

WEST POST GUARD

Fallenspring

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To Raven and Nick,
For teaching me chosen family.

1

Sixteen years after the world ended, three children played a game of baseball together outside of Dr. Worth's house in West Post. The cold was bracing, but nothing the children weren't used to. Dr. Worth's child, Daniel, stood up to the plate while Leo pitched the ball to Faye.

"Ready, Daniel?"

"Yeah, do your worst!" they replied.

Leo raised his knee and hurled the ball perfectly into the strike zone. Daniel swung a second too late as the ball zoomed past them into Faye's ancient glove.

"Daniel," Leo groaned, "you gotta try harder."

"I'm trying my best!" they exclaimed.

Faye casually tossed the ball back to Leo, who shook his head.

"Well, you get two more chances," Leo said.

Daniel nodded. Leo shifted his weight and lobbed another identical pitch. Daniel adjusted their swing and made contact with the ball, popping it straight up. They smiled widely as they ran toward the base. Faye bolted toward the ball and effortlessly caught it mid-air. Daniel frowned. Faye walked over to Daniel and tapped them with his glove.

"Out," Faye said.

"Yeah, I know," they said.

Dr. Worth opened the back door. She smiled at the children as they turned toward her.

"Leo! Your mother's medicine is ready!" Dr. Worth said, holding a paper bag aloft.

Leo tossed the ball to Daniel, who fumbled and nearly dropped it. Running up to Dr. Worth, Leo smiled at her.

"Thanks!" Leo said. "See you next week!"

Dr. Worth smiled.

"You kids take care now, okay?" she said.

"You too, Dr. Worth!" replied Leo as he and Faye took off into a run.

"Not a doctor, kiddo," she said, shaking her head with a smile.

"Close enough!" Leo shouted back.

"Bye, Leo! Bye, Faye!" Daniel called out.

Leo and Faye dashed up the cracked asphalt streets of West Post toward Leo's house on the outskirts of town. The icy air lashed out at the boys' laughing faces as they ran towards the hot springs managed by Mr. Johnson.

"Hey, Leo! Faye!" Mr. Johnson called out. "Here to pick up a bottle for your folks?"

"Yes," Faye replied politely. "Are they ready?"

"They're right here," Mr. Johnson answered. "Now, don't break them because your families only get one a week."

"We know, we know!" Leo whined.

"We'll be careful," Faye nodded.

"How old are you two again?" Mr. Johnson asked, using hand gestures to levitate each of them one glass bottle of hot spring water.

"Nine and a half!" Leo declared.

"Then I'll round Faye up to ten and Leo down to nine."

"Now you—" Leo began, taking a step forward.

Faye launched forward to restrain Leo from throwing punches and dragged him backwards toward their homes.

"We'll be going, Mr. Johnson. Thank you," said Faye.

Mr. Johnson let out a hearty laugh.

"I'll see you kids later!"

Leo wriggled out of Faye's restraint and growled before following Faye back home.

"You should've let me at him," Leo sulked.

"Mr. Johnson's twice your height and three times your weight."

"Doesn't matter. He was being a jerk, and someone needs to teach him a lesson."

"And that has to be you?"

"If that's what it takes!"

The children arrived at Leo's and Faye's homes, next door to each other on the outskirts of West Post.

"Cool, see ya tomorrow, Faye," Leo said, stepping towards his family's house.

Faye frowned and looked at the ground.

"Yeah, see you tomorrow," he replied.

Leo opened the front door to his house and was immediately embraced by his father.

"Leo! My boy, I'm glad you're back safe."

"Dad!" Leo protested. "I'm fine. We were just getting Mom's medicine and the water."

Leo's father pulled away enough to rest two powerful hands on Leo's shoulders.

"Never take time with the people you love for granted, son. If my years on the Guard taught me anything, it was that." He looked toward Faye. "Faye, you come on in as well."

"Oh, uh, yes sir." Faye replied, jogging up to the father and son.

"I don't know who you're calling sir, but as long as we can borrow you for dinner, I'll take it. I already let your parents know. Don't worry."

"Thank you, sir," Faye said.

"C'mon, Faye, let's go to my room," Leo said, grabbing Faye's hand.

Faye followed behind Leo. With a laugh, Leo's father called out after them.

"Put the meds and water on the kitchen table on your way up to your room, okay? I'll pour the water into the generator in a moment."

"Yeah yeah, will do," Leo groaned back.

Leo's mother, who was sitting at the kitchen table finishing peeling a potato, smiled as Leo dropped off the medicine and bottle.

"Thank you, Leo." She gave him a kiss on the forehead. "And as always, it's wonderful to see you, Faye."

"Nice to see you, too, Mrs. Scarlett," Faye answered.

"Dinner will be ready in about an hour, sweetie. You boys can relax and play until then."

"We're too old to 'play,' Mom," Leo announced.

"No such thing, young man," She responded, tousling his hair. "Finding joy in life doesn't have a thing to do with age. You remember that, too, Faye."

"Yes, Mrs. Scarlett."

"Always so polite." She frowned. "I think you two are good for each other, though. You balance each other out."

Faye blushed bright red. Leo tugged him towards the stairs.

"See you at dinner, Mom. Love you."

"Love you, too, sweetie!"

Upstairs, Leo and Faye sat on the floor next to each other. Leo tugged his comforter off of his bed to keep warm now that they weren't running anymore.

"My parents are so embarrassing," Leo said.

"That's because they love you," Faye replied, leaning against him.

"Yeah, that's why it's embarrassing," Leo pulled the cover over Faye. "I get my mom being like that, but my dad? He was on the Guard for years. One of five people who's ever come back after leaving West Post. He said he saw these deer that could change color to match their surroundings and bears that could knock down trees. He faced all of that and he comes back all mushy and soft?"

Faye leaned his head on Leo's shoulder.

"What's wrong with that, Leo?"

"I don't know. It just doesn't seem like something a hero would do."

"Always about heroes with you."

"It's what we need! Nobody here besides my dad and his squadron has ever left West Post. Not since the Impact. We get radio transmissions from the other posts sometimes, but we don't know nearly anything about the world anymore. Before the Impact, they said there were these things that connected the entire planet and we could take pictures of everywhere from space. Now look where we are," Leo sighed. "I just don't get what the point is. We're the last living people after a mass extinction, and we're just gonna cower in West Post and hope it gets better? No, we need someone to turn things around."

"And that has to be you?"

"You keep saying that."

"You keep bringing it up," Faye said softly, nodding off.

Leo leaned back against the wall, the sun barely peeking through the windows.

"I'm gonna show all of you," Leo softly declared.

Faye snored softly as Leo looked out through the window. The woods on the border of town were within Leo's line of sight from his room. Occasionally, Leo could make out the outlines of the creatures that lived there. Especially the ones that glowed. The Post Guard was stationed between the house and the woods, so Leo always felt safe when he spotted a soldier on the patrol nearby. As if on command, a member of the Guard stepped into view. Leo smiled.

"I'll join the Guard, change the world, and become a hero."

In a blur of purple motion and a fraction of a scream, the soldier fell to the ground and the surrounding ground looked darker and wet. Leo

felt a cold sweat on his neck as his eyes opened wider. As Leo's heart rate rose, Faye rubbed his eyes.

"What's wrong, Leo?" Faye asked.

"Something just killed a Guard soldier so fast I couldn't even see it."

Faye sat up in attention.

"What kind of thing?" he asked.

"I don't know. I didn't even see it. The soldier was there, then there was a purple blur, and then he was down on the ground bleeding out."

Faye jerked Leo to his feet and bolted out the door.

"Mr. Scarlett!" Faye called out, uncharacteristically loud and clear. "There's trouble with the Guard."

Leo's father rushed over to Faye, his eyes focused and steady.

"What happened?" Leo's father asked calmly.

"Leo said he saw a Guard soldier on patrol go down. He's bleeding out by the woods."

Leo's father nodded.

"Thank you, Faye." He turned to his wife, who was rushing over. "Millie, take Leo and Faye to Dr. Worth and stay there overnight. Something's in the woods."

"But Tyson—" Millie objected.

"Go with them and keep them safe. I love you."

Leo's father gave Millie a kiss and ran to grab his rifle as the children and Millie put on their shoes and jackets.

"On three, I'll open the door and clear the area. When I say go, run. Faye, I will warn your family and tell them to meet you at Dr. Worth's. Okay?"

Faye nodded in understanding. Millie nodded weakly, tears sliding down her face. Leo tried to speak, but nothing came out.

"It's time to be brave, my son. I know you'll keep each other safe, and then I'll meet you back at Dr. Worth's place. I love you all." Tyson took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "One, two, three!"

Tyson kicked open the door and prepared to shoot, surveying the street ahead of him. The air was silent.

He took three steps forward and, seeing nothing, forcefully whispered, "Go!"

Faye strode forward, clutching the hands of Leo and Millie behind him to pull them along. Leo turned his face to look back at his father and sighed in relief when he put down his gun. Leo turned back forward to keep up with Faye when he heard a woman's scream coming from the Guard station. It was followed by four more screams.

Leo and his mother stopped in their tracks to look backward, and Faye could not drag them forward.

"We have to run. Mr. Scarlett said so," Faye said calmly.

As Leo and his mother turned around, they heard a gunshot and saw something taller than Leo's father hit the ground in front of him. It was dark violet, furry, and covered in blood from its fangs to its claws. Tyson turned toward them, and for the first time, his eyes shot open in horror at seeing that his family had stopped running.

"Run!" he shouted. "I'll cover you! Get the children out of here to somewhere safe!"

Faye tugged hard on Leo and Millie's hands to get them moving, but the two of them froze in their tracks.

"We have to go," Faye insisted, voice still calm.

Millie sobbed as she turned forward to run. Leo began running as well, but kept his eyes on his father as he fired off another round, downing another creature. Leo watched his father reload, only to collapse to the ground in another purple blur.

"Dad!" Leo screamed, wrenching his hand from Faye's grip as tears coursed down his face.

Millie froze and stood motionless, watching as her husband bled out into the earth from his neck. Leo began running toward his father. Panicking, Faye lost control of his breathing and composure while trying to form a plan of what to do.

"Leo!" Faye screamed.

Leo could not see through his own tears and only trusted that he was heading in the right direction. Suddenly, he felt a wall of air hit him before being hurled backward and down to the ground. He felt claws gash into his forearms as they pinned him to the ground. His vision cleared just enough to see a creature with all white eyes, an elongated snout like a wolf, and canine fangs dripping blood onto his face. Its foul breath beat into him from its open mouth.

"Leo!" shouted Millie.

"Mom," whispered Leo back.

Leo's mother charged towards her son, and Faye cursed as he followed her.

"No," Leo whispered, "stay with Faye."

The creature brought its mouth down slowly to Leo's neck, then stopped for a few seconds. Leo struggled against the creature but could get no leverage. He thought of all the heroic deeds he would never accomplish now and all the things he would never get to say to

his mother or father. And as the creature hesitated, he whispered one last regret.

"I wish I had stayed with Faye."

In that moment, Leo's vision went black. He heard a loud pop, and suddenly he felt himself upright and in motion. He opened his eyes to see Faye beside him and the creature in front of him. Leo tripped and fell forward onto the ground. Faye startled to attention at the sight of Leo in Mrs. Scarlett's place. Faye ran to Leo, picked him up off the ground, and took one final look back at Millie Scarlett on the ground where Leo had just been one moment ago. Her face was a war between terror and confusion, but seeing Leo and Faye far away, she smiled.

"Run, boys!" she shouted. "Don't turn around until you reach Dr. Worth!"

Faye yanked Leo forward and sprinted toward Dr. Worth's house. Leo's head spun violently, and his footsteps would not fall in a straight line. Even when he heard his mother's scream, he could not turn around to see her. Instead, the boys ran toward the center of the city, Faye as the eyes and driving engine for both of them as cries began increasing in frequency behind them.

As they entered the more densely populated areas of West Post, others of all ages began running alongside them. Faye steered them towards the edge of the crowd to avoid being trampled. They wove their way through the city to where they had been instructed to go. Faye pounded on the door of Dr. Worth, who opened it immediately and scooped the boys inside with no need for explanation.

"We'll talk in the basement. Daniel's already down there. Hide there until I say it's safe to come out."

Faye nodded once, pulled Leo to the stairs, and ushered him slowly down them. Daniel stood up from huddling in a corner to grab them in an embrace.

"Leo, Faye. What is happening out there? Oh no, Leo, we need to bandage up your arms." Daniel gathered bandages and disinfectant to tend Leo's wounds. "But seriously, what happened?"

"West Post is under attack," Faye responded calmly.

"By what?" Daniel asked, cleaning the punctures on Leo's forearms.

Leo, having heard all of this in a daze, answered weakly, "Wolves."

2

A few minutes later, Dr. Worth joined the three children and barricaded the door with a thick wooden plank through two metal loops on either side of the door frame. She inspected Leo's wounds and smiled at Daniel.

"You do good work, Daniel," she said.

"Not as good as you, mom," Daniel replied.

"Well, I kind of cheat."

Dr. Worth placed a hand on either end of the bandages on Leo's left arm. Closing her eyes, a faint golden glow emanated from between her hands. The bleeding halted, the tissues came back together, and the pain stopped. She repeated the process on Leo's right arm.

"Okay, boys," she said calmly. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"A soldier on patrol went down by the woods. We told Mr. Scarlett, who took down a couple of beasts who appear to be the ones attacking West Post now."

"Beasts?" she asked.

"Large furry, dark purple creatures with fangs and claws. One of them pinned Leo to the ground."

Dr. Worth's eyes widened.

"Then how did you escape, Leo?"

"I—I don't know," Leo answered.

"One moment he was on the ground pinned by a creature, the next he was right beside me where Mrs. Scarlett was. And she was on the ground pinned instead."

Dr. Worth nodded and exhaled slowly. Daniel recognized something in her eyes.

"Mom, do you know what happened?"

Dr. Worth chuckled at her child's insight, but then her smile weighed heavily on her face.

"You three know about magic. Lots of folks in town have had it ever since the Impact. I can heal, for instance. I think Leo may have just discovered his magic."

"Wait, really?" Daniel asked, a little too excitedly.

Dr. Worth crouched down to be eye-to-eye with Leo and asked him softly, "Leo, did you do or say anything right before you moved out of being pinned?"

"I said, 'I wish I had stayed with Faye,' and then I wasn't there anymore."

Dr. Worth sighed.

"I'm sure you don't need one more big thing to happen to you tonight, Leo, but I think you might have magic to switch places with people."

"You mean," Leo hesitated, "I was the one who did that?"

"It's possible." Said the doctor.

A realization washed over Leo like a wave threatening to sweep him off into the sea.

"So I killed my mom," Leo said.

"No," Dr. Worth answered firmly. "The creature did. I don't know why, but it has nothing to do with you."

"But if I hadn't switched places, she wouldn't have been pinned." Leo's voice rose in pitch and speed.

"You had no way of knowing that would happen." Dr. Worth started crying. "Leo, this is a tragedy, but it is not your fault."

"I lost my dad. I lost my mom," Leo said as the pressure thrust words out of his mouth. "They both protected me, and all I did was complain about them until I fed them to the Wolves."

Dr. Worth threw her arms around Leo, crying.

"Leo, there's no way for you to understand this now, but there is nothing good parents want more than for their children to live. I know Tyson and Millie, and they would say you did the right thing. They would be relieved to know you got here."

Leo's arms hung limply at his sides. Daniel wept and hugged their friend. Faye held Leo's hand in both of his and brought it to rest against his nose. Dr. Worth pulled away slightly to look at Faye.

"Oh no. Faye, what about your family?"

"I don't know," Faye responded flatly. "Mr. Scarlett was going to warn them, but then he—"

Dr. Worth pulled Faye into the hug as he trailed off.

"You did a good job, Faye. You did exactly the right thing, and now both you and Leo are alive. I'm proud of you both."

The four silently held each other for a few more minutes as the screaming outside continued. Dr. Worth nervously looked up the stairs toward the door.

"You three stay here, but I have to go back up there and tend to the wounded."

"No, Mom!" Daniel cried, tugging at her sweater sleeve under her white coat. "You can't go up there."

"Keeping you three safe is my top priority right now, but also, it's my job as a healer to help whoever I can. And there's gonna be a lot of people who need my help."

"I know that, but—" Daniel hesitated. "Let me help, too."

"No. I know you want to help, but I can't let you do that."

"Mom, I can't lose you."

A steady stream of tears spouted from Dr. Worth's eyes as she put her hands on her child's shoulders.

"And I can't lose you," she cried. "Which is why you need to stay here and take care of Leo and Faye. I promise you I will come back, Daniel."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what. I love you." She reassured them with a kiss on Daniel's forehead. "Now you three stay here and don't open the door until I do the secret knock. Daniel, teach them the secret knock. We're gonna get through this, so just be there for each other, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am," Faye answered with a salute.

Dr. Worth smiled sadly back at him before removing the barricade from the door, carefully opening it with her handgun ready, and entering the ground floor. She closed the door behind her, and Faye replaced the barricade. The three children heard a muffled version of Dr. Worth talking to someone. Relieved to hear her calm voice and the sounds of medical equipment, Daniel settled onto an ancient couch in the basement. They handed Leo and Faye a blanket.

"We're gonna be here a while. Might as well be cozy."

Faye nodded, took the blanket, and wrapped it around him and Leo, who was shaking.

"Can I get another, Daniel? I think Leo's shivering."

"I'm not cold," Leo said.

"But you're shaking," Faye said.

"I don't need to be coddled!" Leo shouted.

Faye shrunk away from him in fear. Leo softened in surprise and grabbed his left elbow in embarrassment.

"What I want is to be stronger," Leo whispered. "So that people around me don't have to protect me. I also don't want magic that's only good for running away. I want to be a hero. And yes, Faye, it has to be me."

"Why?" Faye asked, hurt.

"Because," Leo said even softer, "I'm the one people died to protect. I have to make that worth it somehow."

Faye and Daniel exchanged uncertain looks at each other.

"Then I want to be a hero, too," Faye said. "So I can fight beside you."

"So do I," Said Daniel. "I want to be stronger, too. I know everyone thinks I'm just a weakling who's smart, but I want to be more than just a brain. I want to be a hero, too."

"Then I guess we're all gonna be heroes," Leo said. "Together."

Leo placed a hand toward the other two. Daniel and Faye placed their hands on top of his.

"Then I guess this is a pact," Daniel smiled.

"Yes," Leo agreed, "To become heroes to save the world."

The three children dipped their hands down and raised them up. Leo smiled.

Even as the city quieted, upstairs buzzed with panicked and pained survivors. The children heard Dr. Worth calmly directing where to place the injured. They heard the generator outside being started and the electric lights switched on soon after.

The children did not sleep at all that night, and neither did the doctor. As the sun peeked through the windows, the generator shut off and a rhythmic set of six knocks came through the basement door. Daniel nodded. Leo removed the barricade that was too heavy for Daniel to lift. Leo opened the door to see an exhausted doctor, who Daniel ran up to hug and nearly knocked over.

"Easy there, Sweetie," she said, a warm smile defying the fatigue written across her face. "Promised I'd be back."

Daniel sobbed quietly as they walked their wobbling mother slowly down the stairs. At the bottom, she collapsed onto the couch and motioned for everyone to gather around.

"Alright," she began, "I won't sugarcoat this, you three. Last night was awful for West Post. Word is that everyone unfortunate enough to

be caught outside between the Guard's station and the hot springs was killed by the—what did you call them, Leo?"

"Wolves."

"That's as good a name as any. Kids, the Wolves took over 50 lives last night in total. A handful more were trampled in the panic. I mostly healed those injured by the stampede of fleeing citizens. Very few witnessed the wolves and lived to tell the tale." Dr. Worth looked at Faye and her eyes watered as her voice broke. "Faye, when the wolves were confirmed to have left, I asked the Guard to check your home. There was nobody there."

Faye nodded.

"If they were in a shelter somewhere, you wouldn't talk like this," said Faye.

Dr. Worth stared at him in shock, then looked away.

"Yes," she said, "I radioed everywhere I could think to ask."

"Thank you, Dr. Worth," Faye said.

Surprised, she turned back to Faye. She placed a hand on his shoulder, and then the other on Leo's.

"Boys, you can stay here as long as you'd like," She said. "As long as you're okay with that, Daniel."

"Of course," Daniel replied.

Dr. Worth smiled proudly at her child before her face turned grim once again.

"I wish I could make things right for you two. I don't know what lies in store for you. But I will be here for you as best as I can. And you have each other." She hugged them both, then motioned for Daniel to join them. "I pray that will be enough for all of us."

Leo, Faye, Daniel, and Dr. Worth lived together for the next three years. After two weeks, Faye stopped checking the bulletin board at the general store to see if his parents' names had moved from the missing column. With the loss of most of the trained Guard, a draft randomly selected new recruits from everyone 15 years or older. Children as young as 12 could also enter training to become soldiers upon their 15th birthday. Even with no wolves sighted in those three years, the city lived in perpetual fear it could happen again.

"I'm joining the Guard," Leo announced upon his 12th birthday at the dinner table.

Dr. Worth dropped her fork.

"Leo," she said, failing to remain calm, "I know you want to help,

but there are other ways to—”

“I’m going to be like my father, Dr. Worth. And you can’t stop me.”

Dr. Worth opened her mouth to speak, but faltered. Sighing, she looked back up at him.

“No, I can’t imagine I could stop you,” she admitted. “What about you, Faye?”

“I’m joining as well,” he replied.

With another long sigh, Dr. Worth picked her fork back up.

“I’m joining, too,” Daniel replied.

Dr. Worth’s fork fell from her hand again as her eyes dilated.

“No!” she shouted, standing up from the table and shocking everyone.

“Why do they get to join, but I don’t?” Daniel protested.

“Because I am your mother, and—” she froze in place.

“What is it, Mom? Were you going to say you don’t care about orphans or that you think I’m too weak to join the Guard?”

“That’s enough!” she shouted.

Her volume surprised even herself, and she took a step back from the table. She massaged the back of her neck, conflicted and terrified.

“Mom,” Daniel said gently, “this is what I want to do.”

“I can’t lose you,” she whispered. “None of you.”

Daniel stood up to hold his mother’s hand in both of his.

“And I can’t lose you,” they whispered. “Which is why I need to be there to make sure that West Post is safe. I promise you I will come back, Mom.”

Dr. Worth choked on her words as she sobbed.

“No matter what?” she asked.

“No matter what. I love you.” they answered.

“I love you, too.”

The two embraced each other. Faye tugged on Leo’s shirt sleeve, and they nodded to each other.

“We’ll look after them, too, Dr. Worth. They’re our family, too,” said Leo.

Dr. Worth rubbed her eyes with her sleeve to dry the tears.

“All of you, look out for each other,” she said. “Remember, what is your greatest resource?”

“Hope.” Daniel replied immediately.

Dr. Worth smiled. She reached down to tousle their hair but changed her mind to place a hand on their shoulder instead.

“That’s right. You can only make the future by believing it will

come." She paused. "And so I believe you three will come back to me safe and sound. I will be here for that day."

She beckoned for Leo and Faye to join her and Daniel in the hug, and the four held on tight.

3

When the 4th Post Guard Cadet Corps officially accepted new recruits four weeks later, Leo, Faye, and Daniel walked to the Guard station together. Leo and Faye passed by their homes for the first time since the attack. Leo's sight did not waver from the Guard station, and Faye's did not waver from Leo. When the three arrived, they received cadet uniforms. Daniel hesitated at the entrance to the men's locker room for a moment before Faye gently ushered them in together.

There was one person already in the locker room. He stood two heads taller than even Faye, stood up straight, and had already put on his uniform except for his jacket. He turned to look at the three. His square jaw settled into a kind smile.

"Are you new recruits, too?" he asked.

"You're new?" Daniel blurted out. "Are you really 12?"

The boy laughed and displayed the green jacket of a cadet recruit.

"I get that a lot," he replied. "But yes, turned 12 two weeks ago. Name's Zenith."

Daniel stared up at him in disbelief.

"I'm Leo." Said Leo, extending a hand towards Zenith.

Zenith smiled and shook his hand firmly but considerately. Daniel shook his head to clear his mind.

"Sorry, I'm Daniel. And this is Faye."

"Nice to meet you all!" Zenith said. "I'm glad I'm not the only guy here."

Daniel shifted uncomfortably.

"You met other cadets?" Leo asked.

"Yeah, two girls," Zenith answered. "They went to the other locker room before I got their names. Guess we'll find out later."

"Six recruits," Faye assessed. "Not much for a corps."

Zenith's eyes focused on Faye, measuring him up.

"Maybe more people will come later?" Daniel suggested.

"We'll see, I guess," Leo said.

Zenith put on his jacket as Leo and Faye undressed. Daniel reluctantly followed their lead.

"I'm headed out to the drill field," Zenith said, shutting his locker. "If you guys have questions, let me know. I know a lot about the Guard. See ya out there!"

"Thanks, Zenith!" Daniel called out quietly.

The three changed into uniform and took the back door Zenith used to join him on the Drill Field. Two girls stood at attention in line with Zenith. One had blond hair and piercing green eyes, and the other had curly black hair that defied the ponytail it had been coaxed into. Leo, Faye, and Daniel joined them in line next to the blond girl.

"Hi, I'm Daniel," they said, extending a hand towards their neighbor in line.

The girl continued to look straight ahead. Daniel chuckled awkwardly.

"I said, I'm—"

"We're at attention. This is no time to speak," she said.

"I'm Conifer!" the other girl said with a smile and a wave.

"Did you not hear what I just said?" said the girl, still staring straight ahead.

"There's nobody here yet!" Conifer said. "What, do we spend the rest of our lives at attention now?"

"Correct," announced a young man in a pressed, black uniform walking toward them.

The six preteens straightened up, faced forward, and locked their fists at their sides.

"You are at attention at all times unless told to be at ease, at which point you will still stay alert," explained the officer. "Such is the life of a Post Guard soldier. If you are not ready to do that, I strongly urge you to leave now."

The icy wind whistled in the dead silence.

"Very well." The officer nodded, pacing up and down the rank of soldiers. "I am Sergeant Wells. You will address me as such. If you prove yourselves worthy today, you will enter the 4th Post Guard Cadet Corps to train for three years and serve your community as watchmen, protectors, and perhaps even leaders. But don't get cocky

yet."

