

THE LONG HAUL

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ABSTRACT
THE LONG HAUL
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The Long Haul began as my first ever entry into a workshop here at the MFA, at 75 pages it was a significantly different project, and I am beyond pleased with the progress made with it alongside my time in the MFA.

This story was originally inspired by the game *Signs of the Sojourner* in which you are a driver going around your civilization hoping to successfully have conversations and acquire goods to sell in your store. The game really spoke to me with the pleasant atmosphere covering a society full of hardship. Towns experienced natural disasters, influxes of people, and obsolescence.

In *The Long Haul* nature is constantly at odds with the people that live there, and without the ability to drive people would starve or die to the elements. It is a harsh world I've produced, with an even scarier threat on the outskirts, but these seemingly impossible obstacles are surmountable through the community.

A further inspiration for my thesis was the most recent Space Race between the billionaires and the pandemic itself. Like the Space Race an endeavor is taken on for exploration wherein there are bigger issues in the known civilization that are being ignored in favor of discovering the new and exciting.

Concerning the pandemic, people had to reckon with a global threat that couldn't be easily contained or dealt with, going outside or being amongst other people became scary and fraught with disaster, and a similar event takes place in *The Long Haul*. It's about taking care of yourself and the people around you before extending out to other people, about self-sufficiency and security.

Mostly I wanted to explore a contained ecosystem of a civilization, that contained further microcosms of towns and communities, the separation brought on by nature creating unique customs and social norms between each one. But I wanted these microcosms viewed as a permanent outsider, a driver tasked with constantly circumventing their home of the Basin and having to know and deal with the unique aspects of each community in order to do their job.

This provided space for me to even explore class dynamics, even in a post-apocalyptic civilization such as the one I've depicted. The difference between the traders, the people who receive the trade, and the people who control the trade. And on top of all that, literacy forms a strict line between these classes, creating distinct sides of privilege and control.

These types of class explorations are interesting to me especially because of the sci-fi and space westerns I've read that do similar things, specifically from Becky Chambers *Wayfarers* series. Though Chambers is a hugely influential force on my work and appreciation of the flexibility of the sci-fi genre and *The Long Haul* doesn't exactly match it in terms of genre, where Chambers writes full sci-fi my thesis leans more towards the dystopian/post-apocalyptic genres.

Additionally, with *The Long Haul*, I was really trying to push myself in terms of form, things like epistolary chapters and screenplay format chapters that I use to explore characters and motivations other than the main ones. These types of experiments really flexed my writer muscles and made me think about my intentions with perception more than I would have before. It became about picking the best camera angle to best depict this story, which has so radically changed from my first idea for it that this completed draft is as new to me as it is for others.

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Part One

Chapter One: Lucky

The luckiest day in Finch's life was the day she *almost* lost her legs.

She was a driver, life force of the Basin, conduit of trade. Someone who trundled along broken, dusty roads, losing feeling in their ass. She'd been doing it for 15 years and she was damn good at it. She knew the whims of the seasons as well as anyone could understand their fickle nature. She could drive backward, blindfolded, and asleep up Miner's Road without a scratch on her pick-up. And anyone would agree that she could barter and bitch with the best of them.

Though there was never anyone *to* say it. She'd been alone on the road more years than she'd been part of a group; a one-woman caravan.

Driving solo was nice because she didn't have to compromise for anyone else, didn't have to wait for slower, less experienced drivers. And if one was inclined to care, driving by herself meant all goods and services and favors and trade came to her, no sharing required. Though what did she need but the wheel in her hands?

As many pros as there were to driving alone, there were just as many cons: longer routes to make up for fewer people, having your only human connections be the shopkeepers you did business with and the physical impossibility of watching your own back.

There weren't too many interpersonal dangers in the Basin, people liked to keep to themselves, and her job was important enough to warrant her some respect. It was the things that came from the Nowhere that could sneak up on her without a second pair of eyes.

Swarms of eyeless birds smashing against windows, blinding drivers, and sending them off the road. Hollow eyed deer that haunted the middle of the roads, tangible enough to make drivers swerve suddenly and crash, when they were incorporeal, no more an obstacle than the

wind. Bears cracked down the middle, revealing desiccated innards and sharp rib bones, slamming, and rocking trucks, trying to reach into the soft center.

Though worst of all was the situation she found herself in, stuck in a sandstorm all on her own.

Finch had just left Markeet; it'd been a good stop, despite itself. Not enough trade, not enough people, and rows and rows of abandoned houses. Everyone leaving for better options. But she'd gotten a hearty meal of roasted crickets and potatoes, the bugs skewered on top of hot coals with the vegetables buried amidst them, in exchange for tallow candles from Dentra.

A rare meal outside her cab had given her the chance to sit and listen to most of a Storyteller. This was her last stop before her route was done, Seron was just a few hours away, and she wanted this journey to be done. So she'd left early, though she hated missing out on the stories and songs, it made her feel connected to the people around her in a way she so rarely felt.

Everyone gathered around a flickering flame, entering a sensation bigger than themselves, guided by the chords of the song and the words of the Teller, it was incredible. Just five years ago she wouldn't miss it for anything, but she had been so tired lately, and all she wanted was to finish the trip.

On top of all that there'd been some folks who seemed less than savory, watching her truck like hungry vultures. There was a certain unspoken rule of leaving a fellow driver's truck undefiled. She'd been roughed up a couple of times by seedy, rival, caravan drivers, but they'd never touched her truck. Weeks or even months of long, hard work, shut up in the beds of the trucks. And if drivers couldn't respect that then they wouldn't make it long on the road.

But these weren't fellow drivers, these were people of a town that'd long been abandoned, first by the water, then by its own people. They were desperate and Finch had a good

haul, alcohol and cloth, flour and meat for the Council and Ulys, people who were trade rich and full.

She pitied the vultures and had it not endangered her contract she'd stop and trade with them. But that wasn't an option, and she was loath to test the efficacy of her scrap gun on them if they'd tried something, so she left. Late at night, later than she should have been out. A thunderstorm brewing on the horizon, and a fifty-fifty chance the Basin walls would keep it out; she'd taken that bet tonight.

She was running low on fuel, set to top up in a few days when her route was done, so she couldn't afford to push her truck faster than 15, but even that was too much for the pockmarked road to Seron. The bumpy road stretched on for hours, with nothing but swirling sand in her headlights, and her warm full belly threatened to put Finch to sleep, despite the uneven terrain. So, she turned on the radio, hoping the wind hadn't knocked out her antenna.

The Council building was in a huge radio tower in Veneer, the tallest building by far and visible from anywhere in the Basin. If you were lost, you could map where you were based on how far the radio tower was from you. From the tower the Council broadcasted two channels: weather and news, largely ignored as drivers knew the whims of the weather better than prissy reps hidden away in the tower, and the Storytellers.

A different Teller every night, all welcome in Veneer to spread their words and music to the rest of the Basin. Finch turned on the story and felt her jaw unclench and her shoulders relax, drinking in the warm drum beats and sweet voice of the woman spinning yarns about the stars. She was sinking into the warm feelings of the Teller and her full belly and the expectation of an easy ride when she heard an unmistakable buzzing in her truck.

