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Bend Against the Wind

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Bend Against the Wind

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre, and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

By
Sidney William Meilleur
BA University of New Orleans, 2011

May, 2013

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Dedication

For me, this degree was nearly a voyage not taken. My wife, Melanie, recognized my creative voice and encouraged me to cultivate it. Her faith in me was so complete that I dared to believe in myself. Melanie is the wind at my back. Without her, I would be adrift.

Bend Against the Wind

My mother runs outside with a shotgun.

Morgan presses a revolver into my hand. "Take this," he says. My fingers reflexively curl around the smooth wooden grip. I can tell by the weight that it's loaded. He takes the rifle from the rack beside the door. "Go upstairs and get Cassie," he says. "Mom's getting your horses ready."

I grab my brother's arm. "I want to stay."

Morgan shakes me off. "There's no time to argue about this, Ezra," he says in his serious voice, the one he started using after Dad was killed. Morgan's a little older than me, so I'm supposed to listen to him, even though he doesn't have the Sight. He's like Mom that way. "Go get Cassie!"

I look into my brother and see several phantom versions of him. Each one goes outside, ready to fight. He's not even thinking about running. Dad would've been proud. I blink, and the phantoms vanish.

"All right," I say. Morgan nods, cocks his rifle, and steps out into the night. I say a quick prayer for him, and then run to my sister's room.

Cassie's only ten--six years younger than me. With her lantern dimmed, I can only just make out the silver rings in her green eyes. Everyone with the Sight has them. Medium Bowdre used to call them "halos." Mine are thick, making my eyes more silver than green. Cassie's are much thinner.

She sees the gun in my hand, and then looks into me. I feel it, like a soft breeze against my skin. Neither of us says a word. She already knows what I would've said. I go to my room to get my hat and duster while she changes into her riding clothes. I slip the revolver into one of my coat's deep pockets. Cassie

is ready by the time I get back to her. I take her hand, and we run downstairs and out into the paddock.

The five horses stomp and whinny. The Fallen Men must be close. Animals can always tell. Mom has two of the horses tacked up and loaded with saddlebags. She hugs Cassie close, and then helps her into the saddle.

"You mind your brother, Cassidy," Mom tells her.

"Yes, ma'am," Cassie says.

For the second time tonight, gunshots echo from across the valley--a dozen or more. They taper off a moment later. It can't have been but ten minutes since the first volley. The Fallen Men must've cornered Old Man Hendrix and his boys as they tried to run. Their ranch is only a half-mile away.

"Ezra," my mother says, looking off in the direction of the gunshots. "Ride west for Fort Downing. If there are any rangers or justices left, you'll find them there."

"What about you and Morgan?" I ask.

My mother's brown hair looks black by moonlight. When she turns to face me, a few strands cling to her cheeks. It's the first time I've seen her cry since we got word about Dad.

"We'll harry the Fallen for a spell," Mom says. "Then we'll ride after you."

None of the other horses in the paddock is tacked up. I know she's lying, but Cassie is watching us, so I force myself to nod and say nothing.

Mom hugs me, and I don't let go until she pushes me away. "Don't worry about us," she says. "Just keep you and your sister safe." Her voice cracks a little at the end. I don't trust mine enough to say anything back, so I mount up.

The shotgun leans against a fencepost. My mother collects it and opens the gate to let Cassie and me ride out. One of the other horses bolts past us, barreling off into the night. Nobody tries to stop it. My horse tenses, as if to follow, and Cassie's mare sidesteps, threatening to buck.

"They're too close," my mother says. "You have to go now!"

I hesitate; I don't want to leave her or Morgan behind. It's not right. Pulling back on my reins, I say, "Mom..."

"Cassie, ride!" my mother shouts. My sister goes, leaving me no choice. I can't let her go alone, and it's too dark to risk letting her out of my sight.

"You do this, Ezra," my mother says in a rush. "You go, and you don't look back." She slaps my horse's haunch, and I relax the reins, letting him run. It's like being torn in half.

We ride as fast as the moonlight allows, but we're only about a mile into the woods when the shooting starts again. First a pair of shotgun blasts then three quick rifle shots. The gunfire draws out for few minutes, then the seconds between shots stretch longer than I can hold my breath.

The shotgun sounds twice more. After that, there's only silence.

#

I step to the edge of an overhang and look down over the valley. The morning sun is warm on my face, but it hasn't reached the narrow strip of green land pinched between the mountains. I can't make out our ranch from here, just the familiar landmarks close to it, like the river bend and White Peak. Everything looks so hatefully normal.

Cassie comes to stand beside me. Her eyes are swollen, but she isn't crying. I put my arm around her, and she leans into me. After a few moments of silence, she looks up and I feel her gaze sink into me. The silver rings around her pupils glint in the sunlight. "Mom and Morgan aren't coming, are they?"

I can't lie. Some part of me would consider telling the truth, and she'd see it. "I don't know," I say. "I don't think so."

Cassie looks out over the valley. "Do you think the Fallen Men turned them?"

"No," I say. Fallen Men will kill anyone, but only someone with the Sight can become one of them. That's why they hunt us. "They don't do that to normal folk."

Cassie takes a breath and begins to hum. I know the tune. It's a lullaby Mom sang for each of us when we were little. Cassie sings a verse.

*"When God is making people
He gives a few the Sight
To look into our futures
With eyes silver and bright*

*The medium helps the wounded
The justice keeps the peace
The ranger stays awake at night
To guard against the beasts"*

She hums the tune for a moment longer, stopping mid-verse. "I'm going to be a ranger," she says. "I'm going to kill the Fallen Men."

I wonder what my father would have said to that. "You want to wear a dress, too?" he'd once asked me. "Let your sister be a goddamn medium. You're going to be a ranger. One day, it'll be your turn to fight, and if you're not ready, people will die."

Congratulations, Father. You were right.

I leave my sister by the ledge to check the contents of our saddlebags. Mom filled Cassie's with oats for the horses and dried meat for us. She'd packed mine with a gun belt, ammunition, a pouch of coins, and a book wrapped in cloth. The book is something I can't afford to think about right now, so I take the belt, fasten it around my waist, and tie the holster to my thigh. When I slide the revolver into place, the holster fits it perfectly--snug enough to hold it, but loose enough for an easy draw. I hate how comfortable it feels.

The belt has enough loops for twenty-four bullets. I fill them and then call for my sister. Our horses give us an edge, but the Fallen Men won't stop to rest, and sooner or later, we'll have to.

We ride until the western horizon is smeared with pink and orange. Shaded by the mountains, darkness comes early to the valley below, but there's still a few minutes of daylight left

on the mountainside, so I gather dry wood while Cassie rubs down the horses.

We make camp in a shallow cave and eat for the first time since leaving home. Dry wood doesn't make much smoke, but I don't want to risk a large fire, so I wrap my duster around Cassie. Thick clouds block the moonlight. When night comes, it comes down hard, claiming everything beyond the firelight.

"Ezra?"

"Yeah?" I'm sitting against a wall by the mouth of the cave. From where she's huddled by the fire, I can't be much more than a shadow to Cassie. That's about all I can make out of the horses tethered to pair of pines not ten paces away.

"Maybe Mom and Morgan got away. Maybe they'll meet up with us at Fort Downing."

"Maybe," I say, because it sounds better than the truth, but Cassie isn't looking into me. The truth isn't what she wants. "Now get some sleep. We'll ride hard tomorrow to make sure we're there if they turn up."

I'm not holding out much hope for Fort Downing on any account. When word of the Fallen Men first came down from the frontier, my father assembled all of the rangers and justices in the territory. Twenty men rode out of fort; three came back.

That was a month ago. Even if someone went for help, it could still be weeks before anyone gets here.

"Ezra?" Cassie ask. "Are you scared?"

Yes. "Can't be," I say. "Otherwise you'll tell Morgan that you were braver than me, and I'll never hear the end of it. Now, try to get some sleep, okay?"

"Okay."

I wait until she's asleep to unpack the book. *Aura Reading, Volume One*. Medium Bowdre died when I was only nine or ten. She'd been the only medium in the territory. Mom bought the book from Mr. Bowdre two years back. It was supposed to be for my sister, but Cassie wasn't old enough to read it properly. Dad told me not to touch it. I read the whole thing.

Anyone with the Sight can see the phantoms--the little glimpses of a person's possible futures. A medium has to look deeper. The book taught me how to do that and how to interpret the auras I saw. It took a lot of practice, and as I got better, my halos grew wider. That's what gave me away. Medium Bowdre's irises had been pure silver. Perfect halos.

Dad beat me with a switch for defying him. He took the book, and I thought he'd burned it. From then on, he forced me to go hunting with him and Morgan. Learning to track and shoot

was okay, but I hated the killing part. When Dad realized that I was missing on purpose, I got the switch for that, too.

Cassie's sleeping soundly now. A bat, or maybe an owl, flaps overhead just outside the cave mouth, and other night creatures snap the occasional twig. Normal sounds. Safe sounds. It's too dark to read, so I just hold the book, running my hands over its cracked leather binding. The lower right corner is buckled in from when my father had thrown it against a wall.

"Don't look back." The last thing Mom said to me. I wish I could do what she wanted, but I can't. My stomach twists in knots around each memory: the sound of the book hitting the wall, the whistle of a pine switch in my father's hand, the silence that meant my mom and Morgan were dead.. The knots keep getting tighter, and I can't untie them.

I drift off clutching the book and trusting the horses to wake me if the Fallen Men get too close.

#

My mother runs outside with a shotgun.

The horses in the paddock are whinnying and stomping. Morgan presses a revolver into my hand. The gun is strangely heavy. "It should have been me," Morgan says. I look up from the gun to ask what he means, but the words stick in my throat.

Morgan's face is smattered with gore. A trickle of blood runs down into his left eye.

Outside, the horses get louder, and I worry that they might break free and bolt. "The Sight was wasted on you," Morgan says. "You should've been the one that had to stay behind and die."

"Ezra!" It's my sister's voice. Something is shaking me. "Ezra, wake up! The horses!"

I blink away the dream and sit up. My back and shoulders ache from sleeping on the hard ground. Our fire is out, but my duster is draped over me. The book is lying beside me, atop my saddlebag. Outside, in the blue pre-dawn light, our horses struggle against the tie line. Beyond them, fog reduces everything to a grey haze. I put on my duster and walk out of the cave.

In the fog, the trees look like ghosts, just blurry shadows in the curling mist. I approach the horses carefully, whispering their names, trying to keep my voice calm and soothing despite the urgency. It takes a couple of minutes to settle them down enough to risk untying them, and by then Cassie has our saddlebags ready. She's fastening one to her saddle when something moves in the fog, something man-shaped.

I look into the figure, and there's nothing. No phantoms appear. A Fallen Man. As if sensing my gaze, it turns and runs straight at us. My sister's mare rears, hooves flailing, and Cassie goes down. There's a splash of red on the ground. The mare bolts, and my horse follows her.

Cassie isn't moving. No time. There's no time.

I draw my gun, taking a breath as I aim and releasing it when I pull the trigger. The recoil feels like being punched in the hand. I adjust, breathe, and fire again. Both rounds hit the Fallen Man in the chest, but it just keeps coming.

Before the Fallen Men, demons only possessed the living. Kill the host, dispel the demon: it was a ranger's first lesson. The Fallen Men don't work that way. They're already dead, and I don't know how to kill the dead.

Neither did my father. As far as I know, nobody does.

The Fallen Man is close enough for me to see it clearly now--an emaciated corpse in tattered filth. Pupils like stoked coals burn in its oil black eyes. Its receding lips show black teeth. Behind them, heat glows as if the thing has a bellyful of fire. A five-pointed star is pinned to its duster. The corpse once belonged to a justice.

If I can't kill it, I need to slow it down.

I lower my aim, take another breath, and pull the trigger. The shot catches the Fallen Man in the kneecap, buckling its leg. It goes down hard, but immediately starts to rise. I holster my gun and crouch to pick Cassie up. Bloody hair sticks to her face. I cradle her against my chest and stand.

The Fallen Man is still coming--slowly now, limping. Behind it, other Fallen Men begin to emerge from the fog. I turn and run.

Cassie is limp, and her weight slows me down, but I use the uneven ground to my advantage, gaining momentum with each downhill step. The fog thickens as I descend, swallowing everything more than a few steps ahead of me. I see the drop-off a second too late.

#

Morgan takes a rifle from the rack beside the door and steps out into the night. I can't see any rain, but I can hear it. Floodwater laps at the doorstep.

"I bought the book for you," Mom says. Her voice comes from behind me, and I turn to face her. Blood oozes onto her brow from an unseen wound somewhere in her hair.

Bloody hair.

My chest clenches.

Mom wipes some of the blood onto her dress. "Don't worry, baby," she says. "It happened real fast. It didn't hurt."

Bloody hair.

I'm so cold. Water is coming into the house.

Bloody hair.

Cassie!

My eyes open to bubbles, and they guide me to the surface. I'm in a mountain lake beside a sheer rock wall. The cold stings like a swarm of hornets. I take a breath and dive. Cassie is still down there somewhere.

A swirl of blond hair.

I reach through it, grab Cassie's shoulder, and pull her up with me. When I get her head above water, I wrap an arm around her and swim backwards with her pressed against my chest.

There's a long, dark smudge in the distance. I swim for that. Cassie chokes up froth along the way, but she doesn't wake up. My muscles burn in spite of the cold. Keeping my head above water is a losing fight.

We barely make it to dry land.

Cassie is still unconscious, but she's breathing normally. There's a shallow gash just above her hairline where the mare's hoof caught her. She could use a few stitches, but a bandage made from a torn strip of my shirt is the best I can manage. I wrap it around her head with shivering hands. Even that much effort is exhausting. Breathing feels like work.

I kiss Cassie's cheek, and then lay down beside her. When I come to, the sun is warm and high overhead. Cassie is sitting beside me, knees pulled up against her chest, looking out over the water. Her makeshift bandage is stained red. She has my gun in her hand.

I sit up, really seeing this place for the first time. Pine trees grow right up to the water's edge. The lake is a mirror, smooth and blue. It's walled in on the far side by a cliff that's at least a hundred feet high. I don't remember falling.

"Cassie?"

Her chin quivers. "My head hurts."

"I'm going to look, okay?" I ask. Cassie nods, and I begin. Several phantom versions of her appear. One stands and screams at the top of her lungs. Another curls up into a little ball, sobbing. One just sits there, staring off into the distance. After a moment, only the last one remains: Cassie's true future.

I focus. The world shrinks until only Cassie remains. New phantoms pop up as thoughts and impulses cross my sister's mind. They fade just as quickly. I look through them, past them. That's when the colors appear.

Faint at first, patches of red light begin to crop up all over my sister. Most are small and pale, almost pink. These are scrapes and minor bruises, nothing of consequence. The aura around her head wound is larger and several shades darker, the bright red of an apple. Not black. Not life threatening.

I stare at the wound's aura, watching for subtle variations in color. The deeper the red, the deeper the wound. There are no dark spots. No fractures or broken bone. Yellow sparks flicker along the aura's edge--infection trying to set in. I'll need to clean the wound. I blink away the visions. "You're going to be okay," I say. "Your head's too hard to break."

"It hurts."

"I know, but it'll be okay."

"No, it won't," Cassie says. She drops the revolver onto the ground between us. "We don't have horses or food or anything. They're going to get us, just like they got Mom and Dad and Morgan."

