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The True Cost

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The True Cost

By

Emily Garrett, Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Masters of English

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

May, 2019

The True Cost

By

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ABSTRACT

The True Cost is a short novel set in a pre-dystopian society. The novel centers around three siblings: Lyle, Bridget, and Paul, along with their friend Reid. The group is living in the middle of an eighty-four-year war that has destroyed their society. Shortly before his murder, Jerry tells the gang to get out of Nork and to find the fabled DOCs. Throughout their journey to the DOCs the group fights through ambushes, deals with death and the destruction of war, all the while trying to figure out the truth behind the war.

Prologue

After

1

Lyle Walker woke in a white padded room and began taking inventory of the blood he could have presumably lost. The gash on his forehead still spilled minute droplets onto his thin white pillow, which had taken on a tan cast from Lyle's filth. Lyle dragged his hand over his beard caked in congealed splotches. He winced at the pain that radiated from his chest every time he inhaled. His right hand began to search his torso for any bone out of place or cracked. There are several. He took his single bed sheet and ripped it until he had a strand long enough that would fit snugly around his forehead.

The footsteps in the hall returned. He quickly tied the bandage, as he glanced frantically for a weapon. He spotted the single faint lightbulb that dangled from the ceiling, just out of reach. If only, he whispered.

2

John Vance walked down a narrow, white-trimmed hallway. Locked doors lined the walls every few feet. The doors themselves were plain other than a painted black number in the center of the frame. Lightbulbs draped like incoherent spiderwebs from the ceiling. John had walked this hall too many times

to count. This bunker was for intruders, the time of each prisoner's stay depended on how much information they were willing to share.

He halted in front of door number 11, the one at the end of the hall. He slid his skeleton key in place and turned the knob.

The light from the hall illuminated the mostly darkened padded room. A young man sat in the corner of the room, his blue eyes wide. To John, the young man didn't look to be older than twenty-five. He had a full beard and multiple lacerations on his face and arms. John assumed that there were more, but due to the stained dusty white shirt and gray pants, he couldn't be sure.

"Where am I?" Lyle asked in a dry rasp, just above a whisper.

John didn't respond. Instead he walked into the small seven by seven room and grabbed Lyle from under the armpits and pressed down on a pressure point. Lyle spasmed onto his sleep mat. A grunt escaped from his lips. John released Lyle's arm and stepped back against the wall.

"Now that we know who is in charge, I have a couple questions for you."

Lyle picked up his head, his hair askew. With one hand, he brushed the hair from his eyes.

"Water." Lyle winced.

"Questions now," John stated. "Water later. How did you find this place?"

"I don't even know where I am." Lyle responded and pushed himself up into a seated position against the wall.

John sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. "Ignorance doesn't suit you. Now, I will ask you one more time." A beat of silence passed. John's gaze never left Lyle's, a tactic that had never failed him in the past. "How did you find us?"

Lyle licked his lips, debating the options in his head, and quickly came to the realization that he had none. He dropped his head. "All I know is that we were crossing the mountains when your men knocked us out."

"Start from the beginning."

"The beginning of all this?" Lyle swallowed, not wanting to relive the kaleidoscopic last year of his life.

Before

Chapter One

1

“The world has moved on.”

Lyle Walker re-read the line aloud in his living room. That line, written in the late twentieth century, by a man who had no idea what life would be like when the world really did move on, encapsulated every emotion Lyle felt about the harrowing topic in one sentence, because, for Lyle and every person still in existence, the world really had moved on.

The book Lyle was currently reading was in despicable condition: pages missing or torn, and edges burned. The author’s name barely legible—only the S and King could clearly be seen. Lyle thought his name must be Stan. After all, he knew Stan Lee, father of Marvel, also wrote around the same period.

Bridget and Paul, Lyle’s siblings and only living family, sat round him on a dingy rug. An oil lamp flickered between them, casting a glow around the room, as the sun finished its descent into oblivion.

A pot in the kitchen boiled over, sending a hiss into the living room. Bridget stood and walked into the kitchen. Lyle looked around their small apartment. Books were stacked on the ground, lining the walls. A large window sat on the east side of the building, a layered chunk of glass taped over a

missing piece, shielded the apartment from the elements. There was a hole blown out of one of the walls that lead into the only bedroom in the apartment. Three twin sized mattresses were strewn in different directions in the bedroom. A small table was pushed against the west wall, next to the entryway door. Three mismatched chairs were placed around the table, each with a plate already set down in front of it.

“Dinner’s ready!” Bridget placed a large silver pot filled with noodles and boiled tomatoes on the kitchen table. Lyle set the book on top of another large stack. The Walker siblings had the largest collection of books in their entire township—they would even bet money that it was the largest in the world. Once the war started eighty-four years ago reading and education took a backseat to fighting. Yet, Allen Walker still held his children’s education as a top priority, even if they were the only ones. He preached that one day it would come in handy; one day his children would save the world. His children believed him, until the day a street bombing killed him seven years before—in August of Year 77.

2

Lyle sipped from a steaming mug of coffee the following morning. The 2020’s medical journal was spread out in front of him. Despite being over a century old, Lyle still found it to be the most academically compelling medical

textbook he had come across. The text was written when technology was at its peak of utilitarianism, an age where every medical test or procedure could be performed microscopically. Despite being heavily trained, the idea of using technology in his operating room seemed foreign to him. He picked up his coffee cup and walked across his living room to the large window that sat two floors above the ground.

The Nork skyline had been forever changed by the war. He had heard stories about large skyscrapers that dwarfed any neighboring building, but Lyle had never seen one in his twenty-four years. The harbor ebbed and flowed two streets over from Lyle's apartment. He could clearly see it over the one-story town homes across the street. A half green, half rusted statue stood out of the harbor in ruins. Half of a body from legs to torso was clearly visible, though chunks had been blown out. Lyle believed the statue stood for liberty at one point in history, though he couldn't find any book that told him.

Citizens walked below Lyle on the cratered streets. All of them were dressed in tan Raylite uniforms. Lyle's getup had two large black stripes down the right side of his uniform—the symbol for doctor.

Bridget emerged from the bathroom, her wet hair tied in a knot on the top of her head. She was in her uniform which sported a single black stripe down the right side of her uniform—the symbol for nurse.

“Lyle, we should talk.” Bridget said as she made her way into the kitchen for a warm mug of coffee.

“That sounds serious.”

Bridget walked over and sat down on the carpet facing the window. “I think that today we should—”

“There he is! Big day, Pauly boy.” Lyle interrupted Bridget just as Paul entered the room. He was in uniform that lacked markings. He carried a tattered book in one hand.

“—not make a big deal about today.” Bridget sighed as she pushed herself to her feet. “He’s nervous enough already, Lyle. He doesn’t need you making it worse.”

“He should be nervous! It’s a big deal!”

“But we don’t have—”

“I’m not nervous.” Paul spoke up. “I know what I’m choosing.”

“Are you joining us at the hospital?” Lyle asked, a smile already brewing on his face.

“No, I want to be a journalist like Reid.”

“Good for you, Paul.” Bridget slung an arm around Paul’s shoulder and pulled him to her chest.

“That way I can write about things that matter.” Paul continued.

“Like what?” Lyle asked.

Paul opened a bookmarked page and read: “Forward, the light brigade!
Was there a man dismay’d? Not tho’ the soldier knew someone had blunder’d:
Their’s not to make reply, Their’s not to reason why, Their’s but to do or die: Into
the valley of death rode the six hundred.”

Paul closed the book. “That was beautiful.” Bridget whispered.

“This is what matters.” Paul smiled over to his older sister.

“Nobody would understand that,” Lyle snorted.

“Yeah, but they need to.”

“Lyle—”

“No, Bridge. You know what it’s like out there, Reid’s told us time and again. Reporters write about the war. You don’t discuss poetry written in the nineteenth century. You don’t get to write about things that matter. It wouldn’t do anybody any good. Times are different.”

Before Bridget or Paul could give their rebuttal, a siren began to blare in long, high-pitched screeches.

“Does everyone have their masks?” Lyle asked as he swiped his dingy white lab coat off the back of a kitchen chair.

“Yes.” Bridget and Paul replied in unison. All three slid their masks on before they exited their apartment into the hall. The masks fit snug around their

mouths and nose. A stretchy band kept it in place by locking behind their ears. The sirens were the newest safety measure the township had installed. If a fleet of fighter jets was spotted in the surrounding area and officials suggested that all residents flee to a more protective building for cover, it would blow. Depending on where resident's housing was located, they were redirected to various structurally sound buildings built to withstand bombings. In the case of the siren, the Walker siblings simply head to the hospital.

The hallway was bare. A dim lightbulb was fixed to the wall every ten feet of so on one side of the hall. The paint was chipped. There were a few sections where the wall almost seems as if it is going to cave in. Dust floated around the silhouettes of the bodies shuffling down the hall, as if it were the first traffic in years. Only a handful of other people were in the hallway, yet everyone was rushing in the same direction. The stairwell creaked. The handrail had long since cracked. The first-floor hallway was almost an exact replica of the one above it, only the downstairs hall had seen more destruction. Walls were busted in, doors sat uneven on their hinges—some hinge-less doors merely leaned against the frame.

An explosion sounded from outside the building causing their small apartment building to shake under the pressure. The three siblings followed a

line of people down the hallway and out of the building. As soon as they exit the building dust from the trail of bombs swirled around the air.

“Do you see Mrs. Sherman?” Paul asked, looking around at the mass of swarmed people.

“I don’t,” Bridget scanned crowd.

“Negative,” Lyle shook his head.

Without another word, Paul turned back inside the building.

“Paul!” Bridget yelled.

Paul sprinted down the first-floor hallway until he reached the last door on the right. The hinges had failed the door months before and Paul had never found the right time to come in fix it, because of this the door sat away from the doorframe against the wall. The apartment he entered was roughly the same size as Paul’s upstairs, though this one had less junk lying around. The only objects Paul could see in the living room was a recliner in front of the far window and a small kitchen table covered in old newspapers.

Mrs. Sherman was the only woman in the township who was alive before the war started, though she couldn’t recollect much from *before*. Her husband died a few decades ago, leaving Mrs. Sherman alone with no children to look after her. In her prime, Mrs. Sherman was a classy woman with midnight black

hair that fell down to her hips. She was a nurse at the same hospital that now employed Bridget and Lyle.

Mr. Sherman had been a soldier. He and Mrs. Sherman had met one day when Mr. Sherman was hit by friendly fire during a training exercise. Luckily, it was a clean hit that missed bone, and even though he was only in the hospital for a few hours, Mr. Sherman left with the heart of his nurse—a nurse who later became his wife.

The first thing Paul noticed when he entered her apartment was how still everything seemed to be despite the chaos right outside. Mrs. Sherman sat in her recliner by the window, her head leaned all the way back against the headrest. She was perfectly still.

Paul slowly made his way across the room and towards the recliner. “Mrs. Sherman?” He whispered.

No reply.

Lyle showed up in the doorway, out of breath. “Paul!” He called, teeth clenched.

“Mrs. Sherman?” Paul asked louder and placed his hand on her shoulder.

The old woman’s eyes opened wide and she flinched.

“Paul. My goodness, you scared me!” Mrs. Sherman smiled, her hand against her chest as if she could physically calm her racing heart. “What are you doing here?”

“The sirens are going off. Time to get you out of here.”

“What would I do without you?” Mrs. Sherman smiled.

“I’m sure you would be just fine.” Paul chuckled. “I’m going to pick you up now, okay?”

Mrs. Sherman nodded just as Paul slid one arm under her legs, while his other arm locked around her back. He stood, cradling the old woman to his chest. Lyle stepped out of the doorway to make room for Paul before he grabbed Mrs. Sherman’s cane off the back of the single kitchen chair.

Bridget waited for her brothers to exit Mrs. Sherman’s apartment. Once Paul walked into the hallway, she breathed a sigh of relief. She pulled her mask off of her face and placed it gingerly on Mrs. Sherman’s face.

“For the dust,” she reminded the old woman.

“Thank you, sweetie.” Mrs. Sherman touched her hand and gave it a light squeeze. They quietly made their way down the now empty hallway. The chaos from earlier had dissipated as most of the tenants were off to their designated hideouts. Paul set Mrs. Sherman down, who then grabbed her cane from Lyle.

Trey Marshall stood in front of his sleek black Bender that hovered a foot off the ground, a car he used to drive around his one reputable client, Mrs. Sherman.

Trey stepped forward when he saw Mrs. Sherman emerge from the house in the arms of Paul who seemed to be Mrs. Sherman's closest friend.

"Good morning, Mrs. Sherman." Trey smiled as he walked over to the old woman.

"Trey, good morning." Mrs. Sherman smiled, sliding her hand through the crook of Trey's arm, his dark skin a contrast to hers.

"Trey?" Paul called. "A word."

Trey nodded, stepping away from Mrs. Sherman.

"Next time she doesn't come out with the sirens, go in and get her."

"Paul—" Lyle interrupted.

"I've been driving Mrs. Sherman for ten years now. She doesn't like it when I come in to get her." Treys ignored Lyle.

"Make an exception. I'm sure she won't mind if it saves her life."

Trey nodded before backing away. Mrs. Sherman tucked her arm again between Trey's arm and his chest and followed him to the awaiting car.

Reid Sumter tapped his pen methodically on the edge of his notepad. The bus was late. Reid swiped his hand through his mid-length auburn hair, pushing back the sweat that lined his brow. The bus stop was positioned caddy-corner to Reid's home, yet was nothing more than a hard plank of wood stacked on top of two tree stubs.

He had been a reporter for the Raylites since the day he turned sixteen, as told from the single black line down the side of his tan uniform. Now, at twenty-three, Reid was convinced he was now sitting on the greatest story of his career—maybe even of his generation.

Despite being born into a family of six, Reid was the only one left. Ten years ago, Randa Sumpter and her three daughters were killed in a bus explosion, caused by a faulty engine. Oscar Sumpter followed his wife in death eight years later during a military training accident on the Nork coastline.

A cloud of dust roared up from under the approaching bus. Reid covered the small mask with his hand, securing it tighter to his face. He closed his eyes before the dust flurries could invade. The public transit system was one of the only pieces of technology that had withstood the brutality of the war. Not by luck, but out of necessity. The bus floated a foot off the ground, soaking up the sun's rays for power through the paneled roofs. When the bombing began all those years ago, the roads were the first to go. Small pot holes grew into looming

craters, large chunks of asphalt sat unhinged and shifted against each other creating small mountains in the middle of city streets. The public transit was now the only active form of transportation, unless one took the chance of walking.

“How’s the day?” Jerry Fields greeted Reid from his post behind the bus’s operating system.

“Not too bad,” Reid responded, bounding up the steps, a smile found his lips as his eyes landed on familiar faces in the first row. “Hey, Walkers.”

Reid plopped down on the seat next to Lyle, his oldest friend. The caravan creaked to life as Jerry pushed it back into drive, commanding it to push on down the road.

“I’ve decided to be a reporter with you.” Paul beamed—he’d always looked up to Reid as much, if not more, as his older two siblings.

“That’s great, Pauly boy.” Reid reached across the aisle and ruffles Paul’s dirty blonde curls. “Hey, Happy sixteenth birthday, kiddo.”

Paul smiled. “Thanks.”

Bridget and Lyle glanced at each other, between preparing Paul for his big decision and their already heavy work load, it had slipped their mind that the Path Ceremony took place on every Raylite’s sixteenth birthday.

Later, Bridget mouthed. She knew her and Lyle would have to throw something together quickly.

Lyle nodded, before turning his attention to Jerry, “Did ya here that Jerry? Reid won the bet.” He chuckled.

For the last two years, Lyle, Jerry, and Reid have had a running bet as to who could convince Paul to join their branch of service.

Jerry shook his head, “Odds were against me anyway. Who wants to be like an old, disabled soldier?”

“You’re the best damn driver this city has.” Bridget reached forward and squeezed Jerry’s shoulder. He blushed.

“Mr. Marlowe,” Jerry glanced in his rearview mirror at Reid. “How’s your new article coming along?”

“Great, actually,” Reid began, his voice low. “Your insight into the spies really helped.”

“Spies?” Paul asked, failing to lower his voice, the truest sign of a novice.

“There are—” Jerry started to answer but is quickly interrupted by Lyle.

“Jerry. Paul doesn’t need to know about that.”

“Starting tomorrow I will. You’re the one saying I’m a man now,” Paul argued.

“Reid, go on.” Bridget nodded.

“There are spies from the Sovrents. They look like us, so it’s hard to tell. It’s making it hard to know who the real enemy is.”

“So we could possibly be killing our own men?” The vein in Paul’s forehead began to bulge as his heartrate quickened.

Reid was silent.

“Lower your voice, Paul,” Jerry warned.

Paul swallowed, cleared his throat, and whispered, “How do they get the uniforms?”

“Some of the trucks carrying shipments have been getting attacked,” Reid answered.

“Right now, all of this is conjecture. Nobody has any proof that the Sovrents are responsible for any of this.”

“There have been attacks on our own bases, seemingly started by our own men. Are you saying that’s just Raylites shooting Raylites?” Jerry glanced at Lyle in the rearview mirror, his eyes burned.

Reid said, “Look, we have spies on their side. It shouldn’t be a big surprise the Sovrents are doing the same thing,”

Jerry brought the bus to a slow stop in front of a five-story brown building—the tallest building in the township. The newspaper and the broadcast team operate within the same building. The first two floors belong to the newspaper, while the top three belong to the broadcast crew.

“You coming with me today, Paul?” Reid stood, pulling his satchel over his shoulder.

“Yes.”