Flying from the backseat was a Roadbeetle, about 2 inches long with huge mandibles and a fluorescent behind. The damn bug must have crawled in when she was cleaning out the cab back at Markeet. She couldn't help the shriek of panic as the beetle flew around her face, even as she tried her best to stay in the glowing lines at the edge of the road, where the beetle *should* be.

Ever since the Council founded Seron there had been the Beetle Wranglers. Finch had seen them moving from town to town, their vans a bright, memorable green. They wore grass-stained coveralls and sand masks with large cages on their backs full of beetles and Glowgrass. Their jobs were to plant and maintain huge swathes of feathery grass along every road in the Basin and then to release their colonies of beetles amongst them. Content with their plentiful food supply the beetles would stay and light the path for drivers during sandstorms and at night. They were vital and it was essential that they were protected.

She was forced to duck out of the way of the ornery insect while trying not to crash, she couldn't swat it or kill it like she would with flies or mosquitos, she had to get it back outside. With one hand on the wheel, she started frantically rolling down the window, she could smell the threatening rain and just prayed that she could avoid the storm.

"Get out you stupid lightbulb!"

As if it understood her insult it bounced off her face before throwing itself out the window and into the Glowgrass. Finch grimaced and spat out the open window, wiping her face roughly, even with the insect gone her body was still on high alert, it felt like any second beetles would start pouring from the back and run her off the road. She took deep calming breaths and relished the feeling of the cool wind coming in until suddenly it wasn't just wind.

So, intent on monitoring the threat she knew, she was surprised by the threat she didn't. A sandstorm, called into being by the gales that brought the rainstorm closer, two forces of nature closing in on both sides and one had made its move.

One moment she was staring intently at the road, the next she was choking on a wave of dust and sand as it poured in through her open window, slamming against the passenger side door and pooling in the seat. As she coughed and wiped her eyes, she lost control of the wheel.

Her truck bucked and thrashed like an unbroken horse, hurtling off the road, trying to escape the sands, flattening Glowgrass, and smashing into a lone tree. Metal squealed and twisted, curling in on itself and its passenger, and with one final, pitiful, roar of the engine the truck went silent, no sound except the rush of the wind, and the buzzing of Roadbeetles.

Chapter Two: Pinned

A scream built up in Finch's throat as the wheel pinned her against her seat, but she held it back and swallowed it. Eating the pain so she wouldn't choke on the sand. Gritting her teeth, she rolled up her window, having to use her other hand to push it up the last couple of inches. Then she was alone, with the tree and the piles of sand.

She tried to move, assess the damage, get away from the wheel, anything, and all those screams she'd bitten back before clawed out of her. The pain was hot and burning, but at the same time, there was no pain, which scared her. From where her legs were pinned and below, they were numb, she couldn't move them no matter how hard she tried. This was really fucking bad.

This. This was the worst part of driving alone. No one knew she was out here. She had no friends up the hill coming to help. On her own, the only people who cared where she was were the vendors she had appointments with within the next town. But they would probably assume she got waylaid by the bad weather and would be late, and by the time they caught on, she'd be long dead.

Finch was stuck considering all this for Oblivion knows how long, staring out her cracked windshield at the tree, taking deep, difficult breaths, when she had her first stroke of luck that night. Headlights, cutting through the sand and lighting up her cab. She turned her head back as much as she could to see a caravan of about three trucks and a van stopped on the road behind her. Silhouettes of people, sand masks on, flashlights out.

The sand beating against her windows and the pounding in her head had been so bad she hadn't even heard them drive up. One of them split to check out the bed of her truck, and if Finch

hadn't been pinned, she would've jumped out of the cab, and introduced them to her big fucking scrap gun. She was gearing up to shout at them when a light pierced through her window and blinded her. Over the noise and the spots in her eyes, she managed to hear the guy yell. "Liz was right! We've got a live one!"

The guy picking through her bed leaped away like it was on fire and ran back to the van, banging on the door until a much smaller figure hopped out and started towards Finch's truck.

How lucky, how *incredibly* lucky.

There weren't many caravans who had medics, as there were barely any to go around, but Finch just happened to be found by one that did. She only had a moment to thank Oblivion and bless her stars when suddenly the man outside threw open the door and let in the howling winds and sands. Finch couldn't even yell at him for being so stupid, she was too busy covering her face and futilely trying to not get invaded by the greedy sand.

The man leaned into the cab more and whistled low beneath his sand mask, poking her leg just above where it was pinned, sending a spasm of pain up her spine. "Got yourself in a bad spot, huh?"

Finch imagined reaching out and grabbing his shirt, yanking him forward to break his face on the roof of the cab. She imagined the spider web of cracks spreading across the glass of his sandmask, the sound of his presumably empty skull bouncing off the metal.

He was still talking to her, his movements molasses-slow, like there was no rush or panic in the world. Finch tried to push him away so she could close the door but before she could the medic was there shoving him away for her.

"Frank, you *idiot*, go get ready to open the van doors."

Frank adjusted himself from where he'd hit the open door, attempting to put on an air of unaffected nonchalance as he scurried away, throwing dirty looks over his shoulder.

The medic cursed under her breath as she pulled out a sand mask from her bag. Her fingers against Finch's face were cold and deft, moving with all the haste and dexterity that Frank lacked.

Finch tried to take the deep, heaving breaths she craved but after the assault of the storm, she was feeling disconcertingly sluggish. Her head was pounding in a way that made her feel like the whole world was sideways and she was upside down.

Distantly she heard the woman talking. "We're gonna get you somewhere safe, can you walk at all?"

Finch rolled her head over to look at the medic and winced when the movement made the pain worse. "I can't feel 'em."

The medic nodded, "You're lucky then, if you could, you probably would've passed out from the pain."

If Finch had passed out in the crash, then the window would've still been down, and the caravan folks would have found her dead and buried in her own truck.

"Dennis!" The medic called out over her shoulder to the slim young man who had been eyeing her goods earlier. He was peering into the back again, reaching for something. When he heard his name, he froze like an animal in the headlights. "Help me carry her."

She highly doubted they'd be able to carry her. She was full-bodied and strong and could've carried both the man and the little medic, but not now, now she was weaker than she'd ever been. The medic undid her seatbelt, and with a concerned look up at Finch, she pulled the lever to push her seat away from the dash.

The seat moved a little bit, barely enough to get her out from under the wheel, but it was enough to bring back that pain. Now that the pressure was gone, deep fissures opened in her legs, like half of her had fallen off a very tall cliff. The half that remained burned and Finch didn't even try to keep down her shout. At her exclamation, the medic motioned briskly for Dennis to help her pull Finch out of the car.

With Finch awkwardly dangling between them they started racing towards the van, trying ineffectively to protect themselves from the sand at the same time. The medic was a lot stronger than she looked.

The man spoke up, his voice loud and reedy in her ear. "Bitch is lucky she's alive, she had some good stuff in her truck."

The medic gave a non-committal hum that Finch could feel as she clung around her neck. Finch wanted to teach this kid a lesson about respect, but she barely had the strength to hold up her own head. Instead, she looked down at the ground, at her limp body. The point of impact on her legs had stained her pants dark with blood, and even though she could see trails of it flow down her pants she couldn't feel them, couldn't feel anything but the wind and the shoulders she hung off.