Reaching the end of the line opposite Leo, the officer looked Zenith up and down.

"Cadet Candidate," Sergeant Wells commanded.

"Yes, Sergeant Wells!" Zenith answered.

"Cadet Candidate, your name."

"Zenith Braun, Sir!"

"You certainly possess brawn. We will see about brains in due time. Why are you here, Cadet Candidate?"

"To serve my community in times of crisis, Sir!"

"A rehearsed answer. A military answer. Are you related to Former Colonel Braun by chance?"

"That is my father, Sir!"

"Don't think that will earn you any favors, Cadet Candidate."

"No, Sir!"

Sergeant Wells snorted and shook his head, moving down the line.

"Cadet Candidate, your name," he commanded.

"Conifer Sato, Sir!" she shouted.

Sergeant Wells shook his head at the volume.

"You could wake the dead with that voice. We may find a use for that. Why are you here, Cadet Candidate?"

"To provide for my family, Sir!"

"An honest answer, but a stupid one. You'd do better to work in a kitchen or mopping floors and save your family the funeral costs while you're at it."

"I want to protect my family as well, Sir!"

"Do not get it twisted, Cadet Candidate. You protect all of West Post. That is where your duty lies."

"Yes, Sir!"

Sergeant Wells sighed.

"Do not disappoint me, Cadet Candidate."

"No, Sir!"

Moving down the line, Sergeant Wells approached the blond girl.

"State your name, Cadet Candidate," he ordered.

"Isabel Williams, Sergeant Wells," she replied evenly and clearly.

"And why are you here, Cadet Candidate Williams?"

"To become a leader in my community, Sir."

Sergeant Wells arched his head back and laughed.

"Sincere, but presumptuous. How about you focus on earning your jacket before jumping to getting stripes on it?"

"Yes, Sir."

Sergeant Williams approached Daniel next.

"Cadet Candidate, you should know the routine by now."

"Yes, S—" Daniel coughed from trying to project. "Yes, Sir! I am Daniel Worth, Sir!"

Sergeant Williams frowned and glared at them.

"Not a good start, Cadet Candidate. We need bodies capable of hard labor, and if yours can't handle speaking, I doubt it will handle the recoil of a firearm, much less the fury of the Wolves."

"I will prove my capabilities, Sergeant Wells!"

"We'll see about that. What is your aim in coming here, Cadet Candidate?"

"To protect West Post from the Wolves!"

"And how will you do that with your spaghetti arms, Cadet Candidate?"

"I will develop my body and mind to meet the challenge, Sir!"

"So you think you're smart, huh? What's 11 times 45?"

"Four hundred ninety-five, Sir!" Daniel replied immediately.

"Am I supposed to be impressed? Combat is not a math test, Cadet Candidate. If you aren't able to keep up, I will cut you from the corps to protect your fellow soldiers from carrying your burdens," Sergeant Wells surveyed the others in line. "Hear that? None of you will carry his weight."

"Their," Faye spoke up.

"Excuse me?" Sergeant Wells said, leaning into Faye's face. "I don't believe you were spoken to, Cadet Candidate."

Faye remained silent.

"Ah, you're a quick learner. What did you interrupt us to say, Cadet Candidate?"

"Cadet Candidate Worth uses they/them pronouns, Sir," Faye responded calmly.

"And why didn't *they* say that *themselves*?" he asked, glaring at Daniel.

Daniel gulped and grasped for words that did not come.

"First your voice failed you and now that big brain of yours. Three strikes and you're out, Cadet Candidate."

"That will not happen, Sir!"

"We'll see about that."

Sergeant Wells moved on to face Faye.

"Now it is your turn to speak, Cadet Candidate. Introduce yourself."

"Faye Corrick, Sir."

"And why are you here?"

"To protect what is most dear to me, Sir."

"And what is that?"

"My family."

"You and Sato would do better to stand by their sides then."

"My family is on either side of me presently, Sir."

Sergeant Wells looked at Daniel, who was holding back a smile, and Leo, who was frowning. The Sergeant shook his head and sighed.

"Your duty is to your entire squadron, to your superior officers, and to the entirety of West Point. I will not tolerate insubordination if the time comes to put your duty before your family."

"I will follow all orders and fulfill my duties, Sir."

Sergeant Wells drilled his gaze into Faye, who met his eyes without flinching.

"If I believe you will put others in danger for your own selfish reasons, you will be removed from duty and from your family. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

Sergeant stepped toward Leo.

"Final Cadet Candidate, your name."

"Leo Scarlett, Sir!"

"Another son of old brass. Did you come here to impress your father, too?"

"My father is dead, Sir."

"Plenty of men have lived to impress the dead before, Cadet Candidate. So why are you here?"

"I will save everyone, Sir!"

The Sergeant stepped back and laughed from deep within his belly, projecting out to the entire field. He turned back to Leo with a piercing stare.

"I'll let you in on a secret, Cadet Candidate: nobody can save anybody. Much less everybody."

"I will die to protect this city, Sir!"

"Dying is not impressive, Cadet Candidate! Everyone does it, including your father. We don't need dead men."

"But we need heroes, Sir!"

Sergeant Wells narrowed his eyes down at Leo, who stared back up at him.

"Scarlett," Sergeant Wells hissed under his breath, "if I hear you

utter the word 'hero' ever again, I will send you home."

The Sergeant walked back to the center of the new recruits.

"None of you are ready to become cadets," he said. "But it is my job to make you ready. You will pledge your whole hearts to all of West Post and live to serve it at all times through obeying the orders of your superior officers. Even if it takes your life to do so. All those not prepared to do so should leave now. This will be your last chance."

A gust of bitter wind whipped across the faces of the young soldiers at attention, but no one among them moved.

"You've been warned," said Sergeant Wells. "Now everyone, return to the quartermaster to receive your training gear. Put it on after receiving it and do not take it off until I say so. Return here immediately as soon as you have equipped yourself. Worth!"

"Yes, Sir!" Daniel answered.

"You are dismissed first."

"Yes, Sir!"

Daniel dashed inside the station as the others waited at attention. They requested gear from the quartermaster and were given a backpack nearly the same size as them. Daniel rushed back out of the building, hunched forward by the visible weight of the backpack. Out of breath, Daniel returned to stand in attention, straining to remain upright and in proper attention form.

"Very good, Worth," he said cheerfully.

"Thank you, Sir." Daniel replied.

"Thank me by running laps around the field until everyone has received their gear."

Despair flashed across Daniel's face.

"Yes, Sir."

They hustled to the fence of the field and began their laps. The Sergeant waited for them to complete two laps before looking to Leo.

"You're up next, Scarlett. Don't want to keep Worth waiting."

Conifer, Isabel, Zenith, and then Faye were each dismissed one at a time. Each returned several minutes later, with even Zenith visibly straining from the weight. Upon returning, they were ordered to join Daniel in running. After Faye returned and caught up to Leo, a whistle came from Sergeant Wells.

"Alright Cadet Candidates, that's enough."

The six young recruits gratefully abandoned their run, gasping for breath. Daniel's knees buckled beneath them as they collapsed to the ground.

"Time to turn around and run in the other direction. Don't want to build overcompensation in your muscles from running in the same direction all the time."

Horror constricted the breathing of each of the six who were already deprived of oxygen. A whistle blew, and each of them gulped as they trotted in the opposite direction. Daniel choked back tears and used their arms to pull themselves back upright. They clung to the fence to keep them upright for the first few steps and nearly tripped over their left foot.

"Worth, quit groping that fence and stand on your own two feet!" commanded Wells.

"Yes, Sir!" Daniel replied, terrified to leave a command unanswered.

Leo and Faye helplessly watched their friend over their shoulders. Daniel felt their legs were about to give in and their lungs were about to catch fire. They thought back to the pact they had made with Faye and Leo and how they would disappoint them. They remembered how they wanted to become stronger and knew they couldn't.

I guess I'm coming back to you after all, Mom, they thought as their left foot once again landed over their center line and in the way of their right foot. They knew the fall was coming, and they resignedly welcomed the end of this torture.

You can only make the future by believing it will come, the voice of their mother said within their mind.

"Hope," they said to themselves.

They felt their left leg strengthen for just a moment, holding firm rather than giving. Daniel recognized the feeling as similar to their mother's healing magic. They swung their right foot around their left ankle, carefully placed it ahead of them, and continued running. Concentrating on one foot then the other, they partially healed each leg over and over with every step. Their teenage Sergeant watched Daniel meticulously, waiting for them to falter.

Each of the candidates felt the insides of their jackets and pants flood with sweat and stick to them. The icy air stung their lungs and sweating foreheads as the covered parts of their body burned. A half hour later, another whistle blew.

"That's enough!" Sergeant Wells announced.

Each of the six collapsed to the earth in exhaustion.

"I did not say at ease, Cadet Candidates! Attention!"

Daniel was the first to rise, lungs heaving out of their chest and their face covered in sweat and snot. The others saw this and rose to their

own feet to stand at attention. Sergeant Wells sighed.

"Why are you here, Cadets?"

"To pledge our hearts to West Post, Sir!" Daniel shouted back between breaths.

"I asked all of you, Cadet Candidates." Wells insisted.

"To pledge our hearts to West Post, Sir!" the six said in messy unison.

Sergeant Wells considered the soldiers under his command and nodded.

"Go to the barracks, take off your gear, and return here by noon with your gear at attention," Wells said. "At ease, Cadets."

He turned around and walked towards the station. As he entered the building, the six recruits knelt down to the ground to catch their breath. Daniel stood up a few moments later, and carefully wobbled inside. Faye and Leo trailed close behind, followed by Isabel, Zenith, and Conifer.

Arriving at the barracks, Daniel collapsed onto the bed and stretched their muscles. Zenith cut in front of Faye and Leo towards Daniel.

"Hey, Daniel," Zenith started, "I'm sorry about earlier. I didn't realize when I called you a guy that—"

"Don't worry about it, Zenith." Daniel cut him off. "You didn't know."

"Yeah, so I shouldn't assume. That's on me, and I'm sorry."

Daniel smiled.

"Thanks. We're good, though, seriously," Daniel said.

Zenith smiled back.

"Good hustle out there. Quit making us look bad."

He gave Daniel a playful but soft slug to the shoulder and walked away. Faye stepped up toward Daniel.

"I'll get you some water and something light to eat. You'll need the strength," Faye said.

"Thanks, Faye."

As Faye left, Daniel looked over to Leo, whose gaze burned into the bunk in front of him.

"Hey, Leo, are you alright?"

"I'll show him."

"Show who what?"

Leo didn't answer. Faye came back with three protein bars and bottles of water. He passed Daniel one of each.

"We have thirty minutes until noon," Faye said. "Leo, stretch like Daniel."

Leo remained silent and still. Faye approached to hand him water and a snack.

"You'll be more sore in the morning if you don't stretch. Come on."

Leo walked out of the barracks, Faye following behind him. Daniel sipped from the water bottle carefully.

"Sorry, Mom. Not coming home just yet."

4

"Zenith!" Daniel yelled. "You have to get up! They're doing bed checks in five minutes!"

"Five more minutes? Okay." Zenith muttered in his sleep.

"Wells is gonna murder us," Daniel said, looking up helplessly at Leo and Faye. "Shit, I hear someone coming. Think we can pretend he's dead?"

A pair of booted footsteps approached, and Daniel, Faye, and Leo stood at attention by their bunks. Beads of sweat formed on each of the conscious boys as a tall figure rounded the corner.

"It's time to wake up, boys!" shouted Conifer. "And Daniel."

Zenith shot up and awake.

"Huh? What?" He shook his head in all directions.

"You have four minutes to make your bed and put on your uniform." Faye said, tossing Zenith his boots.

"Oh shit!"

Zenith scrambled to his feet and began preparing for bed checks.

"Thank every god of every religion for you, Connie," Daniel said. "You really can wake the dead."

"Ha, yeah," She scratched the back of her neck nervously. "To be honest, I thought Wells was being dirty when he said he'd use my loudness for something."

"I get that," Leo said. "He is kind of a creep."

"Shhh! He could be here any minute!" Daniel whispered.

"I should probably get back to our bunk," said Conifer. "Hope Wells doesn't tear you too big of a new one."

"Thank you, Connie!" Daniel whispered.

Zenith threw on his pants before realizing he had put them on

backwards and had to start over.

"Hurry up, Zenith!" Daniel hissed.

"So you're calling her Connie now, huh?" Leo teased.

"Not the time, Leo!" said Daniel, blushing.

He laced up his boots and put on his jacket, patting himself down to appear presentable. Not a moment after he stood at attention, Sergeant Wells appeared at the entrance to the barracks.

"Good morning, Cadets."

"Good morning, Sir!" the four replied.

Wells inspected each of their uniforms and then their beds silently. Each of the four held their breath. They had been given extra chores and assignments after every bed check for the last 10 months, but Wells' silence was encouraging. The Sergeant stood back up from inspecting Zenith's bed and nodded.

"Not bad, Cadets," he said.

Everyone's shoulders dropped a couple of inches.

"Other than the dust on Braun's bed. You can clean that up today and practice your attention to detail by helping the Quartermaster recount his inventory."

"Yes, Sir!"

"I'll see you four out on the field in ten minutes."

Wells left the room, and his footsteps receded into the distance. Daniel slugged Zenith in the triceps harder than a playful amount.

"I hate counting inventory!" Zenith groaned. "The Quartermaster always makes me quadruple check my counts."

"Probably because you can't count that high," Leo taunted.

"Like you're so smart?" Zenith protested.

"I'm not the one that got us in this mess," Leo said.

"Guys!" Daniel interjected, physically getting between them. "We gotta get out on the field and if we have bruises, we'll have to clean the mess hall, too."

"Then why are you hitting me?" Zenith asked.

"It's underneath your uniform. It's fine. C'mon! We're gonna be late."

Daniel strode out of the barracks, followed by Faye and a snickering Leo. Zenith sighed and caught up with his comrades. Out on the field, Isabel stood at a perfect attention beside Conifer, who stood at a mostly passable attention.

"How'd it go?" muttered Conifer out of the corner of her mouth.

"Inventory again," replied Daniel.

"Ouch. Brutal," said Conifer.

Careful, Sergeant's coming, Isabel warned all of them through her newly developed telepathic magic.

The six went silent and stood even straighter as Sergeant Wells appeared.

"Cadets," he acknowledged.

"Yes, Sir!" they all responded.

"Look at you. It's been almost a year now. Some of you are even a lucky 13 years old. You know how to survive in the woods of West Post, you can shoot a gun, and those of you with magic have a passable knowledge of how to use it. Which means you're ready for the Cadet Games."

Leo raised his hand.

"Scarlett."

"Sir, what are the Cadet Games?"

"Today you will compete against your upperclassmen, the 2nd and 3rd Post Guard Cadet Corps."

Daniel raised their hand.

"Worth."

"What are the objectives of the competition?"

"Now we're asking the right things. You will compete in several individual and team events including marksmanship, land navigation, an assault course, what amounts to a three-team version of capture the flag, and a drill leading the public."

Isabel raised her hand.

"Williams."

"What are the outcomes of winning this competition?"

"The highest-scoring Corps receives a bonus to their stipends, a medal for their uniforms, and a private mini refrigerator in their dormitories."

A moment of silence passed. Faye raised his hand.

"Corrick."

"Are there outcomes to losing this competition?"

"If a Corps scores below a 80/100, they must complete an additional year of cadet training before officially entering the Post Guard," Sergeant Wells explained. "Commanding Officers may not take part in Corps planning, so I will leave you to formulate your own strategies. It begins at the shooting range at noon, so I will see you there. At ease, cadets. And good luck."

The Sergeant turned around and walked back into the station. The

six cadets looked at each other in a panic.

"He tells us now?" Leo exclaimed.

"It's going to be okay!" Daniel said. "If there are five events, that means each one is worth 20 points and we only have to get 16 points on each event."

"Is that hard?" Conifer asked.

"It's like an 80 percent," Daniel explained.

"Oh really? An 80/100 is 80 percent? Even Conifer should've been able to figure that out," Leo said.

"Clearly not," muttered Faye.

"Hey!" Conifer exclaimed.

"Come on, y'all, we need a plan," said Isabel.

"Marksmanship is likely to be individual because having everyone compete would take too long," said Daniel. "Same with the assault course. Land navigation, public leadership, and capture the flag will probably be team-based. Who's good at what?"

"Zenith should take marksmanship," Faye explained. "And I should take the assault course."

Leo, Isabel, and Daniel nodded. Zenith blushed.

"I can lead the way with land navigation," Conifer offered. "I'm good at orienteering and most likely whatever else they can throw our way, thanks to my magic."

"I agree," Daniel said. "And Isabel would be a great fit to lead the public leadership drill. You stay calm under pressure and are good at telling people what to do."

"Is that a compliment or a jab at me?" Isabel asked.

"I don't see why it can't be both."

"Why you little—"

"Don't strangle Daniel yet, Isabel," Faye said. "They'll be invaluable during capture the flag."

"Yet?" Daniel asked nervously.

"What about me?" Leo asked.

A brief pause passed before Faye spoke up.

"Your magic would be useful if we can get you in eyesight of an opposing team's flag. You could just switch places with whoever they have guarding it, grab the flag, then switch again."

"Oh," Leo said. "Right."

"Okay, everyone go brush up on your event," Isabel said. "Except Zenith. Don't shoot anybody yet."

"Yet?" Zenith asked.

"See, Isabel? You do a great job telling people where to go!" Daniel exclaimed.

"I'll tell you where my foot's about to go," said Isabel.

Everyone but Faye and Leo started their way back to the station. Faye looked to Leo, who was staring into space.

"They do value you," Faye said.

"Wait, what?" Asked Leo.

"You're looking at nothing. That means you don't feel good enough. But nobody said that."

"I wasn't—"

"Everyone's stressed, and these events aren't your strengths. That's what the pause was."

"I—" Leo folded his arms. "Okay, fine. But it's always like this. I joined the Guard to be a—"

"Don't say it."

"You know why I'm here. They can't have died for nothing, so I have to be something."

"You already are."

"I want to matter."

"You matter to me."

Leo sighed and couldn't meet Faye's eyes.

"Let's go inside," Leo said. "You've gotta warm up for the assault course."

Leo walked towards the station. Faye stood for a moment and then gently jogged to catch up to him.

Marksmanship was scored by one individual per corps, as Daniel had imagined. The 3rd Corps beat their upperclassmen 18-17 before Zenith stepped up to the range. The range went silent. Zenith gulped and took two deep breaths. He took five shoots with his rifle, and a score was announced: 17. The entire 4th Corps stood up and cheered.

"Zenith!" Daniel cheered as he walked back to his Corps. "You scored the same as someone a month away from graduating!"

"That's even more than we need to pass!" Isabel congratulated. "High five!"

"You did well." Faye said.

Zenith froze and blushed.

"Hey, I said high five, Zenith." Isabel insisted.

"Oh right, sorry."

The two clapped hands, but by the time Zenith turned back around to talk to Faye, he had gone to prepare for the assault course. Faye

jogged a couple of laps around the course and began stretching.

"Do you want any help?" Zenith said, coming up from behind.

"My own body weight is sufficient for the dynamic stretches I need." Faye answered.

"Oh, right, cool," Zenith said nervously.

"But I don't mind company."

"Oh, right! Cool!"

Faye continued stretching, and Zenith hummed a song to himself.

"What is that song?" Faye asked.

"Oh, uh, it's something my mom used to sing. Said it was popular on the radio before the Impact."

"They played music on the radios?"

"Apparently, yeah."

"Are you and your mom close?"

"We were. She's no longer with us."

Faye stopped stretching.

"I'm sorry." Faye said.

"Oh no, there's no way you could have known."

"Which is why I shouldn't assume."

Zenith smiled.

"I appreciate that. I've made my peace with it a long time ago, so it's okay."

"My parents went missing during the attack. I know it can be hard. I just try to be happy with the family I still have."

"Oh, yeah." Zenith's smile faded as he looked away. "Can I ask you a question?"

"I think you just did." Faye began stretching again and after a long pause added, "Sorry, that meant yes."

"Oh! Gotcha!" Zenith said as Faye took a drink of water. "Are you and Leo dating?"

Faye spat out the water on the grass next to the assault course.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry." Zenith panicked. "Forget I said anything."

"I—"

Faye hit his chest as he coughed. Conifer appeared behind Zenith.

"Jesus, Z, are you trying to kill our best man before his event?" Conifer asked.

"What? What did you hear?"

"Nothing specific." Conifer said. "Just Faye nearly choking on his water bottle after you said something. You good, Faye?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Faye replied with a strained voice and a final cough.

"How about we leave the man to do his craft, okay, Z?" Conifer said, pushing Zenith towards the stands where the other Corps members were.

"Right, yeah." Zenith said. "Good luck out there, Faye."

Faye waved, a slight look of panic still on his face. As the 4th Corps took their seats together, the assault course event began. Faye went first. Using a rope, he clambered up an eight-foot wall, dropped to the ground, and crawled underneath barbed wire. He vaulted up a series of rising wooden bars parallel to the ground and climbed down a rope ladder partway before hopping off directly onto a zigzag balance beam. Faye dropped into a six-foot pit before launching back out of it. He shouldered a barrel of oil and sprinted through to the finish.

The flawless execution stunned the judges into giving a perfect 20 points for the performance. No other team came within five seconds of Faye's time. When he returned to the Corps, Conifer and Daniel jumped up and down, shouting incoherently and excitedly.

"You did amazing!" Isabel chimed.

"You did well!" Zenith added.

"Thank you." Faye nodded.

"Not bad," Leo said.

Faye smiled widely as his eyes lit up.

"Thanks, Leo."

Zenith felt something in his chest tighten up. He coughed and excused himself. When he was alone, he felt water drop onto his face. With no clouds in sight, he reached up to touch his eyes, confused by the tears coming from them. Zenith shook his head hard until it hurt, gulped, and took two deep breaths. The tightness in his chest didn't go away, but the tears subsided enough for him to walk back to his friends. Faye wove through the celebrating cadets up to Zenith.

"You okay?" Faye asked.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. No worries." Zenith said.

"To answer your question," Faye continued, "I don't know what Leo and I are. He's my family, but it's different from Daniel and me somehow. I don't know. It's silly."

Zenith felt the tension in his chest ratchet up.

"Oh, no. That makes sense," Zenith said.

"Really?" Faye asked, eyes growing wide. "Do you know what that's like?"

"I mean, yeah, I guess."

"Then can I talk to you about this kind of thing?"

Zenith's chest felt about to collapse in on itself.

"Yeah, anytime," Zenith said.

Faye smiled.

"You're the best, Zenith," Faye said. "C'mon, we have land to navigate."

Faye grabbed Zenith's hand and dragged him forward. Zenith looked up at the sky.

"No clouds," Said Zenith.

"Hm?" Faye asked. "I hope not. Without sunlight, navigating would get much harder."

"Don't you worry!" Conifer bragged. "We're in the lead, and I'll get us even farther ahead, with or without the damn sun!"

Three hours into the team land navigation event, the sun set and the temperatures crashed downward with it.

"Conifer, I think we're lost," said Leo.

"We are not lost!" Conifer insisted. "The finish line should be right ahead of this line of trees."

"You said that about the same trees an hour ago," said Leo.

"These are not the same trees." Conifer raised her voice.

"Connie, look." Daniel pointed to a piece of yellow cloth tied to a branch. "I put this here about an hour and a half ago. We're going in circles."

"But," Conifer whimpered, "my magic lets me detect true north. And I've been going west this whole time."

Isabel placed a hand on Conifer's shoulder.

"It's okay." Isabel said. "We're gonna get through this, but for right now, we should let Daniel and Faye take over."

"I—" Conifer sighed. "Okay."

Within the next half hour, the 4th Corps arrived at the finish line. The Sergeant rushed up to them.

"What happened?" He asked uncharacteristically softly.

"Something happened to my magic and I don't—"

Conifer could not finish her sentence through her tears. Sergeant Wells looked around, unequipped for this situation. Isabel nodded at him, looped her hand around Conifer's arm, and gently tugged her to a private area.

Listen to me, girl, Isabel said telepathically. *You've gotta be strong,*

okay? They always expect the girls to cry so they can mock us. So we can't let them see that. We gotta stick together and show them what we can do. I got your six if you've got mine, got it?

Conifer sniffled, wiped her eyes, and nodded. Isabel put her hands on Conifer's shoulders.

You're beautiful, you're powerful, and I'm here for you. Got it?

"Got it."

Isabel smiled.

"Let's get you some hot cider, girl," She said out loud.

The judges returned with the 4th Corps score: 5. Hopelessness set in for the six Corps members. Conifer opened her mouth to say something, but stopped herself as the others followed Sergeant Wells back to the Guard Station. The remaining trials were rescheduled to the following morning, the fourth anniversary of the attack.

The 4th Corps convened early the following morning since none of them could sleep. Conifer silently sat behind the others huddling together.

"So we need a perfect score on both to pass?" Leo asked.

"A 19 in both or one perfect, one 18," Daniel replied.

"What are the odds?" Isabel asked.

"1% and .75% respectively," Daniel answered automatically before looking up at downcast faces. "Oh, you didn't—"

"Well," Zenith said, "We got a 17 and a 20 before. That's only one off from what we need now, right?"

"True," Daniel considered. "No, wait, I think we can do this! We just need to do as well as we did in the first two events!"

Nobody responded. Daniel looked down at their feet.

"Look," they said, "We can't do anything other than our best. And maybe they'll let us off with a warning or allow us to appeal the decision. The better we do, the better our case. It's better than giving up, right?"

Leo, Faye, Isabel, and Zenith nodded slightly. Conifer set her jaw and shut down her desire to cry. *We can't let them see that*, she thought to herself as her team took off toward the town square where the next event would take place.

The 4th Corps were given a scenario of establishing a triage medical center. Isabel calmly took charge, delegating to her teammates and civilians alike while performing textbook CPR. Her fellow Corps members wove through the makeshift medical center, transporting

volunteers (such as Dr. Worth) acting as injured. Conifer, in particular, watched in astonishment. When the hour simulation ended, the judges awarded a score of 19.

"We can still do this!" Daniel said.

"Thanks to Isabel!" Zenith said, raising her hand in the air.

Isabel bowed with a flourish.

"Thank you, thank you. I'll be here all week," she said.