“Don’t be late tonight, Reid.” Bridget reminded. “Paul’s induction is at seven,”

Reid smirked, “When am I ever late?”

Bridget rolled her eyes.

“See ya this afternoon, Jerry.” Reid tapped Jerry on the shoulder as he passed.

Reid lead Paul off the bus. Two soldiers guard the large black metal doors that barricade the inside of the building to the battleground looming outside.

“Gents.” Reid nodded to the soldiers as he pressed a tiny button located on the bottom of the door handle. A small drawer popped out of the door next to the handle, a box sat inside. Reid tore open the box and pulled out a clear tube with a prick on the end. He winced as he pushed the prick in the gap between his index and middle finger and waited the twenty seconds it took for the blood to fill the cartridge. Once the tube was full, he took a step over and placed the meat of his thumb on a small holographic screen in the center of the door. Reid pushed the tube onto the screen and turned counterclockwise, locking it into place.

The screen purred to life, beeping and dinging, until a picture of Reid popped up on the screen, yet the entrance doors still did not unlock. A five-inch needle and scanner popped out of the hologram screen. Reid stepped up to the hologram, the scanner whirred to life as the needle goes into the cornea of his eye, and just as quickly as the needle and scanner appeared, they disappeared.

A green check mark appeared on Reid's picture.

"And the kid?" A soldier asked.

"He's with me." Reid put a hand on Paul's shoulder. Paul stuck out his right arm before being asked, knowing how the system works. A soldier locked a tracking bracelet around his wrist. He'd seen the tests and the trackers every day since his dad died, as he had to follow his siblings to work every day.

Then with a click, the doors slid open. Reid pushed the door open into a small bare foyer. The stairs were immediately to the right while the venerable and retired elevator squatted to the left. Reid walked up to the door that sat straight ahead of the front door. He touched the handle awakening the hologram keypad. He selected 1-1-5-9-0, unlocking the single metal door. Reid stepped into the fast paced, hustle-and-bustle of journalism. His passion, his high.

"Wow," Paul breathed, a smile spread across his face. "It surprises me every time."

Reid tapped his chest. "It's your room now. Welcome to the big leagues."

The large room was lined with desks. Constant shouts of joy erupted from eureka moments. The hum of discussions breath life into the office. Men paced, lounged on desks, or rolled from desk to desk in wheeled charis: A harmonized chaos. The vibration from the printer on the second floor served as a soft, instrumental soundtrack reminding each reporter of their main goal: writing a piece worth printing. There was only one office on the whole floor and it belonged to the Chief.

Reid took a deep breath before entering—and becoming part—of the fast-paced equilibrium. He weaved his way between bodies and desks. Chatter attacked him from all angles and he fought hard to not become distracted from his mission, which was get his story ready for the press tomorrow. He had already briefed the Chief of his story, who thought it was front-page worthy. Reid's first front-page story in the entire seven years he had been a journalist.

Reid's desk was in the far back corner of the office, next to a window that sported a cardboard band aid—and would for the foreseeable future. He slid a stool out from under his desk, one he used to prop his feet up on tireless work days, and nodded for Paul to take a seat.

Before Reid could put his satchel down and settle into his desk chair, Roy Toosler's red face poked out of his office and called his name, commanding him for a few moments of his time.

“I’ll be right back.” Reid told Paul, before walking across the room to Roy’s office.

Reid rapped twice on the wooden door before pushing it open. “Chief?”

“Marlowe, I’m pulling the plug on your story.” The Chief was an aggressively large, mouth-breathing man who commanded every room he entered. He had spent much of his time at the newspaper as the editor in charge, after a few humble years on the broadcasting team. Given his figure, the broadcasters deemed him better suited for the journalism department where the public would not have to be made aware of his physique, thinking it may draw attention away from the actual news at hand.

The blood flowing through Reid’s veins burned. “You said it was front-page material.”

“General’s call, not mine,” Roy explained, inhaling a large gust of air.

“Did he say why?” Reid clenched his jaw, hands packing into fists as his sides.

“Not that he has to explain himself to you, but he doesn’t want to cause an uproar within his men.”

“We have freedom of press.”

Roy released a guttural laugh that shook his desk. He stood. “Look around, Marlowe. What do you see?” Roy pointed through the glass window, that allowed for a perfect glimpse of the front room.

“Reporters.”

“And what are they writing about?”

“The war.”

“The war from the eyes of other Raylites, because that’s all we want people to know about. It’s us against them,” Roy said. “Your story about the spies makes us look bad.”

“People deserve to know the truth.”

“Our world is a battleground. That’s the only truth they need to know. Get used to it.”

4

The stench of death was the doorman of the hospital. Lyle and Bridget flinched at the smell as they walked through the front doors, the hard sting of bleach penetrated their noses first. The interior of the hospital was white. The walls, furniture, and beds all shared the crispness of new life—despite the pervasive death. The hospital was dim compared to the brightness of the sun

outside. Inside, there were small light fixtures that lined the hall and sporadic ones that hung from the ceiling.

“Out of the way!” A voice called. “Critical!”

Lyle and Bridget stepped back against the wall as two nurses and a doctor frantically wheeled a stretcher down the hall. A soldier lay on the gurney, with a third nurse performing chest compressions. Bridget’s breath caught, she willed the man to pull through this trauma despite the blood fleeing his body. Blood fell from the sides of the gurney like raindrops into a gutter. It was not until the stretcher passed that Bridget realized half the soldier’s neck had been ripped out. She closed her eyes until she heard the stunned hum of people getting back to work that always followed an emergency.

“Another day begins,” she mumbled.

Lyle placed his hand on Bridget’s shoulder and squeezed it. “I’ll see you later.”

Bridget took a deep breath as she watched Lyle walk away. Straight ahead of the hospital doors was the nurse’s station, which was a large U-shaped desk that houses spots for each nurse that works on that floor. The same desk can be found on all three floors.

Bridget trudged to the end of the long hall, up a flight of stairs, and onto the second floor that specialized in post-op care and ICU. The nurse’s desk was

currently vacant, which was not surprising with consistently full occupancy and a shortage of women.

After picking up the charts for her first three patients, she set off down the short of the three hallways that branched off behind the nurse's station. She stepped through the first door on the right after two soft knocks on the door.

Martin Trelli was sitting up in bed reading the morning paper. He sported a large bloodied bandage around his head and a small gauze-wrapped stud where an arm should have been.

"Mr. Trelli." Bridget smiled, setting the binders down on the small table that was at the foot of the bed. "How are we feeling today?"

"I'd feel better if I still had my arm. And please, call me Martin."

Bridget pulled a small black tablet out of the holder in the wall and made her way over to the bedside closest to Martin's nub before holding the device up to the remainder of his arm. The tablet came to life, showing a live feed of the inside of Martin's arm. The blood moved like a tide through the veins, but the tendons and muscles stayed at rest, still in shock from the recent departure of the rest of the limb.

"Good news," Bridget clicked the tablet off and placed it on the side table. "No clotting."

"Meaning?" Martin raised his eyebrows.

“Meaning you aren’t dying on my watch.” Lyle answered as he entered the room. He took the top chart off of the small table. “We can fit you with a prosthetic tomorrow morning. Bridget, let’s go ahead and schedule that for Mr. Trelli.”

Bridget nodded before exiting the room.

“Your parents had manners, didn’t they?” Martin spoke up.

“Excuse me?” Lyle slid a pack of fresh gauze out of the supply cabinet that was screwed in to the wall to the left of Martin’s bed, before turning back around to face his patient. He gingerly began to unwrap the dirty gauze from around Martin’s head.

“Both you and Bridget refuse to call me by my first name. It’s courteous, so I can only assume it was something your parents taught you.”

One side of Lyle’s lip pulled up into a lopsided grin. “Our dad was a stickler for manners. Yes, sir and no, sir, please and thank you—all of it.” Once the used gauze was off and in the trash, Lyle wiped the gash in Martin’s forehead with a disinfectant cloth, before he replaced the gauze bandage.

“So far as I can see you’re an adult now, too. You saved my life yesterday, Dr. Walker.”

“Mr. Trelli, you can call me Lyle.”

“Martin.”

Lyle chuckled, "Alright, Martin. I'll come back and check on you in a bit."

5

Lyle stood next to a still-warm, lifeless corpse. The other operators had already vacated the operating room, a sterile room void of sentiment and stinky of bleach. Lyle's fingers were still dripping the fresh blood from the boy on the table. He could hear as the droplets connected and exploded onto the tiled floor. Jerome Hendrix was barely older than Paul. In fact, according to his file he had only aged to adulthood three weeks before. His three dark stripes still bright and defined on his uniform, now laid in scraps on the ground.

Jerome had been rushed in after a training exercise in the abandoned town adjacent to Nork was bombed by Sovrent jets. When Jerome was placed on Lyle's operating table his organs were already oxidized and beginning to shut down. In the end, the trauma had been too much for Jerome's heart, which gave out quickly and with no remorse. Now, Jerome was displayed more naked and raw than he'd ever been, his organs exposed. His intestine sat coiled on his groin as if ready to pounce, despite the dull coffee tan that was taking over due to the lack of active blood flow.

The entryway door clicked open. Bridget entered after overhearing two operating room nurses murmur about being kicked out by Dr. Walker.

“I told everyone to leave.” Lyle clenched his teeth.

“So I’ve heard.” Bridget rested her back against the metal door.

Lyle closed his eyes. “He was just a kid.”

“He was a soldier.”

“Like it makes a difference.” Lyle scoffed. “These sixteen-year olds make the decision to be a soldier not knowing what that means. Just because they choose to be a soldier doesn’t mean they are one.”

“Were you automatically a doctor whenever you turned sixteen and were handed a white coat?”

“That’s not the point.” Lyle slammed his hands down on the operating table. The force caused the table to shake and groan under the instant added pressure. Jerome wobbled in place, his body already beginning to harden. His eye sockets were already sinking into his skull, not as pronounced as before.

Bridget walked over to the shelves that lined the right wall. Each cubby was the home to some type of medical equipment: gauze, scalpels, saws, the list went on and on. Bridget grabbed a blue plastic sheet out of one of the top cubbies. The blue sheets were usually used as a barrier between patient and the cold metal operating table. Bridget stepped up to the operating table in the center

of the room and draped it over Jerome's empty body. Then, ever so slowly, she slid her fingers around the cusp of Lyle's red-stained gloves and pulled them off, allowing them to plop to the floor. Lyle's hands were shaking as Bridget pulled the splotchy smock off Lyle's torso, his uniform underneath still spotless.

"There was nothing you could have done. He was brought in breathing, but he was doomed."

"I'm just sick of it."

"Of what?"

"Of dismembered bodies being rushed through those doors every day. It's so preventable. The bombings need to stop, and now Paul is out there—"

"Paul is not going to be running under any bombs."

"Not that we know of, but he's not going to be with us every day to protect him." Lyle took step away from the operating table.

"Reid is not going to let anything happen to him."

"Maybe I should have become a soldier."

Bridget chuckled, "Don't be silly."

"Bridge, I'm serious. If I can't stop soldiers from dying in here, maybe I can help prevent them from dying out there."

"We aren't built for war, Lyle."

“No,” Lyle shook his head, his eyes bright. “We’ve just never had to find out if we are.”

6

Reid paced around the small courtyard, already on his sixth lap. Paul sat on the single picnic table in the enclosed area, reserved for reporters to get a bout of fresh air during the work day without having to leave the building.

“He can’t just pull my story! People need to know.”

“Write it anyway.” Paul twirled a leaf in between his index finger and thumb.

“Roy won’t publish it.”

“Can’t you print it out and distribute it?”

Reid stopped and made a beeline for Paul, grabbing him by the collar.

“Don’t say such things. Especially not here.” He hesitated, knowing that a certain knowledge cannot be shared before Paul officially takes on the reporter title.

“How come?”

“There are certain rules we have to follow. Namely, we only write what Roy gives us clearance to write. The people above him tell him what is acceptable for the public to know. Anything else is treason.”

“Why do you want to report on the spies?”

Reid swiped his tongue over his lips, thinking. Then, he whispered, “I think my dad was killed by a spy. A Sovrent in Raylite clothing.”

“Why do you think that?” Paul’s eyes grew wide.

Reid shook his head, “Not here. Some other time.”

“Do you think my dad could have been, too?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I think you should write it and not care who sees it. If people need to know, you need to tell them.”

Reid strode over to the bench bent until his eyes were level with his surrogate brother.

“What do you want to write about, Paul?”

“Everything that matters.”

Reid smiled, “I think we’re going to make a great team.”

Before Paul could answer, Roy’s bald head poked out from between the door and the frame. “Meeting. Five minutes.”

Paul followed Reid back through the maze of desks in the main room and into a cramped conference room. All the seats were taken and the standing room only wall had just enough space left for Paul and Reid. A bulky gray machine projected a room similar in size to the conference room. Paul had only ever read about such projections but had never actually seen the old technology in use.

“The general wants to give us a quick update.” Roy announced from his chair at the front of the room, a seat which faces the audience rather than the projection screen.

General Omann wobbled into view. He was a large, unattractive walrus-like man, with a chin that jutted before him like the front of a bus. A large horizontal crease sat pronounced in the center of his forehead. He wore the same tan uniform as any other soldier, but with the insignia of a pinnacle with a star right above in the center of his chest.

“Good day, all,” he greeted, his lips spread into a small smile allowing his browning teeth to come into view. Instead of brightening with the light, his teeth hid farther behind the brown crust that seemed to take over his incisors.

Independent greetings made their way through the dense crowd of reporters with nothing important to say.

“I wanted to check in with all of you as it has been some time.” General Omann was a mouth breather, who spoke slowly. His gurgled intake of breath

was deep, laborious work. After a brief pause to rest between pitches, he continued, "I also wanted to make sure we were writing what was best for the township under these hard times."

We were writing. Reid huffed.

In his seven years as a reporter, Reid had never once come face to face with General Omann, and not for lack of trying. General Omann seemed to steer clear of the journalism floor. Sure, when he was in town and away from the military headquarters, the General frequented the broadcast team upstairs. He was always eager to show his pot-bellied face to the public and offer them his optimistic, grotesque smile.

"I've heard rumors circulating about spies within our midst. And I just—" a hearty laugh made his gullet quiver, "—can say with certainty that whomever is starting such rumors will be punished. Focus on the war at hand, not behind-the-scenes conspiracy theories."

"I'm sure all of us can agree to that, General Omann."

General Omann nodded. "I should hope so. Paint the Raylites as the good guys, because we are. Do not ever make the public doubt our cause."

"What cause is that?" The words were out of Paul's mouth before he had time to cauterize them at the source.

“What was that?” General Omann visibly stiffened in his seat, his eyes narrowed.

Paul cleared his throat and glanced over at Reid.

“Speak up.” The general demanded.

Paul began to push himself off the wall, but Reid shoved him back against the wall and took a step forward.

“I just wanted to clarify what our cause was. There are different theories on that as well.” Reid wiped his damp hands on his trousers. He averted his eyes from meeting Roy’s, already knowing what he would see. Roy’s face would be riper than ever, a red so hot one would expect fumes to be radiating off his body. Reid had only ever seen Roy that mad one other time, and it was not directed at him.

“What’s your name?”

“Reid Marlowe.”

“Marlowe.” The general clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

“Our cause is to save Nork. To save as many Raylites as we can. Our cause, Marlowe, is to win.”

“But at what cost?” Reid probed.

General Omann’s cheeks widened into an almost menacing grin,

“Whatever cost it takes.”

The tick of the clock was the only sound.

7

Reid was the first one out of the conference room once the connection with General Omann fizzled out, and Paul was close on his heels. They made their way back to the miniature courtyard.

“What was that? Paul, you know I’ll always be there to protect you. This is the big leagues now. You know what happens to people who get fired from their chosen field! They get smut duty for the military. I am not cleaning underwear, bunk beds, and dishes for the rest of my life!” Reid inhaled a large breath, his lungs relieved to be fed.

Paul was silent. His legs were pulled to his chest as he sat against the far wall, his chin rested lazily on his knees.

“Paul.” Reid groaned as he slid down the wall next to him.

“They knew they were going to die.”

“Who?”

“The light brigade.” Paul wiped a hand until his nose and sniffled.

Reid nodded in understanding. “Forward, the light brigade!” Reid held out one hand in the air, his voice deep as he recited.

“They were outnumbered,” Paul’s voice was barely audible. He was no longer speaking for Reid’s benefit. He was speaking to himself. “But still they fought. Their charge meant something.”

Reid shook his head. “Paul, you can’t think like that?”

“Can’t I?” Paul turned his head to Reid. He’d hit a nerve.

“My charge is writing about things that matter. Your charge is the spy story.”

Reid nodded. “Yeah, maybe. But, Paul, they died. All those men. We need to keep our head down because if we can no longer write, then we can no longer bring truth.”

“They don’t want truth.”

“Look at me,” Reid placed his hands on Paul’s cheeks and turned his face until their eyes met. “We will have a charge. When the time is right, we will go forward. I need you safe. I promised Lyle.”

Paul nodded. “We will write it though.”

Reid ruffled Paul’s hair. “Let’s get back in there.”

A horde of passengers rode the bus in the afternoon, Bridget chalked this up to the fact that most people had the same quitting time, whereas there was more flexibility in their starting time.

Reid and Paul sat at the front of the bus directly behind Lyle and Bridget. Lyle hadn't said a word the entire trip, but Bridget had a feeling after the next stop, he would. The Old Chinatown stop was the most heavily trafficked area of the township, as it was also where a good portion of the populous resided.

