didn't recognize, and some sketches. Inside that folder was the very life of the tribe itself—the tribe, yes, I remembered—as well as the lives of everyone who had been in it.

There were also some blank pages and a pencil, and as soon as I saw those, I felt like I had to contribute something. According to the records, it seemed like the tribe had apparently split at one point, and whoever had written the notes had gone the other way, with no way of knowing what had happened to my group. It was hard for me to remember what had happened anymore, either, but I tried to fill in what little I could. I wanted whoever read those notes to remember my cat and crow, even when I no longer could. I wanted them to remember me, even when no one else would.

As soon as I finished, I put out the fire, and I started walking again. No time to waste.

~

The slowly rising sun lit up the northern city. The surrounding wilderness,

including the tree-covered hill I hid in while surveying the city, was untamed and uneven, but the city itself was flat and solid. The massive blue-gray dome rested on a stable, level foundation, which someone had clearly designed. There were thick, reinforced windows in some of the panels of the dome, giving me tiny glimpses into the city itself. I couldn't see anything but traffic from that distance, but even that sight was something new and foreign to the wilds. Life.

A group of armed guards in hazard suits patrolled the nearest entrance. That terrified me, and made me take cover behind a tree, but I couldn't remember why I had that reaction... wait, yes, I could. Hunters.

The guards I saw weren't Hunters, though. Hunter suits were a sort of faded, muted green, while the guards I saw wore the same blue-gray as their dome.

If they weren't Hunters, then maybe they would spare me. Maybe they would listen. Or maybe they still wouldn't. Who knew?

I swallowed, both because of fear, and because of thirst. How long had it been since I had drank anything? I probably shouldn't have been ignoring that, especially after so much running, especially with the fever and all. Oh, whatever. It was almost over.

I stood up, left the hill, and walked toward the city. There was no point hiding anymore.

The guards saw me. I dropped my knife and raised my hands, to prove I carried nothing but my pack and the notes. One of the guards still raised and pointed his gun at me, but another one said something I couldn't hear from that far away, and the first one lowered his gun again. The two guards exchanged some more words, then the one with the gun gestured for me to come closer.

I obeyed. Why not?

"Who's there? Are you another refugee?" the unarmed guard asked, once I was close enough. The voice was female, but that was all I could tell about her through the suit. "No, you look like you've been out here too long for that."

"He's hurt," the armed guard added. Male, and with an accent I didn't recognize.

Oh, right. I should have cleaned the blood off before I had approached them, but I had kind of forgotten. "I was in a fight," I said.

"So you're not a refugee, then?" the unarmed guard repeated.

"Of what?" I asked.

The two guards silently looked at each other.

"Let's start at the beginning," the unarmed one eventually said. "Who are you, and why are you here?"

I closed my eyes and thought, but it was no use. Things like that were hard enough to remember even without the headache. "I don't know," I admitted. "I'm

an afflicted wanderer, from... from... the other city."

"To the south?" she asked.

"I think so." How many other cities were there? "I'm sorry. I don't really know anything anymore. Maybe this will help?"

I held up the folder. The unarmed guard took it, glanced at it, and quickly passed it off to the armed one, so he could examine it while she continued her conversation with me.

"So you wouldn't know anything about what's happening down there, then," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"The riots? You don't know about those?"

I shook my head. "I don't really know what happened to the city after I left." Or before, for that matter. "Why? What's going on?"

"Details are a bit sketchy for us, too; they cut off communication. We're getting some information from the refugees, though. Supposedly, there are massive riots, almost like a revolution or something. Mayor King won reelection after his opponent died in a car wreck, but the people—"

"Commander!"

"Yes?" The female guard, who was apparently the commander, turned to face the male, who must have been her assistant.

"I think you should see these files," the subordinate guard said. "Personal diaries, mostly—some medical stuff, too—but look at these names."

The commander took the folder and started to read. I couldn't see her reaction through her helmet, but she kept looking between me and the notes, like she was having trouble believing what she was seeing.

"You traveled with some important people," she finally said. "Scout, I presume?"

"Did I?" I had to take her word for it. I couldn't even confirm her guess at my name; I just couldn't remember. It was hard to think straight anymore, and just trying made me even dizzy. I needed a place to sit, but I didn't see one anywhere.

She turned toward her assistant. "Newton."

"Commander?"

"Take these and digitize them. All of them. Scan everything, even if it's a blank page or a scribble. Send copies to everyone in our unit, including you and me. When you're done with that, inform Central that we may have something, here."

"You want me to make personal copies before I inform them?"

"I want you to take protective measures, should the originals become lost or

stolen. It's called a backup."

"Understood, Commander."

The subordinate took off, notes in hand, and the commander turned toward me again.