I move the gun aside and reach for her. Cassie curls into my arms, pressing her face against my chest.

"I won't let them get you," I say.

Cassie doesn't reply. She just cries quietly into my shirt. When I was little, Mom sang to me when I cried like that, just songs she made up. They were mostly silly things to make me laugh. Some weren't.

*When you can't go
The way the wind blows
You bend against the wind
You bend against the wind*

She sang that to me the night my father beat me for reading the book. I try make up my own song for Cassie, but I can't think of any words. The memory of my father's voice keeps getting in the way. "If you aren't ready, people will die."

Keeping one arm around Cassie, I pick up the gun and slide it back into my holster.

#

It's slow going without the horses. We walk for hours, foraging for beargrass and sumac berries along the way. It's enough to keep us going, but hunger never feels far away. Cassie hasn't spoken since we left the lake. She only eats when I make her.

We stop beside a narrow river to rest, and I look into Cassie again. The wound is stable, but I change the dressing just to be safe. Her watery eyes avoid mine the whole time. I leave her sitting on the trunk of a fallen pine while I rinse the old bandage. Ribbons of red run downstream.

Here and there, stones rise above the river's surface. Patches of brown, knee-high grass grow along the riverbank in the places where sunlight sneaks past the pine trees. Beyond, peaks of naked stone rise above it all. It's peaceful.

And something's wrong.

It takes me a moment to put my finger on it. The river laps and splashes. A breeze whispers through the pines. No birds. No buzzing insects. No animals of any kind. I drop the bandage, and the current pulls it away as I draw my revolver. "Cassie," I say, spinning to face her. "We--"

My sister is standing, startled by my tone. About a dozen feet behind her, a Fallen Man is stalking toward her. The thing's lips peel back in a blackened smile when its eyes meet mine. Its gore-stained jacket is decorated with a six-pointed star: a ranger's badge.

"Run!" I say. Instead, Cassie turns to look. She doesn't move, not even when the monster charges at her.

Inhale. Aim. Exhale and squeeze the trigger.

The bullet catches the Fallen Man in the thigh, just above the knee. It stumbles, flails, and falls. I shoot again, hitting it in the head as it tries to rise. Cassie just stands there, looking down at the Fallen Man as it struggles to stand. I run to her, grab her arm, and throw her behind me. I see her fall in my in the corner of my eye, and for an instant, I look back. That's when the Fallen Man lunges for me.

Its body crashes into mine, sending me toppling backwards. I hit the ground hard, and all of the air goes out of me. My pistol skitters out of my hand. Gasping, I push against the demon, trying to throw it off of me, but it's too strong. Its fingers wrap around my throat, lift, and then slam my head back down against the ground. Cassie screams. My head slams down. Again. Again.

#

Morgan takes a rifle from the rack beside the door, and steps out into the night. I say a quick prayer for him, and turn for the stairs. My father blocks my way. The ranger's badge on his chest shines in the lamplight. His lips are cracked and blackened, like burned meat. There's a pine switch in his hand. "You let your mother and Morgan die in your place," he says.

He lashes out before I can respond. The switch whips the side of my head. Pain echoes against the back of my skull.

"Dad, I--"

"Morgan should've had the Sight." Another blow. "He wouldn't have let me down." I pull my arms over my head to shield myself. The switch whistles in warning; then, stings me again, harder this time, hard enough that I drop to my knees.

"Dad, please!"

"Medium." He spits the word, and the switch comes down on me. No matter where it hits, my head throbs. I taste blood. "A ranger would have protected his family." Another blow. Another.

Fury comes over me like a landslide. "You didn't."

Dad raises the switch over his head. I won't let him hit me again. I look into him, but no phantoms appear, so I can't tell when he'll swing. He screams at me past black teeth. His eyes ignite--flaring like embers. I push deeper, cutting into him with my Sight. An aura appears low on his stomach, below the navel. It's just a small, flickering light--no more than a candle's flame.

My father swings. The blow never lands.

A gunshot rings out, and my father's head rears back. Cassie shoots the Fallen Man again. I'm stuck between worlds, half trapped in the dream. I'm on my back. Dad is sitting on my legs, one hand around my throat, the other raised as if to punch me. Instead, he snarls at Cassie and forces himself to stand. The vision of my father fades.

Limping, the Fallen Man advances on my sister. I still see the bronze aura, a single lick of hellfire. The demon itself.

"Throw me the gun!"

Even with the monster bearing down on her, Cassie doesn't hesitate. The gun lands beside me. I grab it as I roll onto my stomach to shoot. The weight is comfortable in my hand.

The target is so small. Inhale. Aim. Exhale and squeeze.

The bullet plows through the aura and into the Fallen Man. Sparks of liquid fire spray from the wound. Turning to face me, the monster falls to its knees. Its burning pupils fade into the blackness of its eyes. Mouth open in a soundless scream, the heat within dims and goes dark, extinguished. The flaming aura is gone.

For the span of several heartbeats, the Fallen Man remains upright, head hung and arms limp. Then it collapses, face-first in the dirt.

"Is it...?" Cassie asks. "Did you...?"

I nod.

Cassie runs to me as I sit up. "Are you okay? You're bleeding." She rips a strip of cloth from her shirt to wrap around my head. "Hold still."

"Look into me while you do that," I say. I reload my revolver while she bandages me. "Don't blink. Look hard." A breeze passes over me.

After a moment, she says, "I only see your phantoms."

"For now," I say. "It takes practice to see auras." Cassie ties off the ends of the cloth, and I stand.

"We should go before more of them come," she says.

"No," I say. "Let them come." I nudge the Fallen Man's body onto its back with my boot, and take the ranger's badge from its jacket, and pin it to my duster.

It's my badge now.

Reasonable Service

Samuel slashes at me like he's carving letters into the air. I let him come close. The congregation cheers each time the knife almost cuts me. They think I'll lose this time, but they don't see what I see. The other kid is bigger than me, but he's breathing hard, getting slower. I'm letting him chase me.

Halogen lights shine down on us. A chain-link fence surrounds the arena. The congregation watches from the other side, most on bleachers salvaged from playgrounds. Some cling to the fence, fingers wrapped through it, shaking it as they shout. Father Mathias watches from a leather sofa. His vestments blend into the black cushions.

Samuel stabs at me but overestimates his reach. He stumbles forward, off-balance, and I catch his wrist. I smash the heel of my other hand into his nose. His head snaps back, and I punch him again, in the throat this time. Samuel drops the knife, but I keep punching until he drops, too. Two kicks to the head make sure he'll stay down.

The congregation is on their feet, calling for blood. I pick up the knife and give them what they want. It's a kindness, really. A knife is quicker than ash lung or being worked to death. I leave the knife beside the body and step away, hands raised. Samuel's blood runs down my knife arm, pooling in the crook of my elbow.

Father Mathias stands, and silence falls. The light glares off of his balding head. Glasses make his eyes look small. "We all live on borrowed time," he says, raising an open hand toward the sky. "Deuteronomy 5:9. The Lord will punish the children for the sins of the father. Tonight, Penitent Samuel was punished. Tonight, Penitent Samuel ran out of time to atone for the sins of his parents."

After a pause, Father Mathias lowers his hand to point at me. "Heavenly Father, we pray that Penitent Elijah has enough time. Amen."

"Amen," the congregation echoes. I say nothing. My parents' only sin was having me without Father Mathias's permission. I'm told they were hung for it.

A pair of soldiers opens one of the arena's two gates. Together, they escort me back into the old prison as the congregation disperses.

My cell is a windowless cinderblock box with bars along the front. I'm shoved inside, and the cage door is bolted behind me. The back of my toilet serves as a sink. I wash off Samuel's blood, and go to the thin cushion that serves as my sleeping pallet. The soldiers turn off the lights on their way out, leaving the cellblock completely dark.

"Eli?" The voice is a raspy whisper from the next cell over. "Are you okay?"

"Go to sleep, Mouse," I say.

"All right." He muffles a hacking cough. "Thank you. Again."

I don't answer him. Another boy died tonight so that a kid with ash lung could force down a few more breaths. Samuel is the fourth, so far. I don't want to think about the price of Mouse's life, so I think about the writing on the wall instead--the writing and Beth.

#

We walk in single file lines to the penitent chapel, formerly the prison cafeteria. Girls from the kitchen detail give us our daily bread as we enter--one hard biscuit each. Soldiers supervise us with their batons in hand. Our orange uniforms have a word printed on the back. According to Mouse, it says "jail." I keep my eyes on the letters in front of me.

On the far side of the room, a projector casts images of the apocalypse onto the wall. A crackling voiceover narrates the wrath of God. "For seven days and seven nights, the Yellowstone Caldera erupted..."

The falling ash, the decade-long volcanic winter, mass starvation--it's the same video every morning. I know it by heart. The narrator is comparing the eruption to Noah's flood when I join the other seven members of my work detail at our assigned table.

Mouse scoots down to make room for me. He's a scrawny kid. Brown hair, brown eyes. Sickly pale. He's fourteen, I think, but he looks a lot more than a year younger than me. The soldiers brought him in four months ago. He doesn't talk about his parents much, but whatever their crime was, it wasn't his birth.

Charles is the oldest at the table, seventeen. He's in charge of our detail, so he gets privileges like more food at dinner. Every month, the bottom two details have to send somebody to the arena. The detail leaders pick who has to go.

Charles picks Mouse every time.

Aside from the occasional coughing fit from a lunger, only the voiceover breaks the silence. "Every unsanctioned birth is a drain on the congregation's finite resources," it says.

A pair of girls pushes a cart around the room, passing out water in plastic cups. Beth is one of them. Her uniform swallows her. Black hair hangs down into her blue eyes. The too-wide neck of her shirt exposes one of her shoulders when she puts cups onto our table.

I've never said more than a few words to her.

Like all the girls in her detail, Beth's skin is clean. The Warden and his men prefer them that way. Everyone calls the kitchen girls "Magdalenes." They only fall behind on the duty roster if one of them turns up pregnant. At least I haven't had to kill one of them in the arena yet.

Someone slams a baton down on our table. The others startle, and Mouse nearly falls off of the bench. All eyes are on our table now. Warden Casper smiles down at me. His face is all teeth and malice.

"You kept the lunger alive again," he says, jabbing me in the shoulder with his baton. "How's he repaying you for volunteering to take his place? By the mouthful?" He pokes his tongue against the inside of his cheek.

The other penitents keep their heads down. Except for Beth. She stands beside our table, a cup in each hand, eyes darting between me and the warden. The soldiers are chuckling, and blood rushes to my face. Casper is still tonguing his cheek.

"You're pretty good at that," I say.

Casper has fast hands. His baton smashes into the side of my head. Everything flashes white. Everything echoes. I'm on the floor. Casper kicks me in the gut. I can't breathe. My body won't move the way I want it to. This is how Samuel died.

He kicks me again.

Water splashes on the floor, and a bucket rolls back and forth a few feet away from my head. Casper looks from me to Beth.

"I'm sorry, Warden!" she says. "I was just trying to get out of the way. I didn't mean to spill it."

There's a delay between hearing her words and making sense of them. My lungs only accept a little of the air I need. This is how Mouse will die.

Beth picks up the bucket. "Could you escort me to the kitchen to refill it?" she asks the warden.

Casper slides his baton back into the loop on his belt. He's all smiles again. "Of course." He shoves me with his boot. "Somebody get this piece of shit off of my floor."

As soon as the warden walks away, Mouse is at my side. "Try to relax, Eli. You've got to take little breaths." He dips his sleeve in the spilled water and wipes my face. "Slow down. Breathe slow."

Beth looks back over her shoulder as she and Casper leave the penitent chapel. His arm is around her waist.

I know the price of my life. I just don't know why she's paying it.

#

Fences topped with barbed wire surround the prison. Beyond them, a small town's worth of restored buildings house the rest of the congregation, a few thousand people in all. Rows of massive greenhouses line the western edge of town. Going past them is like walking out into Hell.

Mountains rise in the distance like great dunes of ash. Poisonous water gathers in murky pools. Nothing grows. There are no animals. Every gust of cold wind carries clouds of ash, and each breath of that is another step toward ash lung. The soldiers are issued white masks to protect them from that. The rest of us push our shirts up over our noses or wrap bits of scavenged cloth around our faces like scarves.

My work detail drags the salvage wagon as a team, each of us pulling a rope attached to a rail along the wagon's front.

Sergeant Dale looks down on us from his seat just behind the rail. He rarely uses his whip.

The fresh bruises on my stomach throb with each heave. I'm in the middle of the pack, so I close my eyes against the pounding in my head and let the group guide me. The darkness behind my eyes is haunted. Beth looking back from the chapel door. Casper's arm around her. The smooth roundness of her exposed shoulder. The thought of him touching her. I open my eyes and pull harder.

It takes us an hour to get to the ruins, what Father Mathias calls "the necropolis."

We haul our wagon to our assigned staging area. The ash here is several feet deep and hard packed from years of exposure. Most of the buildings here buckled under the weight of the ash during the eruption. Debris from the ones that collapsed more recently litters the street. Here and there, signs or tall vehicles stick up through the soot like tombstones. This city's been dead longer than I've been alive.

We pair up. As usual, I pick Mouse and nobody argues. His ash lung makes him next to useless when it comes to hard work. Each team takes a pickaxe, a shovel, and a canteen from the back of the wagon while the sergeant reads off today's list of desirable items. It's just the usual stuff, like light bulbs and canned food.

Sergeant Dale stretches out in the back of the wagon as we head off. The closest buildings have all been picked clean, so the teams spread out. Nobody expects any of us to run for it. As far as I know, nobody has ever tried to.

"You're lucky that kitchen girl knocked her bucket over," Mouse says as soon as we're out of sight. "Casper might've killed you."

"I think she did it on purpose."

"Maybe." He dismisses the topic with a shrug. "We still need a compass. Two would be better, just in case." He crouches and etches six letters into the ash. "S. P. O. R. T. S. Sports. Have you seen this word anywhere?"

#

Mouse watches as I hack open a metal fire-escape door with our pickaxe. Each impact reverberates down the handle and into my arms. It's a good kind of pain. The door bears the brunt of Casper's sins. I close my eyes between swings and kill the warden a dozen times before the door gives way.

The air inside smells like burned paper. I go first, testing the floor for stability. When I'm sure it'll hold up, I call for Mouse to follow me. The second floor is like a large balcony that overlooks the rest of the store below. Not much light gets in, only what comes in through the door I just beat open.

We move slowly at first, letting our eyes adjust. Racks of shoeboxes line the walls up here. Loose shoes and empty boxes clutter the floor. A stairwell leads downstairs. From a landing in the middle, the first floor looks like a maze of overturned shelves and displays.

A pair of skeletal corpses lay sprawled at the foot of the stairs. One of the skulls is cracked open, as if smashed with a hammer. I can't tell what killed the other one. Mouse hurries past, averting his eyes and giving the dead a wide berth. I step over them.

There isn't much worth picking through down here. Places like this got sacked before the ash stopped falling. "I guess people weren't worried about getting lost," Mouse says, pulling a pair of objects from a display and holding one up to the light. Studying the thing in his hand, he turns away from me and points. "That's northwest, the way we'll be going."

He's pointing at a far wall, but I look anyway. Hope is something I've seen before. It took the form of a faded message written in red spray paint on a library wall. All I see now are empty shelves and specks of dust floating in the shaft of light from above. What I'm feeling isn't hope. It's more like the feeling I get when I'm lying in my cell after a fight and Mouse thanks me for saving his life.