The migration to Old Chinatown two decades ago began when the bombings were first becoming more frequent. The military officials announced that the closer residents lived to each other the better they could protect them. This was one of the reasons that their section of Nork was so desolate. Eighty percent of the populous evacuated their area whenever the announcement was made, most of them abandoned their belongings and started anew.

"Old Chinatown!" Jerry announced as he pulled the bus to a stop. Everyone on the bus stood and exited, except for the four and a handful of others that were seated in the back of the bus.

The doors closed, Jerry stepped on the gas and directed the bus farther down the road.

Lyle turned around in his seat to make sure the other passengers were far enough away to not hear his inquiry. He turned, satisfied with their distance.

“Jerry, can I ask you something?”

“Have you ever known me to say no?”

“No.”

“Shoot.”

“What do you think about the bombings?”

Jerry’s eyes met Lyle’s in the rearview. He hesitated, Lyle didn’t know if it was because Jerry was unsure of where to begin or if, for the first time, Jerry was going to refuse to answer. Thankfully, the answer was the former.

“I was a soldier for forty years. Forty years and I,” he licked his lips, buying him time while he made up his mind to make his last confession, “I think it is time for the war to be over. I think we’ve lost the reason the fighting started in the first place.”

“Resources. Oil, gas, petroleum. Not everyone has forgotten.”

“That’s not a good enough reason for all this war.” Paul interjected and leaned deeper into the conversation.

“I agree. For awhile I have been suspecting that—”

There was an explosion down the road. A thunderous reverberation rattled the architecture surrounding the street. The road below them dry heaved as a large gust of sand rained down on the bus.

“Masks!” Bridget yelled as she pulled her mask into place.

Another explosion, this one thrust the bus higher into the air which caused it to fluctuate on the fragmented pavement.

Shots rang out.

This was no longer just a bombing.

“Get down!” Jerry yelled. He opened a compartment on his dash, collected his Weaver 2x3 and began to fire.

Weaver 2x3 was a fatal, light-weight assault pistols that left men mangled with a single shot.

Lyle turned in his seat and spotted small flames clinging to the outside of the bus. Each spark ignited by the penetration of a bullet. Some of the small bus windows had been blown out and shattered on the floor.

“We have to get out of here.” Lyle screamed and slid his hand around Bridget’s elbow.

“Lyle!” Jerry called, frantically shooting rounds out of his side window.

Lyle crawled and remained hidden behind the dash.

“There are two handguns in the compartment. Grab them.”

Lyle did as he was told.

Jerry stopped shooting and turned to face Lyle, his face grave. Shallow cuts appeared on one side of his face, formed when his side window was blown out. “When you have a chance, get them out of here.”

“Ok.” Lyle nodded. “We’re about to get out.”

Jerry took a few more calculated shots and heard a scream from the street. Bullets flew and navigated around the bus, as they lodged themselves deeper and deeper into the metal caravan’s anatomy.

“Don’t misunderstand me. I mean out of the city.”

“Where would we go?”

“The DOCs. Promise me.”

“Jerry, I don’t know where that is.” Lyle shook his head, trying to make sense of the situation. Another bomb went off on the passenger side of the bus, a large section of the wall was eradicated. Lyle and Jerry were blown out of the windshield, while Reid, Bridget and Paul found themselves being sucked out of the large crater in the wall of the bus. The three crawled into a nearby alleyway.

Lyle’s ears were ringing. The sunlight above him was blinding. He tried to push himself off the ground but failed and collided back onto the awaiting asphalt. He could hear his name being called, he turned. Jerry was a few feet away from him, streaks of blood traversed down his face. Lyle pushed himself up on his elbows and forced himself to crawl to Jerry.

“You need to go now, son.” Jerry’s eyes glanced behind Lyle and grew wide. Using his last ounce of strength, Jerry threw his body over Lyle in time for three Weaver bullets to enter his back, he slid off Lyle and onto the ground.

Blood already gurgled in his lungs as the bullet twisted deeper. "Go." He whispered and released his final breath.

Lyle screamed. He grabbed the Weaver out of Jerry's lifeless hands.

The guns, he thought, where are the other guns?

His head throbbed, a constant metronome. His breaths came in short spurts. Gunfire sprayed around him. The guns were on the ground by his feet. He dove and picked them both up with his one free hand.

"Lyle!" Reid appeared by his side and wrapped an arm around Lyle's waist. "I got you!" He shouted above the commotion. Lyle handed him the two handguns, which Reid stowed in his waistband.

In one swift motion, Reid pulled Lyle up until they were standing, most of Lyle's weight pressed against Reid's side.

"I got you." Reid repeated over and over as he lead Lyle into the alleyway where Bridget and Paul were huddled against a red wall. A metal door sat on the ground, Bridget pushed the black button cemented in to the red brick building. The door slid open and the four disappeared into black.

Muller Winston's bicep bled profusely.

“He shot me!” He screamed again, letting his head fall back on the rusty abandoned car behind him.

“That damn bus driver.” Cullen Porter bent down to inspect Muller’s arm. “You’re lucky his bullet only skimmed you.” Cullen was the only member of this small team to receive some medical training before being placed in the field.

Bram Cooper kicked Jerry Fields’ body over onto its back. The man’s dark dead eyes stared back as if he was still among the living. He bent down and placed a warm hand onto the stilled cold jugular of Jerry’s neck. Once Bram was satisfied and reassured that Jerry was in fact dead, he pulled out the satellite radio from the pack he wore draped over his shoulders. He pushed the correct pattern of buttons and held the radio to his ear.

“Omann.” A deep resonate voice spoke.

“Captain Cooper here.”

“Well?”

“Fields is dead.”

“Good. Any witnesses left alive?”

“Four. Three male, one female. Two medical, one reporter, and a minor.”

“Damn it, Cooper. I said make it clean.”

Silence.

“Fix this. Find them.” The line disconnected.

Bram closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose before returning to his team members.

“Let’s just get out of here.” Nico Brown suggested. “I just checked the bus, it’s clear. That explosion after the driver died eradicated the two passengers in the back.”

“They shot me!” Muller screeched again.

“The driver did and he’s dead.” Nico nudged his head towards where Jerry laid.

“Those kids were with him.” Cullen tied the last knot on the tourniquet around Muller’s bicep.

“If we let them get away, other citizens will think they can get away with shooting me.” Muller pounded his fist into the dirt. “They can’t!”

“You shot first!” Nico came to a halt in front of Muller and hit the metal door of the car right next to his head. “Those weren’t your orders!”

“We were told to take out Jerry Fields when we had the chance. He was a traitor.” Muller stood and pushed Nico’s shoulder with his one good arm.

“And what about the witnesses?”

Bram fired his Weaver into the air. The shot erupted and scared a stampede of mice away from the scene. “Enough. The witnesses are now involved in the shooting of one of our own. They deserve what’s coming.”

Nico and Cullen exchanged a glance, Muller laid his head back against the car.

“Split up. Search the surrounding streets. I’m going to block off this section of the road. Nobody comes in or out.”

10

The trash compartment was cramped. A small light was built into the side of one of the walls. Luckily, only three bags of trash had been disposed of in the bin since the last time it was cleaned out. Lyle stared at the metal wall in front of him, he tucked his knees into his chest.

“Lyle, we need to decide what to do.” Bridget whispered. She hoped the soldiers were not in the alleyway looking for them.

“We need to change clothes.” Reid suggested. “They’ll be looking for our titles.”

“We didn’t do anything wrong.” Paul pushed the single trash bag away from his body, but the metal wall didn’t allow any give, which caused the bag to tumble back into Paul’s lap.

“Lyle!” Bridget raised her voice.

Reid reached over covered Bridget’s mouth.

“We need to get out of town.” Lyle whispered, his fogged eyes never leaving the wall in front of him.

“Get out of town?” Paul questioned his older brother for the first time in his life.

Bridget chuckled, “To go where?”

“Nork is the only safe township left. The only township *habitable*.” Reid turned to face Lyle, wondering how long his best friend has been on the brink of insanity.

Lyle rearranged his position until he was sitting upright on his knees. “Jerry made me promise we would go to the DOCs. It was his dying wish.”

“The DOCs?” Bridget had never heard of this mysterious township.

“I’ve heard of that place. It’s a fable.”

“Jerry said—”

“No disrespect to Jerry,” Reid held out his hand to silence Lyle, “but a group of ex-soldiers from both sides of the war living peacefully on an island is a fairytale.”

“I believe Jerry, and it was his dying wish that we leave, so I’m going.”

Paul glanced over at Bridget, before he shifted his focus to Reid.

“We’re in this together.” Bridget placed her hand on Lyle’s shoulder. “Us against the world.” She glanced at both of her brothers, before her eyes met Reid’s. “That’s how it’s always been. Right, Reid?”

Reid nodded, “Us against the world.”

“What’s the plan?” Bridget asked.

“We need to change.” Reid repeated his notion from before. “They’ll be looking for two medicals, a reporter, and a minor. So, we can’t be that.”

“We can be soldiers.” Lyle announced. “Most likely the men up on the streets have split up.”

Bridget closed her eyes, the reality of the situation coming to light, knowing once they crossed this line there would be no returning to life as it was before. Once they headed for the DOCs and did not show up for work tomorrow, they would be labeled traitors.

Reid and Lyle quickly devised a plan to distract and knock out each soldier in order to steal their uniform.

“If we are going to do this we need to do it now before the soldiers move too far.” Reid pushed himself onto his knees.

“I can’t wear a soldier’s uniform. They would know it’s fake. I’m a woman. Women are not soldiers.”

“You can wear mine. You could pass as a minor.” Paul shrugged.

“Some women are needed in the field. Irene, my first surgical nurse, was called to the field.” Lyle tucked Jerry’s Weaver into his pocket.

Bridget nodded. “Are you sure we can do this?”

Lyle looked at his younger sister and placed one hand on either shoulder. “We can do anything,” he smiled, “Dad raised us to change the world. I’m going to protect you.”

Reid tucked one of Jerry’s handguns into his pocket. “Lyle, let’s go.”

“I’m coming, too.” Paul rose.

“No.” Reid pushed him back into a sitting position. “You stay with your sister.” He handed the last handgun to Paul. “Looks like you’ve chosen soldier, Pauly.”

Paul’s eyes grew wide. “I guess so.”

“Ready?” Reid glanced over at Lyle, who already had his finger balanced on the lever to open the ceiling of the garbage chute and pressed the button down. The chute began to open, which allowed the sun rays to shimmer down into the darkness, this momentarily blinded the four newly minted vagabonds, headed into the great unknown.

Once the garbage compartment slid shut and locked into place, Lyle learned his first lesson. It was far easier to be brave when there were people who looked up to you. Now, in the setting sun and no sound but his racing heart, Lyle felt afraid. Goosebumps popped onto his skin as the evening breeze stumbled into the alleyway. He looked over at Reid, "We can do this, right?"

"We don't have a choice." Reid inhaled, steadying his fleeing heart, before he released a slow exhale.

Lyle nodded, "We better get going then."

The two men walked to the open lips of the alleyway and halted. Silence reverberated through the stilled streets. The only movement was a flame coming from their bus, flapping in the breeze. Lyle jutted his chin to the right. Both men turned in that direction, hands gripped on the butt of their handguns.

Half a block down the street they stopped and knelt behind an abandoned van. The front half of the van had been blown off at some point during the last couple years. The back half the van was still intact despite two missing back tires. Bullet holes pocked the side of the van.

Faint footsteps echoed down the street. Lyle couldn't determine how many pairs of feet hit the pavement, but he didn't think it was more than two. They waited and listened, the wind whispered around them. Then they heard the men.

Lyle slowly got down on his knees and peaked underneath the van, looking for the feet the echoes belonged to. He saw them fifty yards away. They walked in the middle of the street in their direction. Lyle quickly stood and walked over to Reid, his placed his hand on the back of Reid's neck and pulled his head an inch down until Reid's ear was level with his mouth.

"They're coming this way. We wait until they pass and attack from behind."

Reid nodded. "Be careful."

Lyle squeezed the back of Reid's neck before he released it, his heart rate escalating. The men grew closer, though Lyle could no longer make out what they are saying; he knew it didn't matter. Lyle and Reid positioned themselves behind the back-passenger tire of the van, their figures blocked from the street.

"My fucking arm is burning," Muller whined for the hundredth time since Jerry Fields shot him.

“If you don’t stop talking about your arm I’m going to shoot you in the head.” Cullen raised his voice for the first time all day, his patience worn thin.

“They couldn’t have made it far,” Muller said.

“No, we’ll find them. We always do.” Cullen’s left-hand played with the holster he had strapped across his chest. Cullen only needed a couple seconds to draw and shoot before his target would be thrown to the ground. He not only had the fastest shot on his team, but he was damn well sure he could out race any draw in the Raylite military. Not that he was surprised. His dad was a Commander and worked closely with General Omann. Cullen was bred for the military, and his goal was to one day work alongside his father, not just *for* his father.

Cullen and Muller remained unaware that they were seconds away from an ambush.

13

Lyle and Reid squatted silently in the wings awaiting their cue. They listened patiently as the footsteps that were once echoes marched closer and closer. The soldiers were on the other side of the van now. Lyle could see them, he elbowed Reid, ordering him to get ready, as if the two of them weren’t already bouncing on the tip of his toes.

Once Cullen and Muller were a few feet ahead of the van, their backs completely turned and peripherals too far away to detect their movement, Lyle and Reid evacuated the protection of the van and ventured into the exposed middle of the street.

Both Lyle and Reid tiptoed, their grip on the handles of their handguns tightened until their muscles threatened to cramp. Lyle knew that one quick jab to the pressure point just below the jaw resulted in the victim losing consciousness. He hoped he could hit it on his first attempt.

Lyle took one large step forward before he hooked his arm and jabbed his closed fist into Muller's unprotected jaw. A large popping erupted before Muller even had time to scream, but Lyle missed the spot he was aiming for. Muller whipped around, already reaching for his Weaver, when Lyle lunged toward him, grabbed his injured arm and pulled it all the way around his back. Muller squealed and fell to his knees, his eyes began to roll back into his sockets as his vision blurred white from the pain. Lyle wrapped his free arm around Muller's neck and crushed his wind pipe. Muller tried to wiggle free, but any movement only caused Lyle to pull back on the arm that had already been shot.

After the longest minute and a half of Lyle's life, Muller was lying face down in the dirt.

During Lyle's scuffle with Muller, Reid chose to opt for the quick knockout. As soon as Lyle's fist connected with Muller's jaw, Reid had raised his handgun and knocked Cullen to the ground with the butt of his gun. A small gash in the back of Cullen's head leaked blood onto the pavement.

"I thought we weren't going to kill them." Lyle brought his hand away from Muller's neck, after confirming a pulse was still there.

"Is he dead?" Reid pointed to the second body on the ground.

Lyle walked over to Cullen's unconscious body and placed two fingers on his neck, just below the jaw bone. Cullen's heartbeat was still going.

"No," Lyle smiled. "Now let's get these bodies to the alleyway."

Reid grabbed Muller's wrists and began to drag him to the alleyway that sat just behind the van—their saving grace.

Lyle tugged Cullen along through the dirt caked street toward the alleyway. He watched as Lyle began to unbutton the top of Muller's uniform, before he bent down and mirrored his actions on Cullen.

Within five minutes, both Reid and Lyle were sporting a uniform that they had never worn before. They both glanced down at the three stripes that make up their new uniform and felt, to their core, a new destiny called to them. A destiny far greater than the one they lived before.

"We better get back." Lyle whispered.

Reid bent down and pulled Cullen's Weaver out of his holster. "Might not be a bad idea to take a couple more weapons."

Lyle took it a step farther and unhooked Muller's holster, brought it to his waist and clicked it into place.

"Always one step ahead of me, huh?" Reid chuckled, before he took Cullen's holster from around his waist and deposited it around his own. "Perfect fit."

14

Bridget and Paul sat on opposite ends of the muggy trash compartment. The only light was the small emergency bulb in the corner, which barely illuminated the siblings' faces. The rank smell of old trash was steadily seeping out of the soggy black bag they'd shoved into the corner.

"When do you think they will be back?" Paul's voice was soft, filled with worry.

"I don't know." Bridget pulled her knees tighter to her chest. "They've been gone too long."

"I should have gone with them."

"No." Bridget shook her head.

Paul tapped his head against the compartment wall behind him. "Stop treating me like a child. I'm sixteen. If we weren't in this situation right now, I would be considered a man. I would have chosen journalism, gone through the ceremony and everything would be fine! So, yes, I should have gone with them. I'm a man and whether I would have chosen to be a soldier or not, I am one now." Paul closed his eyes, signaling he was done.

Bridget's eyes grew wide. A wave of realization rushed over her. She couldn't believe she had missed this simple fact, "They know who we are," she whispered.

"What?" Paul breathed.

"You missed the ceremony, Paul. Nobody misses the ceremony."

Paul raised his head off of the compartment wall as his eyes flew open, "So what do we do?"

Bridget shook her head. "I'm not sure. We can't go back home."

Footsteps sounded above them in the alleyway, the voices muffled though they could tell it was not Reid or Lyle. Paul stopped tapping his head on the side of the trash compartment, his eyes held Bridget's who reached her hand forward and gripped his forearm. The footsteps trekked along the top of the chute, seemingly oblivious to what was underneath.

The two waited a few extra minutes after the last echo of footstep had come and gone before they spoke.

“Those didn’t sound like soldiers,” Paul finally whispered.

“I don’t think so—” Before she could finish, the footsteps were back. This time they were coming faster. Bridget squeezed her hand tighter around Paul’s arm, who was visibly trying to not wince.

The footsteps grew closer.