Suddenly an overwhelming urge to look at her truck took over; she couldn't believe that her automotive companion of the past decade or so was gone just like that. She rolled her head back over her shoulder and felt rather than heard the agonized noise that ripped from her.

Her truck, *hers*, was totaled, even through the dark and the strange angle she could see that. The whole front crumpled like a paper ball, she wanted to reach out and touch it, assure it that everything was going to be ok. She wanted to reach out and pick up the piece of her heart that she must have left in it because her chest felt suspiciously hollow.

To cap off her failures and losses and agonies of the night her truck's tires were smeared with glowing, vibrant, green. She'd killed Roadbeetles. Flitting little souls now lost to Oblivion, those little bugs who kept the whole Basin running, her minuscule coworkers and neighbors; and she'd *killed them*. Her head slumped forward in defeat and her whole body shook with sobs that took in no air and tears that never ran dry.

By the time they made it to the doors of the van she was barely conscious, every sob using energy she didn't have, and she couldn't comprehend what little conversation there was between Dennis, Frank, and the medic, nor did she care to. She only jolted awake when she was laid out on a cold metal table. She tried to sit up and get a better view of where she was, but small, steady hands pushed her back, keeping her on the table.

The medic, now with her sand mask off. Long auburn hair pulled back in a ponytail, with wayward strands curling around her soft face. Warm brown monolid eyes and a plush cupid's bow mouth, now set in a severe look as she went about her work. She had arms full of supplies: bandages, scissors, a scalpel or two, needles and thread, various jars, and a very large saw. Finch watched in distant horror as the medic arranged them on the tray besides the table.

The wicked blade of the saw made Finch's stomach roil and churn like the storm outside, she lurched onto her side, away from the sight of the saw, and retched. The medic was there in an instant, taking the sand mask off for her, holding a bucket beside her head. Finch retched for a while, ripping her already sore throat, but she kept it down. Dehydration and starvation were killers on the road, you kept down what you put in.

Finch eventually calmed down, swallowing back bile, and staring at a point on the ceiling. Something terrible was going to happen, had happened, and she couldn't help but flinch and crack a joke. "Sands good for nausea I guess."

“I’ll have to write that down.”

Finch tried to laugh in response, but it sounded more like a horrible choking noise, choking on air and sand, her body was alighting with pain. She recognized distantly, from knowledge she’d gained talking to other medics, that the adrenaline from the crash was leaving her, she was going into shock, she was dying.

The medic helped her sit up, cleared her airways, helped her get down some water, and Finch nearly fainted at the sight of her legs, so much dark, dark blood. The other woman nodded grimly as Finch paled, laying her back down again, before moving down to her legs, her hand shivering over the grisly wounds.

“Who’s your next of kin? Who should we bring you back to if…” The unfinished question was clear, and Finch took another painful gulp, trying to fight back furious, hot tears that rose.

“My sister, Jay, but-” A sob that shook her body so hard it jostled her legs and sent waves of pain through her body, the tears a mix of loss and agony. “I don’t have her anymore; she won’t want anything to do with me.”

“Ok, ok no worries, I’m going to take a look, won’t hurt a bit.” She took a deep breath in and out and waited until Finch calmed down and started mirroring her. The deep breaths did little to sooth the sudden vicious fear of dying in this van, just a few feet away from her dead truck.

She was distracted from her fear when the medic’s eyes transformed from one blink to the next. The whites of her eyes were gone, instead multitudes of irises and pupils took the space, the medic was seeing and unseeing, she saw everything and nothing. She had the Sense.

Those with the Sense typically made their way as fortune tellers, using their gift to answer whatever little questions plagued the people of the Basin. Finch had seen them from a

distance most of her life, only going to one once when she was young and scared about the future.

Watching the medic mouth words and looking around at all the different possibilities that laid before them, like so many roads, Finch felt like she was listening to a Storyteller. That same small feeling, that same reverence, it rang throughout her, in the parts of her that weren't numb or foggy with pain. Suddenly the medic's eyes closed, and when they opened, they were back to normal, and she turned to look at Finch, her gaze still far away.

"There are three paths ahead of you, surgery, amputation, or death. All could mean death, luck and skill fracture the paths." The medic shook her head and refocused her gaze. "The amputation will be safer, the surgery is trickier, it could be very dangerous."

"If I keep them-" Finch inhaled shakily, the very act of asking the question made her situation all too real, it was her legs, wasn't it? On the literal chopping block, smashed and bruised to a broken pulp. The tears gushed unbidden, and she closed her eyes against them, hoping against hope that she would wake up from this awful dream, but the nightmare continued. The medic stood, with her knives at the ready, prepared to fundamentally change Finch's life, or at least tidy up the messy job Finch had done at metamorphosis. "If I keep them, will I be able to drive?"

"Not confidently, you might not even be able to walk consistently. There are things in your legs, nerves, veins, muscles, tendons, which are irreparably damaged, that I can't fix, and they might get better, but they could get worse. Some days your legs will be there, some days only parts will be there, some days they'll be gone completely."

Finch tried to imagine waking up every day, uncertain if her body would be working with her or against her, it scared her, the instability of her own parts. Like her first truck. A second -

second hand piece of junk, one day it'd be the brakes, the next it was the engine, every week a tire needed changing. Every day another problem. She'd gotten rid of that truck because it was unreliable, but this was her, her body, her legs.

If there was a chance she could drive, then that was the only option.

"I wanna keep 'em."

"There's a high risk of infection. You could very easily get sick and die, amputation will be much safer, are you sure?"

Finch's vision was getting blurry, and her head was pounding and fuzzy, the adrenaline and shock was wearing off, she was in a *lot* of pain. She swallowed hard and lolled her head over to look at the medic, smiling crookedly up at her. "I trust you, doc."

The medic nodded resolutely and prepared, getting out more tools, strapping Finch down to the table with sturdy strips of leather buckled to table legs.

"You're smart for trusting me, I'm very good at my job." She was holding a bottle and a cloth and had come back into Finch's eyeline again. Her plainspoken confidence settled some of the nervous fluttering in Finch's chest, she liked people who knew they were skilled and weren't afraid to let you know. "I'm going to put this over your mouth and nose, and I need you to take deep breaths for me, you'll go under, and I'll get to work."

Finch nodded and breathed in as instructed, the liquid was potent, going right to her brain, the scent of poppies reminded her of Seron. As she lay there, drifting off, spots of light and darkness started filling her vision, and she remembered with a jolt the Roadbeetles. With a slow, heavy hand, she tried to bat away the cloth.

"Did you see them? Did you see the beetles?" Finch's body shook with hiccups as she tried to hold back the sobs. "I killed them, poor things, did you see them?"

The medic stared at her blankly for a moment, looking at the van doors and back at Finch, like she'd forgotten the horrible thing Finch had done. She spoke slowly, mulling over her words. "They never felt it, they didn't even realize they died." She stopped, biting her lip, her eyes sprinting around the small space for more things to say. "They're becoming stars."

Finch nodded and laid back down, the fight and worry draining out of her as the liquid scent curled up in its space.

"That's good, that's good." She mumbled about stars until the medic replaced the cloth and slowly,

drifted,

off

to sleep.