They laughed and high-fived in a cluster except for Conifer, who sat on a stool in the town square. Leo stepped away and approached her.

"I know how it sucks," Leo said.

"What do you mean?" Conifer asked.

"Feeling like people don't rely on you."

Conifer stood up and started walking away.

"I believe you about your magic," he said.

Conifer stopped.

"I felt something, too," he added. "Something big. I don't think it was your fault."

Conifer braced herself and refused to let herself cry again.

"You'll show them," Leo insisted. "We'll show them all what we can do. We just need to take advantage of the right moment and not let it pass."

Leo tossed her a coin, which she caught with both hands. Conifer didn't recognize the currency.

"It's called a penny," he explained. "Apparently they were worthless long before the Impact. But if you found one that was heads up, it was lucky. I don't believe in luck, so you can have it. Or if you don't want it, you can leave it heads up for someone else to find. Your call."

He turned around and headed back to the group. Conifer sniffled, wiped her eyes, and headed back to her Corps.

"What's next?" She asked.

5

Each of the three teams was given a scrap of brightly colored fabric attached to a wooden dowel. The 4th Corps hid their red flag on the far edge of their territory in the West Post Woods between two trees. Isabel was placed at the flag to communicate telepathically with Daniel and Zenith on defense. Conifer went after the yellow flag of the 3rd Corps, and Faye and Leo struck out for the blue flag of the 2nd Corps. Each cadet was given a paint ball gun to shoot invading Corps to tag them out of the match, on the condition that tagged teammates could return to play if their team retrieved an enemy flag. A whistle was blown, and the chaos began.

Members of each team bypassed Daniel at the front of their territory, but Zenith picked them off from the trees. Conifer located the blue flag within minutes, but as she was about to grab it, she was tagged out from behind. Leo ducked and wove through the woods toward the yellow flag, losing his original pursuer and spotting the cadet guarding the flag. He recited a short incantation.

"I will walk in your shoes."

In an instant, there was a loud pop like a firecracker and Leo appeared next to the flag, which he yanked from the ground. Immediately after, he repeated the incantation to trade places with the same cadet again, crossing 100 meters instantaneously for a head start back to his team's territory. He heard a paint ball splat to his left. He traced the shot back to see its original shooter and used the incantation to switch places again. The unfortunate upperclassman vomited from the disorientation, which Leo took advantage of to run through the woods.

Close to where he could spot and switch with Daniel, Leo heard

another paint ball impact a tree behind him. Leo hid behind a tree as the upperclassman walked up to him.

"I hear you have freaky teleportation magic or something," he said. "Won't do you any good when you're tagged out."

Leo said nothing and remained in place as the upperclassman approached. The older boy walked right up to him, at which point Leo raised his hands in surrender.

"Don't shoot!" Leo said.

The upperclassman shot him in the chest twice.

"C'mon, dude," he said. "How pathetic are you? Now gimme my flag back."

"Would if I could, but I don't have it."

The older boy shoved Leo against the tree, holding him up by the collar of his uniform.

"I'm not playin' around, kid. Give me the fucking flag."

"It's not here."

"Then where is it?"

A whistle blew twice, meaning that the 2nd Corps' flag had been retrieved, knocking them out of the competition. The upperclassman put Leo down.

"What? How?" he asked.

"Don't need to teleport when you can toss it to the Assault Course Champion in the trees."

Leo pointed at Faye, cheerfully waving the purple flag in their territory. The upperclassman sighed and shook his head.

"Whatever. You'll still end up shining my boots by the time you graduate from the academy, you little piece of shit."

He stomped off towards the no man's land at the center of the pitch to meet the rest of his defeated team. Once he got there, Leo traded places with him. Shocked and then furious, he ran towards Leo, who only disappeared once again, leaving a member of the 3rd Corps in front of Faye to tag out. The upperclassman gave up and walked to the judge's area. Simultaneously, with one flag claimed, Conifer and Leo rushed back to their team.

"I know where the flag is!" Conifer announced.

"Okay, we've knocked out three of them, so there won't be much defense," Leo observed, then grinned. "Ready to do operation strobe light?"

"I'll probably hurl, but let's do it!" She replied.

Conifer, Leo, and Faye ran into 3rd Corps territory in the direction

Conifer described.

"We have company." Faye said, launching himself into a tree for cover and continuing forward.

In front of Leo and Conifer, the last defender guarded the flag.

"Start the count!" Leo said, diverging from Conifer to flank the defense.

"Okay!" Conifer shouted.

"I can see you in broad daylight, you little shits!" he shouted back.

"One! Two!" Conifer called out.

"What, you're gonna scare me with numbers?"

"Three! Four!"

On four, Conifer and Leo traded places, confusing the defending gunner.

"Five! Six!"

"Fuck this! I'm just shooting now."

The defender shot at Leo, who ran straight toward a tree.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"Seven! Eight!"

On Eight, Leo switched with the defender, leading him to take on the momentum of Leo and bash right into the tree. Leo, standing next to the flag, tossed it to Conifer.

"Go save our Corps, Conifer."

She smiled and sprinted at top speed through the woods, a victory lap to arrive at their territory with the enemy flag. The victory of the 4th Corps would hopefully save them from repeating a year of training.

However, near no man's land, she felt the direction of true north changing, despite her heading in a straight line. She felt perplexed and alarmed, but that could wait until after cinching 19 points or higher. Coming out of the trees, she entered no man's land and then her own territory. Three whistles went off, followed by one sustained tone to indicate the end of the match. Both teams came out of the woods, but the 4th Corps was ecstatic. Daniel swept Conifer up in their arms and everyone piled in after.

"Connie! You saved us!" Daniel shouted.

Conifer's eyes opened wide.

"Wait," Conifer said.

"Wait for what, silly?" Daniel laughed. "The cake we'll be getting for you when this is all over and done?"

"Stop!" Conifer said, pushing everyone away.

Everyone pulled away, startled and confused. Conifer broke out in a cold sweat, then quickly developed a head-splitting migraine. She screamed, and medics rushed in to check on her.

"I think something big is coming our way," Conifer spat out between excruciating waves of pain. "I don't know what. But something that can fuck with my head and my magic. It's coming from that direction."

She pointed toward Sergeant Wells, who was striding over to announce their score. He shook his head, a big smile on his face.

"You won't believe this, but—"

In a flash of purple, Wells dropped to the ground, blood spurting from his neck. Commanding officers began dropping all around them in blurs of purple. Leo and Faye's hands went cold as sweat poured down their backs.

Leo surveyed the area, looking for somewhere to switch. He spotted a man on the edge of town as a speck in his vision two miles away.

"I'm so sorry, sir," Leo whispered.

"What?" Faye asked.

"These are wolves!" Leo cried. "Everybody grab onto me! We're switching on four! Conifer, count!"

"What?" Conifer asked.

"Count!" Leo commanded.

"One!" Conifer shouted.

"Can you switch all of us at once?" Faye asked.

"Two!"

"My clothes come with me, so maybe? We're about to find out."

"Three!"

Faye, Daniel, Zenith, Conifer, and Isabel latched onto Leo.

"Four!"

"I will walk in your shoes!" Leo screamed.

Leo heard the typical pop of switching, but much louder. He felt his friends's entire body weights pulling against him at their points of contact, instantly dislocating both shoulders. He screamed in agony, wanting to open his eyes to see if his friends were okay, but in too much pain to do so.

"We're all here, Leo," Faye said, voice shaking. "We made it."

Leo relaxed and collapsed to the ground. Faye took charge.

"Isabel, contact the General and get orders. Until then, all of us need to get back to the station and get guns. Zenith, grab Leo. Let's go."

The six cadets raced to the station. General Howlett, top commander

of the Guard, was waiting for them at the front door.

"What on earth is going on out there? I've lost radio contact with everyone supervising the Cadet Games and then I hear the voice of a little girl in my head saying something about Wolves?"

Faye saluted the General, the others following his lead except for Leo and Zenith.

"General, Cadet Corrick speaking. I am an eyewitness of the original Wolf Attack exactly four years ago today, and I saw them again two minutes ago in the woods where the Cadet Games were taking place two miles away. They killed almost every Post Guard and recruit there by the time we escaped using teleportation magic by the soldier being carried. He needs medical attention. We await your orders on evacuation and defense measures."

The General considered Faye a moment and nodded.

"Excellent sitrep, Cadet Corrick," the General replied. "I saw your Corps' work earlier today. Go into town and lead the evacuation of West Post to eastern shelters effective now. We will radio the shelters. All of you who are able, alert the civilians and guide them safely to shelters. Cadet Corrick will lead. Hand over the injured Cadet and we will treat him."

"Sir, permission to speak," Daniel requested.

"Granted."

"I have magical healing. With your permission, I can treat Cadet Scarlett here and then rendezvous with my Corps to provide emergency aid and to support shelter staff if needed."

"Do as such. The rest of you are dismissed."

"Yes, Sir!"

Zenith set Leo down on the ground next to Daniel, then joined Conifer and Isabel in their operation. Faye hesitated, looking at Leo.

"I promise I'll take care of him, Faye."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what."

Faye nodded and began running towards his comrades. Daniel sat Leo up.

"You're not gonna like this, buddy, but popping the joints into place won't be the magical part. On three. One. Two."

Leo screamed as the shoulder jammed back into place.

"Nice, you're doing great. Gonna heal this up and then repeat on the other side, okay?"

"Are you actually going to do it on three this time?" Leo asked

through heavy breaths.

"I make no promises."

As Leo received medical attention, Faye directed the others in evacuating the citizens of the western half of West Post between the Guard station and the hot springs. Isabel gently directed the citizens to follow the directions of the others, who knocked on doors and monitored the flow of foot traffic for safety.

"Is this part of the drill you were doing today?" one mother asked while putting jackets on her children.

"I'm afraid not, ma'am," Isabel answered. "But we will do everything in our power to keep you all safe. And that starts with going to the shelter."

The woman nodded and held the children's hands as they sped to the east.

"We've cleared Blocks A and B," Zenith reported.

"Excellent," Faye replied. "C-F Remain. Let's go."

At the Guard station, Daniel healed up most of the damage to Leo's shoulders.

"That's it, bud. You sit here and rest until this is all over. I've gotta go."

Leo grabbed Daniel's arm.

"I'm coming with you."

"You are not. Doctor's orders."

"You're not a doctor."

"Neither is my mom, but people listen to her."

"This is my chance to be a hero."

Daniel looked Leo in the eyes.

"You already played hero today," Daniel said to his adopted brother. "By saving us and possibly the whole town. Now rest."

Daniel stood up and dusted himself off. Leo clambered to his two feet, grimacing in pain.

"I didn't fix you all the way up," Daniel clarified. "I'm not that good. That's why you need to rest."

"The people who stayed here last time were all killed, Daniel. I'm not going down without a fight."

"I made a promise to Faye that I would protect you no matter what."

"Then you better do it out here."

Leo bolted out the door to the rest of the 4th Corps. Daniel suppressed a scream.

"God dammit!" they yelled, following their friend out the door.

By Block E, the streets had become clogged and dangerous with fleeing people paying increasingly less mind to the Cadets trying to organize them safely.

"They're not listening!" Zenith shouted over the retreat of the townspeople.

"There's only so much we can do," shouted Isabel.

"We carry out our orders and evacuate everyone as safely as we can," Faye said. "Hopefully, Daniel will be here soon to heal anyone who gets hurt."

"I see them on their way," Conifer said. "Wait, no. Not just Daniel."

The hair on the back of Faye's neck stood straight up. He darted through the crowd to get within eyesight of Leo. He saw Daniel supporting Leo as they slowly made their way east.

"He's going to get them both killed," Leo raised his hand up and shouted, "Four!"

Leo nodded, let go of Daniel, and switched places with Faye.

"What happened to taking care of him no matter what, Daniel?" Faye asked brusquely.

"He ran toward you. Do you honestly think I can stop him?"

Faye blushed despite himself.

"Come on. We need to run," Faye said.

Faye and Daniel approached the reassembled Corps.

"How much still needs to be evacuated?" Daniel asked.

"Just Block F now."

Conifer screamed suddenly.

"I don't like whatever that means," Zenith said.

"They're close," Conifer said through gritted teeth.

"Zenith, Conifer, and Daniel, make your way to the shelters and aid them there. Leo, you go with them. The rest of us will evacuate Block F."

"I'm going with you," Leo said. "My magic could be helpful to you."

Faye turned to Isabel.

"Go ahead of me."

"Yes, Sir!"

Isabel ran ahead, using her telepathic powers to reach ahead of her.

Faye turned back to Leo.

"I can't lose you, Leo."

"I'm not some little kid anymore, Faye!"

"Yes, you are!" Faye shouted. "We all are! None of us should be here. You can play hero all you want when you can stand on your own! Until then, you're a danger to all of us!"

Conifer screamed again.

"They're here! We have to go!" Conifer cried.

"Isabel!" Faye yelled. "Retreat!"

Yes, Sir, Isabel responded telepathically.

The last door of Block F opened down the block. A woman with two children in her arms dashed out into the street. Conifer shrieked in pain. A man left from the same house and was torn to shreds by a purple blur.

Leo stepped forward to shout, "One!"

"Don't you fucking dare, Leo," Faye warned.

"Two! Three!"

Them, not me, said Isabel's voice in Leo's head.

Leo froze, not knowing what to do or who to save.

"Leo!" Faye screamed.

The woman wailed at the sight of her dead husband, but continued to run forward. Leo saw his mother pinned beneath the wolves in his mind. Faye leaped at Leo to restrain him.

"I will walk in your shoes."

6

A loud pop announced the switch of Leo and the mother with her children, now terrified and in a daze. Zenith guided her in the shelter's direction. Faye sank to his knees. Leo slowly limped back towards the Corps as Isabel ran back to help him.

"Conifer, Zenith, Daniel. Go. Now."

"Sir, what about—" Zenith began.

"Only half of us get to die! Do you understand me?" Faye screamed.

In shock at Faye's loss of composure, the three took off to the east shelters. Faye raised his hand.

"Four!" he shouted.

Leo shook his head.

"Four!" he screamed.

Leo shook his head again.

"Four!" he howled, tears streaming down his face.

You know he won't, Isabel said to Faye. But you'll make a great leader, Faye. Live.

Isabel sent the entire Corps a message, stopping them in their tracks to look back.

It was a pleasure serving with you all.

A purple blur ripped through Isabel in front of everyone. Daniel fell to their knees and stared at where Isabel had been and now only remained a body in a smear of blood. Zenith picked Daniel off the ground and rushed toward the shelter, tears streaming down his face. Conifer stood stoically, watching Leo and grimacing at her splitting head.

"Four!" Faye wept, hand limp in the air as he stared at Leo.

Leo stumbled over a crack in the road and fell backward. He tried to

push up off the ground, but the pain in his shoulder prevented him.

Guess time's up, he thought to himself. But I saved a lot of people today, including a mom. Maybe that resets the scales a little. He looked up at Faye. *He puts me back in debt, probably.*

A thought occurred to Leo.

"Knife!" he screamed.

Faye perked up and drew his knife in confusion.

"One!" Leo shouted.

Hope flooded Faye like a storm over a desert.

"Two!"

His brain kicked back into strategy, anticipating Faye's thought process.

"Three!"

Faye saw a flash of purple at the edge of his vision, followed by a loud pop as Leo's body with massive momentum pinned down a wolf.

"Four!"

Faye heard another loud pop as he switched on top of a squirming Wolf. He thrust the knife into its all-white eyes. The Wolf screeched so loud that Faye's ears rang. Hot blood flung itself onto Faye. But after a few seconds, the creature went limp and lifeless. Conifer nodded solemnly and ran east.

Faye wiped the blood from his brow and looked up to see Leo holding his arms out for an embrace. Sprinting up the street to Leo, tears clouding Faye's vision. Faye wrapped his arms around him and used his poor balance and heightened center of gravity to throw him over his shoulder and charge towards the shelter.

Faye and Leo arrived at the southeast shelter near their home with Dr. Worth. She was, in fact, the one to greet them.

"My stars, you're alive," she whispered.

"Not for lack of trying," said Faye.

Faye gingerly dropped Leo down so Leo could use Faye and Dr. Worth for supports. Zenith and Daniel saw them and dodged through the crowd to see their friends alive. Conifer followed up behind them and explained the timeline to Dr. Worth. She listened as she healed each of the Cadets, shaking her head at the end.

"Thanks to your warning and your evacuation, I've had very few people to patch up," Dr. Worth explained. "Same at the other shelters. I'm hearing the Guard station and hot springs have suffered casualties once again, but not as dire as last time."

The Cadets tensed up.

"Do you know who?"

"I don't," Dr. Worth frowned. "But you're free to use the radio. The General will probably want to get in touch as soon as possible."

"I'll take care of it," Conifer said flatly, standing up to check the radio.

"No, I am your commanding officer for this mission," Faye stated. "I should report."

Faye stood and walked toward the radio.

"It's strange, though," Dr. Worth remarked.

"That the same places were hit exactly four years apart?" Daniel asked.

"Exactly," Dr. Worth said. "It seems unlikely to be a coincidence."

Daniel rested their chin in their hand.

"Do you think they—I don't know—want something?"

"Don't look at me. I'm just a not-a-doctor."

Faye returned from the radio.

"We were ordered to stay put for now and be on alert to protect the shelter until patrols declare it safe to leave," he explained.

"Who did we lose?" Leo asked.

Faye stood silent for a moment before answering.

"The Quartermaster, two medics, and a couple higher-ranking brass we've never met. General Howlett and the others found cover as the Wolves left."

The others did not answer, bowing their heads in a moment of silence.

"I'll take first watch with Zenith," Faye said. "We'll rotate so everyone can get some rest. It's been a long day."

Faye turned toward the shelter entrance. Zenith, surprised, nodded to the rest of the Corps and jogged to the entrance with Faye. Both of them equipped themselves with a rifle and pistol from the Shelter. At the door, Faye took a deep breath to steady himself, signaled to Zenith the plan for clearing the entrance, and pushed open the door.

The street was empty, and the city was soundless. Faye and Zenith breathed deeply in relief. They stood on either side of the door to keep watch. Neither of them spoke for 10 minutes, finding solid ground in each other's quiet company at first.

"What did you tell the General about the end of our operation?" Zenith asked, looking straight ahead.

"The truth," answered Faye, eyes on the road. "We prioritized the safety of the evacuating townspeople, suffered one civilian casualty

and one Guard casualty, and improvised a rescue mission of an injured Cadet that involved the killing of the enemy assailant."

"I still can't believe you single-handedly took down a Wolf with your bare hands."

"I used a knife and Leo's magic. I don't think that qualifies as single- or barehanded." Faye paused and turned to Zenith. "I lost my composure and nearly compromised the mission, and I put you at risk. I'm sorry."

Zenith turned to Faye with his usual softness in his eyes.

"You said it yourself. None of us should be here. But you got everyone out safe, gave orders, and stayed behind to protect someone under your command. There was nothing more you could have done."

Faye turned his face back towards the city. Zenith frowned and followed suit. Minutes passed by wordlessly until Faye softly spoke up.

"I think I know what Leo is to me now."

Zenith tensed throughout his body as his breathing constricted.

"And what is that?" he asked quietly.

"I've heard men talk about their stomach being in their throat around a girl. Or that they can't stop thinking about her. Or that they get hard-ons looking at her."

Zenith blushed.

"But I've never felt that," Faye continued. "Not for girls or anybody else. It's never even been like that with Leo. He's just always been by my side. Our families were neighbors since birth, and I guess having him around was as normal as there being air to breathe. I took it for granted."

Faye took a deep breath before continuing.

"When he switched with the woman, I realized I might lose him. That was unbearable to imagine. I couldn't breathe. There was distance between us for the first time, and I needed to close it as soon as possible. I needed him next to me."

Faye turned toward Zenith again.

"I think I'm in love with him."

Zenith felt a shattering inside his chest and some foreign version of vertigo. He nodded.

"It sounds like it," Zenith said, still looking straight ahead. "It's not really a surprise."

Faye blushed bright red. Zenith couldn't help but think it was cute, adding to the ache.

"I don't know what to do," Faye said.

"Are you going to tell him?"

"I don't see the point."

Zenith turned toward Faye, who was scanning the horizon.

"What do you mean?" Zenith asked.

"He was more willing to die than to stay with me," Faye said, tears welling up. "How am I supposed to compete with death for the affection of a martyr?"

Zenith didn't know what to say, so the words hung in the air.

"I wish I could stop," Faye admitted. "Not care about the stupid idiot and move on. It hurts to love him."

"Maybe that's what love is," Zenith said. "Maybe loving someone is about the hurt being worth it."

Zenith and Faye made eye contact. Faye nodded.

"Maybe you're right."

The two boys stood in silence for the rest of their watch before calling Conifer and Daniel up next. Faye and Zenith took a seat inside the shelter. A young boy ran up to Leo beside them.

"Mr. Soldier, did you really kill the Wolf?"

Leo smiled sadly.

"Yes, you're safe now. Don't worry."

"That's so cool! I wanna join the Guard and kill Wolves, too!"

Leo looked at Zenith and Faye, unsure of what to say. They shrugged, unsure and conflicted themselves. He smiled at the child again.

"It's hard work being in the Guard. And it can be scary sometimes."

"That's okay! I wanna help people like you!"

"What's your name, bud?"

"Tony!"

"How old are you, Tony?"

"Eight and a half!"

"Well, if you still feel this way in four years, you can join the Guard," Leo said. "So think it over so you can decide then."

"That's so far away, though!"

"You don't know this, but that's actually a really good thing. Until then, take good care of your family and friends, okay?"

"Okay, mister!"

The boy ran back into the crowd. Leo rotated back to face Faye and Zenith, none of them sure of what to say.

Is that what I sound like? Leo thought to himself.

"Cadets!" a woman called out.

"What can we do for you, ma'am? Is something wrong?" Faye asked.

"I saw you working with Isabel during the simulation. Do you know where she is? I'm her mother."

Zenith gulped and took two deep breaths. Leo looked away. Faye stood up from his chair.

"Mrs. Williams, please take a seat."

Worry covered her face as she walked to the chair and sat down.

"Isabel worked with us to evacuate the west side of the city," Faye explained. "She led the efforts to contact everyone and lead them to the shelters. Her work saved countless lives and was just as impeccable as during the simulation."

Faye took a second to plan what to say next.

"A wolf appeared as we evacuated the last home, and she sacrificed herself to get a mother and two children to safety. She died honorably in the line of duty. I'm so sorry for your loss."

The mother began openly weeping, and much of the shelter turned to face her.

If only Isabel were here to be better with people than us, Zenith thought.

Her body trembled with her cries, gasping for breath between waves of wails. After a couple of minutes, she caught her breath.

"Did she have any last words?"

The three looked at each other, knowing her words thanking them would not be comforting. Leo spoke up.

"Them, not me' was what she said to me."

"What does that mean?" she asked, confused.

"It was her signal to us to assist the family she was protecting," Faye explained.

"Are you saying there was a way to save her, but you didn't?"

"No, ma'am, the circumstances were—"

"Yes, there was," Leo said, staring off into space, "and I couldn't protect her."

"Ma'am," Faye interjected, "a choice had to be made, and Isabel's last wishes were to protect the people of West Post."

"I don't give a shit about West Post!" the grieving mother cried, attracting the attention of those in the shelter once more. "I only care about my daughter. She was 13 for Christ's sake! Why is it that the one person you failed had to be my baby girl?"

The three young Cadets looked at one another and hung their heads

in shame. The woman stood up and pointed at them.

"If I see any of your rotten faces at her funeral, I will send you to your own."

She stormed off, shoulders heaving in pain, to a corner of the shelter alone. Zenith felt tears drop onto his face and shook his head to clear it. Faye watched Leo fix his gaze at a point past the walls of the shelter.

"Leo—" Faye began.

"I can't fuck around anymore," Leo said coldly.

"What do you mean?" Zenith asked.

"We can't lose anyone else," said Leo. "Every single person is too precious."

"There are casualties in every war, Leo," Faye insisted, touching his shoulder.

Leo batted the hand away. Hurt covered Faye's face.

"Not if I can help it," Leo said.

Leo stood up and walked away from Faye and Zenith. Faye rose to his feet and took a step toward him before Zenith grabbed Faye's arm and shook his head. Faye relaxed and sat back down.

"I'm gonna get us some water," Zenith said. "I'll be right back."

As Zenith left, Faye hugged himself tightly.

"It's worth it," Faye whispered, "as long as he's alive."

7

The Cadet's shift was cut short by the General's clearance for everyone to return to their homes. Dr. Worth gave Daniel, Faye, and Leo smothering hugs before the five Cadets returned to the Guard station. They debriefed with General Howlett before heading back to their barracks. Conifer spent most of the night staring at Isabel's pristinely made bed.

A vigil was held for the 23 Guards and Cadets killed in the woods, the man Leo switched with, the father killed in town, three civilians and two Guards at the hot springs, and Isabel. Two weeks later, the 4th Corps received medals of valor for their work in warning and evacuating the city. As the last remaining Cadets and because of the staggering loss of officers, the 4th Corps was promoted to full Post Guard status and given their all-black uniforms. Leo was promoted to Sergeant, and Faye was promoted to Captain on the condition that he would command and remain with the 4th Corps.

Leo meticulously continued to refine his magical technique, learning to switch even faster and without an incantation. Through practice, he learned how to hold people that would lead to the least amount of injuries as well. Daniel stood by as a medic, allowing them to practice their magic along with him. Faye watched every day after completing his officer duties, but Leo hardly ever spoke, always looking past people into the distance.

Daniel returned home for a weekend to be greeted enthusiastically by their mom.

"Welcome home!" she squealed.

"Mom, it's not like we never see each other."

"It's not like we always see each other, either. So it's a joy when we

can," Dr. Worth said with a smile. "Now help me with dinner. It's gonna be your favorite!"

"You're making mashed potatoes?" Daniel exclaimed. "How did you get butter?"

"It was a thank you present from a patient."

"Is it ethical to take expensive presents from patients?"

"Is it ethical to eat mashed potatoes without butter? I think not. Now get to peeling. I'll join you in a sec."

Daniel laughed and shook his head, sitting at the table to peel.

"After you're done with that, can you cut up these beets?"

"Sure, yeah."

They chatted as they both peeled. Daniel embraced the warmth and safety of being home. The two talked shop about healing techniques and discussed the politics of the Post Guard. They finished peeling the potatoes, so Dr. Worth put those on to boil while Daniel chopped the beets.