The top of the trash compartment began to slide open. Paul clenched his fists ready to fight if it came to it. The dark of the alleyway gave no hint as to who the two silhouettes were now standing outside the chute, at least not until Lyle jumped down in front of his siblings, sporting new fatigues.

“The stripes look good on you.” Paul tapped Lyle on the chest.

“We need to find a place to stay the night.” Lyle spoke, while Reid sat on the edge of the compartment, his feet dangled over the edge.

“I agree.” Bridget stood, placed her palms above her on the outside of the compartment and pushed her self up and out. Lyle and Paul followed.

The four began to march down the alleyway in the opposite direction of the street. The dark of the alleyway loomed, the only source of light was found in the half moon lit overhead.

“Here.” Lyle shoved one of the extra guns they had snatched earlier into Paul’s stomach. “Don’t use it unless you have no other choice.”

Reid handed one of his guns to Bridget. “We should all be prepared.”

Bridget loosely gripped the handle of the gun as she tucked it into her waistband. She threw a quick prayer up to the black void and hoped she’d never have to use it.

They came up to a wooden fence that stood head high, dividing this alleyway from the one that stood behind it. Lyle and Reid reached forward and clasped hands, Lyle looked to Bridget, “Up you go.”

Bridget obeyed without a word. She slid her worn shoe into Lyle and Reid’s hands and was hoisted up until she was able to steady her free foot on top of the fence and thrust herself over. The alleyway she was thrust into was as empty as the other. The only difference was a small street light that sat at the mouth of the passage.

Paul was the next one over. Lyle and Reid then each took turns pulling themselves up and over the fence. The walk through this alleyway was just as short as the last one, before they knew it, they were at the mouth of the alleyway. The street loomed to either side of them was almost an exact replica of the street they had just come from. Abandoned cars sat forgotten in the street. The store

fronts that lined the edge were either already closed for the night—as everyone knew it was wise to be home by dark—or were out of business.

At the beginning of the war, most of the storefronts lost their business from too many constant damages—collapsed rooves, shattered windows—from air warfare. As time progressed, businesses began to close from loss of customers. The society of Nork and the surrounding townships all became centered around the war and what the soldiers needed to continue fighting. Shopping for entertainment was a thing of the past. Instead, the government molded society into a war machine, functioning only to secure imminent victory. The leaders of the time would have guessed that they would not live to see the victory they would have sworn was just below the horizon. Half a century later and the imminent victory still has not arrived.

The four wanderers walked into a one of the many abandoned storefronts. The space is cramped and cluttered with memorabilia from the lives once lived in this store. It had been a toy shop. Dismantled toy cars were strewn on the ground. Headless dolls scattered and forgotten. A rusted miniature railroad track was shoved in the corner, broken to bits. The cargo broken apart from the train, the caboose nowhere to be found. A ransacked dollhouse lay stripped and

abandoned in the corner much like the houses around the township. A faint smell of mothballs and dust flew around the air and spread with every step they took.

Lyle made his way behind what used to be a checkout counter and into a small back room that may have been storage once upon a time. He drew in a sharp breath as he covered his mouth with his hand. The stench was brutally intoxicating.

The storage room was no bigger than their kitchen at home. Inside, there was a desk shoved in the corner, a large crack zigzagged down the middle. The wood was chipped all along the edge. Shelves had been built into the walls many years before to hold inventory that was waiting to cycle onto the floor. A few untouched boxes still sat, the dust grown so thick it was impossible to tell what toy lay inside. Two half burned candles sit alone on one shelf. Lyle palms them and looks around for matches.

Two desk chairs were pushed up against the shelves. Lyle stepped behind them and tripped over something. He placed his hands on the wall to steady himself. It was a shoe. Lyle bent down and realized that the shoe was still attached to a leg. The rest of the body was shoved up underneath the furniture, the desk chairs were used to block off the rest of the body. Lyle grew lightheaded and placed began to rub his temples with his free hand. He pushed himself off the wall and returned into the store, shutting the storage door behind him.

“Find anything?” Reid asked.

Lyle shook his head. “Just more dust and a couple candles.”

“Perfect.” Reid held up a couple lone matches he found stranded at the cashier desk.

He quickly lit one of the wicks. An amber glow shimmered through the darkening store as the sun dipped further in the horizon. Soon, it would be completely black.

Bridget made her way into the back half of the store where children had been allowed to create their own stuffed animal. The empty cloth cutouts sat in tubs, allowing the child to select whatever type of animal they wanted to create. The fluff was in a large container in the corner. Bridget vaguely remembered building a leopard when she was a child with her father, though she had no recollection of where that leopard was now.

“I made a tan bear.” Paul walked up behind Bridget and bent down next to the box of cutouts. He pulled one out and blew off the layer of dust, revealing it to be a fluffy brown dog, his once pink tongue half hanging out of his mouth.

“You did?” Bridget asked.

Paul nodded. “I named him Jonathan.” He chuckled. “What kid picks the name Jonathan for a stuffed animal?”

“A sweet one.”

Paul shrugged, "I even begged dad to get me another one. A girl for Jonathan to love."

"I actually remember that bear." Bridget recalled. "You brought him everywhere. Whatever happened to him?"

Paul swallowed. "I buried him under Dad's gravestone since there was nothing left of Dad to bury." He paused, "It made me think dad would never be alone."

"You were so young. How did Lyle and I not know?"

"I snuck out one night. The only night I ever have. I didn't bury him very deep."

"We should try to get some sleep." Reid called from the front of the store. He was holding one of the candles Lyle brought out from the storage closet. "I have a feeling we have a long day ahead of us."

Lyle set the other candle in what looked like a pencil holder. "Reid is right."

Bridget and Paul stood up from their place around the box of stuffing-less animals.

"We could use some of this stuffing for pillows." Paul grabbed the crate from the back corner of the room.

"I love sleeping on moth-ball-ridden fluff." Reid made his way to the back of the store after dispensing his candle in the holder next to Lyle's.

“Feel free to use the train tracks instead.” Bridget winked.

Paul grabbed a large chunk of fluff and put the pile in the opposite corner before sitting down next to it. “Should someone keep watch?” Paul asked, wrapping his arms around his knees and pulling them to his chest.

The four glanced around at each other for a few minutes, all unsure whether or not they should.

“What do people do in this situation?” Bridget asked.

“Reid?” Lyle glanced over at his childhood best friend. “You’ve been in the field.”

Reid swallowed. “It couldn’t hurt. We’ll take turns. I’ll go first.”

Lyle nodded. “Wake me if you get drowsy.”

Reid gave Lyle a pat on the back. “Get some sleep.”

Reid walked over to the cashier desk and rickety stool that creaked every time he shifted his weight. He opened the small drawer in the center of the desk and pulled out a small pad of yellowed paper and a dull pencil and began to do what he did best.

Tuesday, July, Year 84.

Facts:

Jerry was killed today.

DOCs? South of Nork.

Questions:

What is the DOCs? What are we going to find when we get there?

Why was Jerry killed?

Killed by spies?

Was Jerry a spy?

Reid rolled his eyes and crossed out the last line. Jerry was not a spy, Reid was sure about that.

15

Paul's cheek rested on his hand. He sat on the creaky stool, while the other three slept huddled in the darkest corner of the store. The moon's shift was about to expire and send it back toward the other side of the world. Light sun rays were already starting to brighten the world outside. The candles were barely burning. Their wax melted and re-hardened on the desk.

A short beam of light flashed into the storefront windows. Paul's eyes grew wide. It was the first movement he'd seen during his watch. He blew out the candles. The stool groaned in protest as he stood. Lyle stirred but didn't open his eyes.

Paul tiptoed to the front of the store, hiding his body behind a thin rack that was once used to hold action figures. A military truck had just turned the corner

onto the street. It crawled past the abandoned cars and sleeping storefronts. When the truck was a few storefronts away a high-pitched mechanic squeal sounded as the truck came to a stop.

“Paul!” Lyle screamed as he jolted awake.

“Quiet,” Paul whispered sternly.

Bridget and Reid roused

“What is it?” Bridget’s hand gripped the handle of her gun.

“Soldiers.”

“Get away from the window, Paul,” Lyle spat.

“Hold on,” Paul held his breath. Two men climb out of the military truck, weapons in hand. “They’re getting out.” The soldiers began to walk the opposite way down the street.

The soldiers were methodical in their step. They’re looking for something, Paul thinks. They’re looking for us.

“This is our chance,” Reid announced. “If their truck is unattended.” Reid walked to the front of the store.

“*If.*” Bridget repeated. “We can’t be sure.”

Reid turned back and stared at Bridget, “*If* it is, then we outnumber them. It’s the best shot we have.”

Lyle nods, his eyes still following the soldiers' movements outside. "Reid is right."

"Lyle." Bridget narrowed her eyes.

"We need a truck Bridget. We can't stay here, and we can't travel on foot."

Paul looked to Bridget. "Come on Bridge. We can do this."

"How do you know, Pauly?"

"Because in the battle of fight or flight we are all fighters." Paul pulled his gun out of his waistband.

"All that means is that we are dumb enough to fight back."

"It's the spirit of the light brigade." Paul smiled.

Bridget nodded. "Fine. Let's do it."

The two soldiers headed back down the street in the direction of the truck. The four wanderers waited in silence as the soldiers advanced unaware.

"Get ready," Lyle whispered slowly. He tightened his grip on the butt of his gun.

The soldiers lowered their weapons as they prepared to climb back into the truck. One soldier was hidden from the wanderers' view as he climbed into the passenger side.

"Now." Lyle flung open the door and sprinted toward the hood, Reid ran the opposite direction around the back of the truck. The first soldier opened his

door before he saw Lyle. When he did, he raised his gun but was too late. Lyle slammed the soldier into the side of the truck, bone crunched underneath his weight. The other soldier began to fire through the open truck door. Paul stepped in front of Bridget. The second soldier was too preoccupied with firing his weapon to notice Reid sneak up behind him. Reid grabbed the soldier by his neck and flung him backwards out of the truck. The soldier fell to the ground and Reid hit him on the side of the head with the butt of the gun.

The first soldier pushed Lyle off him and pulled a knife out of a sheath and swings it at Lyle. The knife grazed his arm. Lyle yelped and raised his gun. His eyes met the soldier's and he hesitated. The soldier cocked his arm back over his shoulder, prepared to throw the knife in Lyle's direction. Lyle fired, and the soldier dropped to the ground. A crimson spurt gushed from his chest. Lyle collapsed

The second soldier recoiled after Reid struck him the first time. Reid attempted to hit him again, but the soldier batted Reid's gun away with his own. Reid grunted, lowered his gun and fired. His bullet lodged in the other man's throat. Reid held the gaze of the dying soldier.

"I'm sorry," Reid whispered.

With the last of his strength the soldier raised his gun to try for one more shot, Reid kicked the gun out of the soldier's hand. The soldier's throat was

exposed and pulsing. His remaining blood still coursed through his veins, until the supply ran out. The soldier stuttered his final breath, his eyes releasing their hold of Reid, as they sunk back into his lifeless head.

Reid fell back against the truck and sat to his knees. Lyle held on to the truck to steady himself as he walked around the truck to Reid. His eyes grew wide at the site of the dead soldier. Lyle's arm was red from the blood that still flowed from his knife wound.

"We had to," Lyle stammered.

Reid nodded, barely hearing Lyle.

"You did." Paul and Bridget appeared before them.

"You had no choice." Bridget added. "It was you or them."

"You're bleeding." Paul reaches for Lyle's arm, who pulls it away.

Bridget walked over to the cab of the truck and began searching through their supplies.

"I killed him." Reid whispered, a knot formed in his throat.

Lyle swallowed, his eyes red-rimmed.

Bridget opened the dash compartment and found an aid kit. She pulled a roll of gauze out of the box and walked over to Lyle and bandaged his arm. "We should get going." Bridget announced. "They are probably more of them."

Someone had to of heard those shots. We'll clean your cut better later when we have time."

Lyle wiped his face with his hands and nods. "I'll drive."

Reid stood and opened the passenger door.

"Bridge, we should get in the back. It won't look right if we're seen with soldiers." Paul nods his heads toward the covered back of the truck.

Bridget nodded, "Good thinking."

The four wanderers took their places. Bridget and Paul climbed into the back of the truck. A large canvas covering loomed over them. The back of the truck had two boxes and a barrel pushed into the back. Bridget took a seat against the wall of the truck. Paul sat down next to her, closer to the mouth of the truck bed. There was a sliver of open space between where the tailgate and the canvas, so they could see what was behind them.

Lyle and Reid were in the front seat on opposite sides of the front-seat bench. Their guns sat in the middle of them on the bench.

"It'll get easier." Lyle put the truck in drive and pattered off down the deserted street.

"Will it?"

"I'm not sure. That's just what people say." The truck came up to an intersection and after adjusting his internal compass, Lyle turned right.

“Going south right?”

“Yea, we’ll hit the coast and I’ll follow that down.” Lyle agreed.

“I don’t know what to expect to find there.”

Lyle shrugged, “It better be worth all of this.”

“Jerry used his dying breath to get us out of town. There has to be something.”

Lyle nodded.

16

Bridget and Paul bounced along in the back of the truck.

“What are the DOCs?” Paul glanced over at his big sister.

Bridget shook her head. “I’m not sure.” She leaned her head against the canvased tarp. “I keep trying to remember if Dad ever mentioned anything, but I don’t think he did.”

“I wish he were here.” Paul sighed. “He would know what to do.”

“He loved that poem, too.” Bridget squeezed Paul’s arm. “Charge of the Light Brigade.”

“He did?”

“He used to read it to all of us. You were just a baby.”

Paul smiled. He was leaning against a large barrel, he closed his eyes.

Bridget glanced over at Paul. The resemblance between him and their father was uncanny and was just becoming clearer the older Paul got.

“You’re just like him. He would have been so proud of you.”

Paul kept his eyes closed, but that didn’t stop his eyes from slowly filling with tears.

Both siblings sat up straight as a banging came from the wall that separated the front of the cab from the back.

Reid’s muffled voice came through the large chunk of metal. “Stay quiet!”

Bridget and Paul looked at each other, each listening to the softer muffled voices that continued in the front cab.

17

Lyle and Reid each sat in silence for a considerable portion of the morning. Both lost in their own thoughts about the life they took and the possibility of taking more. The smell of burned gunpower was still potent. The sun was directly above them in the sky. An everlasting array of corn fields now stretched along each side of the road. They had begun by following the coast, but the road moved farther and farther away as the land became more spacious, though they knew the ocean loomed not too far away in the east.

“What’s that up there?” Lyle stretched his finger out in front of him. Reid sat up straighter in his seat, and saw what Lyle was pointing at. On the right side of the road was a large patch of the cornfield that had been chopped away. In its place was a handful of tents. Two men were standing in the center of the road, their weapons strapped across their chests.

“A checkpoint.” Reid slammed his hand down on the dash. “I heard whispers of these at work. They set up sporadic Raylite bases all between townships now. It’s a new military tactic to combat the spies.”

“What do we do?”

“Act like we’re soldiers.”

Lyle breathed deeply. As they got closer, they noticed multiple military trucks parked behind the tents on the side of the road. The two soldiers in front of them on the road held out their hands signaling for Lyle to come to a stop once they were about thirty yards away. Lyle slowed the truck down until it came to a complete, screeching halt. The two soldiers walked up to Lyle’s open window.

“Is there a problem?” Lyle asked calmly.

“Where are you headed?” The tallest of the soldiers asked.

“Sorry, I can’t say.” Lyle spoke with confidence, despite the sweat that was sprouting on his brow.

“Why?” The shorter soldier asked, his hand moved up and down the strap that secured his gun.

“It’s confidential. You must be first years.”

The two men looked at each other, hesitated, and then turned back to Lyle. Their bodies becoming rigid. “Look, man, the first years are stationed out here to make sure we can handle city patrols. We are under strict orders not to let anyone through without some sort of paperwork.”

“Let me give you some advice,” Lyle rested his elbow on the window seal and propped himself up. “Don’t *ever* refer to me as *man*. It’s Captain Wallers. Understand?” Lyle could see a line of sweat forming on the shorter soldier’s upper lip. The taller swallowed in response, his eyes diverted to the shorter soldier.

“Yes, sir.” Both soldiers responded almost at the same time. “Sorry, sir.”

“Who is your commanding officer?”

“Captain Geoff is stationed here with us.”

“Ah,” Lyle breathed and lied, “Geoff and I trained together.”

“What’s it like being a commanding officer?” The taller soldier asked.

“I’m sure the two of you will find out one day if you keep up the good work here.” Lyle gave one of the soldiers a pat on the back. His confidence was growing with every word he spoke.

“We should get going, sir,” Reid spoke up. “We wouldn’t want to keep the General waiting.”

The two novice-soldiers allowed their eyes to grow wide. “You’re working for the General?” One asked slowly.

“Unfortunately, that is also confidential.” Lyle clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth. “Say, do you have any extra food here?”

The shorter soldier perked up. “I’ll go find you some.” He quickly turned and jogged off.

“What is your purpose here?” Lyle asked the remaining soldier.

“We check the traffic. Make sure there are no Sovrents in the area. That kind of thing.”

Before Lyle could probe him for a more detailed answer the shorter soldier returned carrying a small plate stacked with boiled meat.

“Thank you.” Lyle received the plate and passed it to Reid. “You gentlemen have a good night. Oh, and remember, we were never here.” Lyle winked before pressing the gas and speeding off farther down the road.

Chapter Two

1

Mitch Reeves looked down at Chip Taylor as the military truck drove away, kicking flakes of sand and rocks into the air. It was then they realized they made a grave mistake.

“Was that,” Reeves began.