Lizbeth One

Written on thick pulp paper, stained gray with pen ink, bound into a heavy leather journal.

We found a crash tonight; it was a miracle the driver survived. She's a fighter though, more coherent than she should have been. The surgery went well enough, I'm staying up to see if she turns, using the Sense I believe she's fine internally, but it's never certain. I had given her a choice between the surgery and amputation, despite my urging she went for the surgery. I'm glad she was able to decide, but I wonder how she'll feel when she wakes up.

Thinking back on it I told her death was an option, that probably wasn't great. My bedside manner has gotten worse. I think I've seen too much, I haven't even been on the road that much, but *everyone* needs help. You must distance yourself.

I've had a lot of patients, a lot of living ones, but a lot more I've helped bury. There's no kindness in an infected wound or a disease that eats away at you, no ease in truck crashes or rockslides. I've seen it all. People starve, dehydrate, their skin cracking and peeling away from the hot sun and the dry winds, and we're to believe that infinite coolness and darkness is within walking distance. It just seems too easy.

My patients all believe in Oblivion, am I a bad medic for not believing as well? They trust me to keep them alive and not sent to Oblivion, or in the worst case they trust I'll shepherd them along. If I'm wrong, I hope they got there safely.

I wish I could believe it would be so easy, it's just on the other side of the walls apparently. Both the physical and the spiritual. Afterlife parallel to life. I've never been good at accepting easy answers or believing. I keep my head down and work and I'm good at it.

I keep thinking about how devastated the driver was when she remembered she killed Roadbeetles, she was seconds away from going under but in that moment the fate of those bugs was just as important as her life. What is it like to go through life caring for everything as much as yourself? Sometimes I feel like I'm heartless, I care for my patients, I would do anything for them, but you must keep your distance, you must.

This was supposed to be notes on her procedure, I didn't mean to get so carried away, luckily no one else can read this, they won't be able to see my lack of professionalism.

Chapter Three: Aftermath

When she awoke, for a moment she didn't remember the crash, she didn't remember the dust storm or the tree or the beetles or the stupid men or the terrible pain and numbness. The first thing she remembered was that lovely face wielding that wicked blade. She sat up with a jolt and couldn't stop her pained cry as lightning bolts of pain shot up her body.

As if waiting for her cue the van doors opened, assaulting Finch with the early morning light, and the medic climbed in. Brusque and efficient she examined the bandages, looking over her handiwork from last night. Clean, white linen, no spots of blood but the twinge of her muscles and nerves beneath made Finch gasp.

"They hurt, it's wrong. You need to fix it." Finch's voice was hoarse from sleep and the memories of her screaming.

"There's nothing to fix, you're healing."

Finch wanted to cry and scream and throw a tantrum, it wasn't *fair*. But despite having just woken up she was still so tired, the sensation of the crash and the surgery, the hard, cold slab of the table against her back, all of it was resting in her body. Her bones and muscles reliving it over and over again as they tried to stitch themselves back together.

Finch took a deep shuddering breath and pushed her forehead against the medic's shoulder, who ended up awkwardly cradling her.

"How am I going to drive?" Her voice cracked under the weight of the question.

Finch had never considered the physicality of her job before. Stepping up into the truck, goods coming and going from her truck bed, standing on the tailgate to trade, foot on the gas, foot on the brakes, reading the road in the vibrations through her connection to the pedals and the floor.

“Well, I know a mechanic who can answer that, they’ll have a fix, but don’t let their age fool you. Just cause they’re young doesn’t mean they’re not the best.”

Finch had heard about some crazy kid in Miras who’d nearly blown up their garage and half the scrapyard working on an engine block two sizes too big for the truck it was in. She’d been impressed to hear they’d survived.

“What’s your name?” Finch finally got a hold of herself and sat up, raising her head despite the burden, locking eyes despite her weariness. “I have to know who to thank for saving me, right?”

The woman gave a wry smile before putting her hand out to shake. “Lizbeth.”

* * *

Despite all the hardship Lizbeth was good company, the two of them passed the time driving exchanging stories. Funny encounters on routes, crazy creatures, weird patients. Finch’s stomach hurt from laughing as Lizbeth explained the time she’d had to help birth a calf because her patient refused for the cow to go unaided despite his broken arm.

The talk was good, the laughter was better, it distracted her from the fact that she was a passenger, a thing she hadn’t been in a very long time and the lack of control was not sitting well with her.

Hours later and for better or worse Miras surrounded them. Its high walls rose to greet them, crumbling and ugly as they may be, spiked with lightning rods. And deep within the confines of the walls, what made Miras, Miras: The Scrapyard. It hurt to look at it, piled high with dead trucks, shining brightly in the sunlight, like a beacon calling them forward.

Following the curving wall away from the town center they went right to the hub for truck repair, best spot this side of the Basin. Once they’d rolled up to Lizbeth’s mechanic, Frank

hopped out and unhooked Finch's disheveled and broken truck in front of the garage. It did not bounce on the remaining suspension and life in its tires, nor did it fall to pieces upon the respite of ground, instead the hulking metal beast slumped to the ground, curling in on itself as if to lick its wounds.

Finch was so focused on the pathetic sight of her truck that she startled badly when Frank came around and pounded on Lizbeth's door, leaning on it when she lowered the window.

"That's us then, we're going to market, call out when you're done, Ulys ain't gonna wait long."

"Frank, it's going to take a bit more than a couple hours." Lizbeth said, grimacing, as he spit a mouthful of tobacco-stained saliva to the side.

Frank scratched the back of his neck and sighed exaggeratedly. "Is that so, Lizzy? We're barely a week into this trip and you already want to stop? Thought you had more stamina than that."

Lizbeth didn't say anything, just glared at Frank, not wasting precious words and air on something she could so easily cow him into. Their gazes remained locked, until Frank looked away first, rolling his eyes and shrugging, trying to feign cool confidence despite the nervous adjustments of his clothes and hair, sparse and dust ridden as they both were.

"You know, I've been wanting to take a break for a bit, the hooker needs some attention, and I could do with a good hot meal." Frank clearly wanted to be seen as the caravan leader, but it was a futile effort. His awkward charade split as he grinned at Finch and pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "You know, I bet you could get a decent payout for that scrap."

A few minutes later Lizbeth's van was the only one remaining, surrounded by the plumes of dust kicked up by the leaving trucks. The two of them sat in silence for a while, like the dust clouds were closed curtains, encouraging hushed voices.

“I’m sorry about him, he can be...a lot.”

“That’s a nice way of saying asshole.” That got a laugh. “I’m surprised you’re driving with this bunch, Lizbeth, I’m sure there’s more reputable folks you could go with.”

Lizbeth shrugged haplessly. “We’re assigned once we leave The Library, I didn’t have much of a choice-”

Whatever Lizbeth was going to say was lost as the garage door slammed open. Standing at the mouth of it, with partially dismantled, or mantled, pieces of trucks piled up behind them, was a kid of no more than 19, a big, confident grin splitting their face. They had a wild shock of black hair, sticking up in every direction, despite the grease-stained bandana trying to keep it back, and they wore a similarly grease stained coverall.