"You just gave us the key to understanding this war," she said, "should this rioting actually become one. You might have given us more than that, too, depending on what our researchers make of the medical notes. I'm sure they'd love to speak to you, by the way."

"Even though I'm...." The world tilted, and I stumbled. I started to notice a faint echo on everything I heard, which made it even harder to focus. "Even though I'm afflicted?" I tried again.

"Well, I can't let you into the city, of course, but perhaps they could take you in at a remote facility. It wouldn't be much, but it would mean food and shelter, and the doctors could—hey!"

I couldn't remain standing anymore. I had nothing left. My strength failed, dizziness and exhaustion overtook me, and I fell.

"Stay with me, now!" she said. "Rennar, Collier, get over here! Quickly!"

I groaned. I didn't have the energy to respond, so I just continued to lie down. I was too sleepy to do anything else.

Rushing footsteps. Several sets of gloved hands moving me, checking my vitals, removing my pack, putting me on a stretcher. Lifting. Carrying. I didn't know where they were taking me. I stopped understanding the shapes and colors I saw, so I closed my eyes. More movement. Voices, shouting back and forth. Noise.

I didn't know what would happen to me. Maybe they would revive me, and I'd wake up later in some facility, like the commander had mentioned. Maybe, with enough treatment, I could hang on just a little while longer.

Or, maybe not.

Maybe I had pushed myself too hard to reach those guards. Once the notes were in their hands, all the determination that had kept me going disappeared. My body had already held out longer than it should have. Maybe the time had finally come to acknowledge my weakness.

Somehow, I was all right with that. I knew my body had only given out because it could. I could finally afford to collapse. I no longer had to keep moving.

The guards who read those notes would know who we were, where we were from, what we had seen, and why we had travelled so far. They would know how we had all lived and died. Whatever movement had started with that rioting, I had given them everything they needed to understand and respond. I had done

my part, and I was fine leaving the rest to them.

Someone's hand found the ruined gun in my back pocket. I heard some brief panic, then understanding, probably when they realized it was broken. I whined, like an infant, and tried to raise my arm, to reach out for it. A long pause, some more noise, and then I felt the gun back in my hand.

I didn't really need it for anything. I just wanted to feel it. Just to remind myself. It was a memento, because I didn't have a blanket or a plush toy or anything, and I needed something to hold.

I ran a claw tip over the ball bearing, and its details slowly came back to me. Yes. That was right. I remembered.

I smiled. Satisfied that all was well, I slept.

Afterword



Writing one's first novel is never an easy feat, but I had a dream.

I do not mean this metaphorically, in the sense of having inspiration or a grand vision, though I admittedly had those as well. I mean that, sometime during the early morning of June 10, 2009, I had an actual, literal dream.

From this dream, I took the beginnings of a story. It gave me a rough premise, a small handful of characters, and two specific scenes, along with a pile of bizarre dream-logic. I took the workable ideas, reshaped them, and freed the usable elements from the unusable ones. I then wrote an outline, turned it into a manuscript, and polished the manuscript into respectability. The entire process took a little over four years; I ended up missing the anniversary date by two days. On June 12, 2013, I finally finished the first version of *The Afflicted*.

There was still more work to do after that, of course. I still had to solicit feedback from test readers, correct whatever issues they found, negotiate the usage rights and such for the cover and chapter artwork, plan the distribution, and so on. Still, even at that stage, I knew I had done it. My novel had become a part of the world.

Between my friends and the communities with which I associate, I know a great many creative people, specializing in almost every field of artistic expression imaginable. Visual artists, from sketchers to painters to photographers. Programmers, from software coders to game designers. Actors, from live-action to voiceover work. Other writers. Poets. Musicians. Sculptors. Costumers. If there is a medium by which one can create something, I probably know someone who has tried it. Some have received recognition for their work, while others are merely aspiring hobbyists. Either way, though, the will to turn dreams into reality has always been present. Now, I can call myself a part of that world. It is an indescribable honor to join my peers in creation.

I spent four years creating the first version of this story, which is a significant amount of time to devote to one project. The length of development brought about its own problems, challenges, and frustrations, and each required persistence and diligence to overcome.

Summoning the will to keep going, and to keep working on something for that long, was not always the easiest feat in the world. Some days filled me with inspiration and a desire to keep working, while others did not. I always had to keep moving, though, regardless.

My friends with their short stories, individual paintings, or other small projects regularly had new work to display, while I struggled with the feeling of

relative invisibility in the community. I envied people who hadn't committed to a single project; they had bustling and active galleries, while I had nothing to display, despite having worked just as hard for just as long. Saying that I had a novel I was writing, but that I hadn't finished it yet, eventually wore thin.

I changed jobs twice during the development period, and struggled to find ways to work on the novel, even as "real life" left me with less and less free time. I started taking a laptop with me to work, just so I could write during the bus commute, as well as during my lunch break. When the bumpy jostling of the bus ride broke my laptop, I bought another one, and I kept going.