Taylor closed his eyes and nodded. “Truck 13.”

The truck numbers are only marked on the back of each convoy, which the two men didn’t feel the need to double check before, though Captain Geoff wouldn’t take as an excuse.

“We have to tell the Captain.”

Taylor nodded.

“Tell the Captain what?”

Reeves and Taylor turned. Captain Geoff stood before them. He was a broad-shouldered son-of-a-bitch who didn’t believe in second chances. His round eyes were currently narrow slits trained on Reeves.

Reeves cleared his throat. “Truck 13 just passed. Two soldiers were inside.”

“How could truck 13 pass if we are not allowing anyone to pass?” Geoff asked slowly, his eyes darted between both Reeves and Taylor.

“The driver,” Reeves searched his brain for the name the man had given, “Walters, I think, said he was on a confidential mission for the General.

“Did he have papers?”

“We didn’t ask.” Taylor admitted.

Geoff lowered his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You didn’t ask.” He repeated under his breath. “You two idiots do realize that the fuckers who stole truck 13 killed two of our men this morning.”

Reeves eyes grew wide. “You didn’t tell us that.”

“You should be performing your job regardless, soldier.”

Reeves stood up straighter.

“What do you want us to do now, sir?” Taylor piped up. “Let us make this up to you.”

“Hunt them down. Take Muller and Cullen.” Geoff nods his head toward the two soldiers that arrived earlier that afternoon. Geoff didn’t know the exact reason they were sent out here for patrols. All he knew is that soldiers banished from their duties in the township usually committed a major fuck up.

“The two men are still Raylites, sir.”

Geoff scoffed, “Not anymore. Not since this morning.”

Reeves and Taylor exchanged a glance.

“Look, men,” Geoff licked his lips, waiting for his soldiers to give him their full attention. “It’s either their heads or yours. You decide.”

Reeves and Taylor positioned their right hand slightly above their brow to salute their captain.

Chapter Three

1

Bridget and Paul stayed silent and still in the back of the truck for as long as they thought necessary. They waited until the unknown voices silenced and the hum of the truck's engine continued to spit and putter. Then, when all was still, they peaked over the tailgate and into the small gap between it and the canvas cover.

"What is it?" Paul whispered, as their eyes found the mass of tents on the side of the road. They saw three soldiers huddled together talking. One kept looking back as he talked to the others.

"I'm not sure. A camp of soldiers."

"But why?"

Bridget stepped back against the wall and slid down until she was seated. "I'm not sure. Apparently, the military doesn't have to tell the citizens anything anymore."

Paul sighed, before taking a seat next to Bridget.

"Do you think we'll make it to the DOCs?" He asked softly.

"If we can find it, sure," Bridget shrugged. "I just don't know what to expect when we do."

The purring sound of the truck grew faintly louder as if the engine was working double time. Paul rose and walked back over to look behind them.

He froze.

They were being followed.

“Bridget, they’re trailing us.”

Bridget took her place next to Paul. Two doppelganger trucks were following a few hundred yards behind. Bridget pulled her eyebrows together; the trucks weren’t following, they were charging. Dirt spewed up from the road as they gained speed.

Bridget turned and crawled to the back of the truck and began banging on the wall that separated the cab from the back.

“Behind us!” She yelled over and over, while her hands banged in an unrhythmic motion against the separating wall.

2

Bridget was still screaming.

“Will you shut her up!” Lyle shouted at Reid.

Reid began to bang on the wall in reply, silencing Bridget.

“What do we do?” Lyle asked, his voice shaking.

“I don’t know.”

“We can’t outrun them.”

“No, this is their territory.”

Lyle slammed his palms on the steering wheel. “I thought they believed us!”

“That doesn’t matter now.” Reid shook his head, his brain trying to run through all the different scenarios.

They run, they get chased down and caught.

They stop, they get taken prisoner.

They stop, they get killed.

They run, they get hit from behind, crash, and killed.

Reid took a deep steadying breath and closed his eyes. “Stop the truck on the side of the road.”

“Are you insane?” Lyle was manic.

Reid shook his head. “Lyle, they’re already gaining speed. This is our only option.”

“No—”

“Listen to me!” Reid opened his eyes and turned to face his best friend.

“They don’t know about Bridget and Paul in the back. We have an advantage.

They will see us stop and the two of us will get out and go in the corn fields. They

will follow us. We'll have them surrounded." Reid's heart was beating hard against his ribs, giving him slight self-inflicted chest burn.

Lyle steadied his breathing the best he could and glanced over at Reid. Reid's eyes were resolved, the eyes of a man whose mind was made up. Lyle nodded slowly and sucked in a deep, rickety breath. "Okay," He breathed. "I'm scared."

Reid nodded, his eyes welled with tears. "Me, too."

Lyle cleared his throat. "Tell them."

Reid turned in his seat and banged on the wall that separated them.

"Knock once if you can hear me," he yelled.

A light knock sounded.

"Knock once every time you understand."

Knock.

"We are going to stop, and Lyle and I are going to hide in the fields."

Knock.

"You and Paul are to stay still and ambush when you see fit."

Knock.

Reid turned and checked the battery life on his Weaver. "30% left."

Lyle scoffed. "Let's hope that's enough."

"Pull over here."

Lyle did as instructed. "We better move fast."

Reid agreed. "Get as far away from the truck as we can."

Lyle left the keys in the truck and slid out of the driver's seat and into the road. Reid did the same. The two men entered the corn field and began their determined dance through the stalks.

3

The two siblings left in the van watched Reid and Lyle enter the corn field, but the stalks quickly blocked their view. Every few seconds the wind would tug at a stalk which allowed a subtle glimpse at Reid and Lyle trudging along through the blades of corn.

Paul placed his hand on Bridget's shoulder and turned her to face him.

"You stay behind me when we ambush."

"No." Bridget shook her head.

"Bridget, for once can you just—"

The ground began to rumble. Bridget watched as rocks along the roadway jumped and shivered. Bridget and Paul watched as the two trucks got closer, until they came to a stop about thirty yards away.

The two men Bridget recognized from the roadside camp hopped out of the first truck. Their guns secured were drawn. Two more unfamiliar men piled out of the second truck.

The four gathered in front of the first truck.

“Taylor and I will go on pursuit in the fields since we have more experience with the terrain than the two of you. You stay and make sure they don’t make an escape.”

“Okay.” The two unfamiliar men nodded.

Taylor walked over to their truck. Bridget’s heart was beating loud against her chest, she stifled her own breath.

Was the man coming to look inside the back?

When Taylor was an arm’s length away from the bed of the truck, he bent. His body was below Bridget and Paul’s line of sight. Bridget listened and heard an audible click come from below, before Taylor stood straight back up and motioned for Reeves to follow.

Taylor and Reeves turned and entered the stalks. The two new soldiers post up in front of the first truck.

“I can’t believe we’re stuck in the middle of nowhere.”

“It’s your fault, Muller.”

“My fault? You let them get away, too.”

Bridget glanced over at Paul. The two bent down below the tailgate, giving the two soldiers a little time to get comfortable and lower their guards.

4

Lyle and Reid were hidden between a cluster of stalks. They could vaguely see the soldiers climb out of the truck.

“We know them. The ones next to Taylors and Reeves.” Reid pointed toward the second truck and the two soldiers that climbed out.

Lyle nodded. “We should have killed them when we had the chance.”

Reid climbed out from behind the stalk and began his jaunt a few yards away from Lyle.

“Hey, bro,” Lyle called.

Reid turned around.

“Give ‘em hell.”

Reid winked. “You, too, I got your back.”

Reid bent down behind another stalk, still within eyeshot of Lyle. Both men watched as the two soldiers made their way closer to their hidden destinies.

5

“What do you think is in the back of the truck?” Cullen asked Muller.

“I’m not sure.”

Bridget glanced over at Paul and mouthed, *get ready*.

Footsteps made their way closer to the truck. The tailgate jiggled, then flung open. Paul and Bridget jumped onto the two unsuspecting men, knocking them to the ground. A shot cut through the silent frontier.

6

Lyle looked over at Reid. Fear flooded his eyes. He knew that shot could only come from one place.

The two soldiers weaving through the stalks paused and turned back to the trucks.

Lyle lined up his Weaver to face the two men and pulled the trigger, thinking more to distract than to hit.

The bullet zipped by Taylors’ shoulder.

Taylor returned blind fire.

Corn shucks tumbled down as bullets cut and fractured their great stalks.

Reid slowly began to meander widely around Reeves, who continued forward unaware. Lyle fired from his position, keeping all the attention coming in his direction, so Reid could move undetected. Taylor grunted as the bullet skimmed his shoulder.

Reid had shimmied far enough between the stalks that he now stood only a few feet from Reeves. His foot crunched down on a withered stalk. Reeves turned, his gun away from his chest, ready to shoot. Reid raised his gun and brought it down on the top of Reeves' head.

Reeves fell with a grunt. Reid stepped back and pointed the mouth of the barrel at Reeves' head. He pulled the trigger.

7

Paul didn't mean to fire his gun, yet a bullet was now lodged deep inside the stomach of Muller, who twisted in pain on the ground, attempting to regain his footing.

When Bridget landed on Cullen, the impact dislodged both firearms from both their hands. Bridget's Weaver skittered across the small space and came to a stop in front of their opponent's truck. Cullen's own Weaver seemed to bounce over the dirt and rocks before it halted in the middle of the street. Bridget began swinging her fists and legs in Cullen's direction. Not every attempt collided with his body.

Cullen gripped her neck with one hand and held her body as far away from himself as he could. With his free hand he reached into the side pocket on his pants and pulled out a three-inch knife.

He gripped the knife tight in his right hand and drove it into Bridget's right side and twisted. She screamed. Before he could bring his hand down a second time, Bridget's foot collided with his hand, sending the knife flying across the road. Bridget's fingers scratched and clawed at Cullen's face, leaving small cuts all along his cheek and jawline. Cullen released her neck. Bridget scrambled toward the front of their truck to retrieve her gun, when Muller pounded the butt of his gun into the top of her skull. Bridget's head collided with the pavement, her world went black.

Paul was in the middle of the road. He had scrambled from Muller before he was able to pull himself off the ground. Paul picked up Cullen's gun and aimed it at Muller. Bridget's eyes were closed, blood dripped from her head onto the pavement. Muller raised his gun again to finish her off, but when Paul pulled the trigger this time, his bullet punctured the center of Muller's chest. Muller's body collapsed to the ground. He twitched one, twice, and was still.

Cullen was behind their truck. He reached and slid Muller's knife out of his pocket. He couldn't see Paul, but he could hear his footsteps growing closer.

Paul scanned the edge of the road where all three trucks sat idled. He could see the rise and fall of Bridget's chest, and relief rushed through him. He stepped slowly over Bridget and posted up in front of her. He listened, knowing Cullen could not have made it very far. His eyes caught of glimpse of one of

Cullen's feet poking out from behind the edge of the tire. Paul bent and took a shot.

"Fuck!" Cullen shrieked, his foot shot burning and bleeding. He pushed himself off the truck, swung around the front, his knife collided with Paul's right arm. Paul fumbled with the Weaver, before it crashed to the pavement. He scrambled for it, but Cullen grabbed him by the throat and slammed him into the truck's fender. Paul grunted, his right fist collided with the side of Cullen's jaw. Cullen wavered, but despite his wounded foot, managed to stay balanced. With one final jab, his knife jammed into the middle of Paul's throat. Paul's eyes grew wide as he gurgled for air, but blood sprayed out of his throat. No air. He wheezed, and reached for Cullen one final time, but his arms were already growing weak. Cullen spat crimson onto Paul's cheek and pulled his lips back in a bloody smile.

8

Lyle watched in horror as Cullen pulled the burgundy-soaked blade from Paul's chest.

"Paul!" He screamed, as his younger brother crashed to the dirt.

Taylor used the distraction to pull out his walkie that connected him to camp. "Backup! Now!" Taylor slammed the butt of his gun onto the ground and

used the leverage to heave himself up. Blood pulsed from a gaping wound in his thigh.

Reid pushed his way through the stalks. He could see Lyle running ahead of him. Lyle collided with Cullen before Cullen even realized he's there. The knife tumbled from Cullen's hand when they landed on the road with a thud. Lyle punched Cullen over and over until Cullen was limp and unable to fight back. Cullen's face felt like putty under Lyle's fists.

Reid bent down in front of Paul, whose eyes were half open, the whites shone bright under the afternoon sun. The blood was already congealing under his neck and torso. He glanced around and realized Bridget was nowhere. He walked to the side of the truck and found her unconscious body. He noticed the gash on her head first.

"Oh shit. Lyle!"

Lyle didn't respond.

Reid sprinted over and pushed Lyle off Cullen's body, his face now deformed and unrecognizable. "Stop!" His hands gripped the material of Lyle's stolen soldier uniform, now splattered with blood. "Bridget is hurt. She needs you."

Behind Lyle, Reid saw the stalks moving. Taylors was coming. Reid looked toward the camp and saw the shape of soldiers' bodies running toward them, still more than a mile away.

"We have to go."

Reid released his grip on Lyle's uniform and quickly picked Bridget up off the ground. He ran to the van and draped her over the front bench seat in the truck and closed the door.

"Lyle, let's go."

"We have to take Paul."

"No." Reid put his hand under Lyle's shoulder and tried to pull him away from Paul's lifeless body. "We have to leave."

"We can't leave him," Lyle screamed, pushing into Reid's chest.

"He's gone, Lyle. We have to go." Reid pulled Lyle toward the passenger side of the truck. "Now."

"I'm not leaving Paul." On all fours, Lyle began to crawl toward his brother's body lying still as stone. He pressed his fingers to Paul's carotid artery, willing for a pulse, but there was nothing. Nothing.

Reid wrapped his arms around Lyle, pinning his arms to his sides.

"No!" Lyle thrashed. "I can't leave him."

“More soldiers are coming. We have to go.” Reid was suddenly thankful for the few inches he towered over Lyle, as it made it easier to carry him.

Tears cascaded down Lyle’s face and splashed onto Reid’s fatigues.

“Paul!” Lyle screamed, still attempting to push away from Reid. “I’m sorry, Pauly boy. I’m so sorry.”

Reid made it to the driver’s side of the truck and pushed Lyle onto the seat in front of him. When Lyle tried to climb over Reid to get out of the truck, Reid punched him in the face.

Lyle fell against the seat, defeated. Reid climbed in next to him, and began to drive down the empty road, just as Taylor limped out of the corn fields.

Chapter Four

1

The red dot bobbed like a weighted fishing line as the truck moved farther and farther away from their makeshift camp. Geoff watched and noted the coordinates with every new blink. His men would strike when the truck stopped for the night. The sun stretched across the horizon, preparing to bid the day farewell.

His men had returned from their short-lived battle ten minutes before. Three of his men had died. General Omann wouldn't be happy. He would ask *what kind of soldiers are you training that can't take down civilians?* The General wouldn't accept Geoff's humble pleas that some men that chose to be soldiers at the tender age of sixteen, were not soldier material.

The red bulb shone a new location, Geoff quickly scribbled the latitude and longitude. It had been his idea to install a tracker in each one of his trucks, and he had instructed Taylors to plant one on the civ's truck, just in case they got away.

He hoped General Omann would finally see his worth to the Raylite army, his dedication.

The red light had been blinking in the same place for the better part of two minutes. This was it. Their location was the key, and Geoff had found it.

Chapter Five

1

Lyle's hands were shaking. They never shook like this in the hospital. He punctured a small hole in Bridget's skin and another on the other side of the gash. Blood was dried and goopy in the knife-sized hole on the side of her stomach. She was lucky the soldier seemed to be unskilled at hitting vital organs.

The two siblings were perched on the side of the road, hidden away behind a coven of cornstalks tied together by haphazardly woven leaves. The trio had come to a fork in the road and, after a short spat between Lyle and Reid, had chosen to go to the left, wishing to stay close to the perceived shoreline. After choosing this patch of the cornfield as their sanctuary for the night, Reid had gone to dispose of the truck on the opposing side of the fork.

Lyle licked his lips, mind focused, as he slowly tugged on the fishing wire, pulling both sides of the cleft in Bridget's stomach together.

It was then Bridget awoke with a startling jump. The screech of agony that had burrowed in her throat erupted and left Lyle's ears ringing. Her hands pulled at the fishing wire, unaware of what was happening around her. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head from the pain. The strip of fabric that Lyle had wrapped around her forehead, to secure the large scrape she suffered after falling onto the rocky road, was loosening with every jolt of her body.

Fresh blood specks began to ooze out of the gash in her stomach. Lyle dropped the fishing wire he had luckily found under his seat in the truck and pressed his hands into Bridget's shoulders.

"Breathe, Bridge," he cooed. "You're okay. You're safe."

It wasn't working. Shouts and whimpers stamped from her throat at the same time. Lyle wished her to pass out from the pain, and miraculously she did. Her fingers recoiled and she released the fishing wire (she had pulled out the single stitch Lyle had already completed).

Lyle took a deep breath, picked up the fishing wire, and began to stitch his sister up.

2

Half an hour later, Lyle sat grinding two eight-inch sticks together to make a fire. He had obtained a few twigs from the side of the road and a crumbled piece of paper from Reid's bag. He placed the bundle underneath the sticks to help kickstart the fire that he begged to come. The sun was almost completely set now. Bridget's eyes fluttered, a small sign that she was beginning to wake up.

She groaned. Her entire midsection seared with pain, as if she had been burned. As she tried to sit up, her stomach screeched and tightened.

"Don't try to sit up." Lyle's hand was upon her shoulder, pushing her back down. "Your stitches are sloppy and fresh."