They bounded over to the van door, more energetic than Finch had ever been. Quickly opened the passenger door and jumped up to balance on the edge, just barely keeping themselves up by gripping onto the roof. “Lizbeth! I was wondering when you’d be back!”

“Onyx, we need your expertise.”

“You can always count on my expert teeth.”

Lizbeth laughed but with the corpse of her truck before her Finch didn’t much feel like laughing.

Onyx stuck out their hand to shake, still maintaining their balance, and Finch noticed for the first time that they were missing a few fingers. On their left hand their pointer finger and half of their middle finger were gone, with burn scars crawling down their palm and into their sleeve. Tricky for a mechanic to not have full motor control, trickier to be good enough to have their own garage. She reached out and firmly shook their hand, she liked them already.

“Now I’m guessing that the disrespectfully abandoned truck is yours?” Onyx finally hopped down to face the wreckage that was her truck, they clicked their tongue and shook their head remorsefully. “You hate to see a truck like this. You want it patched up too?”

They gestured to her legs, sympathy in their eyes but mostly focused on her truck.

“Yeah, was hoping it’d be salvageable.”

“Wish I could say yes ma’am, unfortunately that truck is what we in the business call ‘a broken-down piece of shit’. I’m sure it served you well, but in my expert teeth I’d say you’re going to have to scrap it.”

Finch could just cry. That truck had carried her most of her 15-year career, and she took damn good care of it. *Had* taken damn good care of it. “Alright...how much for a new one? I got trade in the back.”

Onyx moved their head back and forth, contemplating. “Let me take a look.”

Finch could hear Onyx scramble up and start picking through what she’d accumulated over the past month. Crates cracked open, glass gently bumping against glass, soft things rolling around in a box.

After a few minutes they stuck a stacked crate through the curtain. Amongst all the things in the back there had just been two large jars full of dried fruit and another two of jerky, Onyx had one of each and a bottle of cider.

“All of this and you get a new truck,”

“Wheelchair and crutches too.” Lizbeth said after glancing at Finch’s legs. Onyx’s disembodied hands set the crate down before ducking back behind the curtain.

“I can do the chair fine but I ain’t made crutches before, I’ll ask around.” They called out from the back, after a moment they came back brandishing a couple packets of honey candies and a bolt of cloth. “How’s this?”

Finch looked it over, feeling like it wasn’t near enough. This kid was giving her mobility, both with the truck and the chair. She had planned on having to give up much more. “I mean you’re setting the price, so...”

“Think of it this way, I’m getting all this good trade *and* a big, beautiful pile of scrap in return. Usually, I’d have to pay you for that, so I’m good over here.”

Finch nodded, she could understand trade, and what better end for her truck than to be traded? It made the pile of broken, mangled metal hurt a little less. “Why don’t you get yourself another bottle of cider and we’ll call it good.”

“Fuck yeah! Let me go grab the temp chair.” They retreated behind the curtain but a second later their hand popped through to shake. “Pleasure doing business with you!”

“You too, kid.” Finch returned the shake, disbelieving laughter coloring her words.

They gave her a two-fingered salute with their right hand and Finch saw they were missing their ring and pinky finger. All together they had just enough to be great at their job. Finch hated to admit it but this dumb kid with their wild hair gave Finch a little bit of hope, just enough to smile and salute back.

* * *

Turning away from the bristling wall, from the garages and Scrapyard, life outside of scrap and trucks and oil and grease inevitably continued, all converging on the center square. People talking and laughing, folks in the caravan calling out their goods, someone in a corner playing an out of tune banjo, the smells of fried dough and roasting meats. And over it all the

taste and smell of dust in the air. Yet all Finch could think was that could have been her out there.

“You ready?” Lizbeth stood beside Finch’s open door, her hands outstretched to help her patient out of the truck and into the bland, rusting chair Onyx had lent them. Prepared to leverage her into the next phase of life, the next evolution of her mobility.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Very slowly Finch slipped from one seat to the next, glad for the small amount of privacy the open door gave her. The chair was foreign, odd, the view of the world it gave her was lower, made the sky seem so much bigger. Her limbs felt cold despite the stifling heat, despite Lizbeth’s warm presence, she felt pinned again, stuck between that tree and her truck; the long difficult road of the future stretched out before her.

* * *

20 pounds of flour, 30 pounds of sunbaked bricks straight from Veldyl, 5 crates of finely brewed cider, 10 jars of honey, 3 boxes of incense cones, most of a box of tallow candles, a whole crate of pickled eggs and jarred tomatoes, and one bolt of warm cloth.

The entire bounty of Finch’s cycle through the Basin, that she was going to use to start business with new buyers to make her next route even better. All her time and effort, handed over to the, now very happy, shop owner, a woman named Enid that she’d worked with before, for lodging in the apartment behind the shop.

Shaking Enid’s hand and making that deal felt like the end. Like once she got in that little rinky-dink apartment and started on her long journey of recovery, she’d never leave. She didn’t feel strong enough to recover, to get behind the wheel again, but she was also too afraid to learn to be a person. It’s a good thing then that Finch never knew when to give up.

She shook Enid's hand and watched her trade become Enid's trade and started to imagine the route she'd go on once she was behind the wheel again. She and Lizbeth brought her documents and bags around to the little apartment, driver lodgings through and through.

Shopkeepers often had these little apartments ready for passing caravans, hospitality in return for trade. Each one looked the same, a single bed, splinter-ridden frame and wash-worn sheets, a poorly built chest of drawers with a chipped washbasin on top. In the front room a table with mismatched cups, and an icebox if you were lucky.

Finch didn't often stay in these little rooms, preferring to stay in her truck, but it did feel strange, turning temporary lodgings for all into a semi-permanent home for one. She could see boot prints of former tenants in the dirt on the floor, the dust never quite leaving, and she ran over them. Wheelchair tracks on footprints.

Lizbeth set the papers down on the chest of drawers and Finch dropped her old beat to shit backpack and duffle bag on the bed, gently placing the remaining jars of fruit and jerky on the table in the front. It wasn't much, and neither were the two rooms, but the well-worn things, artifacts from years long past, and the colorful trade made the lodgings feel like the damn Council Hall.

"It feels weird, being behind four walls, knowing I'm gonna stay behind four walls."

Lizbeth looked up from where she was unpacking Finch's bag, putting her paltry collection of clothes in the lower drawers. "How long has it been since you've lived somewhere that wasn't your truck?"

Finch rolled her head and cracked her neck loudly. "Not since I left Barraí when I was 15."

To her credit Lizbeth didn't balk or make a face, just looked back over her shoulder at Finch. "That's a long time to be away from home."

Finch shook her head. "Nah, I made the road my home, Barraí is just where my sister lives."

She tried not to think about Jay or Barraí, tried not to think of that night she slipped away. It was a rash stupid teenage decision that Finch had made it work through pure stubbornness, but if she remembered that night, if she thought about her sister, chilling guilt threatened to overwhelm her, sending her spiraling. It was easier not to think of it at all.

"When was the last time you talked to her?"

"15 years ago, I wrote a note and hitched a ride on a truck." Finch chuckled self-deprecatingly. "Pretty bad, right?"

Lizbeth nodded, sitting on the bed next to where Finch sat in her chair. "Why did you leave?"