Mouse coughs a few times, lowers his shirt to spit, and clears his throat. "We should do it now. Go, I mean."

"No," I say.

"Why not?" Mouse demands. "You almost got yourself killed today. What if Casper decides to finish what he started? We should go for it now, Eli, while we have the chance. It'll be hours before Sergeant Dale notices we're gone. We could--"

A coughing fit interrupts him, and he sits on the stairs until it passes. When he wipes his mouth, the back of his hand comes away with a red smear. "There's no reason to go back," he says, wheezing.

"My ribs are killing me," I say. That much is true. "I'm not sure I can carry everything, and I know I can't carry you if you have another fit like that. Give me a night to sleep it off."

"One night?"

I nod.

"We can't help that Magdalene. You know that, right?"

"Her name is Beth," I say.

#

We stash the compasses with the rest of our stockpile, safely hidden in the rubble of a collapsed parking garage. In four months, Mouse and I have managed to stash maybe a week's worth of cans and bottled water. We spend the next few hours throwing

rocks at unbroken windows and searching for something to take back to the salvage wagon. We score a couple of bags of salt and a can of something Mouse calls "ravioli."

The sun sinks behind the tallest of the ruins, taking its warmth with it. Our breath comes out in thick clouds. We sit on the roof of a crumbling apartment building and split the ravioli. It doesn't taste like much. Penitents aren't supposed to eat anything we find. Father Mathias says it's a sin to take more than our fair share, but sin feels a lot better than hunger.

I let Mouse finish the can. He scrapes it beyond clean with a plastic spoon. When he notices me watching, he smiles, embarrassed. He looks like a penitent, but he isn't one of us. He still hasn't learned that there's no shame in taking anything you can get.

"What?" he asks.

"What was it like growing up in town?"

Mouse looks into the can, frowns, and chucks it off of the roof. "Cleaner," he says with a shrug. "My parents were in charge of the school, so I wasn't much more popular than I am now." He laughs, but it doesn't sound real. The coughing that follows it is much more believable.

"What was it like growing up in the prison?" he asks when he can breathe again.

I shrug. "Dirty."

#

Sergeant Dale picks through the assorted salvage, keeping some things and rejecting others. When he's satisfied, he orders us back to the ropes for the long haul home. This is when he gets the most out of his whip.

Every time Mouse slows us down with one of his coughing fits, Charles glares at me. The rest of the crew is on his side, but he's the only one who'll stand up to me, and even he stopped pushing it after the third time I survived the arena.

The western sky is a burnt orange color by the time we get the wagon to the intake depot, a barn where salvaged goods are stored. Here, another penitent detail takes over, unloading and sorting through the day's finds. Three other wagons sit empty in the yard outside. As usual, we're the last salvage detail to make it back.

Before we leave the yard, soldiers search us for contraband. This amounts to anything outside of new shoes or underwear. Trying to sneak in food will earn you a beating. A weapon will get you killed on the spot. My pockets are empty. There's nothing tucked under my waistband or into my socks. I watch the sunset fade as the soldiers pat me down.

Once we've all been checked, Sergeant Dale takes us back to the penitent dorms. My feet drag the whole way, and my head

feels heavy. Exhaustion even dulls the pain of my bruises. When I get into my cell, I go straight to my pallet. I don't bother to take off my shoes.

Sleep comes fast. I dream about chasing after the setting sun as though I could catch up with it.

#

The clang of a baton being dragged across bars wakes me. There's a buzzing sound, and the cell doors unlock. I get in line with the rest of my detail, and we head to the cafeteria chapel for dinner and nightly mass.

It's Saturday, so tonight's sermon will be delivered by Father Mathias instead of the usual penitent chaplain. Mathias stands behind a podium by the wall where the morning video is projected. The warden is there with him. The two men smile as they talk. Neither seems to notice my detail as we make our way over to our table.

As soon as we're seated, I look for her.

Kitchen girls move through the room with carts, stopping at each table to pass out water or plastic trays with tonight's dollop of gruel. I spot Beth across the room with one of the water carts. Her hair is held back by a black bandana, and her baggy, orange sleeves are rolled up to keep them off of her hands, but they keep falling back down. She pauses between

tables to roll them back up, but it's hopeless. Her arms are too skinny for her shirt.

From beside me, Mouse whispers, "Does that smile mean you're feeling better?"

There's an edge to his voice, but I ignore him. Beth is looking at me and, for the first time, I look right back at her. She smiles faintly and then goes back to work. Each table she stops at brings her that much closer to mine.

The food cart arrives first. Charles gets a double-sized portion of slop. Lucky guy. When Beth finally gets to our table, I stare until I catch her eyes. They're smoky blue, like the color of the sky at the edge of dusk. She smiles at me again and, when she leans between Mouse and me to put our cups down, her shoulder brushes mine.

For that moment, it's like I can't breathe, like my shoulder is on fire. I can smell her, smell the soap she uses. I want to say something. Anything.

Then she's gone.

We get an hour of recreation time between dinner and the sermon. Sometimes they show a movie, invariably something Bible-themed. Tonight, it's just an assortment of what Mouse calls "classical music." We're not allowed to leave the chapel, but it's the only time penitents are allowed to mingle freely. After forcing down my gray sludge, I turn my plate in, and find a

place to sit with my back against the wall. Mouse joins me there a few moments later.

The silence between us is sharp.

The kitchen girls eat last, and the minutes stretch. A few penitents are milling about, but the presence of Father Mathias keeps them subdued. Most gather in small circles, talking in hushed whispers. Three soldiers roam the room, batons in hand. Several more stand around the door.

Beth moves through the crowd with a Magdalene's confidence. The soldiers never single them out for a beating, not in public anyway. Her eyes cast about the room, finally settling on me.

"Eli," Mouse says as she walks toward us. There's something pleading in his voice. I never look away from Beth. She sits cross-legged in front of me, her back exposed to the room.

"Can I talk to your friend alone?" she asks Mouse.

He sighs with more force than I thought his broken lungs could muster, glances sidelong at me, and stands. I don't watch him go, but I keep him in the corner of me eye. No matter what happens with Beth, I need Mouse alive. He sits a few feet further down the wall and pretends to not watch us.

"How's your head?" Beth asks.

I don't know. My mind is blank. Her eyes are paler blue near her pupils. "Fine," I say, at last. I hold out my hand, as if to shake. I don't even know why. "I'm--"

"Elijah," she says. "Everyone knows your name." I start to withdraw my hand, but she leans forward and takes it. "I'm Elizabeth."

Her fingers are softer than I'd imagined, and her shirt hangs loosely from her, exposing a hint of curved skin beneath. We shake, and she lets go. If she caught me looking down her shirt, she doesn't show it.

I'm not sure what to say next, so I say something honest. "Thank you. For earlier."

"Yeah," Beth says. A couple of seconds pass before she tacks on, "You're welcome."

"So, you did do it on purpose?"

She pulls her bandana off and picks at the knot. Her eyes drift down to her hands. "It was no big deal. Casper would have come around after breakfast anyway. He always does."

"But you didn't have to help me."

She glances toward Mouse. I follow her gaze just in time to see him look away. "You don't have to help him," Beth says.

"Maybe I just followed your example."

"It's not that simple," I say. "Mouse--"

"I need your help," Beth says. She looks over her shoulder. Nobody is close enough to overhear us. "I won't be able to hide it from Casper much longer."

"Help? Help how?" I ask. "Hide what?"

"The kitchen detail is going to fall behind on the duty roster soon," she says. She pauses to let the words sink in. It takes a few seconds.

"You're pregn--"

Beth cups her hand over my mouth, and checks over her shoulder again. I've seen fear--real fear--in the arena. I see it in her eyes now. "Don't say that," she hisses. "Please." I nod, and she moves her hand to my knee.

It's like the rest of my body goes numb. I feel her hand, nothing else. "What can I do?" I ask.

"Volunteer to take my place in the arena," she says. I hesitate, and her hand slides up my leg an inch. "I can sneak you into the kitchens. I'll do anything you want."

My pulse pounds in my ears. "I can't," I say. "My detail's been on the bottom every month since Mouse got here. I'll have to take his place."

Beth takes her hand back. "Then you'll be the one who kills me, Elijah." She starts to stand, but I grab her wrist.

"Wait," I say. If I leave her, I'll be killing her and the baby all the same. "Do they ever let your detail out of the prison?"

"We roll the garbage bins from the kitchens over to the compost heaps by the green houses. Why?"

I take a deep breath, and the words tumble out. "When Mouse first got here, I got stuck with him for salvage duty. I didn't want him, but Charles didn't give me a choice. The prick actually told me to make sure Mouse didn't make it back if he couldn't keep up.

"Mouse wanted to check out the library, and I went along with it. Books are never on the list of things to bring back, but I figured coming back empty handed would teach Charles a lesson for sticking me with a lunger." I'm already talking quietly, but I lower my voice to a bare whisper. When Beth leans in, I keep my eyes on hers.

"We found something. There was a message written on one of the library walls in red paint, and Mouse read it to me. It said there's a place to the west where the ash didn't fall, and things still grow. There are other people there. There were some numbers, too. Mouse says they're directions. We pushed bookshelves in front of it so that nobody else would see it." I pause to gauge her reaction.

Her blue eyes are locked onto mine, sharp and unblinking.
"You're going to run for it?"

"We found some maps," I say. "Mouse can use them to follow the numbers. We have food and water ready to go. Come with us."

"How?" she asks.

I motion for Mouse to join us.

#

We go back to our assigned tables when the rec hour is over. Father Mathias clears his throat into the microphone, and we all stand for the opening prayer--a loosely rhyming poem thanking God for not killing us and giving us the scraps we live off. Soldiers walk among us, making sure that everyone chants along. I mouth the words, but I stopped praying a long time ago.

When the prayer is finished, we sit, and Father Mathias launches into his sermon. "Ash fell like rain. Noon and midnight were identical in darkness. Men and machines choked to death. The world froze, and I asked the Lord what we had done to anger him so. Do you know what he told me? 'Mankind no longer respects me,' he said. 'I must teach him to fear me again.' Well, he taught us. He is teaching us still. But are we learning?"

He pauses, as if expecting an answer. Nobody speaks.

Father Mathias beckons for the warden, continuing only when Casper takes a place beside him at the podium. "I appointed Warden Casper Johnson so that he could transform the worthy among you into righteous members of our fold."

Every year, at Christmas, Father Mathias pardons a single penitent. It's usually a boot licker, like I'm sure Casper was when he became the first to be "redeemed."

"Warden Casper's authority comes from me," Father Mathias says, "and my authority comes from the Lord above. We must learn the lesson of Yellowstone, children. We must respect the Lord. We must respect his authority. Penitent Charles, please rise."

Charles does as he's told.

"Penitent Charles," Father Mathias says, dragging out the words. "Warden Casper tells me that a member of your detail has been disrespectful to him."

Mouse looks to me with wide, terrified eyes. Across the room, Elizabeth keeps her eyes on the podium, her expression rigidly blank.

"This reflects poorly on your leadership," Mathias continues. "Worse, it's hateful to the Lord. Tell me, penitent, what should I do with this sinner in your ranks?"

Charles looks from the priest to Casper, and the warden gives a slight nod. My stomach hardens into a fist. This is all staged. "I would send him to the arena," Charles says.

Father Mathias nods toward me. Right on cue, soldiers sweep in, seizing me. They pull me away from the table, pinning my arms behind my back. I don't resist them.

"The ritual of the arena will come early this month," Father Mathias continues. "Since your detail is the source of this blasphemy, Penitent Charles, Penitent Elijah's opponent will come from it as well. Choose, now."

Charles picks Mouse every time.

"Romans 12:1," Father Mathias says. We all know this verse by heart. It closes every sermon before an arena fight. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." He looks out over the room, searching out people's eyes. "Are there any among you who would volunteer to stand in the place of these two penitents?"

#

The congregation is stomping rhythmically on the bleachers, eager for the show to start. I'm sitting on a bench in a small chain-link cage. Somewhere, on the other side of the arena, so

is Mouse. This is my fault. I made him come back. I should let him win. I should, but I know that I won't.

"Elijah?"

Father Mathias is standing on the other side of the fence. In a minute, soldiers will come to escort me into the ring, but for now, it's just the priest and me. It's the first time I've been alone with him. He's old and thin. Not much taller than me. The fence between us is keeping him alive.

"Heaven knows you've been a good friend to that boy," Father Mathias says, "but your loyalties are misplaced. Our congregation is growing, son. Why, just last week a little girl was born. She's a beautiful, hungry little thing. Her momma and daddy are devout, hard-working people. That's why I gave them my blessing, you see, but I've still got to choose. Do I feed this little baby girl or the sickly child of a pair of blasphemous criminals? What would you do?"

I don't answer him. I don't even look at him.

"I know this is hard, son." Father Mathias raises a hand to stall the soldiers just arriving. "But you've done what you can for that boy. Disrespecting the warden was a sin, but sins can be forgiven. I respect your courage and your loyalty, Elijah. Get through this, give that loyalty to me, and there could be a

place for you in the congregation come Christmas. You think on that." He steps back from the fence, and gestures for the soldiers to carry on.

The soldiers open the cage and lead me to the arena gate. Father Mathias is just reaching his seat when I step out into the halogen lights. The congregation cheers for me, their reigning champion.

On the opposite side of the enclosure, Mouse is shoved through the gate. He's already coughing. Warden Casper is with him, knife in hand. Traditionally, a single knife is thrown over the fence into the middle of the arena. Last time, Casper threw it a few steps away from Samuel. This time, the warden blatantly hands the knife to Mouse before closing the gate behind him. Mouse's pants darken around the crotch and down his right leg. The crowd laughs at him. I hate them all. Every last one of them.

Father Mathias raises his hand to silence the crowd. When they settle down, he speaks. "Congregation, we are assembled this night to witness the Lord's hand at work. Two sinners stand before you. Only one of them may know the Lord's mercy tonight. I will give them five minutes to discover which of them the Lord favors. Should it prove to be neither..." He gestures toward a company of five soldiers, each with a rifle in hand. The crowd

cheers again, and Father Mathias allows this to continue for a minute.

Across the arena, Mouse is staring at me, chin quivering as tears roll down his face. The knife is clenched in his fist, but his arm hangs limply at his side. His eyes are wide, crazy things. Saliva pools in my throat, gagging me. Turning to face the fence, I throw up, and the cheers turn to laughter. This too, Mathias indulges for a moment.

I assume he waves them quiet again, but I'm too busy spitting up the last of dinner to look. "Penitents," Mathias says when the laughter fades, "may the Lord guide you. Your time begins now."

I pull myself upright and spin to face Mouse. He's walking toward me in slow, even steps. I approach him cautiously.

"Eli, I lied," he says when we're within six feet of each other.

"What?"

He points the knife at me, as if to warn me to stay back. "I lied about the message."

"What are you talking about?"

"Please, just listen." He coughs hard, several times. Every instinct in my body screams at me to make my move, but I wait. I owe him that much. Mouse forces down a breath, and starts talking fast as if afraid he'll run out of air. "The message is to someone named Susan. It says that someone named Barry was heading west because the wind carried the ash to the east."

The crowd is screaming, calling for the soldiers to shoot us. I start circling Mouse. He turns with me, keeping me in front of him.