There was something different about Lyle's voice, but Bridget was too sore and weak to pinpoint what exactly she was hearing. Was it just exhaustion? Was he hurt?

"Your stiches are never sloppy."

Lyle rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry I can't be perfect all the time, Bridge. The sun was setting. I didn't have anything to actually clean your wound." His voice was tight as he talked through clenched teeth.

"Geez, Lyle. I was just teasing. What's with the edge?"

"Nothing." Lyle responded with a little too much haste. He went back to scratching the two sticks together.

"Lyle." Bridget's eyebrows pulled together. "What's going on?"

She closed her eyes, summoning the memories she had of the fight from this afternoon. The images were unclear. She remembered jumping out of the back of the truck. She remembered screams. The world going black. Nothing specific. Nothing concrete.

"Nothing." He shrugged her question off.

"Where are Reid and Paul?"

A small spark shot off the sticks and into the pile of twigs and paper. A small fire sprouted and purred to life. The small light allowed her to see Lyle's red-consumed, puffy eyes. His pupils still glassed over. Her heart sunk in her chest.

“Reid drove the truck three miles northwest. He found a tracker under the back when he was looking for tools and a spare tire. He should be back soon.”

Lyle’s gaze was far away, lost in the expanse of the corn fields surrounding them.

“Paul is with him?”

A long pause stretched out between them.

“Lyle.”

Silence. Bridget shook her head, her heart somersaulted in her chest. Her nose burned. It was then she noticed Lyle’s blood-stained hands. At first, she assumed that it was her own blood, after all he did clean and stitch up her wound, but there was so much blood on his hands, his sleeves, his chest.

“Is Paul with Reid?”

“No,” Lyle whispered.

The truth hit them like the jet bombs which had destroyed the streets around them their entire lives, except this bomb was a direct hit on their hearts. It was a devastating truth to swallow that half of their family had been made extinct.

“Where is he?” Bridget asked even though she knew—she needed Lyle to say it.

Lyle scrunched his nose, shook his head. After another moment of impossible silence, Lyle glanced at his sister. Two trails of tears washed away a line of dirt and dried blood from his caked cheeks. His chin trembled as he spoke.

“We had to leave him.” And then, as if trying to explain, “We didn’t have a choice.”

“You left him alone? He’s just a kid. He’s our Paul.”

“He was already gone, Bridge.” Lyle’s throat burned, his eyes searched his sister’s, needing her to understand. “I couldn’t save him. But I could save you, so I did.”

A rustling sounded from the corn stalks. Soft at first, and then grew louder. Lyle reached for his Weaver.

Reid entered their ring of solitude.

“What’d I miss?”

Bridget seemed to not register Reid’s return. Her eyes were still trained on Lyle.

“How did he die?” she asked.

Lyle scoffed, “You don’t need details.”

“It’s Paul. I need every detail.”

Lyle shook his head and stood up. “I can’t.” He turned and walked deeper into the dark cornfield. Only the small shimmering light of the fire lit his way.

Reid sat down on the opposite side of the fire. Bridget watched as the flames reflected on his tan skin. His eyes were focused on the scorched flickering embers.

“Reid.” She winced at the jolt of pain that shot through her chest as she spoke.

Reid closed his eyes, knowing that if he were to look at Bridget he would be at the mercy of her wishes.

“Please,” she whispered.

Reid glanced up, his eyes met hers. He steadied himself with a deep, drawn-out breath.

“We saw the fight from the cornfields. Paul and one of the soldiers.” Reid cleared his throat, pulling his knees to his chest. His eyes drifted back to the fire as if he was seeing the events play out all over again. “He was in control, but then he wasn’t. He was stabbed in the neck.”

Bridget gasped and then winced from her broken ribs’ movement.

Reid glanced up at her. “We ran to help, but we were too late. He was gone. Backup was running up the road. The last wounded soldier had almost made it out of the corn field. We were running out of time. So, we found you and got the hell out of there.”

“You shouldn’t have left him.”

“We didn’t have a choice, Bridge.”

“We don’t leave family!”

Reid sighed, and then crawled over beside her. He reached out and put his arms around her, her head rested on his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Bridge. We had no choice."

Reid and Bridget were unaware that Lyle had rejoined them next to the fire, until he placed his hand on Bridget's shoulder. "They're going to pay, Bridget. If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to make them all pay."

Bridget saw the fire in Lyle's eyes and nodded. One way or another, they would pay.

Chapter Six

1

Geoff walked into Taylor's tent, a tent that Taylor used to share with Reeves. The moon still reigned in the black sky, though a murmur of light teased the horizon.

"Wake up." Geoff kicked Taylor boot.

Taylor's jolted upright on his cot. "What's going on?"

"Have your men left yet?"

"No. We were going to wait until first light."

Geoff scoffed. "Do you think you've earned a night's sleep? You're pathetic." He sneered before he turned and left the tent. He unholstered his gun and unloaded three shots into the still night air. The sound was deafening. The stench of smoke filled his nostrils. He heard his men moving about in their tents. "I want everyone out here now," he screamed amidst the echoes of the gunshots.

One by one his men stumbled out of their sleepy tents and lined single file in front of Geoff, whose gun was still clenched unholstered in his hand.

"I hope everyone enjoyed their beauty sleep," Geoff began, sarcasm enveloped his words. "When I was a first year, we never slept in until we were woken up." He paced in front of the line of men. "Especially after an enemy made a fool out of us and all of you, soldiers," he sneered the word, his jaw clenched,

“—were made a fool by civilians. They tricked us once with the GPS on the truck, but that will not happen again.”

He reached the end of his soldiers' line, turned, and paced back the other way. “As I'm sure all of you are aware, we have traitors roaming the landscape around us. They have killed our friends, our brothers. This morning I have one simple task for you. Find them and kill them.” Geoff stopped walking and turned to face his men, eager to cut them loose on the hunt. “But please, gentlemen, don't get killed. I already have a shit ton of cleanup to do and I don't need to add your sorry asses to the list. Do you understand me?”

His soldiers answered “yes, sir” in shouted unison.

Geoff nodded and brought his hand up to his eyebrow. “Now, go.”

He saluted, an action that his soldiers mirrored, before they sprinted off and began their hunt.

Chapter Seven

1

Bridget felt each step she took in throughout every nerve ending in her body. Her ribs crackled and jingled with every step and breath. Her wound tugged and screamed and burned every second she's conscious. Slumber was her only escape, though she did not get much rest the night before. Lyle redressed her wound this morning, though she doubted it would make much a difference. The piece of cloth he cut off the front seat does not seem to be much cleaner than the stale fishing wire he used to tether her skin back together.

The sun was peaking above the horizon. Two clouds hovered around the glowing bulb without submerging it completely. The three wanderers had begun their trek just as the birds began to chirp their melodious tune. Lyle and Reid were walking at a steady few paces ahead of Bridget. Each man had their eyes trained ahead of them. Their ears turned toward the sound of the wild that stretched out all around them.

Bridget could feel her heart rate slow. Sweat dampened much of her skin. Her legs had been steadily growing weaker the higher the sun rose in the atmosphere, and now at midday, her stamina was recklessly low. She had her arm wrapped around her stomach, afraid that if she released the pressure on the wound the stiches would break and her innards would spill to the ground.

“I need to take a break,” She muttered. Her wounds howled. “We need to keep moving.” Lyle briefly glanced back, sizing up the well of Bridget’s remaining energy based on the slouch of her shoulders and the gait of her limp.

Bridget groaned, “Why? We led them on the wrong trail with the truck. They don’t know where we are.”

“Lyle, we probably have enough time to stop and rest if she needs a break,” Reid spoke up.

“I’m not risking it,” Lyle asserted.

“Lyle, I think—”

“Reid. Enough. I’m protecting the only family I have left.”

“So, protecting me is letting me pass out from heatstroke? Oh, or what if one of my sutures becomes infected? Which is a high possibility.”

“Let me check it.” Lyle finally agreed before he turned and quickly crossed the gap between him and his sister, not wanting to waste even a second. Bridget hesitantly released the grip she had on her stomach and allowed Lyle to lift the bottom hem on her shirt and unwrap the single strand of fabric he had tied around her stomach to cover the gash.

Lyle stopped breathing when he saw the gash on Bridget’s stomach. It had turned a bright apple red, menacing against the pale porcelain of her skin. A yellowed hued pus seeped from the opened folds of her skin. The sutures

seemed to pound and beat in tune with her heart, and with every pulse, it oozed. Flakes of dirt and ash from the fire speckled her stomach and the wound.

“How does it look?” Bridget asked, her face angled toward the sky above. “I can’t look.”

Lyle swallowed, grateful he had time to compose himself. He glanced up, his eyes caught Reid’s. A look of concern filled his eyes. Reid knew it didn’t look good. Lyle knew they had a small amount of time to find Bridget help.

“We need to find a place to clean the wound.” Lyle tied the fabric back around her stomach.

“It’s bad, isn’t it?”

When Bridget turned her head down to look at her brother, Lyle realized all the color had drained from her face.

“No, just needs to be cleaned.”

“I’ve seen you deal with patients. I know when you’re lying.”

A somber chuckle escaped his drawn lips. “It’s bad,” he admitted.

She nodded, “Then we better get going.”

Bridget repositioned her arms around her stomach, as if she willed her wound to heal with a loving touch. She was unaware that her touch of love was a touch of the damned.

2

An hour had passed since Lyle had checked Bridget's wound and there hadn't been a single sighting of a water source. By now, their mouths were dry. Their voices a rasp. Their breath almost a putrid smell of death. The three wanderers knew that they would need to find a water source today or they would be in trouble.

Reid cursed the slow-moving sun. He felt as if they had been walking for a week instead of just a day and a half. He slung his pack onto the other shoulder, wearing it as a crossover satchel. He wondered what his Chief was thinking about him. Had he been labeled a traitor? Had his desk been given away to the next in line? Reid's thoughts were interrupted by the loud purr of an oncoming engine.

"Off the road," Lyle called, unsure of which direction the vehicle was coming from. He could not even be sure they had not been spotted yet.

The three trudged quickly off the road and into the dense stalks of corn. The truck passed quickly from the direction they had traveled from.

"Was that them?" Reid glanced over Lyle.

"I don't know."

"How did they find us?" Bridget was breathing deep, staggering breaths.

"Maybe it wasn't them."

“Then who was it?” Bridget demanded.

“Maybe people from the DOCs?” Reid suggested.

Lyle scoffed. “We don’t know where the DOCs are. We don’t even know *what* the DOCs are. I’m starting to Jerry was mumbling nonsense during his dying breath.”

Bridget pushed her brother. Lyle stumbled against a corn stalk. “Don’t ever say that again. If it was nonsense, then all this was for nothing. Then Paul died for nothing.”

“Okay.” Lyle nodded and pulled his sister to his chest. “Okay.”

“What do we do now?” Bridget asked.

“Follow the truck.” Reid said.

“Are you trying to get us killed?”

“We need food and supplies. That truck is our only hope of getting it.” Reid shrugged. “It’s the only way.”

“Reid is right.” Bridget spoke up.

“Bridge, you can’t survive another fight if it comes to that.”

“If I don’t get food and medicine I’m going to die anyway.”

“No. That’s final.”

“She can fight if we need her too.” Reid interjected.

Lyle whipped around and shoved Reid. “Stay out of this!” His eyes wide.

“I’m in this just as much as you are,” Reid responded.

“No, you didn’t lose a brother.”

“You don’t think I thought of Paul as my brother? After all we’ve been through all these years? Smooth, Lyle,” Reid scoffed, and then left the safety of the corn fields. He turned onto the road in the direction of the truck.

Bridget shook her head. “We’re all hurting, Lyle. That doesn’t give you the right to take your anger out on Reid.” She walked out of the cornfield and followed Reid out into the street.

3

Another lost hour drove the sun deeper into west. The road forced them to make a sharp turn toward the left. The cornfields ended, and vast empty fields began. Though the fields were empty, there was an array of various wildflowers in mid-bloom.

Bridget was now being carried on Lyle’s back. Her arms wrapped firmly around his neck. She was in and out of consciousness. Reid was carrying a gun in either hand and was a few steps ahead of Lyle.

“How are you feeling up there?” Lyle called to Bridget. He tried to keep her awake and talking, though sometimes once she closed her eyes, it was a few minutes before she was able to respond. From his field and hospital experience

he knew her loss of consciousness was due to her need for rest, and though the infection was quickly spreading because of the harsh conditions, she was not at the point of no return.

“My stomach is throbbing.”

“So are my shoulders.” Lyle stopped walking.

“Reid, can you take over?”

“Sure.” Reid placed the guns on the road before he repositioned his satchel to fall to his front.

Bridget’s legs were weak, and she needed to keep her arms wrapped around Lyle for support while Reid got ready to receive her. “Hop up.” Reid bent down in front of her so that Bridget was able to fall lightly on his back instead of having to jump up to wrap her arms around his neck. With a heave, Reid pulled them both upright. Bridget’s arms locked around his neck.

Lyle collected the guns from the road. They had been following tread marks in the road. Before the truck, there had not been any which spoke to the desolation that made up this seemingly untouched landscape. There was another sharp bend in the road up ahead. This one was going to force them to the left, closer to the coast. Lyle hoped it meant they would come upon a source of water soon.

The three turned around the sharp bend and froze. Two-hundred yards ahead of them, in the middle of a deserted road, surrounded by barren fields, was the truck.

4

“What do we do?” Reid asked frantically as he paced on the side of the road. They were in a ditch that kept them partially hidden from the road.

Lyle shook his head, his body positioned defensively in front of Bridget.

“We need a plan.”

“Bridget can’t fight in this condition,” Lyle’s breath was tight. “but if that truck is filled with men then we need her.”

“What if the truck only has one man in it?”

Lyle dropped his head as he brought his hands up to his eyes. “I hate this.”

Bridget reached out and placed her hand on Lyle’s shoulder. “Lyle.”

He shook his head. “Every decision we make is just a big guess. That’s what got Paul killed. We thought we could take them on, and we were wrong.”

“Everything got harder when we left Nork.” Reid sighed and squatted to be eyelevel to his friends. “Bridget, what’s our move?”

Bridget sighed. “We’re out of moves. This truck is our only choice.”

“Then we go for it.” Reid nodded.

Lyle stood and glanced again toward the truck. The warm season grasslands that surrounded, and seemed to swallow, this narrow stretch of road was tall enough to cover the majority of his body. He looked for movement, for any twig or brush out of place. However, between the seasonal swift winds that ruffled his hair and his own paranoia, he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary.

“There doesn't seem to be any movement.”

Reid looped an arm around Bridget's back and pulled her up to her feet. She wrapped an arm around her waist and was not shy about allowing Reid to support most of her weight.

“Bridge, you stay behind me.” Lyle picked his gun up off the ground. He handed another to her. She took it hesitantly, no longer trusting herself with walking on her own, much less using a firearm.

Lyle crawled up the short steep incline to get back onto the road. He reached down and grabbed Bridget's free hand and pulled her up. Reid followed.

The three were walking down the road. Bridget was a few paces behind them. She limped, the right side of her body sagging. Each step made her stomach wound scream. She hobbled along, trying to keep up.

As the three wanderers advanced, the back of the truck drew closer. The hair on Lyle's arms rose.

"I'll take the driver's side." He glanced to Reid, who nodded.

Once they were twenty yards away from the truck, Lyle split off from the group to head for the driver's side. He turned, his eyes met Bridget's. He motioned for her follow him. Stay close, he mouthed. She nodded, her left hand wrapped across her stomach, trying to push back the pain in her wound, yet with every step the fire burned. She felt sweat sprout, puddle, and glide down her face. The hair on the back of her neck prickled, a constant rush of heat sprung from her nape and circled around her cheeks. She knew she had a fever. She knew the infection was spreading. She knew they needed this truck. *She* needed this truck.

Reid was now cut off from Lyle and Bridget. He couldn't see or hear their soft steps as they inched closer to the truck door. The passenger door was closed. He wiped a hand across his brow, every muscle in his body on edge. The late summer wind ruffled his hair and the hem of his shirt as if egging him on.

He reached out his left hand, gripped the door handle and swung in open in one quick motion. The truck was empty. Lyle was standing across from him,

the driver side door sat open wide. They could still hear the soft purr of the engine, and the dense smell of gas seeping out of the exhaust.

Lyle pointed to the back of the truck. Reid left the door open and snaked along the edge of the truck bed, Bridget was already standing in front of the closed bed of the truck. Lyle and Reid each grabbed a door handle and pulled it open. Bridget aimed her Weaver, her balanced wavering ever so slightly.

The truck was empty.

The three were so focused on the deserted truck they didn't notice the movement through the tall grasslands, a movement not caused from the wind. Bridget saw the shadows of men through the corner of her eye.

She whimpered, her voice failing. There were five men climbing up out of the ditch. They were wearing a dark charcoaled gray, a uniform she'd never seen.

Lyle quickly turned toward the men, his Weaver ready to fire. Before he could aim, a small metal slab pelted his wrist. The impact wasn't enough to crack a bone, but it made his fingers loosen. The Weaver dropped to the ground with a thud.

Reid's vision was blocked by Bridget. He took a step back, so that he could see the stampede quickly approaching. He was too late; the men were too close. One pointed a contraption too small to be a gun at Reid and pulled the

trigger. A bulb sparked and shot out of the hunk of metal, still attached by wires. The bulb connected with Reid's chest and he writhed in pain as shockwaves danced through his body. He fell to the ground, his body convulsing.