With one chop, red juice trickled onto the cutting board. Daniel lost contact with their body for a moment and stopped moving. They shook their head and picked up the knife to chop again when Dr. Worth gripped their forearm to stop them.

"No dissociating and chopping," she said.

Daniel put down the knife.

"Can you feel your toes?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Good. Wiggle them for me. Can you feel your hands?"

"Yes."

"How do they feel?"

"Slightly tired from peeling."

"Nice. Can you tell me what you're thinking about?"

Daniel sighed.

"The beet juice," they said. "It looks like blood."

"I can see that. I'll take care of it. You take a seat and take some deep breaths, okay?"

"Okay."

Daniel sat down at the table and focused on breathing until they felt present again.

"I think I'm feeling better."

Dr. Worth walked over to the table and sat beside them.

"You don't have to say anything, but I'm here to listen."

"I don't know," Daniel admitted. "Ever since the Second Attack and

seeing Isabel die, I feel stuck, like I can't do anything."

"That's a very natural reaction. When we panic or get triggered, we call it the flight-flight-freeze-or-fawn response."

"Not exactly helpful in the military, though."

"No, I'll grant you that," she said. "But you need to do what's right for you. Because if you stay, you'll do better at your job if you take care of yourself. Or you can find a different job."

"It's not that simple."

"It never is."

Daniel pondered it over.

"So what do I do? How do I stop freezing?"

Dr. Worth leaned back in her chair.

"If only magic could heal the mind, but alas." Dr. Worth smirked. "I'd sic my 4/5 of a psychology doctorate on you, but doing that to your kid is a little dicier ethically than free butter."

Daniel and Dr. Worth laughed.

"But I know someone you could talk to about this stuff. I think she'd be really helpful if you're interested."

"Huh, yeah," Daniel nodded. "I think I'd like that. Thanks, Mom."

A knock came at the door.

"Who could that be?" Dr. Worth asked.

She got up to answer it. Daniel followed along and spotted Conifer through the window in the door. Dr. Worth smiled at Daniel and opened the door.

"Connie! It's lovely to see you!" she said.

"Hello, Dr. Worth," Conifer replied. "Daniel, the General is calling for us."

"Oh," Dr. Worth uttered.

"They should be back in time for dinner, Dr. Worth."

Dr. Worth relaxed as a smile crept back onto her face.

"Oh wonderful. You should join us if you're available, Connie."

Conifer and Daniel both blushed.

"I, uh, gotta grab something," Daniel stuttered. "I'll be right back."

Daniel sprinted towards the living room where they had set their satchel. Dr. Worth smiled warmly at Conifer.

"You doing okay, Connie?"

"Yeah, I'm good."

"If you ever need anything, even if it's just a listening ear, I'm here."

"I appreciate that, Dr. Worth, but I'm just fine."

"That doesn't mean you're okay."

Conifer opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Daniel returned with their bag and jacket.

"Okay, I'm ready. Let's go."

Conifer cleared her throat.

"Thanks, Dr. Worth."

Dr. Worth closed the door as the two Post Guards walked back to the station.

"We need to stop by Zenith's house, too." Conifer said.

"Gotcha. That's around here, too, isn't it?"

"Yeah, this way."

They walked one block, saying nothing. Daniel looked over and frowned.

"You doing okay, Connie?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." She answered defensively. "Why is everyone asking me that?"

"Because you haven't been yourself lately."

"What does that even mean? I'm doing everything I normally do."

"Yeah, exactly. That's what's off," Daniel said. "What happened to goofing off and joking around?"

"Maybe I just don't feel like it, that's all."

"Maybe you just can't feel like it anymore," Daniel said.

Connie stopped just in front of Daniel, not turning around.

"If you need anything, I'll try to help," Daniel insisted. "And if I can't, I'll find someone who can. I'm here for you."

I'm here for you, Conifer heard Isabel's voice echo from the past. She squashed down the desire to cry.

"Back off, Daniel."

"Why?"

"I don't need your help. I'm not broken."

"I never said you were. But you also don't seem happy."

"Life sucks like that sometimes," she said, walking away. "I'll meet you at the Guard station."

Daniel stood in surprise, watching Conifer leave. They sighed and made their way toward the station. Conifer dressed her face in stone as she approached Zenith's house. *I won't let them see that, Isabel*, she thought.

Conifer took a deep breath and knocked on Zenith's door. No response came at first, so she knocked again.

"Is he not home?" she muttered to herself.

She heard glass shattering from inside and muffled yelling, followed

by hurried footsteps before the door opened.

"Hello?" said Zenith. "Oh, hey, Conifer."

"Who is it?" shouted a voice from inside.

"It's a member of the 4th Corps, Colonel!"

"What does he want?"

"Let me ask, Sir!" Zenith called out. "Sorry, Conifer. What's up?"

"Oh, uh, the General wants all of the 4th Corps to meet right now. He said it shouldn't take long."

"Oh, okay. I'll be out in just a minute."

Zenith closed the door, and an exchange of muffled shouts took place. Conifer rubbed her arm nervously. A few minutes later, Zenith rushed out the door.

"Sorry about that. Let's go," he said.

The two stayed silent the entire walk to the station. Conifer wanted to ask if he was alright. Then she remembered how upset she had been when people asked her that earlier that day and decided against it. They arrived at the Guard station and met with the other members of the 4th Corps and General Howlett.

"Thank you for assembling here today," the General said. "I know some of you were on leave, so I appreciate your cooperation. Faye, please describe the purpose of this meeting."

"Yes, Sir," Faye said. "We are here to discuss how to prepare for the Third Wolf Attack."

8

The words stuck to the air as the eyes of the members of the 4th Corps widened.

"Do we have an expected time of when that might happen?" Zenith asked.

"We are seven months away from the 5th anniversary of the First Attack," Faye explained. "As both attacks occurred on the same date of the year, it is prudent to prepare for this upcoming one, and remain vigilant at all times."

"What preparations did you have in mind?" Daniel asked.

"We will move all citizens in the western blocks outside the previous areas of attack, build walls protecting the eastern blocks, and fortify the hot springs," Faye continued. "Then we will station most of our Guard around the hot springs. We believe the Wolves are after the magic-rich water found at the hot springs."

"The stuff we use to power our generators?" Conifer asked.

"Why would beasts want magical fuel?" Zenith followed up.

"We don't know. But we need those reserves for our own purposes," Faye continued.

"We cannot afford another defeat at the hands of the Wolves," the General added. "Our Guard has lost too many excellent soldiers, citizens live in constant terror, and our hot springs supplies are already being rationed. This is our last stand."

The 4th Corps nodded at each other.

"We pledge our hearts to West Post, Sir."

All Post Guard hands were on deck building city walls and developing defenses for the hot spring. With seven months to plan and build, the

Guard scrambled to prepare in time. However, on the day of the 5th Anniversary, nothing happened. The same was true for the 6th.

"Do you think it's a pattern, Colonel Corrick?" General Howlett asked at a cabinet meeting.

"Every four years? It's possible. We should still prepare for the 7th Anniversary, though."

Yet nothing occurred on the 7th Anniversary. However, with each year, the members of the 4th Corps grew stronger, taller, and more powerful as they rounded their 16th birthdays.

Daniel's healing magic advanced almost to match the abilities of their mother. Their gift for strategy moved them up the chain of command to Captain while the other members of the Corps each became Sergeants. Conifer and Zenith took on Cadet Corps of their own, moving the start date of Cadet training earlier to maximize training before the anniversary each year. Leo trained the 5th Cadet Corps from start to finish and took on the 8th next. On their first day of training, he was taken aback by a familiar face.

"State your name, Cadet Candidate," he said, hoping it was not as he suspected.

"Tony Nua, Sir!"

Leo's stomach dropped.

"Why are you here, Cadet Candidate?"

"To kill the Wolves, Sir!"

Leo was speechless, addressing the boy he had met in the shelter four years ago. He summoned up all of his experience to think of a reply.

"Prove to me you can survive first, Nua."

"Yes, Sir!"

Leo, Conifer, and Zenith ate in the mess hall together that night.

"The older I get, the more fucked up it seems," Zenith said.

"What?" Conifer asked. "Being a teenager raising children to be soldiers to fight against monsters too fast to be seen before they kill you?"

"Yeah, that," Zenith replied, turning to Leo. "You have that kid from the shelter in your Corps, right?"

"What kid?" Conifer asked.

"Oh, you weren't there," Leo said. "There was this eight-year-old during the last attack that came up to me in the shelter and said he wanted to fight wolves because he thought we were cool."

"What's he like now?" Zenith asked.

"Exactly the same."

"A monster killer with a death wish in the heroic martyr's class. This will go well," Conifer mumbled.

Leo rolled his eyes.

"Well, you have almost a year to get ready for the big day," Zenith said. "Just like you, Wolves must count in fours."

"Maybe they count with their feet." Conifer suggested.

Leo zoned out as the other two joked with each other. He enjoyed seeing Conifer bounce back in the last couple of years after Isabel's death. Zenith also seemed more confident, but every time he went back home, he would be unapproachable for days.

How have I changed the last few years? Leo thought.

The day before the 8th Anniversary, Faye and Daniel surveyed the hot springs. Along with the General, they would prepare for the next day, feeling more and more certain it would be the next attack.

"Spreading gravel in front of the wall may slow them down in time for snipers to take shots," Daniel suggested.

"Do as they say," Faye ordered a nearby Post Guard in his forties.

"Yes, Colonel!"

The Post Guard ran to pass on the order to others. Daniel snorted.

"What?" Faye asked.

"It just feels absurd," Daniel said. "We're commanding men with kids our age."

"We have twice as much time in uniform and four times the experience they do. I don't see how age is relevant."

"You're not wrong. But also my mother keeps saying that brains continue to develop until we're 25."

"She's not a doctor."

"This was literally her area of expertise. Her thesis was on this shit."

"Are you suggesting we aren't smart enough?"

"Not at all," Daniel said. "I think we're smarter than anyone here. It just makes me wonder if getting older is all it's cracked up to be. Everyone who's older seems to think so."

"Have to live through tomorrow to find out."

All the Cadet Corps received a joint briefing at the Guard station, led by Leo. He described the position each of them would take. Each corps would line sections of the city wall the following day, concentrating

along the main road from the woods to the hot springs.

"Wolves are not invincible," Leo reinforced. "They are strong and fast, but they can be downed with rifles. They are too fast to track with the eye horizontally, so try to attack it from an angle head on for greatest accuracy."

Leo drew a knife from a holster.

"Should you ever be unlucky to get into hand-to-hand combat, their center of gravity is in their upper shoulders, making them top heavy. Their weak points appear to be in their eyes, which are all white. Make sure your knife is sharp. Any questions?"

Nearly every hand in the room shot up. Leo sighed.

"This may take a while."

After the briefing, Conifer, Zenith, and Leo walked to the mess hall.

"Think they're ready?" Conifer asked.

"They will have to be," Leo muttered.

"They'll have the high ground. It'll be fine," Conifer rubbed her forehead.

"What's going on with you?" Zenith asked Conifer.

"Nothing, Z. Just not hydrated enough, I guess."

Leo stopped in his tracks in the hallway.

"Conifer, which way is North?"

"That—" Conifer raised her hand partway and gasped. "My magic is saying that way, but I know the city is on a grid. It's off 90 degrees."

"Does that mean the Wolves will be here by tomorrow?" Zenith asked. "We need to radio the hot springs right now."

The three spun around and began running to the radio room. A couple of cadets walking by noticed.

"Sergeants," one of them saluted, "is something wrong?"

"Tell everyone to be on standby in the field in 15 minutes. Go!" Leo ordered.

The cadets bolted to their dormitories to pass on the command. Zenith looked at Leo.

"Fifteen minutes?" he asked Leo. "Isn't that a little soon?"

"Can never be too careful," Leo replied. "Conifer, where's North?"

"It's off—what's the one between 90 and 180?"

"That fast? How the fuck are they doing this?" Said Zenith.

"How's the head, Conifer?" Leo asked.

"Hurts! Thanks for the reminder!"

Conifer's heart rate shot up faster than the running should have

warranted. She couldn't catch her breath, and she couldn't understand why. She heard Isabel's voice in her head saying, *It was a pleasure serving with you all.*

It's fine, she thought. I can't let Isabel down. That's why I'm thinking of her.

The three arrived at the radio room. The officers there looked up at them.

"We have a message for the General," Leo announced. "The Wolves are here today."

The hot springs bustled with activity as construction workers fled to the inner walls.

"How are they here early?" Faye shouted to Daniel over the sound of soldiers preparing as they ran toward central command.

"We have no idea how this all works," Daniel shouted back. "We just assumed it would be on the same day and we were wrong."

"The barricades should hold up fine even without the final touches," Leo said. "It's not ideal, but we can make it work here. I'm more worried about the Guard station."

"If they can get to the walls, they'll be safe," Daniel reassured. "He's going to be okay, Faye. He's even stronger than last time."

"But an even bigger fool," Leo muttered as he entered the central command. "Do we have visuals, Sir?"

"Not yet," the General said.

"Your orders, Sir?" Daniel asked.

"Bring a radio with you to the medical unit, Captain Worth. Colonel Corrick, watch with me."

"Yes, Sir!" they replied in unison.

Daniel jogged to the medical unit while Faye stepped alongside General Howlett.

"What are the orders to the station?" Faye asked.

"Worried about Sergeant Scarlett?"

"I felt it prudent to understand the global strategy."

"Right," General Howlett said, unconvinced. "They have been ordered to get to the city wall. If they can make it there, they should be safe from the wolves, as long as they can't climb."

"If?"

"We're unsure how close the Wolves are and have no visuals. If they're here and get between them and the wall—" he trailed off.

Faye looked down the road toward the station, only able to hope for

the best.

The Cadets ran through the empty western blocks of West Post toward the city wall, led by Leo, Zenith, and Conifer. Arriving at the wall, Post Guards at the top dropped rope ladders. Leo climbed up first, with Zenith close behind. Reaching the top, Leo switched with Conifer as planned. Leo directed the Cadets on the ground toward the ladders. At the top, Conifer positioned five wooden poles with bright flags on them to be visible to Leo. Zenith got in position to aim his rifle.

Conifer's breathing refused to slow. She was sweatier than the run to the wall should have made her. Every time the splitting pain pierced into her head, she heard Faye screaming "Four" in desperation as Leo collapsed to the street. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Isabel falling to the ground. So she kept her eyes open and kept busy, assisting with preparations as much as possible.

A scream rang through the air. Leo turned to see one cadet bleeding out onto the ground. He felt his entire body tense up, but two cadets remained at ground level. Leo looked up at the wall at the left-most flag and switched with it. He immediately switched with one cadet on the ground, then with another flag, followed by the last cadet.

Before he could switch back to the top of the wall, he was rammed against the wall face first. Leo felt fur on his neck, and a wretched smell coming from behind him. He tried to reach for his knife, but the Wolf grabbed his wrist. Leo realized something and opened his mouth to shout it when he heard a gunshot and felt the Wolf behind him fall. Leo looked up and saw Zenith's rifle. He switched with a flag at the top of the wall.

"You almost shot me!" Leo shouted.

"But I didn't!" Zenith replied.

Leo looked around, seeing the last few recruits making their way up the ropes.

"Pull the ladders as soon as they're not in use!" Leo commanded.

"Yes, Sir!" The cadets replied.

"What's with the ladders?" Asked Zenith.

"I think they could climb if they tried," Leo explained.

Conifer and Zenith looked at each other nervously. The ladders were pulled up. Then those atop the wall watched in horror as the forms of Wolves became visible as they slowed to climb the wall. Their claws digging into the wooden exterior, they ascended. Zenith got in position and shot, taking down two Wolves.

"Cadets!" Leo shouted. "Aim and fire!"

"Yes, Sir!"

The remaining three climbing wolves crashed to the ground.

"Hold your fire!" Leo shouted again.

No more wolves appeared, but streaks of purple streamed past them toward the hot springs. Conifer massaged her temples as the migraine pierced into her mind. She trembled as her thoughts raced about Isabel.

"Fuck," Leo whispered to himself as he removed a radio from his pack. "This is Sergeant Scarlett. The cadets are atop the wall. Five wolves have been killed with one casualty. Wolves are on the way to the hot springs. Over."

"Roger," The radio operator responded.

Leo set the radio down and watched as purple blurs traced toward the hot springs.

"Faye and Daniel will handle it," Zenith said, placing his hand on Leo's shoulder. "We got the cadets up here safely."

"Not all of them," Leo said, staring down at the body of Tony Nua at the bottom of the wall.

9

At the hot springs, Wolves were forced to slow down to climb the walls. Snipers picked off climbing wolves handily. The General turned to Faye.

“Colonel, it seems your preparations have served us well.”

“With all due respect, this is no time to count chickens, General.”

“You may be right, but they don’t seem to climb walls at their regular speed,” The General scratched his beard. “If nothing else, we will hopefully get an idea of the size of their invading army from the dead left at the bottom.”

Faye nodded. Wolf bodies stacked up below the wall. After 15 minutes, 11 had been shot on the wall or the gravel-lined road. An hour passed after the 11th Wolf went down, and the General nodded at Faye. Picking up a radio, Faye directed an order to Daniel.

“Meet me at the city wall. We’re going to clear the area.”

“Yes, Colonel,” they replied.

Conifer’s headache progressively lessened. Her flashbacks and panic partially subsided with it, much to her relief.

“Do you sense any more?” Zenith asked.

“It doesn’t quite work that way,” Conifer said. “All I know is that true north is back to where it should be and my head doesn’t hurt anymore.”

“You two just got orders from Faye to search the area,” Leo said. “If all goes well, you’ll meet Faye and Daniel in the middle.”

“Roger,” Zenith said. “Let’s go.”

“Be careful down there. We don’t know if they’re all gone.”

Zenith and Conifer descended a dropped rope ladder and began

surveying the western blocks of the city. There were no signs of living Wolves anywhere. An hour later, Zenith and Conifer saw Daniel and Faye approaching.

"Anything?" Zenith asked.

Faye shook his head. Daniel seemed to be mentally assembling pieces in their mind.

"Did we just win?" Conifer asked nervously.

"What do you think, Daniel?" Faye asked.

"I don't have any evidence of any more wolves being here," Daniel said. "But it feels a little too easy, doesn't it?"

"It feels odd," Faye admitted. "But if they truly are beasts, I wouldn't expect strategy. Maybe we simply eliminated their pack."

"But how could beasts show up so consistently around the same time, remove water from the hot springs, and adapt to climbing the walls?" Daniel asked.

"Leo mentioned one of them grabbed his wrist when he went for his knife," Zenith said. "It not only knew what he was doing, but can also grab things with its paws."

Everyone shifted uncomfortably.

"Let's get back to the wall and report back to the General."

The four climbed up rope ladders to the top of the wall to meet Leo.

"If you're all together," Leo asked, "does that mean the area is cleared?"

"As far as we can tell," Daniel answered.

"You don't sound so sure," Leo said.

"They've shown intelligence and coordination beyond what we've expected so far," Daniel explained. "We don't know what to expect anymore."

"Well, if there's no sign of them, it's still possible that they retreated or were all killed."

"We should report to the General," Leo said, picking up the transceiver. "This is Colonel Corrick. After thorough inspection, no signs of Wolves were detected in the West Blocks. We remain cautious, but it is possible that they have moved on or were defeated."

Loud pounding noises startled the five, coming from the West. A purple blur slowed into the figure of a Wolf bounding across the rooftops of the houses facing the wall. Zenith leaped to action and fired twice, but the Wolf's path wove side-to-side and avoided the fire. It turned and dashed towards the wall.

"It's going to jump to us," Daniel said. "Then use the wall to run

into the hot springs. It must have hidden in a house and used it to get to the roof."

"Wolves can open doors now?" Zenith exclaimed, firing two more shots that missed.

The Wolf gathered its momentum and launched itself from the house closest to the wall. Leo scanned the environment, realizing that if he switched, it would only bring the Wolf where it wanted to go. In a snap decision, he unzipped his jacket and launched himself off and away from the wall headfirst.

"Leo!" Faye cried.

Leo waited until the final half-second before hitting the pavement to switch with the Wolf in mid-air. In a loud pop, the Wolf smashed into the road below, leaving Leo hurling toward the wall with enormous momentum. He held his jacket open like a parachute to slow down and lose altitude.

"Out of the way!" Leo shouted.

The four scattered in opposite directions. With a chuckle, Leo switched with one of the two remaining flags on the wall, standing safely atop as a wooden post crashed into the wall halfway down and causing minor damage. Faye bolted to Leo, who smiled.

"I feel pretty proud of that one, actual—"

Faye slapped him across the face.

"Don't you ever do that again," Faye hissed.

"I'm hoping I won't need to," Leo turned back to the western blocks. "I guess we're going to have to search the houses now, though."

After securing each house in the western blocks, the five returned to the wall.

"That has to be it, right?" Zenith said.

"It doesn't seem like there could be any other places to hide," Daniel thought aloud.

Conifer nodded. The headaches were gone while they checked the houses and north had not strayed for her for several hours. She felt like her nerves had frayed like an old rope, and she was relieved to be done with the day. Faye, Leo, and Zenith climbed up the rope ladders first. Daniel turned to Connie.

"You're not doing so hot, are you?" they asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You've been zoning out all day," they pressed. "I've heard you mutter Isabel's name under your breath."

"What? Am I not allowed to think of my friend on the near anniversary of her death?"

"Connie," Daniel said in a low voice, "I broke when Isabel died. I couldn't move, and Zenith had to carry me so I didn't die there. But talking about it with somebody has helped. I've gotten a lot better. You need to work on your stuff before it gets you in real deep shit."

"What is that an order from my Captain?" Connie spat out.

"No, it's a plea from someone who loves you."

Connie blushed. *They don't play fair*, she thought.

"Just consider it, okay?" they said.

"Okay, I'll consider—"

Conifer froze in place. North was varying, ever so slightly. She turned to what she knew to be north, towards the hot springs.

"Connie, what's happening?"

She tried to say something, but nothing came out of her mouth. She couldn't move.

Faye pulled Leo from the ladder up onto the wall next to the last remaining flag. Zenith was about a third of the way up the 20-foot wall. Faye looked towards the hot springs and their brow furrowed.

"What's up?" Leo asked.

"There were 11 bodies at the base of the hot springs."

"Okay, and?"

"There are 10 now."

Leo and Faye scanned the western blocks, looking for anywhere it could hide, but they spotted nothing.

"Conifer! Daniel! Climb up ASAP!" Faye called out.

"I'm going to switch with them," Leo said.

Faye covered Leo's eyes with his hands.

"What the fuck, Faye? We don't have time for this."

"There's one flag. I did the math. You'll be stuck down there."

"Relax, I'll have them hold each other to get them in one trip. I'm sure Daniel will be jazzed about that."

"Trust your comrades. They're just as capable as you. Actually, probably more so."

"Are you trying to piss me off?"

"As your commanding officer, I order you to stay here."

Leo batted Faye's hands away. He looked down.

"Why aren't they climbing? Did they not hear you?"

"Daniel! Conifer! Get up here! Now!" Faye ordered.

"It's Connie! She's—"

A mailbox flew towards Daniel and Conifer. Daniel leaped out of the way, but injured their ankle. They cried out in pain. Putting weight on it to get back to the ladder was agonizing. Zenith looked down from halfway up the wall, and Leo and Connie could only watch in horror.

"I'm switching to get Daniel."

"What did I just say?"

"They can't walk, much less climb."

Faye hesitated for a moment and then nodded begrudgingly. Leo nodded in return and switched with Daniel. They realized what had happened and panicked.

"Faye, Connie's frozen. She can't move."

"What?"

"I don't know what's going on, but she won't be able to climb."

Faye and Daniel could only look down and wait.

"Conifer, grab on. We're switching to the top," Leo ordered.

Conifer stood motionless, eyes wide open.

"Conifer, we gotta go."

"Leo!" Daniel cried. "Connie can't move!"

"Seriously?" Leo said.

Leo wrapped her arms around him and got the flag in sight. He switched, but he felt her slip away. He looked down from the top of the wall to see Connie underneath the wooden pole he had switched with.

"Fuck!" he screamed.

"What happened?" Daniel asked.

"She didn't grab on, so she slipped during the switch."

Zenith looked down and climbed downward toward her.

"I gotta go," Leo said.

"No way," said Faye. "Zenith is going to help her. He's stronger, a better shot, and closer than you are."

"We don't have time for this, Faye."

"He's right, Leo." Daniel said. "There's no more flags, so whoever goes down there will have to carry or defend her. Zenith is the better call for both."

Leo's eyes narrowed at both of them.

"You two should know better than anybody why I need to do this. I'm not losing another one."

"Sergeant Scarlett, you are ordered to stay atop this wall," Faye commanded.

Leo looked at Faye coldly, then back down to Zenith, five feet away

from the ground still. He saw a flash of purple approaching in his peripheral vision.

“Court-martial me then,” Leo said.

Leo’s vision went black as he felt an impact to his head. He collapsed to the ground.

10

Leo gasped awake. He swiveled his head to take in his surroundings. It was night, and he was in a patient bed at Dr. Worth's house. Faye slept in a chair next to him. Leo's head pounded, and he felt nauseous. He groaned, and Faye instantly woke up.

"Oh thank god," Faye said. "You're finally awake."

"Conifer," Leo panicked. "Zenith. What happened?"

Zenith walked into the room, limping slightly.

"I dropped the rest of the way to the ground, shot the wolf down, and stood watch over Conifer until she snapped out of it and climbed up the ladder with me," Zenith explained. "Have more faith in me, Leo."

Leo looked away. He rubbed his aching head.

"What happened to me then?" Leo asked.

"I knocked you out," Faye said.

Leo jerked to face Faye and instantly regretted it as he held back vomit.

"Why?" he shouted.

"You were about to put everyone in danger by disobeying orders and compromising everyone's safety," Leo stated.

"Me saving Conifer's life would compromise everyone's safety?" Leo continued shouting. "You two preach to me about needing to have faith in my comrades, then knock me out because you don't believe in me?"

"Nobody said that we don't believe in you, Leo," Faye said. "But the highest chance of survival for everyone involved was with Zenith, and you know it, too."