"What about the numbers?"

"It's just the time and date. I'd heard what Charles said to you. About making sure I didn't make it back. I was scared. I was just going to offer to teach you how to read. That's why I wanted to go to the library. When I saw the message, I made up a story so you'd want to keep me around. I didn't expect it to go this far."

"No. I don't believe you," I say, advancing a couple of steps. "You were ready to go. You just want me to stay here and die, too."

"No," he says, lowering the knife. "Listen. My parents were scientists. They told Mathias that there was probably fertile ground to the west, but he called this the Promised Land and had

them executed for blasphemy." Mouse coughs again, and again I hold back. "There is someplace better out there, Eli."

"Two minutes!" The warden shouts to be heard over the crowd. The soldiers cock their weapons.

"I don't understand," I say. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Eli, I can hardly breathe. I can't really walk for hundreds of miles."

"But--"

Mouse raises the knife, wrapping his other hand around the base of the handle, and slams the blade into his neck. The tip punches out the other side, blood spurting from both sides of the injury. The crowd goes quiet, as if turned off by a switch. Mouse drops to his knees, but I catch him before he can fall the rest of the way. Writhing in agony, his feet gouge tracks in the dirt as I lay him down. Bloody froth forms on his lips as he mouths something at me.

Go. He's saying, "go".

I can't make words come out, so I just nod. I think he smiles. Mouse takes my hand and squeezes it. I squeeze back

hard, but I don't know if he can feel it. The red bubbles in his mouth pop, and Mouse is still.

Soldiers come in and drag me back to my cell. I'm shoved inside, and the cage door is bolted behind me. I wash off Mouse's blood in the sink, and go to my sleeping pallet. The soldiers turn off the lights on their way out, leaving the cellblock completely dark.

Dark, and quiet.

"Go to sleep, Mouse," I whisper.

I don't want to think about the quiet anymore, so I think about the west instead--the west and Elizabeth.

Perchance

Saboteur. The word caught my attention as I exited the subway station. It flashed beneath the image of an unfamiliar, male face. Digital billboards lined the street, casting patches of inconsistent light onto the sidewalk. Every screen showed the same thing: the word and the face. Order through symmetry. I paused in the doorway to take it all in, but the information on the billboards was not intended for me. I was Precluded. I shouldn't have stopped to look.

Someone shoved me from behind. "Get out of the way, 'clude!"

I apologized and obeyed. A trio of females moved past me, their unshaved heads and colorful clothing identifying them as what I was not: Included. The last of the three called me a "reject girl" in passing. I apologized again. When it was clear that they required no further acts of contrition, I looked back to the billboards.

Saboteur.

I couldn't think of any instances of that word in regulated discourse. *Yes. No. How may I serve you? I do not understand. How many? I have violated protocol. I apologize...* I watched the screens until the image transitioned to videos of males throwing and catching balls; then, I moved on.

My destination was 12 Adlington Court, a house reserved for visiting government officials. I arrived there at 8:06pm, six minutes behind schedule. A blue waste bin sat beside the service entrance. *Empty. No action required.* The door opened into a spacious kitchen. *Floor, clean. Table, clear. No action required.* A saucer, mug, and spoon had been left in the sink. *Disorder.* That thought brought with it a wave of discomfort, like an itch inside my skull. It required corrective action. I turned the faucet on and added detergent to the water. Dish by dish, the discomfort subsided. I was drying the final dish, the mug, when I heard the noise.

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap.

An elderly female entered the room, sweeping the floor ahead of her with a thin, white cane. Her grey hair was pulled back in a tight bun, and a black, button-down dress defined the contours of her narrow body. I'd never seen a blind person before. Children with conditions like that were excluded before birth. This female must have gone blind later in life.

Protocol mandated that I smile and await instructions. I placed the mug on the counter and performed the smile. Her milky eyes cast about the room before settling on me. The corner of her narrow mouth twisted upwards.

"Your smile is wasted," she said. "What are you called?"

I relaxed my face. "I am Elyria. How may I serve you?"

"Elyria. Such a lovely name," she said. "You were late."

"Yes. I apolo--"

"Tell me, Elyria, are you one of the stupid ones?" she asked. "I specifically requested a smart one. What is your aptitude designation?"

"Five," I said. Aptitude designation determined our assignments. Ones performed hard labor. Threes did more complex

tasks, like file clerk or machinist. Fives were rare. I was the only one at Center Two.

"Five? I see," she said. I searched her face for imperative cues--body language that conveyed meaning. Her rigid features revealed nothing. She asked, "How old were you when you were first given the serum?"

"Ten."

"Ten. I see. And do you remember why you were Precluded?"

At birth, healthy children were taken by the Department of Inclusion for sixteen years of education and observation. Those that demonstrated inferior intellect or aberrant behavioral patterns were Precluded. Memories with emotional anchors were uprooted by the serum. They became fuzzy, if you could remember them at all. After eight years of the serum, the only thing I knew for sure was that I'd been aberrant.

"No," I said.

The old female frowned and sucked her teeth. I interpreted these cues as displeasure, but she spoke before I could apologize for my inadequacy. "I am Ms. Olivia Browning, from the Department of Inclusion. You may refer to me as Ms. Browning. You will be assisting me until further notice."

Assistance began with meticulously unpacking her luggage. A narrow tube of shaving gel and a disposable razor went on the right ledge of the tub, shampoo and soap on the left. Casual dresses were hung alphabetically by color (blue, green, purple) and separated from three official, black button-down dresses by three empty hangers. A pair of dark glasses went on her nightstand beside a phone and a leather leash.

#

Bum bum bum bum bum bum bum bum...

The trance device on the service room nightstand played a soft, steady rhythm. The unwavering beat seemed to spiral in on itself, creating the illusion of cyclical patterns. It unflinchingly lulled Precluded listeners to sleep. My insomnia was highly irregular. Even after hours in bed, I remained awake. I searched for a word to describe my condition.

Restless.

The serum repressed emotions--just one of its many effects. I'd had a booster the night before. I shouldn't have been able to feel restless. Something was wrong with me.

Disorder. The itch returned.

I got up and checked the mirror in the service bathroom. Blue eyes. A scattering of freckles across the bridge of my nose, spilling over onto my cheeks. Blonde stubble was just beginning to show on my scalp. A bandage on my right arm covered the welt left behind by my recent injection. I didn't look sick; everything looked normal. But I was not normal. I couldn't see it in the mirror, but I could feel it there--just below the surface. I had an urge to run, to scream.

Disorder.

My breaths came fast and shallow. The muscles in my chest and stomach tensed, as if under external pressure. My hands shook on the rim of the sink, and I tightened my grip until my knuckles paled in an attempt to steady them. This proved ineffectual; the trembling simply migrated into my arms.

Whatever it was, I needed it to stop. In extremely rare cases, acute aberrance developed even after years of Preclusion. Was this what acute aberrance felt like? Those afflicted were invariably excluded, and I wanted to live. I wanted it intensely.

Disorder.

The itch scraped against the back of my eyes, like something trying to dig its way out. A buzzer sounded in the

service room, followed by Ms. Browning's voice via intercom.
"Elyria. Wake up. Get dressed, and come to my room."

The sound prompted a reflexive spasm.

She knew. She knew something was wrong with me. It was 4:36am. Why else would she summon me this early? She knew, and I was going to be excluded. No. That wasn't right. She'd told me to wake up. She thought I'd been asleep. Protocol mandated that I acknowledge and obey her command. I walked back into the bedroom, pushed the intercom button, and said, "Yes."

She responded immediately. "Make haste."

Imperatives must be obeyed. No thought required. I wrapped myself in the armor of protocol. My hands were still unsteady as I pulled on my brown jumpsuit and fastened the belts, but by the time I finished tying my work boots, my fingers were moving normally. Just to be sure, I checked the bathroom mirror one last time. My reflection didn't look acutely aberrant. She looked Precluded. She looked orderly.

The service room was in the basement at the far end of the house. I left a trail of illumination in my wake. Every room was dark when I entered it, including Ms. Browning's bedroom. She sat on the edge of her bed, pulling strands of sleep-kinked,

grey hair back into a braid. Her silk nightgown revealed skinny arms and veiny legs. She looked fragile.

"Elyria?" she asked.

"Yes. How may I serve you?"

"Get my uniform ready. We've caught the bastard."

#

Her dark glasses made it difficult to read Ms. Browning's imperative cues. I'd correctly understood all of her instructions, but the corners of her mouth were still drawn down, indicating displeasure.

"Warn me about any steps or ledges before I reach them," she went on. "Understand?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good. Now put it on."

I buckled the leather collar around my neck, and Ms. Browning gave the leash a tug. The pressure against my neck forced me to take a step backwards.

"That means stop. Understand?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"Good," she said. "There's a car waiting outside. Take me to it. Walk slowly, and do not pull me."

When we got to the car, a black four-door with tinted windows, I helped Ms. Browning into the backseat. I sat in the front, next to the driver, a male police officer who addressed Ms. Browning as "ma'am." We rode in silence, the leash coiled on my lap. The leather was old and cracked, well-used. I slipped my fingers through the loop on the end and squeezed it as hard as I could.

It felt good.

#

The police station covered an entire city block, with wide steps leading up to its massive doors. A landing halfway up the stairs featured a sculpture depicting a nude male and female standing proud and looking skyward. At their feet, smaller, bald figures bowed or raised their arms in reverence. An inscription at the statue's base read: Excellence Through Purity. I guided Ms. Browning around it, while the police officer parked the car.

A male detective in a long, black coat met us just inside the station. He glanced at my collar, but not my face. His slick, shoulder length hair was brushed back exposing a creased brow. I interpreted this as discomfort, or perhaps disapproval.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Detective Lamont. Ms. Browning, I presume?"

"Astute observation," Ms. Browning said. "I can see why they made you a detective." Lamont's lips pursed, but he said nothing. "Take me to him," Ms. Browning continued. "You can debrief me on the way. Elyria, follow this man."

I acknowledged and obeyed.

"He's been working at Center Three, doing low-level evaluation work, for about four months under the name Walter Pater," Lamont spoke over his shoulder as he escorted us through a series of hallways, all empty save for Precluded workers--one clerk, two janitors. "It's an alias. We've checked his documentation. All forgeries. Pretty good ones, too."

The detective led us into a dark room. A one-way mirror revealed a male in handcuffs sitting alone at a table in an adjoining chamber. Short, curly hair. Pale skin. Neatly-trimmed beard. I recognized this male. He was the saboteur.

"He's in the next room," Lamont said, explaining our stop. "He was using his credentials to gain access to the serum lockers at centers three, four, and five. He may have accessed others. We're still looking into that. Anyway, one of the doctors at Center Five caught him in the locker and reported him

to us. When I saw an image of his face, I called your people. We apprehended him about an hour ago."

"I see. And you're confident that this is the arsonist?" Ms. Browning asked.

Lamont looked through the mirror and nodded. "His face matches the sketch. He's the right height, shoe size, and approximate weight, too. It's him, all right. I've got the bomb squad at his apartment over on King Boulevard right now. Anyway, he refuses to talk to us. You want at him?"

"Oh, I should think so," Ms. Browning said.

Lamont led us back into the hallway and through the next door down. I guided Ms. Browning into the interrogation room and to a chair across the table from the saboteur. She handed me my leash and bid me to stand against the wall behind her. Detective Lamont stood just inside the door, arms folded, imperative cues indicating hostility.

For a moment, Ms. Browning said nothing, and in that moment, the saboteur smiled at me--not the usual, perfunctory smile. His smile showed a narrow line of straight, white teeth. It wrinkled the corners of his brown eyes. A genuine smile. Protocol made it mandatory to return smiles, but I did so because I wanted to.

"Mr. Walter Pater, is it?" Ms. Browning said, her tone making the question rhetorical. "It's nice to finally meet you. I've been looking for you for some time."

The saboteur laughed once. "That's funny. You've been looking? How many fingers am I holding up, Olivia?" His hands remained folded on the table. Something inside my chest heaved unexpectedly. I masked the sound as a cough.

Lamont crossed the room in quick strides and punched the saboteur in the face. His head jerked to the side. My breath caught, my fist clenched around the leash, and my eyes narrowed on the detective. All involuntary.

Disorder.

The itch sank into my stomach. I could taste it in the back of my mouth. Bitter and dry, like nothing I'd ever tasted before. I forced my expression back into neutrality before anyone could notice my aberrance.

The saboteur shook his head twice and spit on the floor. "Ouch," he said, smiling with bloody teeth. "I deserved that. It was a trick question." Lamont punched him again.

"Enough, Detective," Ms. Browning said. Lamont made as if he might hit the saboteur again, but then returned to his post beside the door. Ms. Browning's gaze followed the sound of his

footfalls. When they stopped, she turned back to the saboteur. "You obviously know who I am. I know a lot about you, too. More than you might think."

"Really?" the saboteur asked. "Impress me."

"It would be my pleasure." Ms. Browning sat back in her chair, crossing her legs. "I know that you've burned down three serum manufacturing plants and two Preclusion clinics. I know that your real name is Chance Anthony Gould. I know that your parents are Robert and Alison Gould. Your father did medical research for the Department of Inclusion, and your mother was a district manager for the Department of Public Records. Both went on the run, becoming fugitives, roughly two months before your birth, which I presume is because your father detected in you some flaw that would have resulted in your exclusion."

"Not bad," Gould said. "It was a heart murmur."

"A heart murmur? I see." Ms. Browning leaned forward and put her hands, balled together, on the table. "Where are your mother and father, Mr. Gould?"

Gould shrugged. "It's late, so they're probably in bed."

Ms. Browning pressed on, heedless of Gould's mockery. "What were you doing in the serum lockers?"

"I was looking for the bathroom," Gould said.

My chest heaved again. I suppressed the sound, but my mouth quivered at the corners. Clenching my jaw didn't stop it. Instead, the corners twisted upward. I'd performed so many protocol-mandates smiles. This one was different. It was as if different muscles were somehow involved. I lowered my gaze, hoping to conceal it.

Disorder.

My thoughts came in a rush of conflicting pairs. I needed the smile to go away; I didn't want it to. I wanted the emptiness back; I never wanted to feel it again. Why couldn't I control my aberrance? Why wasn't the serum doing it for me? Lamont was watching Gould, but one stray glance in my direction... I bit down on the edge of my tongue until it hurt. The pain cured my smile.

"I see," Ms. Browning said after a long pause. "Perhaps you'd be willing to satisfy my curiosity on a more general level. I can't help but wonder. You're clearly adept at blending in. Why embark on these risky little escapades? Why not just count your blessings?"

"You mean live in a society that doesn't think I deserved to be born?" Gould said. "Sure. Why not? Maybe I should've

settled down, had a kid, and paid my taxes so you could kidnap, lobotomize, or murder little Chance junior at your whim. That does sound mighty appealing, Olivia. Can I get a do-over?"

Lamont snorted.

"Let me say this, Mr. Gould." Ms. Browning's voice took on an aggressive edge. "Prior to the collapse, this city ineffectually employed over twelve thousand police officers. Today, it maintains fewer than five hundred, and crime is a vestigial relic."

"Yeah," Gould said, his tone still conversational. "We're all so lucky to have you around to protect us from criminals and birth defects. Good thing you weren't born blind."

"I believe we're done here for now," Ms. Browning said. She stood, pushing back her chair. Extending a hand in my direction, she said, "We're leaving, Elyria."