"I didn't want to be a glassblower, or a shopkeep." Finch said with a shrug. "Those are pretty much the only two choices in Barraí."

"That's a lifetime contract, isn't it?"

"All contracts are lifetime, anyone who says otherwise is trying to get you to sign one." Finch said with an ugly laugh, laughing because Lizbeth was a little too close for comfort.

At 15 a lifetime contract had been scarier than anything she could have imagined, a contract you had to sign to even learn the craft, a craft your whole family and all your friends and their family have dedicated themselves to. A dedication that made you feel small because you didn't share it with them, and why not? Why were you so different, why can't you just go with

the flow? So instead, you sign a driver's contract and you run away because driving sounds like freedom, but it takes you a while to realize freedom comes with sacrifices.

"They don't have to be."

"Medic ain't technically a lifetime contract, there's mobility there, you gonna switch?"

Finch felt petulant, throwing questions back in her face like she hadn't literally saved her life.

But Finch was bad at being told she was wrong, bad at being vulnerable.

"Do you regret it?" Lizbeth narrowed her eyes and let the two questions hang between them. Two questions, one answer.

Finch felt pinned, she'd been grappling with the same question for years, going back and forth after every victory and loss, her feelings changing easily, even as she kept on the same road. If a truck drives down the same road the same way enough times ruts will appear, an easy path to follow. Finch had been set on one of those in Barrair and miraculously been able to escape it, but maybe she'd just jumped for a different one.

"In a way, yes, my parents had just died, accident, and I had taken that as my sign to get out of there as quickly as I could. But I left my sister all on her own, abandoned her to an empty house, and now I have no idea who she is, who she's become. She was engaged when I left, to some big, sweet, idiot boy, I'm probably an aunt by now, and I just missed everything." Finch took a deep breath and blinked away tears that she hadn't realized had been ready to spill for years now. "But I don't regret not staying, I was meant to be on the road. Sure, it's difficult, and it nearly cost me my life, but I had a lot of great years out with just me and my truck."

Lizbeth got up and pulled two precious things from her satchel: an inkwell and quill and a few sheets of hemp paper.

Making ink was a very time intensive process, there were generations of families who produced it in Seron, primarily for the Council. There would be no Council without ink and paper, no notes, no records, no contracts. Bureaucracy was a beast they'd trained, and ink and paper were its blood and skin.

Some people in the Basin went their whole lives only seeing it in the form of their contract, barely able to read the guidelines laid out on it, only knowing how to write their name. They were worth a lot to those who could make use of them, and Finch didn't count herself among those numbers.

Lizbeth handed them over, brokering no argument with her definitive actions. "Your sister needs to know everything you just told me; she needs to know what just happened to you. She's probably been worried sick about you for years and you just confirmed her worst fears."

Finch winced at the barbs that fell from Lizbeth's mouth, the type of thorns that stuck in her thoughts, latched onto her mind on long, long drives. She was a bad person, a bad sister, abandoning her family and their way of life for a truck and the road. And what did she have to show for it? Two jars of dried fruit and jerky and malfunctioning legs.

She got angry, just for a second, just enough. Who was this medic to poke and prod at her life? As if her history and actions could be so easily fixed with surgical precision, but they both knew now surgery was imprecise. Finch wanted to stew in the anger and frustration, was so ready to throw it back in Lizbeth's face, scare her off, let her wallow in misery on her own.

She thrust the inkwell and paper back, trying poorly to hide the venom in her voice. "You should keep them, write your notes, maybe write back to your own family. My sister can't read, and I can't write anyways, so no point in trying."

Lizbeth screwed up her face as a swath of emotions passed through, embarrassment, pity, sadness, frustration, and determination. She passed them back, practically smacking Finch with the papers, her shoulders tensed and a snarl curling up in her lip. “I’m a Library kid, no family to write to.”

Finch flinched as Lizbeth’s words hit the air like lightning. She’d been to the Library before on runs, one of the last standing remnants of the Everything from before. A tall building with glass making up whole walls, glass her town and family would fix and replace when necessary. Inside it was full to the brim with books, the only place in the Basin that had books, and amongst the piles and stacks and shelves of books were people.

Children who were orphaned, children who had to be given up, apprentices who would rarely see their families, and the people they would all grow into. Educators, Council representatives, scribes, and medics.

The crash had really knocked the sense out of Finch if she hadn’t already connected the dots that Lizbeth had come from the Library. They were both separated from their families, Lizbeth had lost hers and gained literacy, but Finch had given hers up for the road. Given like she had a choice, given because she did, and she sat before Lizbeth and complained. So, she took the paper and the ink, and she ceded the battle.

“Alright, Liz, I’ll think something up to say to my sister.”

Lizbeth chewed her lip, macerating her next words, before spitting them out. “I’ll write it for you, if you’d like, and I’m sure someone in Barraï can read it to her. It’s just- I think it’s important.”

Finch sighed. She was right, which was the worst part, it was important, and she should have done it a long time ago. But it was easier to wallow in pity and guilt, easier to tread the

familiar dark waters of her own thoughts, rather than dive into the unknowable future of reconciliation.

* * *

When medics passed through towns it gave the settlement access to medicine, healing, a keen eye on their aches and pains, and an ear to talk off about any little discomfort. Often this was done out the back of a medic's van, cramped as it may be, it was private and had ease of access to the medic's many tools and tinctures.

Finch's lodgings not only gave her the unique opportunity of a non-wheeled home, but Lizbeth a non-wheeled workspace. Not long after they got Finch settled into the meager apartment Lizbeth asked for permission to see patients in the front room. Finch gave it easily.

The rickety table in the front room became a doctor's work table and soon was full to the brim with the contents of Lizbeth's van, jars of pastes, ointments and unguents, needles and threads, a mirror and candle, pliers and drills and bandages, all of which Lizbeth placed, organized, and looked over with fierce precision.

Finch watched and offered to help as Lizbeth set up her station, each time rebuffed and advised to lay down and rest. But despite the weariness that weighed down her body Finch felt her brain abuzz with activity and her eyes refused to stay closed too long. She was so accustomed to each visit to a town to be busier than the last, trading her trade, working out deals and requests with locals, sitting down with shopkeepers and seeing what they would need on her next pass through. So instead, she hovered in the doorway of her room, not yet ready to resign for the day.

A rush of people had come once they'd gotten word that a medic had set up shop, or even drawn in by the iconic van that one drove parked outside the apartment. For the close-knit town

privacy wasn't of the utmost concern so the dozen or so people piled into the room, standing around waiting their turn as Lizbeth focused on the patient in the chair across from her. Finch tried to stay apart from everyone else, not wanting to be alone in her room, and unable to rest now with all the noise, but not feeling up for social gatherings.

But the longer she stayed out with the horde the more old customers and traders came up to her. Asking about her route, what trade she had, why she was in a chair, what happened, oh I'm so sorry, that's a shame, get better soon.

Each question and pitying gaze chipped away at her, at the memory they'd all had of her, hollowing her, leaving nothing but bandages and scars behind. All she was to them was the crash, that broken down truck comforting itself, the strong, confident trader she'd been before was dead, left behind with the green smears of the Roadbeetles.