Zenith rubbed his arm, blushing slightly despite himself. Leo stared

daggers into Faye.

"What if it hadn't worked?" Leo screamed. "What if it got Zenith and Conifer both killed when I could have saved them both by sacrificing myself? I would have saved everyone!"

"So you admit you would have likely died," Faye sighed. "How do you still not understand that your life counts as a casualty?"

"People die all the time," Leo said through gritted teeth. "Remember that kid at the shelter last attack? He grew up to be one of my cadets. He was the first to drop to the Wolves."

"I'm sorry," Faye whispered. "But none of the other cadets died because you stayed alive to lead them to safety."

"None of the others died because I used my powers to protect them."

"You had safety measures in place," Faye said. "You worked with calculated risk. Zenith kept Conifer safe with calculated risk as well. You were reckless and disobeying orders, and you knew it. Which is why you have a court-martial in one week's time."

"Christ, you tattled on me?" Leo exclaimed.

"You volunteered for it," Faye said. "It was my duty as your commanding officer to report your insubordinate behavior."

"I bet you get off on having power over me," Leo spat. "You can boss me around and punish me when I don't do exactly as you say."

"If you don't want to be ordered around, why didn't you accept the rank of Captain like Daniel did?" Faye asked.

Leo sat silently, his face growing more severe with every second.

"Is it so that you can stay on the battlefield with the privates?" Faye asked. "So you can live out your hero fetish?"

Leo pounced on Faye, wrapping his hands around Faye's neck.

"You think you understand me, but you don't get me at all." Leo hissed.

Zenith launched toward them to pull Leo away, but Leo held on as Faye gasped for breath. Dr. Worth came up from the basement and dropped the tray of food she was holding, shattering the bowl of soup and glass of water.

"What on earth is going on here?" she demanded.

Zenith pried Leo off of Faye and held Leo back. Leo bit Zenith's hand to get loose, but Zenith held on as Faye caught his breath.

"Stay away from me!" Leo shrieked. "I don't want to see your face ever again!"

Faye's eyes widened and tears welled up in his eyes.

"Enough!" Zenith shouted, shoving Leo against the wall.

"I don't need your constant coddling, Faye!" Leo shouted, voice distorted by his face being pressed against the wall. "I know that you have this stupid crush on me, but I don't fucking care. I know what I need, and it isn't you."

Zenith rammed Leo into the wall again, then dug his knee into his back viciously. Faye collapsed to the ground and cried silently. Dr. Worth raced over, helped him to his feet, and walked him toward the front door.

Outside, Dr. Worth gently sat him down on the stairs outside the house. Faye stared straight ahead into the distance. Dr. Worth opened her mouth to speak, but she decided against it and hugged Faye instead. His breathing cracked open into sobs and then open weeping and gasping. Dr. Worth clutched him in her arms as he clung to her for stability.

"I feel like I'm drowning," Faye sputtered through breaths.

"I know," Dr. Worth whispered. "Soon you will remember how to swim. Until then, it's okay to focus on keeping above water."

Faye's body quaked with heaving breaths. His diaphragm shook from pressing air into sobs long after his lungs were empty. Dr. Worth rubbed his back in gentle circles for several minutes as the waves of Faye's breaths settled and no longer swept him out to sea. Faye separated to wipe his face dry from tears and snot. He nodded to Dr. Worth in thanks, who sadly smiled back.

Zenith walked out the door and sat on Faye's other side of the steps. Dr. Worth looked over at him.

"Faye, are you okay if I leave to talk to Zenith for a moment?" Dr. Worth asked.

Faye nodded silently. Dr. Worth stood up to walk inside, and Zenith followed after a moment's hesitation while looking at Faye. After Zenith entered, Dr. Worth closed the door behind him.

Dr. Worth looked toward the unconscious body of Leo on his side in bed handcuffed to the bed frame and with a blindfold on. She raised her eyebrow at Zenith.

"He lost his strength after putting up a fight, so I got him back to bed," Zenith explained. "I guess he's still exhausted from the battle today. To be fair, I am, too."

"How are you holding up, Zenith?" Dr. Worth asked.

"I'm fine. This ain't my first rodeo with the Wolves."

"I know," Dr. Worth said. "I wasn't really talking about the Wolves."

"What do you mean?"

"You've been through a lot, Zenith. It adds up. It's usually best if you talk about it with someone."

"Oh, uh, yeah," Zenith said, feeling uncomfortable. "Being in the military is a lot, but that's why we have each other."

"I'm glad," Dr. Worth said. "But that's also not what I was talking about."

"What exactly do you mean, Dr. Worth?"

Dr. Worth sighed, deciding how direct to be. She sighed.

"I met your father recently, Zenith," She said. "I don't want to make any assumptions, but I hope you know trauma isn't just watching someone die. It can be feeling unsafe for long periods of time. And if you ever want to talk to somebody about that kind of thing, I'm here."

Zenith opened his mouth to speak, but looked away instead.

"I'm going to take Faye back to the station, Dr. Worth. Thanks for looking out for him."

Dr. Worth nodded.

"Take care of each other," She breathed.

Zenith and Faye slowly wound their way to the Guard station. Several times, Zenith wanted to say something, but couldn't piece together the words. As he was about to speak, he felt something graze and then latch onto his hand. He looked down to see Faye weakly grasping his hand. Zenith looked up to see Faye blushing and looking away.

"Is this okay?" Faye asked.

Zenith felt his heart race and a warmth in his chest. He smiled.

"Yeah."

They said nothing else. They walked up the stairs to the wall and climbed back down the other side, then walked until they arrived at the Guard station. Faye softly withdrew his hand.

"Th-thanks," Faye stuttered.

"Uh, anytime," Zenith said, scratching the back of his neck.

Faye grinned slightly and walked into the station. After he was gone, Zenith looked down at his hand. It felt different from the rest of his body. He felt warmth in his face and a surge of energy coursing through him. For the first time, the parts of his chest that felt twisted up and knotted instead felt lightened and warm like hot cider. He didn't know those parts could feel good, and it took him by surprise. He smiled to himself.

"Zenith," Said an icy, gravelly voice behind him.

Zenith's body tensed up immediately as his heart raced for a different reason now. All the warmth fled.

"Father," he said, turning toward the voice. "What are you doing here?"

"I was called by the General for consultation," Zenith's father said. "What did I raise you to be?"

"The successor to the Braun family."

"How do you suppose holding hands factors into that?"

Zenith's fear took over.

"Father, I was comforting a friend."

"Ah yes, the new Colonel," he mused. "I did not raise you to sleep your way to power. You will earn it on your own merit, as I did."

Embarrassment, shame, confusion, fear, and anger swirled within Zenith. He did not know what to say or do. His father sighed.

"You continue to disappoint me, boy. I don't care if the times have changed. You are my son, as much as I hate to admit it, and you will not tarnish the reputation of our family."

Zenith's father shoulder-checked him as he walked into the Guard station. Zenith gulped and took two breaths, but it did not calm him down. He looked at the ground.

Trauma isn't just watching someone die, Zenith thought. After everything I've been through, could my problem really be him?

He felt a warmth on his shoulder. Zenith turned around to see Faye resting a hand on him. Zenith turned bright red and scanned the area for his father.

"Don't worry. He's in the war room with the General," Faye said.

"What?"

"I heard you and your father," Faye explained. "I'm sorry I caused you such pain. I can leave you alone."

"Please don't," Zenith plead.

Faye looked up in surprise. Zenith felt just as shocked.

What am I saying? Zenith thought. If Father finds out, he'll be even more angry.

"I'm glad you said that," Faye said.

"What?"

"I didn't want to leave you alone."

Zenith felt his chest and face flush with warmth again. Faye looked away and rubbed his neck.

"Do you want to come back to my quarters and we can talk some more?" Faye asked.

Zenith felt something in his throat and had trouble thinking as his heart pounded. He thought about the icy disappointment of his father. Then he remembered how Faye had melted that away.

I don't need to be afraid of the cold if I have warmth beside me, Zenith thought.

"Yeah, let's do that."

Daniel and Conifer arrived at Dr. Worth's house the following morning. Dr. Worth swept them both up in a massive hug.

"Thank the heavens," she said. "I'm so glad you're both safe."

"I'm glad to see you, too, Mom." Daniel said. "I'm going to restock your supplies, okay? The General sent me with some after hearing we took Leo and Zenith here."

"That's very kind of him. You know where those go."

Daniel walked away towards the closet, leaving Dr. Worth and Conifer alone.

"How's your family, Conifer?"

"They're good. I still see them every weekend."

"That's even more often than Daniel comes to visit. I'm jealous."

"Ha, sorry," Conifer apologized. "The kids just really need me around, and my folks need help with the garden since Dad got sick."

"They really rely on you."

"I'm just happy to help out where I can."

"Can you rely on them to help you out, too?"

Conifer didn't answer, choosing to look around the house.

"So you're here to take Leo into custody?" Dr. Worth asked.

"Yes, Dr. Worth." Conifer said, raising an eyebrow. "Is that going to be a problem?"

Dr. Worth sighed.

"I may have raised the boy, but he still has to face the consequences of his own actions," she said. "I just wish they wouldn't put a 17-year-old on trial. God, if they knew what I did when I was 17."

Conifer tilted her head in curiosity. Dr. Worth laughed.

"I'll tell you when you're older." Dr. Worth said.

"Promise?"

"Well, I mostly hope you'll forget by then."

"That won't happen. You and I have a date."

"Won't Daniel be jealous?"

Conifer blushed beet red.

"Sorry, sorry, I had to," Dr. Worth apologized.

They both laughed. Dr. Worth looked Conifer over.

"It's been a while since I've heard you laugh, Connie."

"It's been a while since I've laughed, Dr. Worth."

Dr. Worth considered her and took a deep breath.

"Connie, when are you going to talk to me?"

"About what?"

"Don't give me that."

Conifer sighed.

"Look, Dr. Worth," Connie said, "I got scared yesterday. That's all. I wasn't brave enough, and I choked. It won't happen again."

Dr. Worth frowned.

"Connie, you're one of the bravest people, I know. Do you know what trauma is?"

"It's like when the brain is broken from something awful happening, right?"

"I wouldn't say broken," Dr. Worth pushed back, "but the brain changes from trauma. When something reminds you of what happened, your brain thinks it's happening all over again. And it does whatever it takes to protect itself. Sometimes it avoids thinking about it, sometimes it puts up a fight, and sometimes it shuts down."

"That doesn't make any sense," Connie protested. "Why would it shut down?"

"Because you can't hurt if you don't feel anything."

Connie looked away.

"Connie, this doesn't get better on its own. Even some people who work hard on it still feel the pain and panic sometimes. There's not a magic wand that makes it all go away."

"Then why even try?" Connie shot back.

"We can't stop bad things from happening, but we can learn how to get through them. We can learn how to believe that we will be okay. And when we do, we don't have to avoid the pain anymore because we know it won't destroy us."

Conifer sighed.

"You think you can fix me?" Conifer asked.

"No," Dr. Worth said. "Because I don't think you're broken."

Conifer's breath got caught in her throat. She coughed and cinched her face tightly to keep it from quivering.

"Then why do I have to talk to you?" Conifer asked.

"Because we sometimes learn from a cruel world to be cruel to ourselves, and it takes practice to learn another way," Dr. Worth said.

"Or you can keep hoping that your way works and nothing bad happens again."

As Daniel's footsteps approached, Conifer's face went blank.

"Okay, Connie, we need to get Leo to the station now. We've blindfolded him to keep him from switching, but that'll make getting him up and down the wall difficult."

Daniel stepped into the room with the two women. They put together the concern on their mother's face and the stony face of Conifer and sighed softly.

"Ready, Connie?" Daniel asked.

"Yeah," Conifer answered flatly.

Daniel and Conifer put Leo's arms on their shoulders and walked him out the door. Dr. Worth held the door for them.

"Thanks, Mom. Love you!"

"Love you, too, sweetie."

"Thank you, Dr. Worth," Conifer said.

"I'll always be here if you need anything."

Conifer kept walking, moving faster than Daniel could keep up with.

"Connie, slow down! We're gonna drop him!"

Dr. Worth watched as they shuffled down the street toward the wall.

"I didn't talk at her age either," she muttered to herself. "I just hope she doesn't get herself hurt before then."

The three arrived at the station, Leo having not said a word the entire time. Two guards approached and took Leo to a holding cell. Zenith strode over to Daniel and Conifer and watched Leo be taken away. He turned to them.

"Come up to the General's office. We have to talk about something big."

"What do you mean?" Conifer asked.

"While moving the Wolves at the hot springs to an examination area, they found one barely alive and took it into custody," Zenith explained.

"We have a living Wolf stashed away somewhere?" Daniel asked, horrified.

Conifer stiffened.

"We did," Zenith said, "until it turned into a human at sunrise."

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"Sir," Daniel asked the General, "Is it true? Did the Wolf transform into a human?"

"We have guards as eye witnesses. They gave us their report this morning while you were retrieving Sergeant Scarlett."

Daniel, Conifer, Faye, and Zenith looked at each other. Daniel noticed Zenith avoided eye contact with Faye and a half grin flickered on their face before returning to the situation at hand.

"So they can shape shift?" Daniel asked. "Why have we never seen that before? They could have transformed into something better for climbing."

"That's why I don't think it can transform at will," Faye said. "If it could impersonate a human, then why wouldn't they use that to their advantage in all the chaos?"

Daniel put a finger to their lips as they thought.

"Can they talk?" they asked.

"Guards heard it swear when it transformed, but it hasn't answered any questions," Faye explained.

"Which is why I need you four to take over interrogation," General Howlett said. "Use whatever strategies you deem necessary."

"We should start diplomatically," Daniel stated.

"Agreed," Faye said. "If we can get it on our side, then we may get more information."

"Just let me do the talking," Daniel said to the others.

They arrived at the cell and saw a short, curvy woman wearing a white shirt and khaki pants, clearly from a cadet uniform set that was too large for her. Daniel nodded to the others and approached the cell.

"Hi, my name is Daniel Worth," they said. "Can I ask if you have a name?"

The woman did not acknowledge Daniel, staring straight ahead.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

She continued staring ahead. Daniel turned to the guards in the room, whispered a command into their ears, and then spoke up so everyone could hear.

"Kill her."

The woman stood up and clutched the bars and glared at Daniel. Their three friends looked at them in shock and horror.

"So you seem to understand me," Daniel said.

The woman grunted and looked away, defeated.

"That's great. Because I want to tell you something," Daniel started. "I don't want to kill you. I want to understand you. If you help me understand what the Wolves are doing, then maybe I can help you, too. Is there something you want?"

She opened her mouth to speak and then closed it. With a sigh, she tried again.

"You can just kill me. I won't betray my people."

"People?" Daniel asked. "There are more of you?"

She shut up again.

"You call them people, and you speak English. So you aren't just beasts who can look human."

"What do you think we are?" she spat.

"We've only ever seen you all as rapidly moving, purple, and furry creatures that we've been calling Wolves. We don't know who you are or why you attack, and we don't understand how you can move so quickly. All we know is that we have roughly four years in between each attack and that you can be slowed down to visible speeds by barriers."

The guards and Daniel's friends grew nervous as they disclosed more and more information to the enemy. The woman seemed taken aback as well.

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked.

"I told you," Daniel said. "I want to understand you. So you need to know what I know so you can better explain things to us."

"Maybe I'll just turn into a 'Wolf,' escape, and bring this information to my people."

"Then why haven't you?"

The woman turned away.

"Can you at least tell me your name? I'd like to know who I'm talking to."

She pouted for a moment before sighing.

"Janna," she said. "There, happy now?"

Daniel smiled.

"Thank you, Janna," they said. "I genuinely want to help you and your people if I can. Maybe then we won't have to be at war with each other and cause so much pain. Can you tell me more about your people?"

Janna considered Daniel.

"We need mana."

"Mana?"

"You know, magic power," she said, tilting her head. "Do you not know about magic?"

"No, we do. We just don't use that word. So mana refers to magical energy or potential?"

"Well, yeah," she said. "And your hot spring water contains plenty of it. I assume that's why you protected it from this last raid."

"We use it as well. To power our generators. Why do you need it, though?"

"Why does it matter?"

"This again?" Daniel asked, exasperated. "If I know what you use it for, maybe we can come to an agreement about how we might help each other. I told you what we use the hot spring water for, so it's your turn."

Janna hesitated again, but shook her head and spoke up again.

"Twenty-two years ago, an asteroid hit the earth."

"Right. We call that the Impact here."

"Then you know debris went into the air, causing it to block out the sun for long enough to cause climate change, destroy crops, and kill most of the human population."

"Other than a couple other settlements we've spoken to by radio, we assumed we were among the last remaining outposts of people. I was taught we're called West Post because we're on the western side of what used to be called America."

"That's right, you must've been born after the Impact if you got all this second hand. Why are you all so young?"

"You still haven't answered my question about what you use the hot spring water for."

"You first."

Daniel sighed.

"Your 'people' have killed much of our senior Guard members in recent years, so we have rebuilt by lowering the minimum age to join the Post Guard."

"Captain—" Faye cautioned.

"You call yourselves the Post Guard?" Janna asked.

"Yes. Why?" Daniel responded.

"It just sounds like something else from before the Impact is all."

"You were alive before the Impact?"

"I was young, but yes. About five years old when it happened."

"I have so many questions," Daniel shook their head, "but it's your turn to answer my original question. Why our water?"

Janna's brow furrowed in puzzlement. She shrugged.

"Alright, fine. Our village is based around a huge fragment of the asteroid that hit earth. The Fragment absorbs mana from our surrounding area, which has killed much of the wildlife in the area."

"What? Why?"

"Because mana is the energy of living things. Asteroid debris manipulates mana, which is why people who breathed in enough debris from it—or the children of those who did—have magical powers. Magic is just a manipulation of the energy inside our bodies."

So that's how I'm able to heal and Isabel could communicate with others, Daniel thought. *We affect the body's biology. But how do Leo and Connie's magic work?*

"Connie," Daniel asked, "which way is north?"

Conifer pointed due north.

"Which way is north?" What does that mean?"

"Connie, can I tell her?"

Conifer stammered for a moment before nodding nervously.

"She can detect which way is north, but it's disrupted by Wolves. Why aren't you disturbing it now?"

"Because I'm not a 'Wolf' anymore. The magic wore off."

"What do you mean?"

"The fragment that absorbs manna releases it around every four years in one large burst. It interacts with our natural powers to become faster, stronger, and beast-like."

"Then why don't dead wolves turn back into people after a day or two?"

Janna looked away with sadness in her eyes.

"I don't know. Maybe our biology can only change back if we're

alive.”

Daniel frowned.

“I’m sorry to speak of your fallen comrades,” they said. “We acted in self-defense. If we had known you were people, we would have tried to negotiate long ago. Why didn’t you try to negotiate with us?”

“Because my people were driven out of our original settlement for our power to become monsters. We assumed any negotiations would go just as poorly.”

“I’m sorry that you were driven out. We would have heard your case. Now we have the chance to prove it.”

“So the asteroid fragment drains all the mana of the nearby wildlife. I’m guessing it also drains your own? Is that why you need our water?”

Janna’s eyes widened.

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Then why don’t you just leave the area?” Daniel asked. “If it’s draining your life force, why not go somewhere else?”

“My people worship The Fragment.”

Daniel blinked twice.

“Your people do what?” They asked.

“When my people were driven out of our original settlement after the Impact, the people of that settlement came to destroy us. But at a critical moment, the mana burst exploded, turning us into monsters that could destroy the pursuing army. We stay there because my people believe it protects us.”

Daniel put a finger to their lips again as they thought.

“You keep saying your people believe it. Do you not?”

“I think it’s bullshit.”

“Then why not leave?”

“You think I could survive on my own in the wild? Or find a new settlement to go to after being chased out of my own? It’s safer to stick together.”

“So your people worship a fragment of an asteroid that sucks away your mana, causing you to have to use the quadrennial mana burst coming from it to become creatures that can raid nearby settlements for mana to survive another four years?”

“I know it sounds crazy, but I don’t have any say in what my village believes. And I can’t live without my people.”

Daniel pondered for a second.

“Thank you, Janna. You’ve been very helpful, and I’m going to see

that you're rewarded for that. I'll be back shortly."

Daniel motioned for their comrades to follow them as they walked to their quarters.

"Daniel, why did you—" Faye started.

"Wait until we're alone," Daniel said.

Arriving at Daniel's room, they used their key to unlock it and ushered everyone inside.

"What is it, Daniel?" Conifer asked.

"I think we can strike up a diplomatic relationship between our settlements!" they said excitedly. "We'll have Janna lead us to her village. We negotiate an agreement to provide mana water to them, and we end the war between us!"

Faye and Zenith looked at each other, then looked away, blushing.

"What?" Daniel asked.

"It's just," Zenith said, "we don't have much of our own mana water."

"This seems like it's on Janna's people to find their own solution to this." Faye added. "We can't help people who don't want to help themselves."

"Then are you opposed to a peaceful solution?" Daniel asked. "If we don't talk to them, we'll just have to keep fighting and killing each other."

"Let's just see what the general says," Zenith said.

"We need to report what we found out either way," Faye said. "Let's go."

Faye and Zenith walked out of Daniel's room, but Conifer stayed behind.

"You're really hoping they'll say yes to your plan, huh?" she said.

"Hope is all we have," Daniel said. "You can only make the future by believing it will come."

Conifer looked up at Daniel in awe.

"When did you become so wise?" she asked.

"When I started listening to others."

"Absolutely not," The General said.

"But we can reach a diplomatic solution, Sir!" Daniel persisted.

"There's no point, Captain," General Howlett dismissed. "We are running low on our own reserves as it is. We can not share such a limited resource with a group of people who can not see the common sense to leave their situation. Nor do I believe they deserve our

cooperation after what they have done.”

“If we don’t work with them, then they will only return in another four years.”

“We stopped them in their tracks with minimal casualties this time. I am confident we can do it again with four more years to prepare.”

“But Sir,” Daniel pressed, “Now they have seen our barricades. We know now that they are intelligent humans who have four years to devise a strategy to defeat us.”

“Not that intelligent if they can’t leave the thing that’s killing them.”

Daniel took a step back in surprise.

“Then we’ll just sit here, wait, and kill more people?”

“It is the safest approach.”

“Sir, I disagree. If we go—”

“Captain,” the General stood up. “Our oath is to protect West Post. These people do not have my sympathy or my devotion. We will extract as much information as we can from our specimen and experiment on it when it has stopped talking.”

“She,” Daniel muttered.

“What was that, Captain?” the General glared down at Daniel.

“She, Sir,” they dug in. “Her name is Janna, and she is not an ‘it.’”

The General walked directly in front of Daniel, chest to chest with them.

“Take a walk, Captain. It will clear your head,” the General turned to the others. “You are dismissed.”

Faye, Zenith, and Conifer stared with wide-open eyes at Daniel. Faye shook his head, saluted the general, and left. Zenith followed suit, then Conifer. Daniel took a deep breath as he maintained eye contact with the General. They saluted and left. As soon as they had exited the office, they stormed towards their room.

“Daniel, wait!” Conifer called out as she ran to catch up to them.

Daniel reached their dormitory again and entered. Conifer followed them into their room.

“What, Connie?” Daniel said. “Did you come to chew me out, too?”

“I want to help you,” Conifer said.

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s take the diplomatic approach.”

“We can’t. The General just denied the operation.”

“Then we do it anyway.”

Daniel’s jaw dropped. He checked the hallway to see if anyone was around.

"Are you insane?" Daniel whispered.

"You're right. We need to negotiate with them or else we'll just keep killing each other until someone runs out of people." She paused. "I have to hope that we can do something else."

"Then what would we even do? Break Janna out and go there on our own? We have no diplomatic privileges."

"We could just see what their demands are and bring them back. Prove that we can negotiate with them peacefully. Maybe the General will see then."

Daniel shook their head slowly.

"We can't. We'll be breaking orders. They could easily call this treason."

"Would you rather needlessly kill people with families and loved ones, just to keep the General happy?"

Daniel groaned and grabbed their head.

"We couldn't do it on our own, just the two of us," Daniel said. "And there's no way we could get Zenith or Faye on board."

"Hm."

Conifer snorted.

"What's so funny exactly?"

"Doesn't this all sound pretty heroic?"

"I'd say more like suicidal," Daniel realized what Conifer was saying. "No! No way."

"We know the perfect third man."

Daniel picked up a pillow and screamed into it for several seconds.

"Faye's going to skin me, then kill me."

"You know, I'm starting to see why Leo likes disobeying orders. It's intoxicating."

Leo hated to admit it, but as a child, he had been afraid of the dark. Not the physical lack of light, as much as not knowing what could be where he couldn't see. Laying down in a cell with a blindfold on to prevent him from switching and hands chained to the wall, he remembered that fear distinctly. Someone or something could be right in front of him and he would never know.

"Leo."

He startled up to a sitting position.

"Conifer?" he asked.

"Shh," Conifer shushed. "Daniel and I need you. We're going to stop the Wolves from attacking ever again. Are you in?"

Leo added it all up in his head.

"You're going against orders," he said.

"Nothing you're not used to."

Leo groaned.

"We'll keep anyone from having to die again, Leo," Conifer pleaded.

"Please."

"Did you come up with this plan?"

"Daniel did."

"That's encouraging, at least."

"Hey!"

Leo sighed.

"I still have that penny," Conifer said. "During the Cadet Games you said, 'We'll show them all what we can do. We just need to take advantage of the right moment and not let it pass.'"

Leo smiled and leaned forward.

"Well?" Conifer asked. "We don't have much time."

"I'm waiting for you to take the headband off. I need to see to get out of here."

"Oh!"

Janna sat in the cold cell at night with nothing other than her barest of clothes to keep her warm. She regretting working with Daniel. It would do nothing but get her people killed while she rotted in a cell until also being killed. She missed her mother and wished to have her venison one last time.

"Captain, what are you doing here so late?" the guard asked.

"I'm here to see the prisoner. I have more questions." Daniel said.

Janna snapped to attention, turning around to look at Daniel.

"Very well, Captain."

"Can you please leave it to just the two of us for now?"

"Why, Sir?"

"General's orders. Privileged information for Captains and above."

The guard hesitated, but gave in to their superior officer.

"Yes, Sir. If she puts you in any harm's way, call out and we will return to keep you safe."

"Absolutely, Sergeant."