The one problem I never had, though, was a lack of support. As long and arduous as the journey was, I always had family and friends who were willing to help. Some offered feedback and assistance with the novel itself, while others simply kept me company, but I doubt I could have done this without any of them. Therefore, I would like to take a moment to thank them all.

First, of course, is my immediate family: mom, dad, and my dear sister. They offered proofreading assistance, but more importantly, they raised me, and they shaped who I am as a person.

Next are fellow authors Gloria Skurzynski and Alane Ferguson, or as I know them, Grandma Glory and Aunt Lanie. With that kind of background, I suppose writing has always been in the blood. I thank them for opening me up to that world, and for the direct help they provided with my novel itself, once they had learned that I was one of them.

As far as friends go, my first mention has to go to husband-and-wife team DavidN and Whitney. Although we didn't physically meet until near the end of this journey, David has been with me from the very beginning. He encouraged me every day, at every step of the process. He was there when I first had the dream, when I finished the final edit of the final manuscript, and at every moment in between. Every time I despaired, he talked me out of that despair. Every time I thought I'd never finish, I remembered a certain four-year project that he had completed, and my will to join him in his accomplishment renewed. Then, when I had finally done it, Whitney gave me some very good advice about copyrights, so I could protect what I had spent so long to create. They both are unbelievably kind, infinitely helpful, and they could not be a lovelier couple.

The other three Team Hatoful members, BudgieBin, Xaq, and RavenWorks, kept me sane throughout the journey. Some of them helped with the first test reading of my novel, and some didn't, but all of them kept me company. They made me smile whenever I needed it. They have always been excellent friends.

Azlyn "theOwlette" Mennenga drew the cover illustration, Rock "RKTDWG" Erikson designed the text for it, Clare Hoskins made all of the

chapter and afterword illustrations, and Christa "Thabi" Buckentin made additional promotional images for advertisements and such. Far from simple business transactions, though, each of them took my ideas, ran with them, and spun them into their own unique and creative visions. Each was kind, helpful, friendly, creative, and an absolute pleasure to commission. These are not just people who draw pictures; these are true artists.

Ebook Launch formatted this novel for Amazon Kindle and Smashwords. While I might have been able to navigate each site's formatting rules, cobble something together, and subsequently worry about whether I had done everything correctly, there is a certain peace of mind in trusting the professionals.

Gretel, Naomi, Gino, Emery, and David M. supervised, managed, or otherwise employed me in the jobs I've held throughout this journey. Their paychecks kept me fed, sheltered, and out of bankruptcy. They even enabled me to afford a replacement laptop, which was critical in allowing me to continue working on the novel.

My former high school English and Creative Writing teacher, the late Betsy Tapia, taught me what I currently know about the rules of grammar. I owe the novel's structure, vocabulary, and lack of passive voice to her repeated admonishments. It was my dream to present this novel to her someday, once I had finished it. I wanted her to see what her former student had done. Sadly, she passed away during the novel's development, and I was thus unable to realize this dream. I shall forever regret having taken too long, and having missed my chance because of it. I am sorry. However, as small a consolation as it may be, I believe that her wisdom lives on through her students. If you enjoyed this novel, then please be sure to thank her memory.

All the friends and family members who read the manuscript, and provided much-needed feedback, also deserve credit. They include:

- Alms4purgie
- Bird
- Crassadon
- Darkness Falls
- Iron-K
- Kyran Foxfire
- Piisami
- Premchaia
- Siphedious and everyone in his Writer's Slam panels
- Slither Blazeshadow
- Zoey Hoshi

Their comments and critique, along with those of the people previously mentioned, helped shape this novel into what it is.

Finally, I want to thank you, the reader, for your time and consideration, and for giving me the opportunity to tell this story. I only hope that you enjoyed it, and that my efforts to entertain did not disappoint or fall short. If you have noticed any typos or text errors, please feel free to contact me, and I will fix them and credit you for your assistance.

One of my largest sources of inspiration, both for the novel's plot and for the will to keep writing, came from deceased artists, creators, and entertainers—everyone from William Shakespeare to Freddie Mercury, and from Winsor McCay to Raul Julia. These people have already come and gone, but because they left their mark on the world, they live on in the hearts of their followers. I am not arrogant enough to compare my work to such greats, of course, and I do not even yet know whether this novel will succeed. However, I do not have to know. If even one person reads this story, likes it, and remembers it, then through that person, I have achieved immortality. It is a pleasing thought, and one I owe entirely to those who would remember my work.

With all sincerity, and with every portion of my heart, thank you, all of you. This novel would not exist were it not for you. You have helped me achieve my dream. Thank you. I love you all.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Kjorteo Kalante'.

Kjorteo Kalante
November 26, 2013