Finally giving up Finch wheeled over to her door, she could feel Lizbeth tracking her journey across the room, watching her even as she tended to her patient. But even giving up couldn't be easy.

At the front of the room the door flew open. A few people stumbled as they were struck and Lizbeth was up immediately, glaring at the person in the doorway.

A young woman wearing a patchwork jacket and too-big-boots balanced and swung back and forth on a pair of crutches, crowing in delight after having kicked the door open. Lizbeth walked up to the young woman and pushed her hard, picking up the crutches from where they'd fallen and closing the door behind her.

She tried ineffectively to smooth over the moment with a smile to her patients as she walked through them. "My caravan member, she likes her jokes."

When she met Finch at the doorway, she could tell Lizbeth was livid, her grip on the crutches white-knuckled and shaking, and it did not improve when the door opened once more.

“Lizzy! That hurt!” The young woman stomped through the room, barely regarding the dozen or so people around her. “I was just being funny!”

“Well, you’re not.” Lizbeth snapped over her shoulder, slipping past Finch to lean the crutches against the wall in the bedroom. Finch leaned back in her chair to look at them. Loops on top to go around her forearms with handles to hold, light aluminum shaft and leather grips and straps. The nearest she’d get to walking anytime soon.

“I did you a favor delivering them! You don’t need to be a bitch about it.” She was loud and unashamed of their squabble, despite the whispering and fretting from the people around them. Lizbeth on the other hand tensed up more and more with each hushed word like a trap ready to spring.

“And you don’t need to act like a child with other people’s property.” Lizbeth hissed at the other woman, trying her level best to look professional in front of her patients. With a sigh she pinched the bridge of her nose. “Finch, this is Marta, Frank’s niece.”

“You were the solo driver, right?” Marta looked at Finch with her head cocked to the side, like a confused dog.

“Marta-”

“Yeah I am.”

“Guess there’s a good reason they don’t let most folks do that.” Marta pointed to the chair and the bandages on Finch’s legs, as if it wasn’t obvious what she was talking about.

“Why’d you get to?”

“Finch, go rest. I’ll deal with her.” Lizbeth began to pull Marta, a tourniquet grip on her arm, depriving her of blood and freedom. Finch could already see the lecture bubbling up, Marta was going to get an earful.

“Everyone else in my caravan left, I stayed, simple as that.” Finch called out as Lizbeth dragged Marta away, uncomfortable with the pointed questions, but not willing to let them hang in the air. She wasn’t special, there hadn’t been a new contract drawn up when the last driver had left, she’d just continued to renew her contract. No mind or fuss paid to her lone status, as long as she kept up the good work, and she always did. Had.

Lizbeth successfully pushed Marta out of the apartment and indeed gave her a thorough lecture, and when she returned, apologetically to her patients, Finch was behind the closed door of the bedroom. Laid out in bed, having hauled herself out of the chair like Lizbeth had shown her, staring at the crutches leaning up against the wall.

She fell into a fitful sleep, the low hum of conversation on the other side of the door leaking into her dreams. She was in a market, trading up a storm, coming out richer than she’d arrived. She was in Barraï watching her dad artfully make sandmask after sandmask. She was at a firepit with her old caravan, young and fresh on the route. She was leaving in the middle of the night, from Barraï, from Markeet, she was never coming home, she was pinned against the tree, she was alone, alone, alone.

Council Chapter

FADE IN

INT. COUNCIL HALL - MEETING ROOM

GENEVIEVE, 25, a beautiful woman wearing a clean, form fitting blue jumpsuit with a pristine white shawl overtop and BARNABY, 70, a thin, severe looking man in a black robe, stand at a tilted table with a map of the Basin on it, adding, removing, and adjusting multicolored pins around roads and in towns. These pins indicate drivers, medics, representatives, beetle wranglers, and fuel trucks. Anything on wheels is represented with a little pin.

VIVIAN, 45, an older woman but no less beautiful, gray streaks in her blonde hair, walks in and her presence is announced with the many jangling bracelets and necklaces she wears, her clothes are plain except for a very loud, overlarge cardigan she wears.

VIVIAN

Every cycle I say I'm never going to do public days again but this time I mean it!

GENEVIEVE

Oh, come on V, you can't expect any of us to do it, look at Barnaby he'll scare them all away.

BARNABY

All the better for it.

GENEVIEVE

You like talking to people anyways, what's the problem?

Vivian throws herself into a chair near the table, sighing loudly.

VIVIAN

I like talking to people when they don't have such unreasonable demands! There were so many people today complaining about The Hole, what do they expect us to do? Make more water?
Ridiculous.

GENEVIEVE

If they were able to make it all the way here to Veneer, why didn't they just move themselves?

VIVIAN

I thought the same thing! As always, I offered to have their families relocated to communities closer to the water and reminded them that the Library is an option for their children.

GENEVIEVE

We could always do with more medics and teachers.

VIVIAN

Yes, well, some of them took me up on the offer of relocation, but there was such a stubborn man. He started yelling about tradition and heritage and the Council's responsibility and all these things. So tiresome.

BARNABY

I'm sure he shies away from hard work. People like him are the true disease within the Basin, no better than a contract breaker.

Vivian laughs and stands, putting a hand on Barnaby's shoulder.

VIVIAN

You're so serious! Don't worry, he was just angry at nature and things beyond his control, so he came to take it out on us. Well, me, but eventually he'll leave his dried-up little town and join his fellows in glorious work.

A COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE enters the room with a JOURNAL, he bows quickly to the three Core Council members before handing the Journal to Genevieve.

COUNCIL REP

Councilwoman, today's correspondence.

GENEVIEVE

(sarcastic)

Oh goody.

(normal)

Thank you, you're dismissed.

COUNCIL REP

Ma'am.

The rep bows and walks back, as they reach the door they hesitate.

COUNCIL REP (CONT'D)

One more thing, ma'am, Councilman Detrick has been in the studio.
without broadcasting for an hour now.

VIVIAN

Oh, that's fine, he loves fiddling with the station.

COUNCIL REP

Yes, though he seems...frantic.

BARNABY

Thank you for your opinion, representative.

Council rep bows again quickly, keeping their gaze on the floor.

COUNCIL REP

My apologies, sir, I did not mean to overstep.

The Council rep leaves.

BARNABY

My training must be lacking if the representatives feel comfortable enough to speak out of turn.

VIVIAN

They seemed really worried about Detrick, don't take it personal, Barnaby.

BARNABY

You were an educator, Vivian, you must know the performance of the students are a reflection upon the teacher.

VIVIAN

Oh yes, I was an excellent teacher.

Barnaby narrows his eyes at Vivian who smiles unaware, before looking at Barnaby.

VIVIAN (CONTD)

Oh, I meant nothing by it, my students were all very young anyways. And perhaps they're reflecting Councilman Shepard's teachings and not your own?

BARNABY

(Looking up from the table and around the room)

Where is Shepard anyways?

GENEVIEVE

Out. Barnaby, we've received three more driver contract requests, do we have the available resources to approve them?

Barnaby looks over Genevieve's shoulder at the correspondence journal before reaching into his robe and taking out another journal and flipping through it.

BARNABY

Theoretically yes, we have the means of making as much fuel as we could need. But I need more hands to distill it, and there's always the matter of more vehicles.