The guard stepped away and out of sight. Janna watched Daniel, terrified of what they might do.

"Janna," Daniel whispered. "Get ready to run."

"What?"

Daniel got out a set of keys.

"Follow me."

Leo, Conifer, Daniel, and Janna rendezvoused in the woods outside of town.

"Who is this?" Leo asked. "I don't recognize her."

"We'll talk on the way, Leo," Daniel said. "We've gotta go."

"Go where?" Said someone behind them.

The four turned around to see Faye.

"Faye, I can explain," Daniel whispered.

"Please do," Faye said.

Daniel stood for a few seconds, thinking before they sighed.

"Do I have to?" Daniel asked. "I've got nothing."

Faye stood quietly for a moment.

"You have no right to make promises for West Post," he said.

"I won't! I just want to find out their conditions. Hear their side and have them hear ours. Prove that we can meet in peace and show the General it's possible."

"The general won't be convinced by a renegade soldier."

"You know what we're about to do. So I guess it's over. Janna can be experimented on, Leo can be thrown in jail forever, and we and the wolves will kill each other for eternity until we're out of children to hurl at each other. Just abandon hope all together."

The four held their breath. Faye looked at Daniel, then Leo. He turned away from them.

"Take care of him, Daniel."

Daniel nodded.

"I will. No matter what."

Faye walked away towards the station. Janna turned toward Daniel.

"Is he going to rat us out?"

"No." Said Daniel. "But we need to get going."

Faye reached his quarters and opened the door. Zenith sat up in bed, shirtless.

"Where did you go?" Zenith asked.

"Just needed to take a walk."

Faye gazed out the window for a minute before returning to bed.

12

"You're actually a Wolf?" Leo asked, walking beside Conifer and behind Daniel and Janna.

"No," Janna replied. "I'm a human who happens to be able to turn into what you call 'Wolves.'"

"How is that possible? They moved so fast and were so strong."

"How are you able to switch places with things?" Daniel pointed out. "There's so much about magic we don't understand yet."

Leo softly sighed. Janna continued to lead the way through the woods in the dark.

"How far away is your village?" Daniel asked.

"In Beast form, it takes us a few hours to travel," Janna replied. "I don't know how that equates to human travel."

"You call it Beast form?" Daniel asked.

"Better than Wolf form, at least," she said. "I don't know what kind of mutant wolves you've seen that look like us."

"I don't have much to go off of," Daniel admitted. "I've never left West Post."

"What?" Janna exclaimed. "You're a Captain of your Guard, and you've never left the city, even to scout?"

"I've been in the inner woods for training, but never left a five-mile radius of the city center. Only five people have left West Post since the Impact and returned alive, and none of them are living now."

Leo's face hardened. Janna shook her head slowly.

"Then you've never met a person from another settlement," She whispered.

"Not until you."

Daniel smiled at her. Janna looked away.

"Using 'person' pretty loosely there, Daniel," Leo simmered. "We're still talking to a monster."

Janna stopped and spun around to glare at Leo.

"I'm a human, just like you. What do you not get?"

"Humans *are* monsters," Leo said. "Especially when they kill children and their parents."

"We fought to protect our children and their parents, too. Without mana, they would have died from the Fragment."

"Then leave!" Leo shouted. "Why, for fuck's sake, would you choose to worship something that's killing you?"

"That's rich coming from you, Leo," Daniel muttered.

"What's that supposed to mean, Daniel?" He demanded.

"We all do it," they answered softly. "You throw yourself into danger to make sense of how others sacrificed themselves for you. Faye clung to you to stay afloat."

Daniel stopped walking. The others stopped as well.

"I think we all hold on to things that are killing us," Daniel said.

Conifer looked away and rubbed her arms slowly.

"Why?" Leo asked.

"The same reason we do anything," Daniel answered. "To stay alive."

Janna considered Daniel thoughtfully. Leo shook his head and started walking again.

"Speak for yourself." He said, passing Janna.

Conifer looked up at Daniel nervously, and they smiled gently back at her. Both of them followed behind Leo. Daniel sighed and watched Janna speed up to catch Leo.

"Let me lead. You don't know where you're going, Red," she said.

"My name's Scarlett," he retorted.

"Close enough."

Janna took the lead to navigate. After a quiet half hour, she turned to Leo.

"Question for you," she inquired.

Leo gestured for her to continue. Janna breathed in slowly, thinking.

"Why come with us?" she asked. "You clearly hate us for what we've done to you. You'll probably be in deep shit with your own people for doing this. So why help?"

"The people I loved died to save me," he answered immediately. "I have to make their sacrifice worth it. If I can save lives this way, then I have to."

"So that's what Daniel meant," she reflected. "But wouldn't those people have wanted you to live a happy life in their stead?"

"I'm supposed to smile while standing on their dead bodies?"

Janna examined Leo for a moment and turned to face forward again.

"You don't wish you had them back," Janna said softly. "You want to join them."

"You know nothing about me, Wolf."

"And you know nothing about me, Red," she sighed. "But I recognize a death wish when I see it."

"You think I want to die?"

"I think you want the guilt to stop, and you don't know any other way to do it."

Leo did not answer. Janna shook her head again.

"Look, I know there's nothing that your sworn enemy is going to say to change your life's purpose," Janna said. "I won't guilt you or try to convince you life's a peach because it sucks."

"Off to a good start."

"Shut up," She said. "You know the shitty thing about being a teenager? You're old enough to understand perfectly how the world breaks people, but you're too young to have witnessed anyone heal from it."

"Are you calling me stupid?"

"No, you three are all probably smarter than me."

"At least two of us."

"Anyway, age doesn't make you smarter. Age doesn't automatically make you anything but older. But wounds also only get better with time."

"Your point?"

"Old people look down on both of us because they're ashamed of who they were when they were our age. I'm not trying to do that to you. I'm old enough to have learned that things often get better, but young enough that I haven't forgotten what it feels like to not know that. I know it sucks, and I know having old people lecture you feels condescending and shitty. But I wish I could upload into your brain the understanding that life can be lots of things at once."

"Upload?"

"Oh, right. I'm old. It's like taking what's in my head and putting it into yours."

"Yeah yeah, life is good and bad, got it. Thanks for the lesson, Wolf."

"You don't learn to shoot a gun by someone telling you how," Janna

said. "You learn by doing it until you build muscle memory. And you don't understand something until you've experienced it enough to build that pattern up in your head. That's what you need time for, and you'll never get that time if you give up."

"I haven't given up on anything."

"Fine. Then I'll make you a bet. Live another five years and prove me wrong."

"Why do you care?" Leo snapped.

"Because my people did this to you," Janna said solemnly. "Someone needs to take responsibility for it."

Leo looked at Janna before facing back forward.

A few hours later, the four stopped to rest for the rest of the night. Daniel heated cans of beans over a gas stove while the others set up camp. Having finished her duties, Janna sat down beside Daniel.

"I heard what you said," Daniel said to her.

"About what?"

"About taking responsibility," Daniel stirred the pot of beans. "I feel much better about our decision to ask you for help."

Janna tilted her head at Daniel.

"You know, I was expecting you three just to use me to get you to my village. Gun at my head the whole way or whatever," she paused. "Why are you so kind to someone who hurt so many of your people?"

"There's not many humans left anymore, as far as I can tell," they said, staring at the bubbling meal. "I figure we're all 'our people' at this point."

Janna and Daniel sat silently for a moment.

"Can I ask you a question?" she asked.

"Go for it."

"What possesses you to be so positive?"

Daniel half-smiled and started ladling beans onto a metal plate.

"When I was young, my mom told me hope was our most important resource," they said. "I thought that was really corny, even as a kid. Like something they put in fairy tales to write off plot holes lazily. But it makes sense when you break it down. See, I looked up the words in the dictionary. Hope is confidence in the future, and confidence is having trust in something. Hope isn't something you can prove. It's just trust that things will be better eventually. And in a world that's always up and down, the odds are on our side that it will go up if we wait long enough."

Daniel handed Janna the plate, which she gratefully accepted.

"Or we'll die first, at which point it won't really matter, I guess," they added.

"Encouraging." She said, mouth full of beans.

"Let me ask you a question, Janna. If that's okay."

"Go ahead."

"You talked to Leo about learning from time. Am I really missing something just because I'm younger?"

Janna chewed, swallowed her food, and leaned back.

"That's the unfair part of life, I think," She mused. "That you build up your idea of how the world works and even how your own brain works when you have the least information. Daniel, I can tell you are smart. I think you know more than ten adults three times your age combined. I also don't think you're lacking in experience. You've also been through lifetimes of struggle at your age, I bet."

She considered them for a moment.

"I don't think I'm better than you because I've been around longer. But the benefit of some extra laps around the sun is that you don't just see people get hurt. You see them live through it. And if you let yourself see that instead of focusing on only the hurt, then it gets easier to have that trust in the future you were talking about."

Janna felt the heat of the plate warming her hands and shook her head with a smirk.

"Or we get bitter about it. Time isn't enough on its own to heal. But you still need enough time to heal, so it's better to start early."

Daniel frowned and looked up at Conifer setting up a tent. She used a stone to drive stakes into the ground to hold the canvas taught. She sighed. The last 48 hours had been a lot, and she still hadn't processed it all yet. The words of Dr. Worth tumbled into her mind.

"I don't think you're broken," she thought. "You can keep hoping that your way works and nothing bad happens again." What did that even mean?

"Conifer."

She snapped into position to hurl the stone in her hand at the person who snuck up behind her. As her pupils dilated and heart pounded on a dime, she noticed just in time that it was Leo. He put his hands up.

"Whoa," He said calmly. "I was just checking if you needed help with the tent."

Conifer hung her head in fatigue and frustration.

"I'm sorry, Leo. I'm fine."

"You sure about that?"

"I'm fine," She reiterated, growing impatient.

"Okay, okay. How about the tent?"

"I'm almost done. Go eat some beans."

"Alright, see ya over there."

Leo walked over to Janna and Daniel. Conifer saw Daniel and felt warmed up by his smile.

They could never love someone as messed up as you, she thought.

Her gaze turned upward and stared into the void of the sky. She felt nothing and thought nothing. A soft voice from in front of her snapped her out of it, though she didn't hear what they had said. She looked down to see Daniel approaching her carefully.

"Sorry, what was that, Daniel?"

Daniel's face crinkled in worry.

They feel sorry for you, she thought and felt herself slip away again.

"Can you do something for me, Connie?" they asked.

"What?"

"Can you wiggle your toes?"

Conifer squinted at them in confusion.

"Excuse me?"

"Come on, just humor me."

She wiggled her toes in her boots.

"Can you feel your hands?" They asked.

"Yeah, duh."

"How do they feel?"

"Sore from hitting the stakes with this rock."

"Gotcha. Can you tell me what you're thinking about?"

They can't know. They'll reject you and think you're weak, she thought.

"Nothing much really."

Daniel frowned and sat beside her.

"You know I'm here for you, right?" they said.

"Yeah, I know."

"Do you believe me?"

"I know you wouldn't lie."

"That doesn't actually answer my question."

"Daniel, I—"

"I'm in love with you, Connie."

Conifer reeled backwards and fell onto her back.

"Oh my god, are you okay?" Daniel asked frantically.

"What the fuck was that about?" Conifer whispered aggressively.

"It's about how I've always liked you. We don't know what might

happen when we reach Janna's village, but I know I wanted you to know what you mean to me."

"I—I—" Conifer stuttered.

"You don't have to say anything. Maybe it was unfair to spring this on you. I'm sorry, I should have—"

Conifer put a hand on Daniel's knee, and she leaned against them. She heard the voice inside her say that she didn't deserve it, but she did it anyway and found peace against their shoulder. They handed her a plate of food, which she picked at slowly.

Later that night, Leo stood guard while the others slept. Conifer tossed and turned in her sleep, haunted by nightmares of standing still while her friends died to protect her. She saw Daniel being ripped apart by Wolves just like Isabel and startled awake. Crying, she whipped her head from side to side to look for Daniel. They were sleeping soundly in a sleeping bag next to her. She reached out her hand to touch them, but pulled back at the last second.

I'm going to be too much for them and they'll leave me.

She stayed still for several long minutes. Then she began shimmying, inch by inch, closer to Daniel. Arriving at their side, she could feel the heat coming from their forehead. She leaned into it and closed her eyes. When she opened them, Daniel was looking back at her, smiling. They reached their arm out of the sleeping bag and put it around her. She let herself be swept up in their arm and melted into them. For the first time in years, she felt safe.

13

In the morning, the four took down camp and continued in the direction Janna led. Leo followed directly behind, with Daniel and Conifer walking together in the back. Their hands occasionally grazed each other until Daniel took her hand firmly in theirs.

"So what's the big plan, Daniel?" asked Janna, looking backward.

Conifer let go of Daniel's hand. They both blushed.

"What do you mean?" Daniel asked.

Janna chuckled at the couple's embarrassment, then turned serious again.

"I mean what do you think you're going to do when you get to my village?" she asked. "They'll recognize me right away, but they won't have any idea who you are. And I don't know if I've made this clear enough, but they don't take kindly to strangers."

Daniel rubbed their chin and closed their eyes as they thought. Janna stopped to watch them, and the others followed suit. After a deep sigh, they opened their eyes.

"Janna," they began. "can you go into town and arrange a meeting with the leader of your village? Then we can parley somewhere neutral outside of the village where we won't frighten anyone."

Janna frowned slightly.

"I can try," she said. "I'm just a soldier, but the village is small enough that we all know each other. What will you do if they say no?"

"Depends on what they say," Daniel said, walking forward again. "We should keep going."

Daniel walked past an unconvinced Janna, who jogged to catch up. Leo looked at Conifer and shrugged before they sped up to keep up with the others.

An hour later, Conifer's head started pounding. She groaned in pain. Daniel snapped to attention and put an arm around Conifer to embrace her as she winced in pain. They looked at Janna.

"I thought you could only transform once every four years?" Daniel said.

"Give or take a couple of days. What's happening?"

"Conifer can sense wolves nearby," Leo explained. "It causes her migraines. So why is she feeling it now if there can't be any Wolves?"

"Maybe it's not Wolves that she can detect," Daniel conjectured. "Maybe it's the presence of magic. Janna, you said there's a fragment of the asteroid from the Impact in your village, right? Are we getting close?"

"Yeah, we're probably about a half-hour away now."

"Connie," Daniel said softly, "We can make camp here to parley if you can't go any further."

Conifer looked up at Daniel's caring face.

Pathetic, said her inner thoughts. *Dragging everyone down yet again.*

"I can go a little further," She insisted.

"If this fragment is strong enough to hurt this bad this far out," Daniel said, "I don't think it's wise to—"

"There's no way they would come this far away," Leo said. "The fact that it's keeping Conifer away will only confirm to them that their fragment is protecting them from us."

Janna sheepishly nodded. Daniel looked toward them, then at Conifer gripping her aching forehead.

"Then I'll stay behind with her," Daniel said. "You two go on ahead and I'll—"

"I'm going with you." Conifer swatted Daniel's hand off of her and marched forward, clutching her head. "Let's get close enough that we can talk to them. Then we'll stop."

Janna watched her walk in the village's direction, with no need for a guide. She looked at Daniel, who looked just as much in anguish. Leo sighed and followed Conifer. Janna pressed on as well. Daniel looked at their hand and cinched their eyes tight. They counted down from 100 by sevens, as their mother's friend had suggested they do when they panic.

I can't lose her, they thought. *It'll be all my fault.*

They rose to their feet and jogged toward the rest of the party.

The four all felt an oppressive force weighing them down, like their

energy was being drained as they walked closer to the village. Janna spotted the structures of her village and pointed them out from the top of a hill. A single street of buildings spread out over a half mile. There were, at most, a dozen houses and a handful of shops. The only signs of working electricity came from what must have once been a gas station convenience store. The awning over the gas pump had collapsed to the ground, a large, almost-luminescent stone on top of the crumpled metal structure.

"Is that stone by the gas station the fragment?"

Janna nodded.

"Is this all of it?" Leo said.

"You mean my home?" Janna hissed at Leo.

Leo raised his hands in surrender. Janna continued to glare at him.

"I think Leo was just surprised by the size. How many people do you think there are?"

If the number is low enough, Janna thought, will they try to attack?

She remembered Daniel's kindness throughout the trip and sighed, determined to continue helping them.

"Now? Around 50," Janna said.

Daniel's jaw dropped slightly, doing the calculations in their brain.

"You sent so many of your people to West Post—" they began.

"And they're never coming back," Janna's jaw hardened.

The four stood in silence. Conifer massaged her temples as the migraine grew more agonizing by the second. Daniel took a deep breath, counting down by sevens.

"Janna," Daniel began.

"I'll go into town and bring back the Chief," she said, not looking back at them. "Or else I'll come back and figure out what to do next. If I don't come back by tomorrow morning, flee back to your homes."

The three from West Post stared at her in astonishment. She turned back and looked back at Daniel.

"If I never see you again, thank you for bringing me back home."

Janna jogged and then sprinted toward her home. The three took a seat and looked at each other.

"How's the head, Conifer?" Leo asked.

"Feels like after hearing you talk for an hour."

"Ah, there she is," Leo smiled. "No need to worry, Daniel."

Daniel sat down next to her. Leo walked away to watch the horizon for Janna's return.

"Connie, you didn't have to—"

"I don't need you to protect me, Daniel. I'm sick of people thinking I'm weak."

"I don't think you're weak!" Daniel protested. "I'm just worried about you."

"Well, you don't need to be!"

"I want to be."

She looked into their shining eyes of earthen brown. They grounded her, but that scared her as well. She could feel her heart throbbing in her throat and ears. The migraine brought with it flashbacks of Isabel and Leo during the second attack and now of being motionless during the third. She pushed those thoughts away and turned away from Daniel.

"You should focus on how you're going to negotiate peace with these people," she said.

"I have ideas for that already," they said. "What I don't know is how to help you."

"You're not your mom, Daniel."

"And you aren't yours, Connie."

Conifer held her face taut and stiff to prevent herself from crying. She thought of her mother tending to the children, house, and kids on her own while her dad struggled with some illness Dr. Worth couldn't identify or fix. Her mother always called her reliable. Someone she could count on. Conifer took pride in that. The other kids, much younger than her, all loved her and depended on her as well. That was why she went home so often.

If I can't protect them, then what am I even doing here? she thought. *They're going to hate me. And Daniel and Leo, too.*

She couldn't catch her breath. Her back was slick with cold sweat. She felt a hand in hers and looked over to see Daniel, an anchor in the choppy seas.

"Connie, you are one of the most courageous people I know." They said. "You're committing what amounts to treason with me in order to protect the people you love and care about. I mean, hell, you convinced me to go through with this. There's no map for what we're doing. We just have to figure it out. And I want you to be here with us. Because your perspective and your strength are going to save lives."

They took her hand in both of theirs and kissed it. Conifer's heart rate spiked for a completely different reason.

"But you're human. Everyone needs something. I need my friends. I need therapy." They swallowed hard. "I need you. And I'm worried I'll

lose you if I don't figure out how to help you get what you need."

Need? Me? she thought.

A maelstrom of feelings overwhelmed Conifer, and her eyes flooded with tears as she locked her hands around Daniel's arms. Daniel pulled her into them and stroked her untamed, curly, black hair. Sobs erupted from her chest, concussing her body until they were absorbed by Daniel's. They clung to each other, both weeping under the different but similar burdens of their lives.

As their heart rates synced up and slowed, Daniel kissed her forehead. She kissed their neck and looked up at them.

"What a pair we make, huh?" they said.

They both laughed. Conifer's gaze kept drifting to Daniel's lips.

"Can I—" she began.

"You can do anything you want."

She leaped into them and landed her lips against theirs. They kissed gently and separated. Conifer smiled and looked away.

"That was ni—" she started.

Daniel's warm hand came up to her cheek, and she leaned into it instinctively as they guided her face back to theirs. Daniel kissed her deeply, and both of them felt the longing within them pour into their touch. Conifer pressed her hand into the dip between Daniel's shoulder blades, finding softness in the valley of their back. Daniel admired the strength in Conifer's compact and muscular body. They pulled away and rested their faces in the crook of each other's necks.

"Were you expecting that to happen within minutes from our former mortal enemies?" she asked.

Daniel chuckled.

"Honestly, this is somehow the thing I least expected to happen in the last 72 hours." they said.

"Prepare for that to change," Leo called out.

Daniel and Conifer separated in shock from Leo's sudden reappearance. He shook his head, laughing despite himself. He looked at them both seriously.

"Janna's on her way back with about six other people."

"Chief," Janna introduced, "these are the people who escorted me back to the village. This is Leo, Conifer, and Daniel."

The elderly chief nodded at the three of them.

"Daniel, Leo, Conifer, this is Village Chief Hansen, and these are the Chief's bodyguards and counsel."

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Chief Hansen," Daniel said with a slight bow. "As Janna said, I am Captain Daniel Worth. I appreciate your willingness to meet us here in a neutral location and speak."

The Chief looked at each of the soldiers. He stood rigidly and nodded.

"You act as representatives for your people?" the Chief asked.

"Yes," Daniel spoke. "I am part of an initial group to determine how our interests may align so that I can return to my people and discuss further action towards peace."

"Peace," The Chief repeated. "An admirable goal. But has Janna told you of our state of affairs?"

"My understanding is that a fragment of the asteroid that hit 22 years ago is draining mana from your community, forcing you to find alternative sources of magic energy to sustain your people."

"Well put, Captain. I recognize that our people have put yours through a tremendous amount of pain." He turned to face Leo. "It would seem especially true for your comrade."

Daniel spun around to see Leo's stony expression toward the chief.

"I apologize, Chief Hansen," Daniel said quickly. "The journey here led to a great deal of fatigue."

"Mm," The Chief replied. "Why were you in such a hurry, Captain? And why are there so few of you? I bring with me a large proportion of our entire village to speak to you, while your much larger settlement sends a teenage Captain and two soldiers just as young to escort a prisoner back to their enemy."

"Chief Hansen." Daniel felt the panic piling up inside them. "The West Post Guard attends to a great number of responsibilities. I come to you humbly and with so few troops as to assuage any fears that we are here to attack."

"Interesting wording, Captain," the Chief noted. "If you are not here to attack, perhaps there are others meant to attack us while you distract us."

"Chief Hansen, I assure you that this is no ambush. We stand on the high ground of the region for you and your guard to see from. Also, forgive me for pointing out that you have what appears to be a radio transceiver in your jacket pocket to call for reinforcements. I imagine you have set into motion defense preparations, which I recognize as wise strategy and also assure you is unnecessary."

Chief Hansen laughed and held up a radio from his pocket.

"You're a sharp one, Captain," he said. "But you still haven't answered my questions. Why now? Why you? I don't know the ranks of your Guard, but I can't image Captain is at the top. We're not on a ship."

"We wish to end bloodshed between our peoples by establishing diplomatic relations between us as quickly as possible. I am recognized as a member of the Guard with great interpersonal and relationship-building skills, and I suggested this mission with myself and my most trusted comrades at the lead."

"Janna," the Chief called.

"Yes, Sir!" She replied.

"You said that these soldiers escorted you back here. I am thankful they did, if only to have you back. But they did not escort you all the way to our village. They stayed here. Why is that?"

"They said they didn't want to cause panic in our community, Sir."

"And why is the woman with them grimacing?"

Janna looked at Conifer, who began sweating.

"They believe the fragment takes an especially high mana toll on her, Sir." Janna explained.

The Chief nodded.

"I see," he said. "Well, Captain, I don't believe you act on the authority of your people. This all seems put together with bubble gum and duct tape."

"Chief Hansen, I am unsure what you mean by bubble gum, but I assure you that I carry with me the hopes and approval of my superior officer, Colonel Faye Corrick."

"Ha! You're too young to remember gum. And you've been sent to negotiate what may be the biggest diplomatic mission of your lifetimes. Something that really should have been ordered by your highest officer, which I have a hard time believing is a Colonel if it resembles any military I've been a part of."

"Sir, if I may," Janna spoke up, "I have traveled with these soldiers for a couple of days now, and I can vouch for their positive intentions."

"Positive intent is meaningless if it results in a negative impact, Janna," he replied, cleaning his glasses. "I have no intention of making a deal with our foes when they can't even send an official diplomatic party on their behalf. I suspect you three are rogue operatives, which either makes you untrustworthy by even your own people or the last three people in your city that want anything to do with us. Either way, you are useless to us. Return to your city to be court-martialed or

hanged or whatever it is you do with traitors."

The chief turned his back on the three to walk back toward the village. His guards and counselors followed.

"Whatever your game is, young ones, I hope you had fun," he said, waving his hand.

Janna stood in shock.

"Sir, I—"

"Come back home, Janna. Your family misses you."

Janna hedged, frowned apologetically at the three, and shuffled toward the Chief. Daniel fell to their knees and looked back at Conifer. She walked up to them and sat beside them. They turned to see Leo stomping in the Chief's direction.

"Leo," Daniel said. "It's over."

"We can get you water!" Leo shouted.

The Chief stopped walking, but did not turn around.

"Leo, what are you doing?" Conifer whispered.

"You didn't get water during your last raid," Leo said. "You need it to live. We can get it for you."

The Chief shook his head.

"You couldn't even convince us to hear your plea. There's no way you will get us precious reserves that your people killed to keep their hands on."

"This is your last chance, you know," Leo said, voice slowly losing control. "We're the last ones here to negotiate. Anyone who comes here next will come to end you all."

"Leo!" Daniel shouted. "Stop!"

The Chief turned around.

"Yes. That's true," The Chief agreed, surprising everyone. "This is our last chance to stomp out the only people who know where we are. Forgive me for being soft and letting you escape. I took pity on you as children. I see now that was misguided."

Leo took a step towards Conifer and Daniel and put his arms around them. The Chief gave a motion to his men, three of whom took out guns.

"No, wait!" Janna said. "Sir, they won't—"

"I admire your bravery if nothing else, kids. This took guts. But guts doesn't win wars. Men, fire."

A loud pop came from the three as they vanished, replaced by a tree from the woods behind them.

"What the hell?" The Chief shouted. "Men, call in the

reinforcements and send them to kill those kids on sight. This is a matter of grave importance.”

Janna watched in horror, not knowing what to do. The three teenagers were nowhere in sight, and she could only hope for the best.

I wish I could get you back home, like you did for me, Daniel.