Bridget found her voice and screamed when a burning smell floated off Reid and hit her nose. A second man pulled out the same contraption, took aim at Bridget, and fired. The beaming bulb collided with her already injured stomach and she fell. She heard a rip, felt warm blood leak out of her stomach and knew her stitches had popped. Her mouth opened—she wanted to scream. Reid's eyes were closed. It was the last thing she saw.

An older man was walking toward Lyle. Lyle grabbed his Weaver with his good hand once he regained his balance and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. He pulled the trigger again, still nothing. He threw the gun at the older man coming closer. It hit the man in the forehead, he grunted in pain. Lyle stepped back and watched in horror as he saw a man sliding a black bag over Reid's head. Bridget laid still next to him.

Lyle bent to his knees. The man he had hit with the Weaver walked up, blood spilled like a waterfall down into his thick red beard. He hit Lyle once in the corner of his jaw. Lyle fell to his side, his jaw popped. The man pulled a needle from his pocket, placed it in Lyle's arm and released the clear fluid into Lyle's system.

“No,” Lyle’s voice trailed off. The world grew grainy and far away. The men started talking to each other. Shouting commands. Lyle couldn’t make out what they were saying. He watched with wide eyes as the man in front of him, who smelled of sweat and smoke, pulled a black hood out of his pocket and slid it around Lyle’s head. Lyle’s eyes rolled back into his head and his world disappeared.

Chapter Eight

1

A pulsing ache in his lower jaw woke Lyle. He groaned, rolling his stiff neck around the back of something. A chair? He slowly opened his eyes. His hands were shackled behind him, his legs strapped to the legs of a chilled metal chair. His eyes moved around the unfamiliar room. An oval room that housed dust and memories; smelled of mothballs and sweat. The room was covered in dilapidated cream and white striped wallpaper, various patches were ripped or worn off, leaving stains of useless glue on the already dingy sheetrock. A faded circular rug spanned the middle section of the room. The design was faded, but Lyle could tell it had once been a deep blue, maybe. A lighter configuration was centered in the murky beryl. It looked like some sort of bird—maybe a turkey with a white head? Whatever it was, Lyle was sure the creature was surrounded by a ring of stars.

Two couches sat opposite each other on the rug and on either side of Lyle. One of the couches sat lopsided, the legs broken off. The other couch was missing two-thirds of the seat cushions. It was then Lyle saw Reid, strapped in the same way, his chair a few feet to the right of Lyle's. His head was bent forward, a puddle of spittle formed on his thigh.

“Reid,” Lyle sputtered, his jaw clenched whenever he spoke. A sharp stabbing pain shot through his jaw, into his gums, and settled in his teeth.

“You’re awake.” A deep voice echoed through the room. Lyle jerked his head up, realizing he wasn’t alone.

Two men were positioned in what looked like the front of the room. The one with the red beard was seated on top of an old, creaking dark wooden desk. A distinct crack ran down the middle. The man had a large piece of gauze taped to his forehead. A light pink splotch colored the center of the bandage. A twinge of smile found its way onto Lyle’s lips. *At least I got a good jab in*, he thought.

Behind the desk was a wall made up of floor-to-ceiling windows. A couple of the windows had cracks and divots. The one on the far-left side, was shattered completely. Glass shards still littered the unkept wooden floorboards. Deep gold curtains were drawn back and tied, letting in the natural light. A second man was standing, looking out into the large open yard that sat beyond the window. Lyle thought he recognized the man from before. He was a dark, tanned man with straight black hair tied into a long ponytail. He had a thick, straggly beard. He was a middle-aged man whose hair was streaked with rays of gray, his dry skin taut over his cheekbones and pointed nose.

“I’d wipe the smile off your face if I was you.” The red-bearded man slid off the desk and grabbed a rusted metal bar. He was a younger man, maybe a little

older than Lyle. His jaded muscles shown in his fitted gray uniform. Lyle could not get the gray uniform out of his mind. It was one he had never seen. Raylites didn't wear gray, and as far as he knew, neither did Sovrents.

"Will." The older man stepped away from the window, his arms crossed over his chest. "We do nothing." His accent appeared to be only a whisper of what it was long ago, as if it was a simple drawing instead of a vibrant mural.

Through Lyle's vast knowledge of books and the little education his father had equipped him with, he knew that the war had destroyed more than just buildings, landscapes, and technology. The war had done away with cultures from around the world. There were no longer tribal dances and songs, no rituals for holidays or everyday life, no praying and no gods. There was no longer a variety of foods or drinks. No campfire songs, fables or ghost stories, and no talk of what once was. There were no street performers or acrobats or actors. The arts were a distant memory, history a bore, and language useless.

Yet, here was a man, standing in front of Lyle, whose accent was a direct line into the past, a piece of his culture that couldn't be taken away. As the dark man stepped around the younger man and closer to Lyle, he could see that a single braid was fixed with a few strands of loose hair. An impression stuck out of his gray uniform, something was tied onto a chain around his neck. Lyle had seen a picture of one before, the shape seemed to match that of a medallion.

“We can start without him.” Will took a step forward, next to the middle-aged man.

A door behind Lyle swung open, the immediacy of the noise, jolted Reid awake. He was breathing hard, hyperventilating. Lyle turned his neck as far as he could and saw as Reid took in the way he was tied to the chair.

“Reid.” Lyle whispered, he tried to keep his jaw from moving as much as possible. “Calm down.”

Reid tried to pull his arms out of the straps, to no avail. He cringed every time the leather straps bit and burrowed deeper into his skin.

Lyle watched as a man appeared in front of him. His thick leather boots pounded with a *thud* into the thick rug every time he took a step. He had dark red hair speckled with gray clumps. His mustache was a thick strip of deep gray that sat stiff under his nose.

“I’m sorry about the materials used to tie you up. We had to make do.” The man’s voice was methodically steady. “We don’t get many visitors.”

“Probably due to your hospitality,” Lyle spat.

The man smirked and bent to Lyle. “You must be the one that hit my son with your Weaver. Heard you had some spunk.”

Lyle swallowed.

The man stood, he was taller than the man with the accent, though his son with the red beard had him beat by a couple inches. "My name is Patrick. Leader here at Concord."

"Concord?" Reid breathed. "Where are we?"

It then dawned on Lyle that Bridget was nowhere to be seen. He thrashed from side to side trying to see the room from all angles.

"Calm down." Patrick's eyes were locked on Lyle, ignoring the questions coming from Reid.

Lyle bounded in his chair, trying to move the chair around to give him a better view of the room. Instead, one of the chair legs snapped as it gave out, sending Lyle crashing to the ground.

"Where is Bridget?" Lyle screamed, despite the way his jaw throbbed.

"Safe," Patrick answered, bending down in front of Lyle. "Now it's time to cooperate."

"Where is she?" Lyle screamed.

Patrick pulled a rusted pocketknife out of his back pocket and flung the knife free. "I'm not a very patient man." He breathed slowly, calming himself.

Patrick tapped his foot. "You're Raylite soldiers. You've been on our trail for years."

“Not soldiers.” Lyle spat. The shoulder supporting the rest of his body was starting to throb. Half his face was pushed into the rug, while his legs dangled in the air, still strapped to the chair.

“I may have been out of the Raylite game for a long time, but I know their uniforms when I see them. Unless you’re spies. I’ve heard rumors of Sovrent spies.” This last part was a whisper, as if he was conversing with himself.

“We’re Raylites. I’m a doctor. He’s a journalist.”

“Temperamental doctor.” Will muttered. Patrick shot him a look.

Lyle’s eyes seemed to glow with contempt as they met Will’s.

Patrick shook his head. “I don’t buy it. There’s no reason a journalist and a doctor would be found this far out of Nork.” Patrick nodded a signal to Will, who stepped forward and struck Lyle in the shin with the metal bar. Lyle grunted, but refused to scream. Will pulled the bar back and slammed it into Lyle’s kneecap. A small scream fled his lips.

“We’ll talk.” Reid breathed, straightening in his seat. “Just leave him alone.”

Patrick held up his hand. Will stepped back from Lyle’s tensed body on the floor.

2

Bridget's eyes fluttered open in a small makeshift infirmary. The first thing she saw was a man hunched down in front of a desk, but she could not tell what he was doing. She inspected the room quietly at first, not wanting to announce to the man that she was now awake. There were two tattered cots positioned perpendicular to the west wall. Bridget quickly realized that she was on her own for the first time on this journey. Her heart began to hammer in her chest, a pulsing rhythm that tired her out. She had never been completely alone. During her lowest moments in life even when she felt mentally alone, she had always known Lyle and Paul were just a whisper away. *Paul*. She had now not seen her younger brother in more than a day, which was the longest amount of time she had ever gone without seeing him.

She was a master of grief. A master of loss. After losing her father, Bridget devised ways to keep him with her. She read his favorite poem "Annabel Lee" by Eddie Poe every year on his birthday. She made sure to do the laundry on the same day every week—her father had believed in structure, especially in a world of chaos. It was little everyday things that she believed kept him with her, and it would be this seemingly small life hack that would keep Paul alive in her.

Above the two cots was a large shattered window with three brazen foundational cracks sprouting from the window pane. The smell of rubbing

alcohol dominated the room and brought Bridget barreling out of her train of thought, the summer breeze blew a freshness into the muggy room through the window.

Bridget glanced down and noticed her arms and legs were tied loosely to the cot's springs. She was also no longer wearing a shirt. Her pale skin looked luminescent amid the bright sunrays that soaked the dank infirmary. The gash on the side of her stomach was newly stitched, the rusted fishing wire now a distant memory. In the wire's place were now carefully threaded sutures, taut and secure. The area around the wound was sore and swollen, and shone a deep ruby red.

Bridget squirmed, trying to wedge her hands out of the straps that held her in place.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a deep voice called. The man at the desk at ceased working. His body was tense, the muscles in his back protruded through his shirt.

He turned slowly, glancing at the straps around Bridget's wrists, making sure she was still being held. He looked to be about a decade older than Bridget. He had a scar that etched along his jaw line, partially hidden by scruff. A sprinkle of gray was already beginning to cake his dark black hair.

“Where is Lyle?” Bridget’s voice was weak. Sweat lined her brow. Her cheeks were red with fever. Her head ached and throbbed in her ears.

“Safe, probably. I’ve been busy saving your life.”

“Saving my life? After *you* injected me?”

The man scoffed. “I wasn’t the one that injected you, though I was there last night. You’ve been out most of the day today.”

Bridget struggled to sit up. The man walked over and placed a hand on her shoulder, pushing her body back onto the cot.

“I really think you need rest. You still have a fever.”

“I’m a nurse. I can take care of myself.”

The man ran a hand through his chin-length unkempt hair, before placing his hands on his hips. “I figured you wouldn’t want to dig around in the hole in your stomach checking to make sure the infection hadn’t spread, soaking up pus and blood, pouring disinfectant in and then washing it out,”

Bridget’s stomach churned as she pictured herself performing these tasks on her own battered side. “Okay,” she whimpered, closing her eyes, fighting to regain her composure. “Are you a doctor?”

“Closest thing we have to one. Luckily, we don’t need to use this room very much.”

Bridget looked around the run-down room. The desk that the makeshift doctor had been sitting at when she first woke up was strewn scalpels, needles, gloves, a stethoscope, a diagnostic set, and first aid necessities. It looked like some of the materials had been recently sorted and piled into lazy haphazard piles.

Luckily, Bridget thought.

“I’ll be back in a couple hours to give you another steroid shot. Until then, you need to rest.”

“Where are you going?”

“To find your brother.”

3

Patrick turned his attention to Reid. Lyle’s face was still pressed into the floorboard, the shoulder that was holding his body up was throbbing and now his shins did as well. “How did you find us?”

Reid shook his head. “You grabbed us.”

“You got too close.”

“To what?” Reid groaned, a searing pain shot into his head. His head pounded. What kind of drug did they give us? “My head is throbbing.”

“Who else knows we are here?”

Reid shrugged, with his head pounding it was hard for him to concentrate.
“I’m not sure.”

Patrick sighed, turned toward Will and nodded.

Will gripped the metal pipe in his hands until his knuckles turned white, crossed the room and jabbed the bar twice into Reid’s stomach. He yelped, the wind knocked out of him. He gulped for air.

“Hey,” Lyle screamed, he writhed around on the ground, willing the shackles that bound his hand to the back of the chair to break. “We’ll tell you.”

Patrick held his hand up, Will backed away from Reid.

“We were sent to find the DOCs, but not from the Raylites.”

Lyle noticed the glance between Will and the darker skinned man. Patrick didn’t flinch.

“From who?”

“A friend.” Reid took a deep breath, sweat trickled his brow.

“He was killed by the Raylites.” Lyle’s eyes met Patrick. “At least we think it was them.”

“Who was this friend?”

“Jerry Fields.”

Patrick's brows pinched together. He turned from Lyle and Reid to face the wall. He walked toward the windows, hands clasped behind his back, looking out into the sunlit yard.

A long, strenuous silence stretched out before the men in the room. Lyle watched Will, gauging his reaction, but he stood there as confused as Lyle.

"Dad?" Will finally spoke.

Patrick didn't respond. He didn't make a move.

"Did you know him?" Reid spoke up.

Patrick's head dropped, his gaze now on the floor. Slowly, he turned to face the rest of the room. "Jerry was one of my closest friends. We fought together. When he was discharged, I left to come here, and he stayed behind." Patrick smiled, reliving the moments. "He's the reason we made it this far. Every few months, he would drive down here to deliver supplies to us." Patrick took a deep breath, "Untie them."

"How do we know if they are telling the truth?" Will took a step forward.

Patrick glanced at his son, "Untie them."

Begrudgingly, Will stepped forward, slipped his pocket knife's blade under the straps that bound Reid and cut them loose. "You can untie your feet."

Will turned and began to unshackle Lyle. Once his hands were free, Lyle alternated rubbing each wrist. A bright tomato-red imprint circled his wrist. Will

pulled the unlocked shackles from around Lyle's ankles before tossing them to the side.

"Thanks." Lyle stood.

"Don't thank me. If it was up to me, you'd still be shackled, and I'd still be beating you." Will walked back over the desk and took his place next to the older man who'd barely spoken. Instead, he watched. His dark eyes seemed to take in every person, every movement, and every shared glance in the room.

"Do you know where the DOCs are?" Lyle kept his eyes trained on Patrick.

Without hesitation, Patrick smiled. "Even better."

Patrick walked passed Lyle and Reid and out the back door of the room.

Lyle glanced over at Reid, who shrugged in return.

"You should follow him." The man with the accent spoke as he made his way across the room and ushered Lyle and Reid out of the circular room into a narrow hall.

Patrick was walking eight yards ahead of the others down a long stretch of hall stained by the elements over the years. It was obvious that the house had once been an immaculate structure, one with very little flaws. The tiled floor was cracked in some places, shattered in others, or was missing entire chunks. A large stairwell rose up deep into the large entryway. The steps were a sleek, dingy marble. Small foundational slits in the wall slipped up toward the ceiling. A

small hole could be found directly above the stairs, which was the reason a large silver bucket was placed on one of the steps under the whole.

For how decrepit and run down the foundation of the building seemed to be, there was a cleanliness to it. Despite its age, it was still being taken care of. Still being lived in.

Lyle heard faint murmurs reverberate off the crisp walls and dance into his ears. Reid was keeping pace with Lyle and heard the voices at the same time. He glanced behind him, but only found the foreign man and Will.

Patrick pushed two oversized oak doors open, sunlight streamed in. The voices grew louder, closer. The sun rays were so menacing that Lyle could not make out the shadows that loomed on the lawn in front of the porch until he stepped outside. A large, well-maintained garden was taking up a good chunk of the yard to the right of the porch. A half-constructed wooden structure sat to the left of the porch. Due to the lack of walls, Lyle could see three people inside working. One was in front of a firepit stirring something in a large pot, one woman was cutting vegetables, and one was washing dishes.

A handful of children ran around the yard throwing a ball, their shouts and giggles of delight filled the open air. A group of men and women were throwing knives at targets, while another group sat off to the side cleaning their guns. Every single person was dressed in the same gray pullover that Patrick, Will, and

the other captors wore. A few curious eyes forgot about the task they had been completing and now looked at the newcomers. Lyle and Reid stayed close together.

“This is the district.”

Lyle stepped off the porch and into the soft green grass. He turned around to look at the building he had just come out of. A large white balcony hung overhead, most of the railing surrounding it was gone. A crown the shape of a dome sat on the top of the large house, yet half the dome was missing. The whole left side of the house was missing, but bits and pieces of the structure remained intact.

Reid focused on the tallest structure on the horizon. It was a rectangle, as white as the house behind him. The tower stretched toward the sky. Bite marks seemed to be taken out in a dozen places. A large hole had been blown into the very top. It was then, looking at the structure, Reid noticed the oversized wall that loomed about half a mile away on all sides. The perimeter around the house was completely secured and closed off from the outside world. Despite the destruction that seemed to haunt the bones of every structure and memorial, the wall appeared unscathed. A thought loomed in the back of Reid’s mind: was the wall intended to only keep unwanted passerbys out or to keep their citizens in?

4

An increase of pressure woke Bridget up. She grunted as he eyes fluttered open. The man from before was back, his fingers pressed around the room.

“How are you feeling?” He asked, his eyes stayed trained on the wrapped wound.

“Better when I’m asleep.”

A small smile spread across the man’s face.

“Well the swelling isn’t increasing anymore, which is good.” The man pulled another syringe out of his pocket. “This may be your last steroid shot. We’ll have to see how you are in the morning.”

Bridget nodded.

“If you feel up to it, I can take you to chow. Your brother should be there.”

“Chow?”

“Dinner.” The man shrugged. “Or I can bring it to you here. Either way, you need to eat.”