Gould's smile slipped, and his eyes shot to me. At first, I read his cues as interest or curiosity, but no. That wasn't quite right. Ms. Browning flexed the fingers of her outstretched hand expectantly. Her cues were obvious, but I still hesitated. I didn't want to give her the leash.

Disorder.

My pulse accelerated, and my skin became prickly and hot. Gould's eyes widened, and I knew. His brown eyes were locked on mine, and I read the recognition in them. He knew what I was. He'd seen my aberrance.

If Gould could see it...

Several things happened at once. Gould spun in his chair, twisting to face Lamont, and said something to the detective. Lamont scowled at whatever it was, but I couldn't hear Gould over Ms. Browning. "Bring me the leash, you idiot," she snapped.

Imperatives must be obeyed. No thought required. I surrendered the leash, and Ms. Browning snatched it from my hand. "Five," she muttered, shaking her head. "Take me into the hallway."

Looking up from Gould, Lamont opened the door for us and stepped outside. I tried to follow him, but a tug on my throat stopped me just short. Ms. Browning stepped to address to Gould again.

"You know where this is going, Mr. Gould," she said. "You should reflect on how difficult you'd like that journey to be."

Blood gathered in the corners of Gould's mouth. He looked at me, not Ms. Browning, when he said, "Maybe you should reflect on that. Before it's too late."

Ms. Browning scoffed and flicked the leash for me to go.

#

Ms. Browning had breakfast in the station cafeteria. Under normal circumstances, I would have eaten in a different room, one specifically designated for the Precluded. Instead, I sat beside Ms. Browning, taking bites of my protein meal, while she ate bacon and eggs. The leash lay on the seat between us. There were only a few other people in the room, but all of them averted their eyes from our table. As a rule, the Precluded were ignored, overlooked. It wasn't me that they were avoiding.

I finished eating well before Ms. Browning. She'd only just finished her eggs when Detective Lamont took a seat at our table.

"It's me, Detective--"

"I know who you are, Detective," Ms. Browning said, waving off his introduction with a slice of bacon. "I'm an old, blind woman with a Preclude on a leash. Who else would think to join me? Now, report."

Lamont cleared his throat, and said, "His apartment is clean. Too clean. He must've had another place somewhere. We're looking into that. We still don't know what he was doing in the serum lockers, but nothing's been reported missing."

Ms. Browning chewed her bacon before answering. "I see. And what of Mr. Gould?"

My fingers touched something cracked and rough. The leash. I didn't remember reaching for it. *Disorder*. I tensed in anticipation of the discomfort, but none came. I waited. *Disorder*. Still nothing. I risked a deliberately aberrant thought. The bacon smelled good. I wanted a piece. *Disorder*. Nothing. I slid my hand back onto my lap. A smile threatened to form around the edges of my mouth, but I fought it back. Nobody noticed. Preclusion was like invisibility.

Lamont was saying something to Ms. Browning; I'd missed the beginning of it.

"...all strapped in and ready to go," he said. "The table'll jolt him a few times every hour at varying intervals. That's what breaks them, you know? Not knowing when it's coming."

"Excellent," Ms. Browning said, picking up another piece of bacon. "I knew Gould's parents: Robert and Alison. Very intelligent people. Their son is a nuisance, but it's them we're really after. I'm convinced that they couldn't have managed their escape alone, especially not while Alison was with child. The department wants them, and anyone who helped them."

A Precluded clerk with a manila folder approached the table, stopping a few feet short of Lamont. Her hairline was a crescent of dark stubble that made her expressionless face look very round. Lamont and Ms. Browning continued their conversation, but I stopped paying attention. I watched the Preclude as she waited. She never looked away from the detective, her eyes constantly scanning him for imperative cues. Her own cues were like a blank page. There was nothing there. Just mindless obedience. How could I ever go back to that?

"What do you want?" Lamont finally asked the clerk. His impatience seemed obvious.

The Preclude read him before answering, delaying her response. "I apologize." She performed her smile and held out the folder. "This requires your signature."

Lamont took the folder, flipped it open, and used a pen tucked inside to sign a document. He did it all so fast that I couldn't imagine he'd actually read anything on the paper. "Here," he said, thrusting the folder back to the Preclude who accepted it and departed. Lamont turned back to Ms. Browning and said, "I hate it when they just stand there and stare at you like that. Anyway, like I was saying, just give me the rest of the day with him. He'll be begging to tell you anything he even thinks you might want to know."

"Please commence," Ms. Browning said. Lamont rose, and Ms. Browning spoke again. There was no subtlety to the malice in her voice. "One more thing, Detective. Mr. Gould needs to learn the price of defiance. Even if he does beg, I won't be back until tomorrow morning. Keep him in isolation, and continue his treatment until I return."

"Yes, ma'am," Lamont said.

The detective walked off, and Ms. Browning returned to her breakfast. I fought to control my breathing. Gould had seen. He knew I was aberrant, and tomorrow morning, he'd tell. Gould was right. I did know how that journey would end. Exclusion.

For me, "too late" would be tomorrow morning.

#

A different officer drove on the way back to the house on Adlington Court. I rode in front again, my hands folded over the leash on my lap. It was 7:45am. The city was still waking up. Garbage trucks manned by Precludes were making their rounds. Other Precludes walked along the sidewalks en route to their assigned posts. So many brown jumpsuits.

In the backseat, Ms. Browning's phone vibrated.

"Hello," she said. "It's going very well. Yes, it was Gould. We have him in custody. Thank you. Not yet. I suspect that he was looking for new ways to disrupt serum distribution. Oh, most certainly. After he breaks, we'll find something suitably precautionary but not too graphic for the media."

She made exclusion sound so easy.

The officer dropped us off, and I guided Ms. Browning inside and to her bedroom. "Detach the leash from the collar," she commanded, as she unbuttoned her uniform dress. "Put the leash on my nightstand. Until further notice, the collar is part of your uniform. Understand?"

I chose to acknowledge and obey.

When Ms. Browning finished undressing, she instructed me to gather her dirty laundry. While she caught up on missed sleep, I washed, dried, and ironed her clothes. I found some comfort in performing the mundane tasks, in the repetitive motion of moving the iron over cloth. There was a rhythm to it: put the iron down, push the button, slide, repeat. My hands moved, and my feelings shrank into distant, more manageable things.

I was going to be excluded. Maybe not. If I turned myself in, maybe the doctors at the clinic could fix me. Maybe a higher dosage of the serum could overcome my aberrance. Lobotomize.

That's how Gould had described it. Maybe a higher dosage could lobotomize me, make me like the clerk in the cafeteria. Was that what I wanted? No. It didn't matter. The acutely aberrant were always excluded, and I thought that I understood why. We'd all say "no."

When the laundry was done, I went to the service chamber and disrobed. I neatly folded the normal parts of my uniform. I threw the collar into a corner on the far side of the room. My neck was sore where the leather had pressed against skin. I rubbed it as I curled up on the bed. During idle moments, the serum would put the mind at rest, a sort of wide open vacancy. Like expectation. Open, and waiting for something to fill that void with direction. It was a peaceful place, but it was gone now. My aberrance had destroyed it. Sleep was impossible. Instead of vacancy, wild thoughts flooded my mind.

Thoughts like running away.

Even if Gould managed to keep my secret, it was only a matter of time before someone else noticed. It was getting harder and harder to hide my feelings. My identification card worked like currency for meals or subway fare, but usage was closely monitored. I wouldn't get far using it. I ran through scenario after scenario. They all ended with my exclusion--

sometimes by injection at a clinic, other times at the hands of the police--but always death. I didn't have a chance.

Chance. Gould.

His parents had escaped and managed to raise a child. Gould knew how to hide his past, to forge documents, to disappear into the Included. If I wanted to survive, I needed his help. Only, there was no way to get it. Frustrated, I sat up and hurled my pillow against the wall. A scream tore at my chest, trying to escape. I pressed my palms against my eyes, and ran my hands through the fine stubble on the top my head. It was getting too long. Protocol mandated that it be shaved weekly.

I took in a sharp breath and held it.

#

I stood over Ms. Browning and watched her sleep for several minutes. The Precluded didn't dream, or at least we didn't remember our dreams if we did. I wondered what Ms. Olivia Browning dreamed of. In her dreams, could she still see?

"Wake up, Olivia," I said. My first imperative.

She woke with a start, sitting up. "Hello? Who's...? Who's there?"

I looped the leash around her neck and pulled the ends tight. Her bony fingers clawed uselessly at the worn leather. She twisted and kicked. It didn't take long.

I'd expected to feel something. Order, disorder? Something. Instead, I felt nothing.

#

I got off the subway one block from the police station. I approached it from the rear, where the service entrance would. The gate was open and guarded by a lone male in a booth. I walked right past him.

A pair of rusted dumpsters, both half-full, flanked the service entrance. The metal door opened into a room lined with lockers and benches. Several precluded males and females sat around, silently waiting to be summoned. Their blank eyes settled on me briefly before returning to the floor.

I picked an old male with dirty boots. "Where is the Preclude supply room?"

He looked up and performed a smile. "Down the hall on the left. Second door on the right," he said.

"Where are the interrogation tables?" I asked.

#

A printout posted on door 212 gave the prisoner's name and identification number. Below that, it listed "H. Lamont" as the case officer. His signature, with the time and date, was scrawled in blue ink at the bottom of the page along with "Do not disturb."

The instruction seemed unnecessary. The other three doors on this hallway stood open, the rooms empty. Aside from Precluded workers, I'd encountered only one other person on the way there: an officer who hadn't looked up from his phone, much less taken notice of me or the brown bundle I carried.

Door 212 didn't have a window. There was no way of knowing who else may have been on the other side. The Precluded didn't lie, but if Gould wasn't alone, I would have to. It wouldn't work if I looked scared. I took a deep breath and worked against my squirming nerves to smooth my expression. It took a few tries. When I was sure I had it down, I reached for the knob.

When I opened the door, Gould's screaming assaulted me. My composure evaporated. I pulled back, releasing the knob, and the door swung shut, sealing the sound behind it. I was stiff all over, as if I'd been hit in the stomach. Excluding Ms. Browning had been easy. Hearing that agony was not. I hadn't seen anyone else in the room, but it still took me a minute to recover

enough to even approach the door. A clock on the wall read: 2:16pm. Gould had been tortured this way for roughly six hours.

The next time I opened the door, I rushed in, not giving myself the opportunity to flinch away. Gould wasn't screaming anymore. He was whimpering. I wasn't sure which was worse. Dropping the bundle, I ran to the side of what looked like a metal bedframe filled with wires. Gould was strapped down to it, blindfolded and stripped down to his underwear. The room reeked of urine and sweat.

"Lamont? That you?" Gould asked between panting breaths. "Please. Help me. Nose itches. Real bad."

I peeled the blindfold back. It was soaked through with sweat and tears. Gould blinked a few away as he squinted against the fluorescent lights overhead. "Elyria? What...? What are you doing here?"

"I have a jumpsuit for you. We're going to shave your head and face. I've got a razor and gel." I released the strap that bound his upper body and began working to free his right hand. "We should hurry. Help me get these things off of you."

Gould obeyed, reaching for his left hand as soon as his right one was able. "You're rescuing me?" He laughed, then coughed several times. "Where's Olivia?"

"Excluded," I said, not looking up from my task.

Gould's hands stopped moving. "You killed her?"

I finished unbuckling his legs before answering. "I know you saw. You would have told her that I'm acutely aberrant, and she would have excluded me. She was going to exclude you, too."

Gould had sat up, supporting himself with unsteady arms. His eyes seemed softer somehow, more amber than brown. He let out a heavy breath, and said, "I understand."

Two little words.

The feelings I thought I'd escaped in Ms. Browning's bedroom caught up with me. "I had to," I said. My voice cracked on "had". A lurching cramp in my stomach nearly doubled me over. Excluded was a bad word. Too sterile. Gould's word was better. Kill. I'd killed her. I was a murderer.

Gould slid his legs over the edge of the table and stood, keeping one hand on the ledge to steady himself. I reached into my pockets and pulled out Ms. Browning's razor and gel. They slipped through my fingers when I tried to give them to Gould.

"I apologize." The regulated words felt stupid and small, but I'd never meant them so much before. I said them so hard that my eyes stung and watered.

Still gripping the table, Gould crouched to get the razor and gel. "This isn't your fault, Elyria. We can talk about it later, but right now, you need to pull yourself together."

He was right. I knew he was. I just couldn't make it happen. The emotions were too much. Too big. Uncontrollable. Like a reverse trance machine, they spiraled inward, feeding on each other. Killer. Disorder. I wanted to. I had to. Aberrant. Afraid. The edges of my vision blurred and narrowed. "I'm trying!"

Gould sat cross-legged on the floor. "Come shave my head. I've never done it before." He ran a hand through his hair. "Please?"

I sniffled back against my running nose as I walked over to him. He handed me the can of gel, and I rubbed some into his damp hair. The tight curls clung closely to his scalp. Kneeling behind him, I made Gould look up and dragged the razor from his hairline back toward me about an inch. After the second pass, I flicked the loose hair from the blades.

Scrape, scrape, flick.

I found a rhythm and let it take me. My hands moved, as if of their own volition. Gould only flinched a few times at the

very beginning. Half of his scalp was exposed before he spoke again. By then, my vision was clear.

"You're not acutely aberrant," he said.

I kept the razor in motion. "I do not understand."

"I've read your file," Gould said, only just stifling a shrug that might have cost him some skin. "Your kind of aberrance is called 'subversive'. It means you were too smart, too empathetic, and way too independent. They're not in the market for future revolutionaries or reformers."

"But I can *feel*."

"I know," Gould sighed. "That's my fault. Well, mine and my father's. We targeted every subversive with aptitudes of three or better. We spiked your punch, Elyria."

#

The elevator doors opened onto an empty car. Jumpsuit and work boots aside, Gould looked completely different. The beard had added years to him. When I first saw him in person, I would have guessed thirty. Bald and clean shaven, he looked more like twenty.

"Stay against the back wall. Keep your head down," I said. We got in, and I pressed the button.

When the doors opened again, Lamont was waiting on the other side with a phone pressed against his ear. "She's not answering," he said. "I don't care."

Gould glanced sidelong at me, but I kept my eyes on the floor a few feet ahead of me. The detective barely noticed us as we walked past him. "I need answers now," Lamont said, stepping into the elevator and repeatedly pressing the button. "Because a pair of baldies from Center One just stole a garbage truck and crashed it into--"

The doors closed before we could hear more. I caught Gould smirking in my periphery. "Stop it!" I whispered. He adjusted his expression but only after winking at me. I wanted to hit him. He was going to get us caught if he wasn't careful. We turned a corner and headed for the Precluded locker room--and the service door.

Sirens echoed in the distance as we stepped out into the sunlight. Two police officers were chatting by their squad cars, but otherwise the loading area and parking lot were deserted. Only a few hundred feet separated us from the open gate. Hundreds became dozens. The guard in the booth looked up enough to see brown and went back to flipping through a magazine.

"Hey! Hey! Stop those two!" It was Lamont. "The Precludes! Stop them!"

Gould grabbed my hand, and we ran. Knots of people cluttered the sidewalk outside the station. We charged through them, shoving people aside as we went. Lamont and the other officers chased us, guns in hand, shouting for us to stop or come back as though we might suddenly remember to obey their imperatives.