14

Leo, Conifer, and Daniel switched into the woods where a small sapling had once been. Leo and Conifer looked at Daniel.

"We gotta run and warn Faye about what happened," Daniel said. "They might track us all the way back home. Leo, do you have anything in the tank to switch us far away?"

"Not in the woods where it's hard to see. It'd be faster to run."

"Then run!" Daniel said, taking off.

The other two caught up quickly and ran through the woods as quickly as they could sustain. Daniel shook their head, furious with themselves for how that had gone.

What was I thinking? they thought. I knew that wouldn't work. It only made things worse, and it's going to get my friends and I killed. Or maybe we'll make it back in time so we can be hanged instead.

Conifer saw the anger on Daniel's face and wanted to comfort them, but knew that she couldn't until they got to safety. The three of them ran for a couple hours until Daniel stopped and put up their hands.

"Daniel, what are you—" Conifer began before she heard the cocking of Post Guard firearms.

Leo and Conifer put up their hands in surrender as General Howlett strode towards them on a horse. Faye followed up behind him, face weighed down with sorrow.

"Captain, you have quite the report ahead of you. But that can wait until you're secure in bonds. Men, seize these three."

"Sir, permission to speak about our pursuers," Daniel requested as three soldiers uncomfortably walked toward the three to put them in handcuffs.

"Pursuers?"

"Yes, Sir. The people of Janna's village are pursuing us from the south for knowing their whereabouts."

"How many?" The General motioned for soldiers to check south.

"The village has 50 people, but judging from the military they sent to us as Wolves, I estimate 20 troops at most in pursuit."

The soldiers with handcuffs looked up to the General. The General sighed.

"Continue to restrain them. Colonel, you are to defend the prisoners."

"Sir, we can help defend against the—" Daniel objected.

"You can not be trusted with anything, much less a gun. You will follow the orders of Colonel Corrick."

A gunshot rang out from the south. The General barked orders to the rest of the soldiers and raced on horseback in the direction of the combat. Faye looked down at Daniel, Leo, and Conifer, swallowing uncertainty, fear, relief, and shame to remain calm.

"What the hell happened to your diplomatic mission?" Faye hissed.

"It went, well, south," Daniel said.

"Not the time for wordplay, Daniel," Said Faye.

"They saw right through us and determined we weren't an official diplomatic party and tried to eliminate us before we could reveal their location."

Faye sighed sadly.

"If they rely on their Wolf form for combat, then I can only hope their military is lacking in human form," Faye said.

"This will be the first time we fight as humans," Daniel said, sadly.

"I hope Janna is okay."

Soldiers began retreating backward toward the four. Faye looked at his friends.

"On your feet. We're running."

"In handcuffs?" Conifer protested.

"General's orders." Faye said sternly.

The three ran north away from combat as Faye remained in place and provided cover fire from atop his horse. Daniel and Conifer ran as fast as they could while restrained, with Leo behind them. They heard gunfire picking up in frequency behind them. Daniel felt despair wash over them, restrained and running away from a situation they caused.

You piece of shit, they cursed themselves. You're going to get even more people killed now. On both sides.

The earsplitting sound of enemy fire made their ears ring, and

Conifer fell to the ground. Daniel immediately dropped to her level and dragged her behind a log for cover. They noticed it immediately: the wound that entered the back of her upper left thigh and did not leave the other side. Daniel looked down at their cuffed hands that would prove useless to remove bullets or shrapnel. They would have to heal slowly and carefully to push out the shrapnel so it didn't get stuck in the tissue. Daniel felt hopeless.

"Daniel," she said, unable to catch her breath.

"One sec, I'm going to fix this."

They placed one hand on either side of her wound and channeled what they now understood to be mana through one hand and into the other. But nothing happened.

"What?" they muttered to themselves.

They tried again, and no energy came from Daniel's hands. There was no glow and no healing as blood spurted out from the wound. A horrifying realization came to Daniel.

"Connie, we're gonna have to tourniquet. My magic isn't working. I'll try to heal any damage to the leg later, but we have to keep you stable first."

"Huh?" Conifer said, slipping in and out of consciousness.

Daniel yanked off the belt of his uniform and used it to cut off circulation to Connie's leg. They cried from the frustration of how little they could do. Looking up, they saw Faye coming towards them on a horse.

"Faye!" Daniel cried.

Faye whipped his head around and found Daniel. He came to a stop beside them, eyes snapping open at Daniel's hands covered in blood.

"Connie was shot. My powers aren't working. She's bleeding out from a wound in her left thigh."

Faye nodded gravely.

"Get her on the horse. We need to get out of here. Have you seen Leo?"

Daniel strained to lift Conifer up, getting help from Faye to get her all the way up. They looked around for Leo but saw nothing.

"I haven't seen Leo. He was running behind us when Conifer got shot. Maybe he switched somewhere in all the chaos."

Faye hesitated, wanting to look for Leo, but seeing Conifer, he took off with her in the opposite direction from the fighting. Daniel ran behind, tears clouding their vision, until the gun shots became quieter and less frequent and eventually stopped. Judging the situation as

safer, Faye stopped in an area of heavy cover and waited for Daniel to catch up. He helped move an unconscious Conifer back down to the ground to Daniel for further examination and treatment.

"The tourniquet is working," Daniel reported. "That's not really a good thing, but it's better than the alternative."

"You said your powers aren't working?"

"Let me try one more time."

Daniel placed their hands around the wound once again, feeling an immense pressure on their back and inside their chest. They forced everything they could out through their hands, but nothing would come out. Daniel tried placing their hands in different locations, breathing deeply, concentrating harder, grunting, and then even screaming. But the glowing light never appeared. Something tightened in their chest, shutting off any mana flow within them.

Useless, they thought. Weak. I can't do anything when it really counts.

They brought their bloody hands to their face and wept.

"Connie!" Daniel screamed, unable to control himself.

"She's still breathing, Daniel," Faye took hold of their shoulders.

"It's not over yet. Remember what our greatest resource is?"

"Fuck hope!" Daniel yelled. "A shit ton of good it's done me. I hoped we could talk to the General. I hoped we could talk to Janna's people. I hoped we could warn you in time for nobody to get hurt. I hoped I could heal Connie. I hoped I could find Leo. It's all pointless. It's a feeling, not reality."

Faye frowned. He didn't know what to say, so he pulled Daniel into his chest as they screamed curses at the world and at themselves. Faye scanned the horizon for threats and his eyes landed on Zenith bounding towards them, face covered with blood. Faye got his attention and gestured for him to come their way.

"Zenith! Sitrep!"

He stopped his horse and jumped down to see Conifer on the ground. His jaw dropped. He swallowed and took two deep breaths.

"We were evenly matched out there. I saw 15 of them, and they took down at least a dozen of ours. We took out at least 10 of theirs, and the rest of their people retreated. The General gave his last order to retreat and return to West Post, stating that you are now in command."

The words "last order" hung in the air like a stale odor. Faye could feel himself suffocating on it. He closed his eyes for a moment and reopened them in determination.

"Zenith, you look out for these two. I'm going to go back and look

for Leo."

"Colonel!" called a soldier on horseback, carrying the body of another wounded Post Guard. "Awaiting your orders!"

"Stabilize any wounded and return to West Post!"

"Yes, Sir!"

Three more members of the Post Guard on horses came out of the woods, but no more. Faye did the math in his head.

"At least twenty lost or missing. Including Leo. I'm going after him."

Zenith grabbed Faye's arm.

"You have to lead them, Faye," Zenith said. "I'm sorry, but they need you."

"Let me go, Sergeant."

"You have a duty, *General*. You need to get Connie to safety."

"You take her then!" Faye shouted, trying but failing to pull free.

"Then who will take Daniel on their horse?"

Faye struggled against Zenith, who refused to let go.

"I can't lose him, Zenith."

"I can't lose you, Faye!" Zenith shouted. "And neither can the Post Guard. Once the wounded have received attention and we've determined the area to be safe, we can come back. But until then we have to go. That was the General's last words."

Faye screamed, trying to dislodge himself from Zenith's grasp. His shoulder popped out of place from the strain. He grunted loudly and then kept trying to pull away. Zenith wrapped his arms around Faye to restrain him. Faye sobbed into his arms.

"He could be bleeding out right now," Faye said in heaving breaths.

"Conifer already is. We'll come back for him, I promise," Zenith whispered in his ear.

His last word shocked Faye out of crying and into rage. He turned toward Daniel.

"You promised you would look after him, Daniel," He said through gritted teeth. "You promised no matter what!"

Daniel went pale and stopped breathing.

"Faye, we have to go."

"You promised!"

Daniel looked down at the ground in all-consuming shame. They could feel nothing else. Faye returned to a stoic calm and mounted the horse with the one uninjured arm. Zenith placed Conifer on Faye's horse with him. Faye refused to look at Daniel as he bolted toward

West Post. Daniel continued to stare at the ground. In their peripheral vision, they saw a hand reaching down to them. Daniel looked up to see Zenith on his horse, waiting to help Daniel up.

"It's time to go," Zenith said.

Daniel took his hand, climbed onto Zenith's horse, and held on all the way to West Post.

The West Post Guard identified 21 dead soldiers and 3 missing. Among the missing was Leo Scarlett. Conifer was treated by Dr. Worth, but an infection had already started in her leg. Daniel sat by her side without rest as she recovered. Zenith came by briefly the following day to visit, clapping Daniel on the shoulder gently as he left. Faye paid a visit the same day, but left immediately after making eye contact with Daniel. They both averted their eyes. As Dr. Worth entered the room, Faye left without saying a word. Daniel went numb, and Dr. Worth frowned.

"Sweetie," Dr. Worth said. "Can you come over here for a minute?"

Daniel said nothing, staring back at Conifer.

"Daniel," Dr. Worth reached out again.

They did not respond.

"Daniel Tyler Worth, I will kick you out of this recovery room if you do not follow me to the kitchen right now. You have 5, 4, 3, 2—"

Daniel stood up and wobbled toward the kitchen, passing their mother while staring down at the ground. Dr. Worth took a deep breath and met her child in the kitchen. On the kitchen table was a pile of pancakes with a lit candle next to it.

"Happy birthday, Daniel," She said. "In my day, we would say you were officially an adult today."

Daniel said nothing.

"Blow out the candle and make a wish." She said.

Daniel dunked his fingers in a glass of water and then pinched the candle out.

"I appreciate it, Mom," They said. "But I'm just not feeling it."

"What are you feeling, Sweetheart?"

"Not now, Mom."

"Then when?" she said. "After you've beaten yourself up for several more days over something beyond your control?"

"I shouldn't have taken them there."

"They chose to go, just like you did."

"I should have healed her in time."

"You tried and couldn't."

"I should have looked out for him."

"You were looking out for Connie."

"I made a promise."

Dr. Worth sighed.

"Sometimes we accidentally make promises we can't keep. I promised the Scarletts I would keep him safe, too. Then I let him join the Guard and throw himself into danger at every chance." She paused and looked at Daniel. "Do you think they'll ever forgive me for that?"

Daniel looked away.

"The person I promised is still alive. And he won't look at me."

"I know." She sat down in a chair beside where Daniel was standing. "And that's also something you have no control over."

"Great, so I just can't control anything?"

Dr. Worth scooted the stack of pancakes toward them.

"Welcome to your first lesson of adulthood, sweetie. Often we can't control much. I'm sorry it's like this."

Daniel sighed.

"I talked to someone recently. She said that when you get older, horrible things happen, but also you see people can keep on living anyway."

"That's very true."

"So it gets easier?" Daniel asked.

Dr. Worth turned and saw the pleading in their eyes. She took a deep breath and looked out the window to the street, tinted orange by the fading dusk. She patted the chair beside her for Daniel to sit, and they obliged.

"I don't know that it ever gets easier. But we get better at dealing with all the bullshit."

"The person I was talking to said she wished she could shove the idea into our brains that life can be lots of things."

Dr. Worth laughed softly. "It's true."

"Why are you laughing?"

Dr. Worth sighed and smiled.

"Sorry. It's just one thing you learn as a parent is that you can't just shove things you've learned into your kids' heads," Dr. Worth said. "They have to learn it themselves. And sometimes you can help with that, but it's not easy."

She drew a line in the table with her finger.

"We don't leap and bound from A to B. We have to grow like

branches until we connect the two," she continued. "And that's frustrating for old fogies like us because we can look back and trace the branches and wonder why people who haven't gotten there don't get it. But if you drag someone with you to where you're at, their own branches won't support them and they'll fall."

Daniel looked out the window, and Dr. Worth turned her gaze to where they were looking. She cleared her throat gently.

"So you have to meet people where they're at. Sit with them and nourish them so that they can grow. You can give directions as you sit together, show them what's worked for you and all who came before us, but they have to get there on their own. And they also have to want to."

Dr. Worth turned to Daniel again, who looked back up to meet her soft gaze.

"And who knows," she admitted, "maybe we're not even right. Maybe that direction won't bring them sunlight the way it did for us. Which is even more reason you can't force people to go your way. Everyone is different."

"Do you ever find that disheartening, Mom?" Daniel asked.

"No, I find it fascinating."

"Fascinating?"

"Yes, and curiosity is what will save the world, I think."

Daniel shifted their weight on their chair.

"I thought it was hope?"

Dr. Worth gazed back out at the street.

"Where do you think hope comes from?"

Daniel watched her smile for a few moments, then swiveled back out to watch the window with Dr. Worth. They sat in silence until the sun set.

15

General Faye Corrick looked at Conifer and Daniel standing at attention. He shook his head.

"At ease," he finally said.

Daniel and Conifer relaxed, a little confused. Faye had called them in together. They assumed it was to begin the formal process of putting them on trial.

"I'm not going to have you tried," Faye said.

Daniel and Conifer looked at each other in shock, then back at Faye.

"Why?" Daniel asked.

"Because I'm the General, and I get to decide in these matters."

Conifer and Daniel nodded solemnly.

"However," Faye said, "you will both be discharged without honor. You will turn in your uniforms to the Quartermaster, remove your things from your quarters, and leave the Post Guard today. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Sir," Daniel and Conifer said.

"Very well. You are dismissed."

Conifer rolled herself out of the General's office. As Daniel stepped out, Faye spoke up.

"Daniel."

"Yes, Sir?"

"I don't blame you for Leo," he said, staring out the window towards the woods. "I was the one who let you go. And that's why I will face the responsibility for this."

"No, General, you—"

"I am the General, and I get to decide in these matters," Faye turned around to face them. "Your last order is to take care of yourself,

Captain Worth. If I find out you disobeyed that order, that's when I'll hate you."

Daniel nodded.

"Yes, Sir."

"Goodbye, Daniel."

They caught up with Conifer. Both of them returned their uniform and supplies to the quartermaster, cleared out the things in their quarters, and left the Guard station. They took one last look back.

"What do we do now?" Conifer asked.

"Whatever we need to, I guess."

Faye watched them leave from their office window. A knock came from the door.

"Come in," he said.

Zenith entered, a new scar visible across his forehead.

"So you're not trying them," Zenith said.

"No."

"But you're trying yourself?"

"Yes."

"Nobody will convict you."

Faye nodded silently.

"That was kind of the point."

"You don't have to do this for them."

"Sure, I do."

"Why?"

"Because it's my fault. I let this happen on my watch, and it's my people's blood on my hands." Faye looked down. "I wanted it to work. But it cost me 21 lives. Maybe 24."

Faye looked back up at Zenith. Neither knew what to say.

"Do you hate me, Zenith?" Faye asked.

"No. Do you hate me, Faye?"

"No."

A thought of Leo came to Faye's mind, and he collapsed to the ground. Zenith ran over and knelt beside him.

"What do I do now?" Faye asked between gasps for air. "It hurt to love him, but it was worth it. He was my reason for living."

The words ripped through Zenith's chest, piercing cold and sharp.

"I guess you find something new to live for," Zenith replied.

Faye wiped away his tears and kissed Zenith.

"Okay."

* * *

Conifer sat at her family's kitchen table, alternating her attention between her younger brother and younger sister to help them with their studying. In between suggestions on their homework, she attempted to corral her youngest brother. There was a knock at the door. Conifer slowly shuffled to the door.

"Let your mother answer it, Connie!" shouted her father.

Conifer ignored him. She opened the door. Dr. Worth smiled back at her.

"What's up, doc?" Conifer said.

Dr. Worth laughed and shook her head.

"You're too young to know this, but that line used to be hilarious."

"If you have to explain it, then it isn't funny," Conifer replied, tilting her head.

"You had to be there, I guess."

Dr. Worth took out a bottle of medication and tossed it to Conifer.

"Here are your antibiotics. Keep taking them once a day until they're out. Last thing we need is some superbug bacteria on top of everything else."

"I don't know what that means, but I'll do what you said."

"Very good. I'll see you again soon."

Dr. Worth waved and turned to leave.

"Actually," Conifer blurted out, "can I talk to you for a bit, Dr. Worth?"

Dr. Worth smiled and nodded.

"Sure!"

With some effort, Conifer stepped over the lip of the door and out of the house.

"I'll be back in a minute, Mom!" Conifer shouted out. "Ittekimasu!"

"Itterasshai!" her father called back.

"Okay! I love you, honey!" her mom called out.

"Love you, too!" Conifer said.

Dr. Worth and Conifer moved down the street.

"Where did you want to go?" Dr. Worth asked.

"Anywhere."

"Well, you're in luck. There's anywhere all around us."

Conifer shook her head.

"For a mom, you sure make a lot of dad jokes."

"It happens when you're a single parent. You have to do all the jobs."

Conifer smiled.

"What did you want to talk about, Connie?"

Conifer's smile faded.

"You aren't gonna say 'I told you so?'" Conifer asked.

"Do you want me to?"

"I don't know what I want." She admitted. "I just know my way didn't work."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been putting off talking about a lot of things. I wanted to prove I was strong."

"Do you honestly believe that it's weak to have feelings?"

"I don't know. I just kinda assumed so."

"What do you think strength is, Connie?" Dr. Worth asked. "Not what other people think strength is. Who do you think of when you think of somebody strong?"

Conifer blushed.

"Daniel." She whispered.

Dr. Worth smiled.

"What about them do you think is strong?"

"I like that they can talk about things, even when it's hard. They're just honest and open with what they need."

"And when they need things, do you think they're weak?"

"No."

"So why are you so special that it's different for you?"

"I know I'm not. It doesn't make any sense."

"Sure it does."

Conifer looked at Dr. Worth in confusion.

"What do you mean?"

"It has to make some sense to some part of you. Otherwise you wouldn't believe it so hard. Question is why that part of you feels that way and why it's so important."

Conifer came to a stop and thought it over. Dr. Worth patiently stopped beside her.

"Before she died, Isabel told me that girls always get called weak for crying, so we have to prove that we're strong and not let anybody see that."

Dr. Worth nodded, her face revealing that a realization had fallen into place.

"With all due respect to Isabel—rest in peace—I think you should remember that you're still following the advice of a 13-year-old."

"Huh."

"How often do you take advice from 13-year-olds these days?"

Conifer considered that for a moment.

"I never really thought about it that way."

"Sometimes there are moments in our lives where I wish someone could've swooped in and taken over. Made it okay and pushed back against the things we're starting to believe about ourselves before it gets out of hand."

"Yeah, that would've been nice."

Dr. Worth thought about it for a moment.

"Can you do that for yourself now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can you be there for that part of you who's still a 13-year-old girl listening to her friend tell her how the world works? For the 13-year-old girl who watched the same friend be killed. For the 13-year-old girl who felt like the way to honor her memory was to hold onto her advice? What does she need?"

Conifer teared up slightly.

"To be told that it's okay to cry. That people care about her and want to help her. That it wasn't her fault she got lost in the woods or that her head hurt. Or that her friend was killed. That it's going to be okay."

"How about you tell yourself those things now?" Dr. Worth said gently.

Conifer cried even harder.

"I bet you're getting off on all these tears, you sick fuck," Conifer joked.

"Interesting theory," Dr. Worth said. "Look, Connie, this isn't something that goes away after talking about it once. You'll get better at handling it as time goes on, but it takes practice with someone who knows what they're doing."

"Like you?"

"Maybe someone unrelated to your partner."

"I—we're not—"

“Uh-huh,” she said. “I know some people, though. Can I introduce you to them sometime?”

Conifer thought about it for a moment. She felt lighter. Like when she was with Daniel, but without the heat and the pressure inside her chest. It felt good.

“Yeah, sure.”

16

Daniel and Dr. Worth ate breakfast together two months later.

"I hear they're not going after Janna's people," Daniel said. "They're just gonna prepare their barricades for the next four years."

Dr. Worth set down the roll she was eating and considered Daniel.

"What are your thoughts about that?" she asked.

"I'm glad they're not going to try to destroy Janna's people. But I still have to think there's a better way than continuing to kill each other. By this point, Janna's people will probably be hurting already unless they could find some other source of mana."

"It drains the life energy out of you?" Dr. Worth asked. "It's a wonder anyone can survive there."

"I still can't tell if that's what made my magic go on the fritz or if it was something else." Daniel nibbled on a roll disinterestedly. "Mom, have your powers ever gone away like that?"

Dr. Worth looked down.

"Yes." She whispered.

"When?" They asked, excited to find a clue.

"When I couldn't treat your father."

Daniel's excitement evaporated. They knew their mother didn't like talking about this.

"Nevermind. I'm sorry for bringing it up," they said.

"No, I think it's time that we talk about this as a family." She took a deep breath. "I met your father here in West Post. He was working in mechanical maintenance, keeping the machinery of this place running for years after the Impact and converting generators to run on hot spring water instead of gasoline. He fixed my generator once, which is how we met. Then he was conscripted into the Guard shortly after."

She looked at her breakfast and pushed it away.

"As you know, he returned from a scouting mission outside of West Post. One of only a handful of people who came back from the dozens who had left. Leo's father was actually the one who rushed him here." She wiped away tears in her eyes. "Tyson set him down on a bed, and I saw the deep slash across his abdomen. His breathing was labored, and I didn't know how to heal the damage to his internal organs. I felt completely empty and questioned myself. I put hands on his chest and stomach and tried to heal him, but nothing happened. No magic would come out, no matter what I did."

Tears streamed down Dr. Worth's face. Daniel dabbed at their eyes with their sleeve.

"I screamed at myself for being unable to help, and I felt something lock up inside me. Like a door slamming shut. I felt him grab my hand before he told me he loved me. He closed his eyes and stopped breathing. Tyson put a hand on my shoulder as I wailed over him. I felt useless and hopeless, and I couldn't use my magic again for a long time."

Daniel sniffled, unsure of how to be of comfort. They felt selfish, but they had to ask the question on their mind.

"For how long?"

"Until you were born," She said with a soft smile. "When you were born, I thought you were the most wonderful thing I'd ever set eyes on. I saw how curious you were about everything. A poor babe thrust out of a comfortable womb into a cold and cruel world, and all you wanted was to understand it. I wanted to protect you, and I also wanted to be like you."

Daniel sat up in surprise.

"Like me?"

"You brought me hope again, Daniel. And I loved you even more for that. Soon after that, I could heal again." She laughed through her tears. "Which was good because you were a clumsy child."

"Hope," Daniel said. "I remember my powers first showed up when I remembered you talking about how it's our greatest asset. Is that story why you said that?"

"You said Janna had mentioned magic even being like life force, so it would make sense if they followed the same rules. I don't fully understand magic or life. What I know is that giving up is a self-fulfilling promise. Hope isn't enough on its own to make things better, but I don't think you can without it."

"Reminds me of something Janna said. Something about how time won't heal wounds on its own, but you still need it to heal."

"Janna's a smart woman," Dr. Worth remarked. "We say things like that are necessary, but not sufficient."

"Necessary," Daniel repeated, "but not sufficient. Does that mean that I can't heal without hope? It sounds like something out of a children's story."

"Things like magic involve using our bodies and minds in ways we can't explain. That's why we use metaphors and imagery to explain it to each other," She thought aloud. "I suppose hope helps us visualize things in such a way that the mana can flow properly. A pianist doesn't manually think about every muscle they need to move to play. They just imagine the music in their head and it guides them to move their body the right way."

Daniel thought about this for a moment.

"Do you think there's a way I can get my magic back like you did? Maybe by using some kind of mental image or visualization like you're saying?"

"I don't know. What do you think?"

"I think it's worth trying."

Daniel felt something loosen in their chest. Like a knot being teased apart. Dr. Worth smiled.

"I think so, too."

Faye oversaw the reinforcements of the barricades over the next four years. After a certain point, though, he could not think of anything more to do. He paced his office, trying to come up with a plan.

Daniel would know how to do this better, he thought.

A knock came from the door.

"Come in," Faye said.

The recently promoted Colonel Zenith Braun stepped into the office.

"The wall around the hot springs has passed inspection. All preparations are complete and have been reviewed twice."

"Will it be enough, do you think?"

"It's impossible to tell," Zenith said. "We don't even know if they are alive, much less if they plan to attack next month."

"Then there's nothing else to do," Faye said, looking out the window.

"Now we wait," Zenith agreed. "Perhaps the worst part of this whole thing. The impending doom of not knowing."

Faye nodded. He walked forward and took Zenith's hand in his. Faye noticed a large bruise on Zenith's lower arm he had not noticed before.

"What happened to your wrist?" Faye asked.

Zenith pulled his sleeve over the bruise.

"I saw my father this morning," he muttered.

"That never goes well," Faye said. "I hoped that your promotion would put you on equal footing, given that you're both of the same rank."

"I think it made him more angry, to be honest," Zenith said with a sigh.

"Let me guess. He thinks it's because we're together."

Zenith nodded. Faye bit his lip, looked upward, and shook his head.

"You have more than earned your position after almost a decade of service. I wasn't even the one who suggested the promotion." He looked at Zenith. "We could have him arrested for assaulting an officer, you know."

"There's no point. He's getting older, and I can see something is affecting his mind. He doesn't remember like he used to, and he doesn't always know where he is." Zenith blinked hard and spoke again, more gently. "I feel a little sorry for him."

Faye tilted his head in surprise.

"How do you show him so much kindness when he has shown you none? He abandoned you as a child and only returned to hurt you."

"Because I don't want to be like him," Zenith said. "When we started in the military, I thought I needed to throw out my softness and toughen up. Now I understand it's something I'm proud of: being kind even after all I've been through."

Faye kissed him on the cheek.