Bridget nodded. “I think I can manage. Look,” Bridget swallowed, “I’m sorry about earlier.”

The man shook his head, “No need. Let’s just start over.”

“Bridget.” Bridget reached her hand forward. The man shook it.

“Neal.”

Neal slid the needle into the meat of Bridget’s stomach and pushed the syringe down in one quick motion, releasing the clear injection.

“You ready?”

Bridget reached her hands toward Neal. “Can you help me sit up?”

Neal grabbed her hands and pulled. Bridget groaned as she swung her legs over the side of the bed.

“You sure you’re ready?” Neal asked.

“I need to make sure Lyle is okay.” Bridget took a deep, calming breath.

“He’s fine.”

Bridget shook her head. “I need to see for myself.” She placed her feet on the ground and stood.

5

“I know these buildings.” Lyle’s mind was racing through the books, histories and the stories he had been told. His brain shuffled through the teachings his father gave about the history of their once great nation; back to when there was a pure house built for freedom. A house where the cherished elected president would live and guide the nation through all walks of life.

Lyle looked back at the single white tower that boasted toward the sky despite being a patchwork of what it was before the war. The tower was once a structure which embodied the eternal gratitude the once new and scrappy nation felt for one of the original founding members of society.

“The District of Columbia,” Lyle whispered.

“Nobody really calls it that anymore. Not since the city was evacuated sixty years ago. There’s not much pride to be had when the citizens flee instead of fight.”

Patrick began to walk toward the food tent.

“Was it evacuated when the population fled north?”

Patrick stopped walking and turned back to face Reid. He nodded. “When the war began the country protected this city because of the history. But history has no place in a country on the verge of having no future.” Patrick slid his hand around the back of his neck and squeezed. “The government stopped defending the history and moved to Nork to protect the future.”

“And you moved here.” Reid said.

Patrick chuckled. “Eventually. Understand that that doesn’t mean we are not set on protecting our future.”

Before the conversation could continue, Patrick turned and led Lyle and Redi to the food tent. There was a wooden bar nailed up between two of the

structural poles. The wooden bar was about four inches wide which left enough room for Patrick to rest his elbows against the bar.

The man washing dishes was the first one to stop working. He set the plate he had just finished scrubbing down on a drying rack before drying his hands on a towel that he had sticking out of his back pocket.

Now, looking at the man in the food tent, Lyle realized the distinct resemblance between him and the foreign bearded man inside the massive white house during their interrogation.

“This is Sam,” Patrick introduced, pointing to the man. “Yelli’s brother. Sam, this is Lyle and Reid.” Sam had the same brown skin and black beard that his brother sported. Sam gave Lyle and Reid a simple nod as the top half of his body bent slightly forward.

“Nice to meet you.” He spoke slowly, his voice soft. Lyle and Reid took turns extending their hands and shaking Sam’s.

A heavysset woman set down her chopping knife. She picked up handful after handful of chopped potato and placed them into a giant wooden bowl before handing it off to the woman stirring the large pot above the fire. Once free of her task, the heavysset woman turned her attention to the new arrivals. Her black hair was flaked with white specks. Her skin was almost as dark as her hair. She had

black granite eyes that shimmered in the afternoon sun. They shone with all the pain and loss she had faced getting to this point.

Lyle was keenly aware that every person in the compound had their own unspeakable truth. It was each unspeakable truth that bound this tribe tighter, their pain unified each individual like an interconnected heartline.

“I am Nyelli.” The woman stuck her hand out to shake Lyle’s. A thick accent

Lyle nodded. “Lyle. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Nyelli is who is to blame for my gut.”

“Oh, no!” Nyelli wagged her index finger back and forth. “I am not the one who comes back in line for seconds on the nights we have extra, nor am I the one that snacks throughout the day and night.”

Patrick let out a large guttural laugh. It was a laugh Lyle had not heard in years. The kind of laugh people save for when they are incandescently happy—a kind of happy that does not exist in Nork anymore.

6

Neal’s hand was now secured around Bridget’s waist after her unsuccessful attempt at walking on her own. They were rounding the exterior of the looming dingy-white house. Stretch marks down the outside of the wall led

the way. Bridget reached out and touched the interweaving fractures while her eyes stayed looking straight ahead. There was a curve in the building coming up. A low rustle of movement sounded from the green yard that loomed beyond the edge of the house.

“Not too much farther.” Neal was breathing quicker now. Bridget was relying on him to hold up half her body weight. Her bandaged stomach screeched in pain with every step she took. Fire torched the infected area. Bridget had to bite down on her lower lip to stop herself from screaming.

“I should have made you stay in bed.” Neal chuckled. “It would have been easier on both of us.”

As they turned the corner, Bridget’s breath caught in her throat. There were more people living here than she would have thought. They lived hidden and self-contained behind a large wall that circled the perimeter. The fresh smell of a home cooked meal lingered in the air, it was coming from the other side of the yard where—

“Lyle!” Bridget cried with all the strength she had left. She pushed off Neal, unable to contain the need to see her only living family member. “Lyle!” Bridget managed to take two large lunges on her own before, her legs gave out and she collapsed to the ground. A scream of pain erupted from her throat as her wound collided with the sodden ground.

Before she knew it, Lyle was beside her on his knees. He pulled her to his chest.

“Bridge. I’m here.” His heart thumped loudly against her head.

“Are you hurt?” Bridget screamed, her eyes scanning her brother’s face and chest.

Lyle shook his head. “No. I’m fine.”

For the first time since she woke up in the infirmary, Bridget cried. She let herself feel the overwhelming pain of Paul’s loss and the pain from a wound that still burned.

Lyle glanced up at Neal, who was still standing in the same place Bridget had left him.

Lyle nodded.

Neal returned the nod before making his way to the food hut.

Lyle ran her hand through Bridget’s hair.

“It’s okay. Shh.”

Her breathing steadied.

“Let’s get you up.” Lyle stood before wrapping his arm securely around Bridget’s waist and heaved her up to her feet. Her stomach burned.

“I don’t think I can walk anymore.” She whispered.

Lyle slipped one hand behind her knees and the other behind her shoulder before sweeping her off her feet, as he has done for years with his patients when they are unable to walk or climb into their beds. He made his way over to a cluster of picnic tables and placed her on one of the benches.

Reid appeared with three bowls balanced in his hands. He placed one in front of Bridget before setting the other two on the table.

He walked over to Bridget and slid his arms around her shoulders before planting a kiss on the top of her head. "Eat some grub. I may not be a doctor, but I know you need to get your strength back."

Bridget allowed her lip to pull back into a soft smile for the boy who had grown up as an extension of her family, despite the large one he had gone home to every night.

There was a small wooden box in the center of each picnic table for napkins and silverware. Bridget reached forward and grabbed a spoon. The soup was simple. Chicken and rice dotted with carrots.

Neal walked up to the table with a basket in one hand and a glass of water in the other. He first set the water down in front of Bridget,

"You need to keep taking in fluids."

"Thanks," she whispered.

“I really came over because Sam just pulled his famous sourdough from the fire, and the three of you have to try it.” He pulled three unevenly cut slices out of the basket and placed them on the table.

Lyle smiled, reaching for a chunk. “What’s your name?”

“Neal.”

“Thanks, Neal.” Reid nodded, reaching for his piece of fresh bread.

“Well, I better not keep the others from the fresh bread.” Neal turned and began passing out bread to the other community members who had begun congregating at the picnic tables with their steaming bowls of soup.

“Neal!” Lyle called as he pushed himself off the table. He crossed the space that stretched out between him and Neal.

Neal turned, not knowing what to expect.

“Thank you.” Lyle stretched out his hand. “For taking care of my sister. I—” Lyle shook his head, eyes began to burn. “I don’t know what I,” he shook his head. Lyle would not allow himself to say the words out loud.

“Don’t mention it.”

“Lyle, I see you met our own doctor.” Patrick gave Neal a pat on the shoulder.

“I wouldn’t call myself a doctor,” Neal shrugged. “but I do what I can.”

Reid joined the small circle. “Patrick, I’d like to ask you some questions.”

“About?”

Reid glanced over at Lyle, who spoke up. “About this place.”

Patrick and Neal exchanged a glance. “Later.” Patrick nodded, his eyes shifting between Reid and Lyle. “After the young ones go to bed. They don’t know about the war outside these walls, and we would prefer to keep it that way.”

“Later.” Lyle agreed and turned back toward the picnic table and ate his first meal in days.

7

After the sun had long since set, and the moon reigned as the ever-present watchmen as the world slept, the adults gathered in a circle around burning embers. The bright orange and reds swirled around the bottom of the manmade small pit. The colors danced, bouncing off each other every now and then. Each adult was warming their skin which was exposed to the cool summer breeze. Despite the large wall that surrounded the facility, the cold ocean breeze still wafted through the air and invaded closely guarded space.

The three wanderers sat in chairs nestled in between this strange group of people who had different accents, wore different colored skin, and spoke of peace.

Patrick broke the silence. Nobody knew how to begin.

“This community is one made of shared interests, patience, and love. Many of us were birthed on this very ground and grew up learning of the outside world through excursions and lessons.” Patrick glanced around the circle of his chosen family and smiled, “It’s in this place where Raylites and Sovrents became one.”

Lyle and Reid exchanged a glance. Bridget was trying her best to stay engaged and focused on what was going on around her, but between the drugs and how much her body needed to rest, she was having trouble enough just keeping her eyes open.

“Wait, Raylites and Sovrents?” Lyle’s eyes grew wide.

“How is that possible? After what the Sovrents did to us.” Reid spoke up, he moved his body to the edge of his seat.

“What did we do to you?” Yelli spoke up, his voice even and uninjured.

Reid scoffed, his tone exasperated. “You massacred thousands of our men in cold blood. That’s what started the war in the first place.”

“Sovrents tell a different tale.” Sam, Yelli’s brother, spoke quietly.

“Yeah? And what’s your *tale*?”

“The Raylites ransacked our villages, raped our wives, burned down homes. They left us with nothing and yet they still blame us for the start of the war. The war began because of your greed.”

Reid and Lyle exchanged a glance of disbelief. The truth as they had known it had now been put into question.

"Sovrents are not who you think they are, just like the Raylites were not who we thought they were," Yelli said.

"You're wrong," Lyle spat, his boiling blood turned his face a deep shade of pepper red. His voice rose. "My father was murdered by Sovrents on his way home to his three *children*."

"Are you sure it was the Sovrents?" Yelli's voice was still flat, his breaths were even and deep.

Lyle scoffed, "What? Yes, that's what the reports said."

"Reports written by..." Sam let his question saunter off as he lifted his hand questioningly in the air.

"Raylites, of course, but they tell the truth."

"The truth," Patrick chuckled. "The truth as the general sees it. Not the truth as how things happened."

"How is this possible? How did Raylites and Sovrents begin to live in peace?" Bridget finally spoke. She had spent the last few minutes listening in silence and trying to comprehend what was being said around her, all while attempting to stay conscious and fight the pain that radiated from her stomach.

Yelli and Sam looked to Patrick.

"Yelli." Patrick nodded.

Yelli cleared his throat. "Our father," he glanced at his brother, "was a Sovrent pilot. He mainly did recon missions over Nork. He tested your boundaries and defenses, but never dropped bombs or anything. My mother got word one day that his plane had been shot down, and he was thought of as dead in our village."

"What really happened to him?" Reid leaned forward, his elbows pressed against his knees for support.

"He was found and hidden away by a Raylite. He would have been killed if he had been found by anyone else."

"Who was the Raylite?"

"My father." Patrick spoke up. "He was able to keep him hidden for a couple weeks, but eventually the General finds out everything. My father was labeled a Sovrent spy, so they ran South. They found the DOCs abandoned and in bad shape. They started a life here, together."

"My father sent word home, and within a day my mom packed us all up on a boat and we sailed to the DOCs," Sam finished.

"Spies?" Reid sat up straighter. "That's the story I'm writing about now."

"You think spies are a new story?" Patrick scoffed. "Every story they tell you to write has been written before. The Generals keeps society on a constant loop."

"Why a loop?"

"To keep society from looking to the future," Yelli answered. "Instead, society is kept pushed back into a past they don't remember."

Patrick nodded. "If society never looks to the future then they will never demand change. They will never demand an end to the war."

"What's your plan?" Lyle asked.

"Plan?" Patrick held Lyle's gaze.

"Your plan to get society to begin to see the future."

Patrick shook his head, "That's not our job."

"So, what? You've created this safe haven where Raylites and Sovrents can live in harmony and that's it?" Lyle stood. "What's the point? What good are you doing for the war?"

"My desire is to keep my people safe, not to end the war."

"Why can't it be both? Eventually, this place will be found, and then what? How will you keep your family safe against an army of thousands?"

Patrick stood up and took the three steps that separated him and Lyle.

"You can not speak to me that way in my home. If you think—"

“He’s right.” A deep voice joined the conversation. Lyle glanced over to find Will as he rose out of his seat.

“Take your seat, son,” Patrick ordered.

“No.” Will shook his head. “Lyle is right. If we aren’t trying to bring peace to the world, then what’s the point? We live in constant fear of being found. We take turns posting up at the wall by the road, waiting for soldiers to appear. That’s not living.” Will’s voice grew louder and more resolve as he spoke. “We deserve to *live* in peace, not just hide.”

“I will not send my men out there to be slaughtered.”

“Nobody is asking you to,” Lyle explained. “They can choose for themselves.”

Patrick shook his head, “No.” And with that final syllable, Patrick left the circle and made his way to the grand house where the children slept soundly.

8

Yelli and Neal stood outside the large oak door balanced on one hinge. They knocked.

“Come in.” A soft voice came from the other side of the door. Yelli swung the door open and stepped into the oval room. Patrick was seated behind the

large desk on the opposite side of the room. His feet were propped up on the desk, his gaze focused on the ceiling.

“What is it?” Patrick asked.

Yelli and Neal each took a seat on one of two couches that sat facing each other in the center of the room.

“We should talk,” Neal stated slowly.

Patrick sighed. “I’m not going to be okay with sending men beyond those walls.”

“How long have we been friends?” Neal questioned.

Patrick rolled his eyes. “Thirty years—ever since you were born.”

“And how long have we been friends?”

“Ever since I was born. Is there a point to this?”

“We’ve known you the longest. Been friends with you the longest.” Neal continued, “So believe us when we tell you that this change is a good one. You said it yourself, our numbers are growing rapidly, which means this space won’t be able to house us forever.”

“Do you remember when Will ran away to become a soldier?” Patrick said quietly as he stood, made his way over to a couch, and took a seat next to Neal.

The two men nodded.

“He came back with nightmares. Nightmares that took control of him.”

“We know.” Neal nodded.

Patrick shook his head, “What you don’t know is that one night he had one of his spells and came into Alana and my bedroom. His mom tried to calm him down, but he grabbed her...” Patrick took a deep breath. “I was in here reading so that I didn’t disturb Alana. I heard her screams.” Patrick stood and began pacing around the couches. “I made it to the roof in time to see Will dangling Alana over the wall. She was pleading with him and he was demanding her to tell her where she had taken his men. I screamed at him to wake up, to stop, and right before I got to him...” Patrick ran a hand through his hair.

“He dropped his mom to her death and he doesn’t remember a single thing.”

“You told everyone she lost her balance.”

Patrick nodded. “To protect Will. I thought if he knew then he would be lost to us forever. All Alana wanted was for him to get better, so I did what she would’ve told me to do. I lied about her death.”

“You should’ve told us, Pat.”

“That’s a big secret to bear on your own,” Neal said.

Patrick’s eyes were red-rimmed. “That is why I can’t allow Will to go. Who knows how he’ll react? He’s finally found a way to bury those memories and now he wants to run back out there and create more?”

“Will is going to do what he’s going to do. He’s always been a stubborn kid.” Yelli pointed out. “But that doesn’t mean he can’t have protection from himself.”

Patrick glanced at Yelli. “What are you saying?”

“Neal and I will go. We’ll watch out for them. For Will.”

“I can’t ask the two of you to risk your lives.”

“The kids are right, Pat, this isn’t living. We can’t stay hidden away forever.”

Patrick nodded. “I will protect our family here.”

Yelli smiled. “We know.”

9

Bridget woke an hour later, her head rested on Lyle’s shoulder. The embers in the fire pit were still glowing a deep reddish-orange. Only four remained around the circle. Reid, Will, and Lyle were deep in a conversation.

“I can train you,” Will was saying, “I’ve been through the Raylite training. I know how they think and the tactics they use.”

“We shouldn’t rush into this,” Reid stated. “If we want to succeed, we need to be smart and patient.”

“Spoken like a true soldier.” Yelli appeared before them. Neal was a few paces behind.

“My father isn’t happy, is he?” Will asked half-heartedly.

“He’s just scared, Will, but he’s allowing it.”

“We’ve decided to join you,” Neal said.

Yelli shrugged. “We figured an experienced fighter like myself and Neal would be useful.”

“And Neal?” Neal glanced over at Yelli gave him a pat on the back, “Thanks, bud.”

“We were talking about training.” Reid glanced over at Yelli, “You could help us with that.”

Yelli nodded. “Yes, I will. The new year will be upon us in four months. That is when we will strike.”

“A new year, a new society.”

“The end of the war.”

“I will start training when I can.” Bridget spoke.

Lyle nodded. “You focus on getting better and then we’ll see.”

Bridget looked among the five men that surrounded her. The five men that would begin their training to change the course of the war, and she knew they would. They were safe inside a sanctuary they could call home, and that was

enough. It would continue to be enough until the wind decided to blow them back home up north, until Nork was ready to be saved.

VITA

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