Gould seemed to take particular pleasure in plowing through the Included. Their incredulous expressions had a nearly uniform quality to them, like they didn't believe their eyes, like the very thought of running, disobedient Precludes was too much for them to process.

Behind us, Lamont and his men capitalized on the path we were making. They were catching up. The monitors lining the street flashed the time and temperature. 3:03pm. Seventy-two degrees.

I jerked hard on Gould's hand, forcing him to change direction.

We bolted across the street, adding the sound of car horns and braking to the shouting. Ahead of us, a concrete stairwell led down to below the street level. A sign above it read: SUBWAY

CBD 23rd STREET STATION. I ran for it, pulling Gould along with me.

One of the officers risked a shot as we rounded the guardrails. Flecks of concrete bounced off of my head. The noise gave the people at the top of the stairs only a moment's warning before we crashed into them. Panicked by the gunshot, the included among them changed direction or tried to run. Gould and I moved downward in an avalanche of pushing and shoving and tripping.

At the bottom of the stairs, the tumbling chaos bled into a milling swarm of people. Trains were arriving and departing, their wheels screeching along the rails. I hit the ground at the landing, slamming my chin against the concrete. Gould pulled me to my feet and dragged me into the crowd. For the first several steps, I stumbled along, a metallic taste in my mouth and heat throbbing in my head.

We jumped the turnstiles. On the other side, Gould dropped my hand and said, "Walk natural."

It took a moment for the words to sink in; then I obeyed. I'd thought we might lose Lamont by catching a train, but in the din of the station, we were just two more bald people in brown jumpsuits. Invisible.

#

Instruct all Precludes to return to their centers immediately.

The sentence ran as a repeating marquee on every billboard. A police cruiser turned onto the block, and I let the blinds fall back into place. "Wait here," Gould had said. "There are some people I want you to meet. I'll be back." In the hour since, the city outside had ground to a halt.

A third story apartment in a condemned building served as my hideout. Bare walls, bare floor. Order through vacancy. I didn't want to be there anymore. I sat beside the window with my back against the wall and closed my eyes. Just for a minute.

And then, I dreamed.

The Rough

Stay among people. Pretend to be human. Keep an eye on the exits. Those were some of the first rules that freedom taught us. I was a fast learner.

Dr. Kingston helped us escape. They killed her and hunted us. We needed help, and I was the oldest, so it was my job to find it. I shaved my head and wore a trench coat. It was the best disguise I could muster. I had a pistol to keep me company, but I washed down a mouthful of graphite dust just to be safe.

Things like clean air, the rule of law, and sunlight didn't trickle down to the arcology's lower levels. The cops put down tweaked-out gearheads and riots, but anything else required bribes--not that it mattered. The police worked for the company, and the company was after us. Fortunately, muscle was always easy to find in Low Town. I held silent auditions in one dive

after another. I watched them drink, fight, and posture. The trick wasn't finding a tough. It was finding a good one.

It was his cigar that caught my eye. Its fragile skin remained unbroken, even as he rolled it between pneumatic fingers. His arms were naked metal from shoulder to fingertips. He wore the prosthetics like a gunslinger's pistol--in the open for everyone to see. Their housings, designed to emulate the smooth contours of living flesh, were dented and scuffed. These weren't cosmetic enhancements. They were tools. Used tools. Federal regulations required that such prosthetics operate within the parameters of "biological equivalence"--no inhuman strength or speed. He looked like the kind of man who broke the law. One glance and people avoided meeting his eyes. I couldn't blame them. Any other place and time, I would have, too.

That's why I picked him.

He was sitting alone, nursing his drink like he couldn't afford another. I took the seat opposite him. "This isn't a place for little girls," he said by way of greeting. His voice was a gravelly baritone. It suited him. I set an envelope on the table that divided us and slid it toward him. He bathed it in a cloud of cigar smoke before picking it up and inspecting the contents. He didn't count it, just ran a thumb across the top of the bills. I kept a hand out of sight, below the table. Like his

exposed steel arms, my hidden hand sent a message; it was the same message: *Do not provoke me.*

Showing a stranger that kind of money was risky. I looked like an easy mark. Beneath the table, I coiled my finger around the trigger. The disposable pistol came preloaded with ten rounds. There were only six left. If his insides were more metal than meat, six bullets might not be enough to stop him if things went south. The gun was insurance, but it wasn't a guarantee. There were no guarantees in Low Town. "I'll double that if things go well," I said.

His eyes shifted from the money to me. He was under the gun and he knew it. With slow, deliberate motions, he put the envelope back on the table. "This is a lot of money for a little girl like you to be walking around with," he said. "What are you? Sixteen, maybe?"

Nineteen, but I ignored the question. "I need protection for a couple weeks, and I need to talk to someone who doesn't want to talk to me."

He laughed, snorting out smoke, and leaned back in his chair. My finger relaxed on the trigger, just a hair. "That someone must be awfully antisocial if you need my help," he said. "I'm assuming this someone has helpers?"

"Bodyguards. At least two. Suits."

"Suits," he repeated, nodding. Suits meant professionals. It meant concealed firearms and inconspicuous upgrades. Business suits were like trench coats. You never knew what was underneath. "So this someone's from Uptown?" It was a fair assumption. Suits didn't come cheap.

"He's a roller," I said. The corporate brass was in charge of Uptown. In Low Town, the high rollers called the shots. If you crossed the brass, Low Town was a good place to run to. If you crossed a roller, though, there was nowhere left to go. His eyes went back to the envelope. It was thick--thick enough to cover the risk.

He glanced up. "You plan to kill him?" It wasn't an objection.

"Are you taking the job?"

He took a contemplative drag. "Yeah. I'm in." He slid the envelope and his hand under the table. The seconds stretched as he tucked the money away--or pulled his own gun.

Neither of us blinked.

Neither of us pulled a trigger.

"I'm Duncan," he said, his hand coming back into view.

"What do I call you?"

"Ersatz." It was the name I'd picked for myself. My real name was Three. At least, that's what the doctors had called me. One and Sojourner were dead. So was Seven. Four had recently

disappeared while scavenging for food. I figured they got her, too. "Let's take this conversation somewhere else."

Duncan finished his drink and stood, towering over me. Like me, he wore a long coat. I suspected our reasons were similar. Even with the sleeves torn off, you could hide a lot under a trench coat. I slipped my pistol into the waistband of my pants, and we headed out into the open corridor.

The facility had been a world of sterile, white lights. Low Town was nothing like that. It was a kaleidoscope of neon signs, rusted metal, and crowded trams. It was a world of dark corners and exposed pipelines. Everything was dirty. Especially the people.

The corporations paid taxes, funded public works, and inspired consumer confidence. They didn't murder little girls. High rollers like Santo did that for them. His men were being paid to hunt us.

Two of them spotted me as soon as we got outside. I barely had time to make eye contact with them before the shooting started. My mind registered danger. My body buzzed in response to the stimulus. They had the drop on us, but humans were slow.

I wasn't.

My gun was out and speaking their language before the first shots zipped by me. The staccato bark of gunfire cut through the ambient noise in roaring claps as bullets hurled past each

other. Strangers took cover or ran. I scored two solid body hits on one of the goons. It barely fazed him. Subdermal armor. Fucking gearheads. It didn't help that my gun was a cheap plastic piece of crap.

Santo's thugs were typical Low Town gangbangers. They compensated for skill with chop-shop upgrades and automatic weapons. Duncan was in a different league. His pistol was the kind of cannon that kicked harder than meat hands could handle. It spit fire and thunder when he pulled the trigger. He was glorious. Bullets slammed into the walls around us, raining flecks of metal against our backs. He didn't so much as blink. The bastard was actually grinning.

Duncan's shot caught the man I'd hit square in the chest. It came out the other side in an explosion of red mist. One shot, one kill--one left. I was almost out of bullets. The other hunter kindly gave me two of his.

I dropped.

New stimulus, new response. My kind didn't die easily, especially not with a belly full of carbon.

There was pain. It came in blinding waves that left me dizzy and incoherent. I could still hear the gunpowder dialogue between Duncan and the hunter. Above me, I saw a hologram of a naked girl advertising beer. Everything was distant and inaccessible. The pain made a ghost town of my mind.

The shooting stopped. The world lurched, and my horizons spun. Instead of the advertisement, I was looking at the ground. It was painted with blood. My priceless blood. Everything was red.

Then, everything was black.

#

Reboot.

Consciousness returned, and brought with it a host of sensations--the foremost of which was fear. I was lying in a bed. People who slept in crawlspaces didn't wake up in beds. Beds were for humans--and test subjects. I kept my eyes closed and swallowed the urge to panic as my other senses scouted my surroundings. I was nude, but I wasn't restrained. I smelled sanitizer and latex, but also smoke and machinery. This wasn't the facility. My guess was a chop-shop, an underground medical practice that specialized in second-hand upgrades, illegal modifications, and not asking too many questions. An unfamiliar man spoke. His voice was crisp and academic.

"Complete regeneration in less than an hour," he said reverently. "She's incredible."

"But how's that even possible?" That was Duncan.

"Look at this scan," the man answered. "See that there, by her stomach? There's another one here, by her heart. Two more, there and there, by her kidneys."

"Wait... what are those?"

"They're some kind of designer organs. No idea what they do. Her whole body's been custom engineered. This girl wasn't born, Duncan. She was made. Technically speaking, she's not human."

"She calls herself Ersatz."

The stranger chuckled. "I'm not sure how appropriate that is. The word implies an inferior copy. This girl might be fabricated, but she's made of finer stuff than you or me."

"She doesn't have any implants or upgrades," Duncan observed.

"No. I'm guessing that her body would reject them." He was right about that. The first five of us shared that design flaw, much to the irritation of our creators. Only the last two models were different, and Seven was dead. "Listen, this isn't some backroom biomechanics. Whoever made this girl has a lot of resources. I'm guessing one of the Big Five. I think you should walk away from this one while you still can."

It was good advice.

"I just can't do that, Noah. They're trying to kill her," Duncan said.

"They'll kill you, too, if you get in the way. Hell, they'd probably kill me just for taking a scan of her. Corporations bury their mistakes. They bury the witnesses, too. You hardly

know this girl. Is this about Lavinia? Getting yourself killed like this won't--"

"I know," Duncan interjected forcefully. Then, a little softer, he said, "I know. It's not like that. Not exactly."

Noah sighed. "Suit yourself, hero. Regardless, I think it would be best if the two of you were on your way now. I don't need this kind of trouble."

"What? You're seriously going to make me carry her out of here?"

"Hardly," Noah said. "I expect she'll walk. She's awake, and has been for several minutes."

I opened my eyes and sat upright. The dingy chop-shop was set up in a converted storage room. Used implants and prosthetics lined the walls. It was a macabre collection of dangling arms and legs. Only a few of them looked looted. The bed was surrounded by rolling tables cluttered with surgical implements, power tools, and several small blowtorches. My clothes were in a pile on the floor. I slipped off the bed and gathered my things. The shirt was trashed, but the rest was still wearable. My gun was gone, probably left at the scene.

Duncan averted his eyes while I dressed. Noah, a lanky old man with shaggy hair, did not. I was indifferent to his gaze. Doctors weren't like people--they never saw me. I was only ever

unit Three in their eyes. Dr. Kingston had been the only exception.

Nobody spoke until I finished. It was Noah who broke the uncomfortable silence. "What are you, child?"

"Trouble," I said. "The kind you don't need. I'd love to stay and chat, but we were just leaving. Remember?" Noah's expression soured, but I could see Duncan grinning in profile. The good doctor didn't try to talk to me again as he escorted us out. Duncan thanked him as we left. Noah patted him on the back and wished us luck. I didn't look back.

We walked in silence for several minutes. I could feel his presence behind me, expectant. I wanted to say something, I just didn't know what. Thank you, maybe, but for what? Not leaving me for dead? Not taking Noah's advice? Averting his eyes? I couldn't find the right words, so I said nothing. Eventually, Duncan put me out of my misery.

"What are you hoping to get out of the roller?" he asked when we were a few corridors away.

"His name is Santo," I said. "I want the name of whoever is paying him."

"Then what?"

I turned to face him. "Then, I'll have a meeting with that person, too."

"So, that's your plan? To kill your way up the chain of command?" He made it sound naive. Maybe it was, but I didn't know what else to do. We couldn't keep running forever.

"I need to show you something," I said. "Follow me."

We blended into the crowds of a nearby tram station. The place was choked with commuters and panhandlers. The constant screech of the passing trains muted everything else. The stations made for good hiding places, but I never rode the trams. I walked the rails instead.

Most people avoided the railway tunnels, and with good reason. They were dark, loud, and extremely dangerous. The air was always thick with a haze of steel dust, and the trams roared by with only narrow spaces separating them from each other and the tunnel walls. Each track had an electrified third rail used to power the trains. Touching it was deadly. Crossing multiple tracks required careful timing and steady footwork. To his credit, Duncan followed me into that hell unflinchingly.

The Low Town trams ran through the bowels of the arcology, passing pipeline mazes, obsolete tunnels, and other forgotten places. It was a paradise of hiding spots once you learned how to avoid the track inspectors and the occasional tweaked-out junkie. There was no avoiding the rats, though. There were lots of rats.

For my kind, dim light was more than enough. The darker it became, the more our eyes adjusted. Pitch black was still a problem, but anything less was workable. "Can you see?" I asked, as we moved into darker passages.

"Night eyes," he said, tapping his temple. I nodded my understanding. Night eyes were popular in the sunless corridors of Low Town. Popular, but expensive. I was wondering how Duncan had been able to afford the upgrade when our walk was interrupted.

Five found us a few dozen yards from our destination--an abandoned utility room amid a labyrinth of piping. She came up from behind and pressed a gun into Duncan's back. "Don't you fucking move," she told him. They were harsh words coming from a twelve year old. Duncan froze.

"It's okay, Five! He's with me," I said.

Five studied my face for any sign of coercion before backing down. "I've got my eye on you, asshole. I won't think twice. You got that, gearhead?"

She was a scrawny girl with black hair worn in a perpetual ponytail and bright blue eyes. When Duncan turned to face her, I could see a smile threatening to form at the corners of his mouth. He was a fool if he thought she didn't mean every word of it. Before, Five had been a quiet, docile girl--always compliant, never confrontational. Then they killed Seven, and

everything changed. Seven had been the youngest of us, only eight when she died. They'd shot her a half-dozen times with shotguns at close range--including once in the face. Anytime I considered having mercy on a hunter, I thought about Five cradling Seven's ruined corpse. It did wonders for my sense of moral ambiguity.

One, the oldest of us, died in a fire meant to smoke us out. Sojourner had been hit by a train while fleeing hunters. All that remained of them were our memories. We'd laid Seven to rest in a makeshift tomb deep in the underworld. It had been Mazzy's idea--a proper burial. We all cried that night, but Five was different. Her tears were hateful, each one a promise of revenge. She'd made a lot of those promises, and she'd kept at least a dozen so far. Something in her eyes must have tipped Duncan off. He schooled away his stillborn grin. "Yeah," he said flatly. "I got it."

"Ersatz! Ersatz! You're back!"

I hardly had time to register Mazzy's presence before her arms were around my waist. None of us knew why Six had taken to calling herself that. "Two is Sojourner. Three is Ersatz. I want to be Mazzy," she'd declared one day, and so she was. At nine, Mazzy was the youngest one of us left. She was also the only one with upgrades.