"I love that about you." Faye said. "But also, you don't need to forgive people who have done reprehensible things to you just to be a good person."

"I never said I forgave him." Zenith said. "Just that he won't stop me from being me."

Faye drew Zenith into his arms. He wished he could hold him tight enough that the pain would wring out of him like a sponge. Zenith did not know what Faye was thinking, but understood through his familiar touch. Faye pulled away and spun their engagement ring around his finger with his right hand.

"You say the word and I will extinguish everyone who has ever

harmed you, my love."

I love his loyalty, Zenith thought, but it scares me, too.

A month passed, but there was no sign of the Wolves or Janna's people. Conifer and Daniel held hands outside Conifer's house a week after the 12th anniversary of the first two attacks.

"Is this what peace feels like?" Conifer asked. "Hoping that your enemy has given up? Or died out?"

"It definitely doesn't feel peaceful," Daniel remarked.

"Do you think they found somewhere else to get mana?"

"I hope they did. Or else they probably wouldn't have survived the last four years of mana drain. You remember how that felt."

"Does that mean they found a new place to attack?" Conifer asked.

"I guess it's impossible to say. Maybe they found some undefended source that they wouldn't have to fight to reach."

"Whatever happened, I guess we're not missing out on any action."

"I don't miss being on the Guard at all personally," Daniel said.

"What possessed you to join in the first place?"

"What I said our first day: to protect us from the Wolves."

"I call bullshit," Conifer said. "Leo and Faye lost people in the first Attack, but you didn't. You didn't have any revenge to get on them. You had to know your talents would be better put to use elsewhere."

"Fine, you got me," Daniel admitted. "I wanted to become stronger. The three of us made a promise that we would join the Guard together on the night of the first Attack. I wanted to prove myself and show my friends I wasn't weak."

"Do you think you succeeded?"

"I think I proved to myself that I was strong enough," Daniel said. "And maybe that's enough."

Conifer grinned and looked up to see a figure running towards the two of them. Instincts kicked in, and Daniel stood up and readied himself to fight. It was Conifer who noticed who it was first.

"Janna?" She whispered.

Daniel gasped. Janna approached them and bent over, heaving with breath. Her clothes were torn at her side with a gash in the skin, steadily bleeding. Daniel spoke to her as they put their hands on her to heal the wound.

"Janna, what are you doing? How did you get into town?"

"There's an opening under the Eastern wall." She said between gasps of breath. "I spotted it when I saw a group of children crawling

through it to explore the woods."

The wound on Janna's side closed up most of the way, but not all the way. Daniel shook their head.

"We're gonna have to figure that out later. What are you doing here?"

"Leo's imprisoned in my village."

"Leo's alive?" Conifer exclaimed.

"Why is he imprisoned?"

"Because he made the fragment disappear."

Daniel and Janna sprinted to the west wall across from the Guard station.

"Stop right there." A young Post Guard ordered.

"Hold on, Lees." An older Post Guard said. "Captain Worth? What are you doing here?"

"We have an urgent message for General Corrick. Tell him Leo is alive."

Faye was at the wall in an instant, eyes wild and body pulsing with frantic energy.

"Daniel, what is—Janna? What the hell is going on here?" Faye demanded.

"Leo is alive and imprisoned in my village for making the fragment disappear." Janna explained.

"How can that—" Faye took a deep breath to focus. "When did the fragment disappear?"

"Two years ago. He just appeared where the stone used to be, and the fragment was gone. Nobody has found it anywhere."

"Two years ago?" Daniel asked. "Why did you come here, Janna? And why now?"

"Because Leo has been sentenced to death after the fragment failed to be recovered in time for it to transform anyone."

All the color drained from Faye's face.

"Why are you telling us this, Janna?" Daniel asked. "Why risk your safety in traveling through the forest alone?"

"You got me home when I was imprisoned. It's time I at least try to return the favor."

Faye ran back towards the station.

"Faye, what are you doing?" Daniel called out.

"Getting a horse. I'm going."

"Alone?" Daniel exclaimed. "Are you out of your mind?"

"I'm not putting my soldiers in danger like last time. This is personal, and it's only going to be me if we lose anybody. I'm going to get him back like I should have back then."

"I'm coming with you," Daniel announced.

"Me too," Janna said.

Faye stopped running to look at them.

"Did you not hear me? Plus, you are not a soldier anymore."

"You don't know where the village even is." Janna said.

"And I promised you I would protect him," Daniel argued. "I won't let him go again."

Faye took a deep breath.

"You have twenty minutes to meet me at the Guard station ready to go. I will pack the supplies for all of us. Now go."

Faye and Daniel bolted in opposite directions. Daniel arrived at his mother's home, where Conifer and Dr. Worth stood waiting.

"I'm going with Faye to get him back."

Dr. Worth began to protest, but thought better of it. She wrapped her arms around them.

"All three of you come back safely. Promise me."

"I promise. No matter what. I love you, Mom."

She smiled at her child, who had grown up so fast.

"I'm going with you," Conifer announced.

"You're going to have trouble in the woods," Daniel frowned.

"I assume you're taking horses. I can handle that just fine."

Daniel nodded and looked to their mother.

"We'll be back, Mom. I love you."

"Love you too, Sweetie."

Daniel and Conifer nodded at each other, then dashed back towards the Guard station.

Janna lugged four packs to the stables, where Faye prepared four horses for travel.

"Where are you going?"

Faye turned around to see Zenith.

"Leo is alive. He's being held captive in Janna's village. I'm going to get him."

"And when were you planning on telling me?"

"You weren't in your quarters, so I left a letter for you."

"You were going to leave me without saying a word?" Zenith said, corners of his mouth beginning to quiver.

"Zenith, there's no time. He's going to die if I don't leave immediately."

"I always knew you would choose him over me. Dead, missing. It doesn't matter. You would always toss me aside for him." Tears streamed down Zenith's face. "You never wanted me, you just needed me."

"That's not true." Faye said, continuing to saddle the horses. "I love you, Zenith. I want to be with you, and Leo being alive won't change that. But I need to save him before he's killed. Can we have this conversation after I get back?"

"If you get back." Zenith said. "You took the time to leave an order of succession, but couldn't say goodbye to your fiance."

Janna stood silently, not making eye contact with either of them.

"Zenith, I—"

"Here, you'll need this." Zenith flung his engagement ring at Faye and walked away. "Give it to the man you truly want to spend your life with. The one you would never abandon."

Faye caught the ring and watched Zenith storm away. He looked at Zenith, then back at the horses. Leaving behind the horse, he ran toward Zenith.

"Faye!" Daniel yelled, out of breath. "We're here. Let's go."

He froze in place. Faye turned toward Daniel and Conifer, then back at Zenith. One tear rolling down his face, he jogged back to the horses, handed Daniel and Conifer their packs, and mounted the horse. The four of them took off into the forest a couple of minutes later. In his quarters, Zenith heard horses running, but did not turn toward the window to watch them.

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"With horses we should be there in a day. Day and a half at most," Janna explained.

"What exactly happened, Janna?" Daniel asked.

"We don't honestly know," Janna said. "We just woke up one day realizing that something was different. We weren't being drained of our mana anymore. When we went to the gas station to investigate the fragment, it was gone. In its place was Leo, crumpled and too exhausted to move."

Faye looked worryingly at Daniel, who smiled sympathetically.

"So they kept him locked up for two years?"

"They thought they could get information from him about where he had switched the fragment to, but he never said anything. So when the time for the mana burst came and went with no sign of the fragment, they decided he had outlived his usefulness and sentenced him to death two days from now."

"Do you think they'll listen to us this time?" Conifer asked. "They weren't exactly open to it last time."

Daniel frowned at the memory.

"This time we're all stronger and smarter than we were four years ago," Faye said. "We're going to save Leo and all of West Post. There is no other option."

Janna, Conifer, and Daniel exchanged glances. Faye rode ahead, determination burning in his eyes. Daniel smiled.

"You're right. We'll make this happen," they said.

Faye, Daniel, Conifer, and Janna arrived at the village after one day. They tied up the horses at the edge of the forest and walked into the

village, Janna leading the way. Villagers pointed at them in horror from the windows. A young man in a suit stood in the center of the road with guards on either side of him.

"Janna, what have you done?" he said flatly.

"Chief Lopez, these three came to negotiate for peace between our peoples."

"I recognize the one with blond hair and the girl," the Chief said. "They were part of the negotiation party that Chief Hansen denied for not having the proper authority. Who is the other one?"

"The proper authority." Faye walked forward. "I am General Faye Corrick of the West Post Guard, and I came to negotiate a treaty between our peoples and for the release of our comrade that you have held captive."

Chief Lopez considered the three and motioned for them to follow him. They entered the gas station together where the Chief, two advisers, Janna, Faye, and Daniel sat around a table. Two bodyguards stood behind the Chief.

"I was among Chief Hansen's advisers the day you first came here," Chief Lopez explained. "I agreed with his assessment of your party's authority, but I'll admit that I wanted to hear what you had to say anyway. Even more so now that you appear to be officially sanctioned by your authorities."

"I speak on behalf of West Post, Chief Lopez, and I thank you for hearing out our position," Faye said.

"And what is that position, exactly?"

"We wish to lend aid to your village in exchange for an agreement of peace and the custody of our comrade."

"How much has Janna told you about the actions of your comrade?"

"I have been told that he used his magic to transport the asteroid fragment to another location which has not been discovered."

"And you understand the significance of the fragment to our people?"

"I understand that every four years it would burst with enough mana to turn your people into their beast form."

"Not only that," Chief Lopez added, "but the mana bursts rejuvenated our people each four years. Enough that, when combined with mana from the hot springs of your land, we can continue to survive."

"Permission to speak, Chief Lopez," Daniel requested.

"Granted," Chief Lopez answered.

"If you could not retrieve any hot spring water from West Post four years ago and the mana burst did not occur this year, how have your people survived?"

"The short answer is that many people died in the first two years from the mana drain of the fragment. Our population was halved in that time. Since the fragment disappeared two years ago, its drain on us has stopped, allowing us to recover and not require the mana burst to survive."

"If the removal of the fragment has removed the need for external sources of mana," Faye said, "I do not understand what the concern is. Why is our comrade being sentenced to death?"

Chief Lopez sighed.

"The fragment was of cultural significance to many people here. They believed it protected us by granting us the powers of the Beast form. Its disappearance at the hands of an enemy has caused a great deal of distress and concern about being defenseless should your people come to wipe us off the face of the earth."

"You possess our comrade, and we have the upper hand in terms of combat," Faye said. "If you release your prisoner to us, we can offer you peace in return. It works in everyone's best interest."

"Who is this comrade to you that you will bargain so much for him?"

"We look out for all of our people, Chief Lopez."

Chief Lopez searched Faye's eyes and demeanor. He shook his head.

"This is personal for you," Chief Lopez observed. "Well, I assure you this is personal for me as well, General. But how am I to trust your intentions? How do I know you won't send in an army of soldiers from the forest to crush us as soon as we release your friend?"

"You have only my word and your eyes to see that we come alone and in peace."

"We have killed many of your people, General Corrick," Chief Lopez said. "It must not make sense to you that we have stayed in the presence of a stone that sapped us of our very life energy. It must seem unforgivable that we attacked your people without ever trying to negotiate for what we needed first. Surely you have been touched by this war as we all have."

"My parents went missing during the first attack, and I have watched many of my soldiers die at the hands of yours."

"So why?" Chief Lopez asked genuinely. "Why extend peace to us? Why help us?"

"Chief Lopez," Conifer addressed, "Our hands are not clean either. We killed your people, even if it was in self-defense. Four years ago we came here in an insulting attempt at negotiation, leading to a bloody battle for both sides. And now my comrade has disrupted your traditions without your permission."

Conifer took a deep breath and looked at the Chief, who was listening intently to her.

"We can't go back and change what happened. We live in the present and create our future. Either we continue the cycle of revenge, or we can strive for a better tomorrow. And I have to hope that there is some chance that a better tomorrow is possible since you are choosing to listen to us."

"I felt that the great fault of Chief Hansen was that he would not listen," Chief Lopez admitted. "General Corrick, you and I are both very young for the burdens placed on our shoulders. But perhaps with less past comes fewer expectations for the future. And more room for change and growth."

Chief Lopez looked at Conifer, then back at Faye. Daniel's breath caught in their throat, unsure what the Chief would say next.

"Let's talk about what the terms of this agreement may look like," Chief Lopez said, then motioned to one of his guards. "Please get everyone something to eat. This may take a while."

Daniel, Conifer, and Faye looked at each other as relief sprouted within them. Janna smiled at them both.

After several hours of negotiations, the parties adjourned for the night. Janna led them to her house to stay the night, then left to retrieve the horses for them.

"You three just get some rest," She said, closing the door behind her.

Faye and Daniel waved at her and turned back towards each other. Conifer excused herself to the restroom, and Daniel and Faye made eye contact.

"Is it just me or—" Daniel said.

"Is this going way too easily?" Faye completed.

"Yeah," Daniel shook their head. "This isn't going anything like it did four years ago."

"Nothing's the same as it was four years ago."

"True."

They both sat in silence for a moment.

"Faye?"

"Yeah?"

"Today we started talks with the people who we have been at war with for 12 years," Daniel said. "And somehow, that has been easier than figuring out what I can say to you."

Faye nodded solemnly.

"I don't know what to say either," he said.

They looked down at the ground for a moment. Daniel looked up.

"But I want to try to figure it out," they said.

Faye made eye contact with them.

"I want to try, too."

Faye reached one hand forward, face-down. Daniel reached in as well.

"To trying?" Daniel suggested.

"To trying," Faye agreed. "Together."

They dipped their hands down and then back up again. Conifer returned and smiled.

"What are we doing here?" she teased. "Whatever it is, I'm in."

The peace talks continued another full day before documents were officially drafted and signed. General Corrick and Chief Lopez shook hands. The final terms included a non-aggression pact, mutual aid from West Post to the village, open trade and travel between the two, and the release of Leo Scarlett. In the morning, the prisoner was brought to Faye, Daniel, and Conifer in rope bonds and a blindfold, which were untied promptly afterward.

Leo opened his eyes to see Faye, Daniel, Conifer. He took a step back from shock. Faye, Daniel, and Conifer also reeled back at seeing their friend, four years older, skin and bones, but alive. Daniel fought the urge to embrace him in front of the village Chief and council. Instead, they took his left hand in both of theirs. Faye did the same with the right hand.

When all responsibilities of the peace talk were settled, Chief Lopez shook Faye's hand once again.

"I look forward to working with you, General."

"The same to you, Chief."

Together Faye, Daniel, Conifer, and Leo walked out of town with Janna escorting them.

"You did the damn thing," she said.

"I can't believe it, but we did," Daniel said.

"We couldn't have without you, Janna," Faye bowed.

"Alright, stop that," Janna said. "We all did what we could, and it ended up working out. That doesn't always happen."

"Doing what we can is necessary, but not sufficient?" Daniel asked.

Janna chuckled. "Yeah, I guess so."

The four reached the edge of town.

"Have a safe trip home, everyone. Oh, and Leo," Janna said. "You still owe me another year before you can prove me wrong."

Leo didn't answer. Janna waved at the four as they left. She turned around and walked back to her home with the certainty of knowing that it was not in danger any more.

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Faye, Daniel, Conifer, and Leo rode back towards West Post. When the sun set, they stopped to camp a few hours away from home. Faye noticed Leo shivering in the cold and wrapped a blanket around him. Daniel handed him some hot cider to drink, which Leo accepted silently. Leo let the drink warm his hands.

The silence choked the air. Nobody knew what to say. Daniel and Faye looked at each other. Daniel nodded.

"How did you switch with something as massive as a boulder?" They asked.

Leo took a long drink of the cider.

"I practiced for two years with boulders in the woods. It just takes a higher toll on the body the bigger the difference in masses is."

Worry splashed across Faye's face. Daniel continued.

"How did you survive in the woods for that long without rations, all by yourself?"

"My dad taught me how they survived their mission outside of West Post," he said. "I just did what he said I should do."

Daniel shook their head.

"I still can't believe it. Where did you switch the fragment to?"

"I'm taking that to my fucking grave."

The silence returned.

"Leo," Faye said. "You don't seem happy even though we ended a war together. You were part of that, even if I wouldn't have gone about it the way you did."

Leo shook his head.

"What does that mean?" Daniel asked, pointing at themselves as they shook their head.

"I couldn't save anybody," he said.

"Nobody else will have to die from this war or from the mana drain of the fragment," Daniel said. "I think that's more than enough for one lifetime of heroics."

"I'm not talking about West Post or the village."

"Then who are you talking about?" Faye asked.

Leo stared into the distance, eyes unfocused and cold.

"My mom, my dad. Faye's parents. Isabel. Tony Nua," He said. "None of them deserved to die. Just like I don't deserve to live."

Faye stood up, but Daniel motioned for them to hold on. They nodded, and Faye sat back down. Conifer sighed.

"I've never really understood deserving as a concept." Conifer said. "Who decides what people get for what they do? And it's not like people ever get what they deserve anyway. People get away with awful things. People who try their best still suffer."

She took a sip from her own cider.

"But I guess my point is that you don't have to earn your right to live. It's not some budget you have to balance between good and bad, life and death, saving and being saved. You get to live because you were born. And that's it."

"The people who died because of me were born, too," Leo said.

"Yes, and it was a tragedy to see them go," Daniel said. "Which is why we don't need to add to the tragedy by throwing our own lives away. That won't bring them back."

"But at least I won't have to live with seeing them every time I close my eyes," he said.

"There are ways to help that without dying, Leo," Conifer said.

You have to meet people where they're at. Sit with them, Daniel thought back to their mother's words. *They have to get there on their own. And they also have to want to.*

"I'm here, Leo," Daniel scooted closer. "I'm sorry so many things have happened to you, but you're here with me now and I'm glad. I love you. And not because you've done a bunch of badass things that helped lots of people. It's because you're my friend. The boy I played baseball with when I was five, the guy I counted inventory with so many times, and now the person sitting next to me by the fire and drinking cider. I chose you because I like having you in my life. That's it. And if/whenever you want a friend to sit by you, I promise I will be there as long as I physically can be. Okay?"

Faye rubbed his arm, thinking about Zenith. Leo looked Daniel in

the eyes, and Daniel could see he was about to cry.

"You promise?" he asked.

"No matter what."

Leo leaned into Daniel and wailed into them. Daniel wrapped themselves around Leo, Faye set down his supper plate to hold Leo from the other side. Daniel and Faye smiled as tears streamed down their faces. Conifer smiled at the three childhood friends back together at last.

The four rode into West Post the following morning. They walked the horses back to the stables, Daniel eager to bring everybody home.

"Come on, we have to get back. Mom will be so happy to see all of us together."

Conifer added, "And Daniel and I have some news we want to share."

Daniel stammered for a moment.

"We do?" Daniel asked.

Conifer elbowed them in the ribs.

"Oh. Oh!" Daniel realized. "Yes, we do. I forgot Leo hadn't heard about it yet."

"Heard about what?" Leo asked.

"You'll see!" Conifer said excitedly.

Faye looked up and saw Zenith staring back at him flatly. He turned to Daniel.

"I'll meet you back at the house."

"Okay! But hurry! I'll try to get butter tonight so we can have mashed potatoes!"

"Mashed potatoes sound incredible right now," Leo said.

"Right?" Conifer said.

Daniel, Conifer, and Leo walked out the door and back home. Faye walked over to Zenith, unable to make eye contact at first. He screwed up the courage to look him in the eyes and saw that his were glistening, despite the sharpness of the rest of his features.

"Zenith," Faye said, "I have no right to ask for your forgiveness, so I'll only ask to apologize."

Zenith nodded, so Faye continued.

"I know your past, and I did the worst thing a person could do to you. When someone I love is in danger, I throw all reason and all of my feelings out the window. I would've done the same thing for you."

Zenith raised an eyebrow.

"I know that by leaving you—with a fucking letter—my actions screamed I was choosing Leo over you. That's not what I meant, but I don't get to decide how it felt. So you get to decide what you want to do. But I want you to know that I'm choosing to be here with you instead of running away in shame, fear, and self-hatred. To show I can be by your side, if you want that." Faye took in a massive breath. "So you can tell me whatever you want. 'Fuck off' is an acceptable answer."

Zenith thought for a long moment. Faye did not break eye contact, as much as he wanted to.

"I don't forgive you."

Faye nodded, his eyes watering.

"A wise person said I don't need to forgive people who have done reprehensible things to me just to be a good person. Love isn't about dealing with hurt because it's worth it. It's about deciding every day to be with someone where they are at. And you weren't there for me."

Faye nodded again, tears flowing in a continuous stream.

"But I also wasn't there for you," Zenith said.

Faye's back tensed with shock, not having a clue what Zenith might say next.

"You needed me just as much as I needed you, and I made you choose between the life of your first love that you've known your whole life and the feelings of your fiancé. That's an impossible decision. I wanted you to prove your love to me so I could prove I deserve it. And when you didn't, I felt like I wasn't good enough. But that's my own bullshit that I have to deal with."

Zenith looked down. The words weren't coming out the way he had practiced. They kept stumbling out. He took a deep breath and tried again.

"Faye, I don't forgive you. And I don't know if I can love you."

Faye stood motionless, clinging for life to every word.

"I also want to see if I ever can," Zenith said.

The tears flooded back out of Faye again, this time from relief rather than shame.

"Because, unlike the others who have hurt me, you owned up to it. And gave me space to ask for what I need," Zenith said. "So I choose to be here with you now, if that's what you want."

"Yes!" Faye exclaimed, holding himself back from hugging him. "I want to try. I want to be here with you, however you feel comfortable."

They smiled gratefully at each other as the horses neighed beside

them.

When Faye and Zenith arrived at Dr. Worth's home, Conifer let them in with a smile. Zenith walked in, but Faye stood at the door with a sheepish smile.

"Nope, that's not gonna work." Conifer shook her head.

"What?" Faye asked.

"You're not gonna be awkward tonight. You're with your family, together for the first time in years. So you're gonna work out all your awkwardness with me before you get in here and have a good time, okay?"

"I—uh, okay," he said. "I just—we haven't talked other than during negotiations, Conifer."

"And?"

"I feel guilty about that."

"I get that. I do, too."

Faye tilted his head slightly.

"Really?" He asked.

"Yeah, I've been wanting to talk to you for ages, but every day, it felt harder. So I'm glad we're talking. It'll be easier next time now."

Faye smiled.

"Yeah, I hope so." He said.

"What else is going on, Faye? Let's get it out in the open."

"I don't know. Zenith and I had a really intense conversation before I left to get here, and I haven't really processed it."

"Do you want to?"

Faye paused for a moment.

"Yeah, actually," he said.

Conifer smiled and nodded.

"Let's come over here and do that then."

Four years later, Conifer smiled as she watched as her daughter, Izzy, played catch with Daniel and Uncle Leo in Dr. Worth's back yard. Daniel slowly lobbed the ancient tennis ball towards her, and she caught it with both hands. Everyone clapped, and she smiled. Dr. Worth walked out with hot cider, and Izzy ran up to meet her.

"Grammar, Grammar," She said excitedly. "I caught it!"

"That's so good, Izzy!" Dr. Worth said. "Do you want some hot juice?"

"Yes please!"

"Remember to drink it slowly, Sweetie," Conifer urged her quietly.

"Yeah, yeah, Mom."

Conifer looked up to Dr. Worth exasperated, who laughed and shrugged back. Leo and Daniel walked up to them and took their own mugs of steaming cider. Leo waved as he spotted Zenith and Faye approaching. They waved as Faye unlocked the gate to the backyard. Izzy ran up to meet them.

"Uncle Faye, Uncle Faye, can we play catch?" Izzy pleaded.

Faye smiled, letting go of Zenith's hand to bend down to Izzy's level.

"Sure!" Faye said.

"You aren't tired yet?" Leo asked, exhausted. "We've been playing all morning."

"Nope! I wanna play with Uncle Faye! He catches good."

Izzy dragged Faye into the yard and tossed the ball nowhere near him, but Faye scrambled towards it and caught it. Izzy clapped her hands.

"See?" she gestured at Faye.

Zenith laughed and shook his head.

"Z!" Conifer beckoned Zenith over.

Zenith walked towards her and gratefully accepted a mug of cider from Dr. Worth.

"How is working with the vets going?" Zenith asked.

"Good," Conifer said. "It's nice to listen and offer support."

"I've heard from everyone that you're great at it," Zenith said.

Conifer blushed and smiled.

"I'm glad." She said.

Daniel beamed at their wife with pride. Leo set down his mug and went out to relieve Faye from sprinting to catch every throw.

"You go take a seat, Faye." He said, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Thank you." Faye whispered, walking over to the other adults.

"Uncle Leo! Uncle Leo!"

"Yes, Izzy?"

"Can I throw it at your head?"

"No, Izzy. That would hurt."

"But it would be funny!"

"Maybe for you, but I try to be nice to myself. So please don't hit me in the head."

"Okaaaay," Izzy whined.

Faye smiled at Zenith's side, both sipping on their ciders. Faye

placed a hand on Daniel's shoulder. They smiled back at him.

"Baba Baba," Izzy cried to Daniel, tears on her face.

"What's wrong, Sweetie?" They asked.

"My knee hurts." She said, pulling up her pant leg to show a bleeding scrape on her knee.

Daniel knelt down and placed a hand on either side of it. They talked to their daughter as they prepared themselves to heal.

"That looks like it hurts."

"It does." Izzy sniffled.

"We're gonna make it better, Sweetie. And I'll be here until it is. You're brave, and you have the most important thing. Do you remember what that was?"

"Hope," she said, still pouting.

The scrape glowed and restitched back together. Daniel looked at her in surprise, since they hadn't started the healing process for her yet. They smiled.

"That's right, Sweetie."

"Thanks, Baba!" She said, running back to play.

Daniel turned back to smile at their friends and family. They watched their daughter play and marveled at her playfulness and courage. Daniel looked back at their mom, who smiled back at them. They remembered a conversation with their mother years ago.

"I wanted to protect you, and I also wanted to be like you." I get that now.

They settled in their chair and held Conifer's hand in theirs. Leo and Izzie played, and Dr. Worth filled Zenith and Faye in on how Daniel was going to be taking over her practice. Daniel smiled. The cold air stung their lungs, but they didn't mind.