Mazzy's left hand and eye were both prosthetic. Neither had been cosmetically masked, which left her looking incomplete, like a partially disguised robot. She was also fully chipped out for network access. Mazzy was the first model to have been adapted for military intelligence purposes. If she could physically touch a networked machine, she could control it for as long as it was within reach. All it took was a few drops of her blood.

"Wow! He's *big!*" Mazzy said, craning her neck to take Duncan in. "Do we have to feed him? I sure hope not! We're running low on rat kabobs."

Duncan resurrected his smile and knelt down to be on her level. "Hi," he said, offering her a hand to shake. "I'm Duncan." It wasn't the kind of response I'd expected from a hired gun.

"Mazzy," she replied with exaggerated formality. "I am very pleased to be making your acquaintance." His steel hand swallowed hers as they shook. "Are you going to make the hunters stop coming?"

Five scoffed.

I expected Duncan to give Mazzy some kind of empty platitude. Instead, he regarded her thoughtfully, taking in her dust-smudged face and expectant gaze. "You're just like Ersatz, aren't you?" he asked her.

"No way," Mazzy objected. "She's totally obsolete! I'm a much newer model. Also, I noticed that you didn't answer my question. Are you going to stop them or not?"

I was just about to rescue Duncan, when he stood slowly and answered her. "Yeah, kid," he said, smile fading. "I'm going to try."

"Promise?" she asked.

"Promise."

Mazzy considered this and then nodded sagely. "The quest is yours, sir knight!"

Five spat. "Human promises aren't worth shit," she hissed and then stormed off.

"You don't know that!" Mazzy shouted after her, hands clenched into fists at her sides. "You don't! Dr. Kingston kept her promise. She kept her promise! You don't know!"

"Let her go, Mazzy. She'll be back," I said, squeezing her shoulder. "Hey, do you think you could run back to the camp and grind up some graphite for me? I burned through the last batch, and your knight and I need to talk." Mazzy nodded and headed off.

I waited until she was out of earshot before I spoke again. "Seven of us escaped together. We're all that's left. I wanted you to meet them, so you'd understand. I need to stop the

hunters, no matter what it takes. Did you mean what you said?
The promise?"

"Yeah," he said. For the length of three breaths, I searched his unblinking eyes. I didn't know why, but I believed him.

"We can pay you more."

He shook his head. "We already made a deal."

Somehow, I'd known he wouldn't take the money, but it didn't make any sense. *He* didn't make any sense. I needed to understand. I thought back to his conversation with Noah.

"Duncan?" I asked, "Who is Lavinia?"

Duncan drew a cigar from an inner pocket of his coat. He lit it with a match in a series of rapid puffs. Little, unintelligible smoke signals congregated on the low-hanging ceiling. For a long moment, he was silent. "I was a suit, once," he said, at last. "I worked for one of the Big Five. AraTech, specifically. Are they the ones who made you?"

I shook my head. "Different Fiver. Bainbridge."

He chuckled. "That's a relief. I'd rather take on a pharmaceutical conglomerate than an arms manufacturer." It was a weak joke. Both companies were part of the Big Five, an elite group of megacorporations who controlled the global economy. It didn't really matter which one you were up against. They all had

armies of 'security personnel'. "Anyway," he said, "I met a girl on the job. You've got to understand, I was younger back then."

"Why does that matter?"

"Because I was still pretty, back in the day," he said with a wink. I laughed, honestly laughed. It was a strange, almost unfamiliar sound.

"This isn't a place for old men," I said, smiling. "What are you? Thirty-five, maybe?"

"Nice. I'm twenty-eight," he said. "So, Lavinia was the daughter of one of the brass. I got assigned to her security detail. I was pretty pissed off at first, actually. No suit wants to get stuck following some pampered rich girl around." I tried to imagine Duncan, following dutifully behind some Uptown girl, metal arms laden with shopping bags. It was surprisingly easy. My first laugh must have paved the way for others to escape, because they came freely. "Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up," he said with a smirk. "The thing is, Lavinia wasn't what I expected. She didn't want to go to the mall. She wanted to go to Low Town."

"To the clubs?" I asked.

"Yeah, she did some of that," he admitted. "Mostly, though, she wanted to see what life was like down here. I tried to talk her out of it. She was a perfect hostage candidate. I should never have told her that."

"Why?"

"Relax, I'm getting there," he said. "Lavinia was stunned by what she saw. In Uptown, people think life down here isn't so different from up there, just with more crime and less luxury. They've never had to live in a one-room hive apartment or face a gearhead on a synth bender. They think the Three Demand rioters were just trouble makers. They don't understand that clean air, food, and water aren't a given in Low Town. Lavinia got it in her mind to change that.

"At first, she tried throwing money around. When that didn't work, she tried to get the local media to post unbiased reports about the living conditions in Low Town. Of course, that wasn't happening either. The more frustrated she became, the more it strengthened her determination. I loved her for that."

"Were you... um...," I fumbled for the right word. "Together?"

He smiled, at my expense. "Yeah, you could say that. We kept it to ourselves though. Anyway, we were at a protest one night when a pack of bangers showed up and started shooting into the crowd. The media called it gang violence, but it was just the usual routine--a high roller sending his boys in to do a corporation's dirty work. They were after Lavinia. I got her out of there, but I got pretty shot up in the process. Damn near killed me. That's where these come from," he said, flexing his metal arms before taking another long drag.

"After that, Lavinia decided that she could play hardball, too. She cooked up this scheme where she would pretend to be taken hostage, and then use herself as leverage to negotiate some kind of deal on behalf of the Three Demanders. I'll never forget the look on her face as she explained her plan. She was so beautiful and full of hope. I tried to talk her out of it, of course, but I was stuck in the hospital, hooked to machines and going in and out of consciousness. There was nothing I could do. It didn't matter anyway. Someone shot her twice in the back of the head that night after she left the hospital." He paused for another drag. "The news ran a story the next day claiming that terrorists representing the Three Demanders were responsible. I spent the next two weeks in the hospital while the police used Lavinia's death as an excuse to come down hard on the protesters. When I finally got out, I didn't have a job anymore. I'd been blacklisted by the Big Five. So, I came back to Low Town. Nobody checks your references in Low Town."

"You didn't try to avenge her?" That was Five. She'd snuck back in sometime during his story.

Duncan sighed. It was as if all the sadness in the world came out in that single breath. "Any one of the Big Five local brass could've been responsible. That left me with about a thousand suspects and no witnesses or leads. I couldn't just start killing people indiscriminately."

"What about her daddy?" Mazzy asked. She, too, had crept back. She had a dirty plastic cup in one hand and a refilled bottle of water in the other.

"That was at the beginning of the story, you little sneak," I said. "You were supposed to be back at the camp."

Mazzy rolled her eyes. "I ground up more graphite right after you gobbled up the last of what we had ready," she grouched as she handed me the bottle and cup. I took them both while giving her a stern look that she studiously ignored. Turning back to Duncan, she asked, "So, did her daddy do anything to make it right?"

"You can't ever make a thing like that right," Five said with cold certainty.

"No, you can't," Duncan agreed. "Her father took a flying resignation."

"What does that mean?" Mazzy asked. Nobody answered. "Oh, come on. I'll just look it up online, so you might as well tell me."

"He jumped out of a building," Five said. "A tall one."

Absentmindedly, I took a mouthful of the graphite shavings and started to wash them down. Duncan watched me out of the corner of his eye. In the middle of my third swallow, curiosity got the better of him. Or maybe it was just the need to talk about something else. "Why are you doing that?" he asked.

I couldn't talk with my mouth half-full of graphite sludge. Mazzy picked up my slack. "It's for the nanites," she said. "Our bodies are swarming with tiny, molecular machines. We have special parts inside that make them. They use carbon for fuel and raw material. Graphite is made out of carbon, and it's easy to get, so we eat it."

I forced down the last gulp and picked up where Mazzy left off. "There's enough carbon in most food to keep us operational under normal conditions. If we want to do more, we have to use more. Quick bursts of speed or strength don't take much, but repairing something like a gunshot wound does." Duncan took it all in, but I could still see Lavinia's ghost in his eyes.

Mazzy must have seen it, too, because she hugged him. Her tiny arms struggled to make it around the big man. He seemed surprised at first, but then crouched to return the embrace, enfolding Mazzy in steel and sighing into her tangle of auburn hair. "I'm really sorry about your friend," Mazzy said. "We've lost friends too. Five is right. Nothing fixes it." For several moments, Duncan held her, his face turned down into her hair, cigar burning idly between metal fingers. Mazzy rubbed at his shoulders, as though she was trying to warm him.

"Hey," she said, pulling a hand back. "What's this?" Mazzy plucked something from the back of his coat--a small, needle-like object. The shape was too regular for shrapnel.

Duncan swore and snatched the thing from her, crushing it like some kind of dangerous insect. "We have to move," he said. "It's a tracking device. I don't know... Noah!" He said the man's name like a curse. "He must have put it on me when we were leaving his shop. That filthy son of a..." He didn't bother to finish the sentence.

"I'll... I'll go break down camp," Mazzy said. Her voice was laced with fear.

"No," I said. "No time. We have to go now."

I did a cursory check of my own clothes as we navigated the twisting network of pipe-lined access tunnels. Five led the way, gun first. Duncan kept his gun out, too. He armed me with a small revolver that he kept in an ankle holster. In his hands, it had looked like a toy. In mine, it felt menacing. Only Mazzy remained weaponless, as always.

No matter which way we went, the nest of maintenance shafts led back out into the tram tunnels. As we emerged, a train obscured our vision.

It passed, and the shooting started.

Five fired first--three shots. Each flash of the muzzle captured a frozen image of the wide tunnel. Several tracks converged here. The place was crawling with Santo's hunters. One of them collapsed as the world exploded into the chaos of a firefight. We scattered. To my right, Duncan drew a second

pistol. His two guns performed a hellfire duet as he ran beside the tunnel wall amid a shower of sparks. To my left, Mazzy darted back into the pipeline labyrinth. Five feinted one way and then another as she too retreated back the way we'd come.

I followed Duncan, nursing my six bullets. A pair of trains crashed through the scene with virtually no warning. Bullets ricocheted off their reinforced hulls, and I heard the unmistakable sound of at least one impact. The trains didn't stop for that kind of thing. The remains of the railway's dead were scattered and neglected along the tracks. Nobody bothered to clean them up, except for the rats.

The constant choir of gunfire lit the tunnel like a dozen competing strobe lights. Gun smoke mingled with the thick fog of steel dust as trains plowed through it like four-hundred-ton fists. I had a belly full of carbon, and I was accustomed to the perils of the tracks. This was my world.

Santo's men weren't suits. They were common thugs, hopped up on synth and the borrowed confidence that came with superior numbers and automatic weapons. They didn't know who to chase. They didn't know where to step.

And I was tired of running from them.

New stimulus, new response.

A surge of nanites coursed through my veins. They accelerated my brain chemistry, reducing reaction time and

enhancing my reflexes. They wove themselves into my muscles, allowing me to perform surreal feats of strength, like jumping over oncoming trains and leaping across tracks three or four at a time.

I left Duncan behind as I danced between the rails, spitting bullets and appropriating the guns of the fallen. The trains became my allies, the haze my cloak, and the third rail my co-conspirator. Only a few of the bangers had enough hardware to keep up with me.

They died first.

Within a few year-long seconds, the momentum of the fight shifted. The clamoring applause of gunfire dwindled into sporadic claps. Wounded hunters cried out in pain and fear. I silenced them all, stalking through the mists like some merciless demigod. I'd taken a round to the shoulder and another had grazed my hip. Just flesh wounds. Easily repaired.

I found Duncan slumped against the tunnel wall, head down and sitting in a pool of his own blood. His arms hung limply at his sides, a pistol still clenched in each of his metallic fists. I shouted his name as I ran to his side. He didn't respond. I tore his shirt open to inspect the damage. Two tiny holes in his chest wept life. "Hey," he wheezed, eyes opening. Tiny bubbles of blood formed at the corners of his mouth. "Looks like I owe you a refund." He tried to laugh. He gurgled instead.

"No! No, no!" I said in a flat panic. I didn't know what to do. We'd never learned how to deal with things like this.

There'd been no reason. Any injury our nanites couldn't fix was invariably fatal. "What do I do, Duncan? Please. What do I do?"

"Stupid human." Five crouched beside us. She was smattered in gore--bloody mouth, bloody fingernails. She had a serrated knife in her hand. Not a gun. I could almost pity the men she... I thought of Seven. Never mind.

"Take my guns and go," he rasped.

"I just can't do that," I said. Duncan gave me a blood-flecked smile. Tears were streaming down my face. He was dying while billions of invisible machines worked to mend every little scratch on me.

Five put a hand on my good shoulder. "He's going to see Lavinia," she said. Any other time, I would have been taken aback by the emotion in her voice. She was trying to comfort me. "It's all right."

Somewhere behind me in the mists, I could hear Mazzy crying. That was the trigger.

"No." I said, suddenly decisive. "Give me your knife." Five's expression was horrified, but she complied. I could only imagine what she thought I might do with it. Try digging out the bullets? Put Duncan out of his misery? "Mazzy?"

"I'm here, Ersatz." Her voice was a tiny, fragile thing.

"Run back to the camp. I need all the graphite we have left. Five, go with her. Hurry!" Both obeyed without question.

"You're wasting... time," Duncan said. "Golden rule... of Low Town. Every man... for himself."

"If you followed that rule, you wouldn't be here, jackass," I snapped. Then I cut myself. I made two bone-deep gashes--one across the inside of my wrist and then another perpendicular to it. They formed a 'T' shape on my forearm. I thrust my bleeding wrist against Duncan's mouth. "Swallow," I demanded. Whether consciously or reflexively, he did as he was told.

Mazzy used her blood to control machines. Each drop was the vehicle for a legion of nanites that infiltrated their systems and worked to bend it to her will. My body didn't produce that kind of nanite, but it did manufacture vast swarms of tiny repairmen on demand. They were knitting my flesh and ruptured veins even as I bled them into Duncan's mouth by the million.

I was an atheist. Being man-made gave me a unique perspective on religion. I was the product of intelligent design, but the pantheon responsible for my creation was a cruel one. Humans made us. They also experimented on us. The various tests designed to establish the 'threshold of our recuperative powers' were what finally prompted Doctor Kingston to commit the first act of true nobility our kind had ever witnessed. Now, this man who had shown me that same spark of nobility was also

dying for it. I made an offer as I reopened the knife wound. If my creator's creator allowed this to work, I vowed to pay the debt--double if things went well.

God sensed a bargain.

By the time Mazzy and Five returned, Duncan was barely conscious but breathing easily. Old scars remained, but the newer holes in his flesh had smoothed over. Five was dumbstruck. Mazzy came to stand beside me, a cup of graphite chunks in her hand. "Oh," she said, as if figuring out a missing word in a crossword puzzle. "You did it like I do. That's awesome! I didn't even know we could do that. Here. Have some yummy graphite." I took a mouthful, reopened my veins, and gave Duncan another dose of me.

After collecting a few more items from our fallen adversaries, we carried Duncan to the next random campground on our nomadic, underworld circuit. While he slept, the rest of us bathed in the warm spray of a leaky pipeline. The hot water ran red at our feet. We needed supplies, so once we dried off, Mazzy and I decided to risk what she liked to call a "surface raid" while Five stayed behind to guard the camp and watch over Duncan.

First, we found an ATM for Mazzy to hack. She could never understand why humans still felt the need for paper money. It made perfect sense to me. Paper was tangible. You could touch

it, hold it. If you had it in your hand, it was yours. I didn't know how to explain wanting a sense of control to a girl who could make machines do whatever she wanted.

Once we had money, we ran the gauntlet. The open corridors had too many eyes. The longer we were up there, the more likely we were to get caught. It was a deadly game of cat and mouse-- and we were always mice. Our objective was to get in and out as quickly as possible. Some raids went better than others. We had lost Sojourner on a botched one, and Four had never returned from her last solo attempt. I tried not to think about them as we made our run. Instead, I tried to imagine Duncan behind us, following us around like we were Uptown girls on a shopping spree, but that had a melancholy aftertaste, too. Sometimes, I wondered why they hadn't designed any nanites to treat those kinds of wounds.

At an art supply shop, we bought thick, rectangular pencils made of pure graphite--no wood or anything. Then, we shopped for clothes. I had a few specific things in mind to help us get close to Santo when the time came. I had the clothes double-bagged to keep them clean until we needed them. Lastly, we picked up foodstuffs, mostly the bland nutrient bars that were a staple of every Low Town diet. You could eat them dry or, with a little hot water, as an almost-passable cup of soup. More importantly, they were lightweight and nonperishable.

Duncan was awake when we returned with our bounty. I ate a few pencils and made him down another helping of my blood. He drank it agreeably enough, but Mazzy wrinkled her nose and declared the whole thing "gross"--this from the girl who regularly pricked her finger to bleed on things.

For the next few days, we ate, we rested, and we moved--a new camp every night. My nanites were healing Duncan, but he lacked the capacity to replenish them. Each day I gave him two infusions of my blood. By the second day, he was walking on his own. By the fourth, he seemed fully recovered, but I wasn't taking any chances. I made him drink again that night and the following morning.

On the fifth night, we decided to make our next move. It was a Friday.

"You're not coming," Duncan said.

"Fuck you, Dracula," Five snarled. "You don't give the orders around here."

"You're not coming," I said. Her eyes murdered me a dozen times for that. "Mazzy, either. You're both too young. You'd stand out, and we can't afford that." Santo was paranoid, even by roller standards. He lived in a suite above his nightclub, and he never left the building. We had no choice but to go to him--and that meant going through The Abyss.

We were counting on the weekend surge. The Abyss was a popular destination for Uptown people looking for a taste of Low Town 'culture'. The cops stayed away, the synth flowed freely, and the cosmetically-enhanced shot girls all doubled as prostitutes. There was usually a crowd, but on the weekends the place was packed. There was no better camouflage than being a needle in a haystack.

"It's just reconnaissance tonight, anyway," I said. "We're only going to look around."

Five swore and Mazzy pouted, but the conversation was over. Duncan and I were going. They were staying.

#

Our new clothes were clean, but we weren't. Duncan and I emerged from the underworld covered in dust and reeking of steel. We checked into a cheap hotel--the kind that charges by the hour and doesn't ask to scan your ID. I showered first. It was my first real one since escaping the facility. Five months of neglect didn't come off easily.

When I was done, I dried off and slipped into my outfit, a neon green wig and a slinky black dress. It worked. The girl I saw in the mirror was unfamiliar. She looked young and pretty, not desperate and filthy. Duncan was waiting for his turn, and we didn't have a lot of time to waste, but I lingered there--

hesitant, unsure of this stranger. I thought about Lavinia. If I'd had everything, would I have risked it?

Probably not.

Duncan gave me a once-over when I finally convinced myself to leave the bathroom. I'd stood brazenly naked before him in Noah's lab and thought nothing of it, but this time he didn't avert his eyes and, despite the dress, I felt exposed.

"Not bad. You'll fit right in. They'll think you're going for the retro look," he said. Then he slipped past me, and closed the door.

I spent the next half-hour wondering what "not bad" meant.

#

Getting past the nightclub's doors was easy. There were too many people for the doormen to screen them all. If you weren't dangerously tweaked or sporting conspicuous artillery, they let you in. Behind me, Duncan was in a suit, his eyes obscured by a mirrored visor. I was just one more Uptown girl slumming it with a bodyguard in tow. The bouncers looked right through us as we walked by.

The Abyss was a jarring mix of loud music, polished chrome, and moving lights. The press of bodies formed into currents, complete with eddies and dance floor islands. We let the tide pull us along, venturing ever deeper into the hunter's lair. Above us, dozens of segmented balcony sections served as private

VIP booths. The air was sweetened with a mild intoxicant. Its effects were lost on me, but I wondered how it affected Duncan. I was thinking about him too much. What was this like for him? Had he come here with Lavinia? Had Noah been right--was she the only the reason he was helping us? Did he think I was pretty like her?

"Up there," Duncan said, nodding toward the balcony level.

It was him. Santo, the Lord of the Hunt. He cut an imposing figure as he stood at the railing and surveyed his kingdom. He was powerfully built, with broad shoulders and thick arms. From behind, a pair of suits watched over him. They looked polished and professional.

I wanted to kill him, and my body responded to that impulse. My muscles transformed into coils of steel rope, and the world came into sharp focus. If not for that, I might not have noticed the girl staring down at me. It was Four. Her name fell awkwardly from my mouth. She stood there, a few yards from Santo, like a guest on his private balcony. I froze, my turbulent emotions sending mixed signals to my body.

Duncan must have seen her, too. There was no mistaking what she was. Aside from age, only a few superficial details--such as hair color--distinguished us as individuals. Duncan tried to pull me away, but I resisted. Four was alive. My heart sang. My heart shattered. Her eyes remained cold, hard things. She

mouthered something at me. Then something else. On the third silent message, I realized what she was doing--counting down from one hundred. She was on ninety-two when my brain acknowledged what my heart couldn't believe. She was giving me a chance to run. I mapped her rhythm for three counts and then allowed Duncan's insistent hand to draw me away. Eighty-eight.

With Duncan at the lead, we turned back against the tide of bodies, forcing our way upstream. Seconds ticked by, slipping through our fingers like sand. Seventy-six. Seventy-five. Seventy-four. Normally, people would have stepped aside for a man like Duncan, but there was nowhere for them to go. Friday was betraying us. Sixty-two. Sixty-one. We were less than halfway back to the door when my count reached fifty. We weren't going to make it.

Thirty-seven.

Twenty-two.

Sixteen.

Eight.

With his free hand, Duncan pulled a gun from his shoulder holster. When it spoke, everybody listened. A bouncer on a balcony overlooking the door collapsed in a flash of red. Duncan's arm swung forty-five degrees. He fired again and another man dropped. To my racing mind, the people around us seemed impossibly slow to react. A third bouncer was dead before

the panic started. The count was at five. I reached under Duncan's coat, pulled out the gun tucked into his waistband, and spun to face the balcony. Four was gone. So was Santo.

Three.

Two.

A spray of blood slapped me in the face. A woman beside me had been shot. Duncan and I were moving targets in a choppy sea of human shields, some of them Uptowners. Santo's men couldn't risk too many shots like that. Even he wasn't above the law if the brass turned on him. I scanned the balconies for the shooter, found him, and returned fire. My second shot sent him toppling into the crowd.

A streak of motion caught my eye. Four moved in a blur, leaping from balcony to balcony--building up speed. Careering off of a support column, she flew at me like a meteor.

And hit.

The impact tore me from Duncan's grasp and sent me hurtling into the crowd. With my momentum dulled by a dozen collisions, I hit the floor. The crowd washed over me, pummeling me with the mindless brutality of a stampede. I lost my gun and my wig. Bloody and desperate, I hurled myself upwards with all of my might. I landed, hard, on an empty balcony section. Over the space of several ragged breaths, my broken bones fused, and I was able to stand again.

Four landed a few feet away from me. A knife in her right hand gleamed prismaticly in the dancing light. The gun in her left did not. I stared at her with pleading eyes. She was one of us. She couldn't be one of them. "You shouldn't have come here," she said.

"I don't understand," I blurted. "What are you doing here?"

"I sold out," she said bluntly. "You guys were a sinking ship."

"Why didn't they kill you?"

She laughed. "I'm more valuable to Santo alive." From downstairs, Duncan's guns bellowed over the music and screaming. He was still alive, at least. I took a step toward the ledge. Four angled to intercept me. "Don't, Three. I will shoot you."

Three--not Ersatz. It was insult and injury in a single word. "What about the brass?"

"You don't know?" Four's mouth twisted into a smirk. "GN found Seven's body," she said. Gibson Neurotech--our creator's chief rival. "Someone tipped them off. I figure it had to be Mazzy. She's such a cunning little bitch. Once Bainbridge learned that their tech had been compromised, they wrote us off."

I shook my head. "Then why does Santo keep sending men after us?"

"He wants Mazzy," Four said. "I told him what she could do. Oh, don't look at me like that. I didn't totally screw you guys over. I refused to hunt you and told them some crap about how we moved every night and never used the same camp twice. I gave you guys a fighting chance."

Downstairs, the call-and-answer gunplay dragged on. "Santo killed One... and Sojourner... and Seven. How can you work for him? How?" I demanded.

"I figured you'd feel that way. Such a shame," she said, shaking her head in disapproval. "Santo and I are going to run this town. There's a place for Mazzy in that. You and Five? Not so much, I guess."

A second of mutual understanding passed between us. The fight between my heart and mind ground to a halt. A sudden clarity of purpose guided the army marching through my veins. Four had weapons, but I was three years older and a solid foot taller. I had longer arms and longer legs. That gave the nanites more muscle mass to reinforce. I was stronger and faster. So, I rushed her. She got off two rounds as I closed the distance. Neither of them connected.

My fist did.

I broke her jaw and elbowed the gun out of her left hand. She head-butted me as I tried to pry the knife from the other. We went down together, rolling in a flurry of blows. The blade

slid across my chest and ripped into my side, where it stuck on a rib. I broke her wrist before she could pull the knife free and we separated--her lunging for the gun, and me pulling out the knife. I threw it as hard as I could as she spun to shoot. It caught her in the temple, and sank in to the hilt. She discharged the gun uselessly into the air as her body fell, limp.

There were two ways to kill our kind. The first was to do so much damage that our systems simply couldn't keep up. Dead is dead. The second was to deactivate the part of our brain responsible for controlling the nanites. The knife had incapacitated Four, but healing was an involuntary action, and she was still breathing. Given enough time, her body would force it out like a splinter. I crawled over to her and peeled the gun from her hand. At that moment, I finally understood why there were no nanites for mending broken hearts. There wasn't enough carbon in the world for that.

I pressed the gun to Four's head and completed her deactivation.

The half-wall at the balcony's edge sheltered me from incoming gunfire as I sat numbly beside Four's corpse. Bullets pelted the barrier and the wall above me. Shrapnel bounced off of me. The music played on and a dozen guns sang along, but I was unconcerned with it all. The pain of my wounds, briefly

numbed by adrenaline, caught up with me. I welcomed the distraction, but my hopelessness prevailed. I was pinned down, Duncan's guns were silent, and Four's blood was pooling around me.

A man in a suit came up the stairway that was the balcony's only traditional entrance. Not Duncan. It was one of Santo's bodyguards. "Don't move," he shouted, pointing a submachine gun at me. I stared up at him in complete indifference. He kicked Four's gun out of my hand and jerked me to my feet. "Go," he ordered, pushing me toward the stairs with the barrel of his gun. I went.

Downstairs was a charnel house. Bouncers and unlucky patrons littered the open space. Duncan was among them, lying face down. His left arm had been blasted away at the elbow. The broken forearm was laying a few feet away, gun still clutched in the hand. Santo stood over him with an automatic shotgun. The other suit was there as well, along with a few bouncers. "Sir," my escort said, "She killed Sasha."

Sasha. So, Four had finally taken another name. It was a good name. It suited her. Tears wet my cheeks. Not for Sasha. Not even for me. They were for Duncan. He was dead, and seeing that extinguished something inside me. Had this been what it was like for him when Lavinia died, this irreconcilable sense of nothingness?

Santo raised a hand, and the music stopped. "So, you're the legendary Ersatz," he said. He was smiling. His teeth were unnaturally white in the black light. "You hired a good man here. He didn't go down easy." He nudged Duncan's body with the toe of his boot. "I remember him from way back. He was always stubborn. He ever tell you how he got those arms?"

I said nothing.

"I was still small-time back then," he said. "I took his arms, I took his girl, and now I'm taking you, too. It's practically Shakespearian." He laughed. Then his bouncers did, too. "Listen, Ersatz. You tell me where to find Mazzy, and I'll let you live. You can even have Sasha's old job. The pay's good. So, what do you say? Mourn the dead, or join them? Your call."

The lights went out.

From somewhere on the other side of the club, a girl screamed in defiance. "Die, motherfuckers!" She punctuated the sentence with an assault rifle. Five. She was here. That meant... the lights. *Mazzy!* I turned on the suit behind me. Distracted by the sudden darkness and gunfire, I caught him off guard. In a series of nanite-boosted blows, I dismantled him, eyes first. He became my human shield, as I took his gun and opened fire. Santo and the other suit were on the move, but I raked the disoriented bouncers. The game of cat and mouse was over.

The other suit maneuvered in a private dance with Five. That left Santo to me. I discarded my human shield and began to move. The Lord of the Hunt and I circled each other in our own intricate choreography. Flush and cover--weave and fire--feint and bait. He was fast, almost as fast as me. A little warning light lit up on the back of my gun. I was running out of ammunition, so I played the one card I had left--apathy.

Santo was using a bar for cover. I bolted forward and vaulted over it. In the narrow space behind it, neither of us would have any cover. We almost couldn't miss. I hit the ground shooting. The bullets sparked uselessly against his subdermal armor. The gun was lightweight--not enough stopping power. It sputtered out, and Santo laughed. His shotgun blast slammed me backwards as dozens of scalding bits of metal ripped into my flesh. I fell down. He stood up, triumphant. "It's a shame you have to die, gorgeous," he said. "You were magnificent. Say hello to Sasha, One, Two, and Seven for me."

"You forgot Lavinia." It was Duncan's voice.

Santo had a half-second for confusion to play out on his face. Then the sweet voice of a familiar instrument sang him into the next world. Duncan fired twice, and Santo's skull erupted in a spray of gore.

"Ersatz!" Duncan hopped the bar and crouched beside me. I was too weak to move. Carbon depletion. I was shutting down.

Pain and exhaustion made everything a blurry smear. I struggled to focus my eyes on him. A cut on his cheek was knitting itself closed.

Duncan sat his gun down and cupped my face in his hand. Metal fingers, delicate touch. I wondered how his real hand would have felt. "Come on, Ersatz," he said, softer this time. "Stay with me."

"I'll try," I said. "Promise."

And then unconsciousness claimed me.

#

Reboot.

#

The open corridors weren't safe with all the other rollers competing over what had been Santo's. The chop-shop had state-of-the-art security and an emergency stockpile of food and water. It was a perfect place to lay low, at least until the worst of the gang wars were over.

Noah was smiling when he stepped into the shop. I smiled back at him.

"Hey, Doc," Duncan said, cheerfully. "Think you can patch this up for me?" He waved his half-arm for effect. Noah muttered an oath, and turned to run, but Mazzy and Five blocked his path. Five had her knife out.

"Where do you think you're going, asshole?" she asked.

VITA

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