VIVIAN

Some of the drivers can share!

GENEVIEVE

And we know of some empty towns with potential contract breakers.

Vivian nods thoughtfully and Barnaby smiles a grim smile.

BARNABY

Quite right, councilwoman, I will send a representative at once to adjudicate on standing contracts.

Barnaby walks towards the hallway that leads to the studio when COUNCILMAN DETRICK, 80, a disheveled man, wheels into the room quickly. His fine clothes are wrinkled, and the edges of his sleeves have ash and burn holes in them, his wheelchair is ornate and padded and slightly larger than would fit him, as if he'd shrunk since sitting in it. He has a frantic look in his eyes.

BARNABY (CONTD)

Oblivion above, Detrick, you nearly ran me over!

DETRICK

I have news! Wonderful news!

VIVIAN

Detrick, you seem delirious.

DETRICK

I have heard voices in the static!

Genevieve and Vivian share a concerned look.

BARNABY

You were in the radio studio. It would be abnormal if you heard no voices. Now mo-

DETRICK

You don't understand! Voices beyond our range, voices not of the Basin!

BARNABY

You've been sitting in that studio alone for too long, you've finally gone mad.

VIVIAN

Maybe you should lay down, Detrick.

GENEVIEVE

I can start my studio time now; we have some directions for representatives anyway-

DETRICK

Shut up all of you, just come with me.

Detrick wheels around and heads back where he came from, after a moment the rest of the Council members follow as well.

DETRICK (CONTD) (O.S.)

Where has Shepard gone off to? This is important dammit!

INT. COUNCIL HALL - RADIO STUDIO

The studio is sparse and more mended than whole, microphones with exposed wires, stacks of ham radios with broken dials and piecemeal cases. A soundboard sits on the table with the insides exposed, a soldering iron and magnifying glass are next to it.

All four Council members crowded into the radio studio with Detrick sitting at the desk. He starts adjusting the radios and static fills the room.

GENEVIEVE

(whispering)

What is the protocol if a Council member has gone mad?

BARNABY
We have a vote.

VIVIAN
I wonder if he's decided on a successor.

The static gets even louder, and Detrick motions the other three over.

DETRICK
Listen!

The four stand in silence listening to the static for a while.

BARNABY
Detrick this-

GENEVIEVE
Wait.

Through the static VOICES can be heard. Although they do not know it each Council member hears a different voice, a voice from beyond the grave. A student, a grandfather, a friend, a sister, voices of people long gone, but for each Council member the voice only rings some distant bells. The loved ones are still loved, but now the voices aren't theirs.

VOICE
North...north...north.

DETRICK
You see! I told you!

VIVIAN
Oh, my word.

BARNABY
That could be a driver or a town station, it could be anything.

DETRICK
There's nothing attributed to this station, nothing here at least.
There must be another station in the Beyond.

VIVIAN
So that means...

GENEVIEVE
More people!

BARNABY
(shocked)
Impossible.

GENEVIEVE
We need to make contact as soon as we can, Detrick, can you respond?

DETRICK
I've been trying but there's been no indication they can hear me; it must be a repeated message.

GENEVIEVE
Then we need to send people out north.

BARNABY
Now it's you who's gone quite mad I'm afraid, Genevieve.

GENEVIEVE
No, just imagine how we'll flourish! More trade, information exchange, maybe they'll even have more water. Anything could be out there, and it's ours for the taking!

DETRICK
Maybe they still have Everything, we'd be fools not to try.

VIVIAN
Who would willingly go into Oblivion?

GENEVIEVE
Barnaby, maybe we could send your contract breakers?

BARNABY
I need more hands not less just to keep the Basin running, absolutely not.

DETRICK
I'm sure there are those who value progress as much as us.

VIVIAN

It would be valuable to contact other civilizations, interesting at the very least.

GENEVIEVE

Where is Shepard when you need him?

The door to the studio opens and SHEPARD, 26, walks in, dust covered and exhausted. His cloak and hair were once black and the glass of his sandmask was once clear, but the sands of the Basin have accepted him as one of their own.

SHEPARD

I've been looking for you all everywhere, what's going on?

GENEVIEVE

Shepard! Excellent! We have a job for you.

Shepard rubs a hand down his face and shakes his head, a shower of dust falls off.

SHEPARD

Of course.

FADE OUT.

Chapter Four: Radio

After the patients left and the sun hung low, dying the sky brilliant purples and pinks and oranges through the clouds and dust in the air, Lizbeth came to rouse Finch.

“You need to call the Council.”

Enid had a radio in her storeroom, the better to listen to Council news and to keep up to date with the caravans she had business with. Finch stared at the clunky piece of hardware, there were loose wires, and it made the sound come out staticky and muffled. But the wires poking out of the radio and the receiver growing warm in her hand were just distractions from her mounting anxiety.

A driver’s contract was simple, you get a truck, you’re in a caravan, and you go trade. Ferrying goods and people from town to town, keeping people fed and clothed and housed in a roundabout way. A driver’s contract said you had to complete 24 routes, 24 circuits around the Basin, 2 years of service to the Basin and its people and their lives. Finch had completed 12, but it wasn’t 24, and an incomplete contract was a broken contract.

If you broke a contract then you became a pariah, people couldn’t expend resources on you without risking their own contracts. And due to your history as a breaker you couldn’t strike up a new one, except for a biofuel processor contract. Stuck in Keros, surrounded by the stinking, festering refuse of everyone’s lives, made to work until you dropped, all so the whole Basin could keep running without you.

She’d heard they needed more people in Keros. She could only hope the Council would understand.

Finch messed with the dials and knobs on the radio until there was a loud spike of static, louder than the other channels had been. And for a moment Finch swore she could hear voices,

beyond the static, almost beyond her ability to hear them. A woman's voice, a man's voice, familiar in a way that hurt.

Finch and Lizbeth shared a confused look before the static cut out abruptly, and the bored voice of a Council rep on duty came through the radio.

"Council Communication Channel, who am I speaking to? Over."

Finch took a deep breath, changed hands to wipe her sweaty palm on her leg and stated her case. She was barely able to get through her explanation of the accident when the representative cut her off.

"Do you need to be reminded of the stipulations of your contract, Finch Gaffer, should you fail to comply? Over."

Finch felt her throat close around her words, conserving precious air, and even the shaking of her hands felt slow and far away. She had always been grateful that for all her trials on the road, even before the crash, that at least she wasn't in Keros. At least the stink of fuel wasn't embedded in her skin, growing in her nails and hair. She could smell it on her truck after a refueling, that over-ripe, fecund scent of rot, the sharp, acidic scent of vital energy. Just that little bit was too much for her, but if she couldn't speak, if she couldn't just press the button on the receiver then that smell would be all she was.

"I will resume my contact when I am able, my medic is here to vouch for me. Over."

Finch locked eyes with Lizbeth, halfway to handing over the receiver now. Lizbeth was staring at the radio, confused, before slowly reaching out and taking the receiver from Finch.

"This is Medic Lizbeth Park speaking on behalf of Finch Gaffer, I performed surgery yesterday and am imposing a medical leave on her contract. We are requesting an in-person discussion of the contract at hand. Over."

She could breathe and move, she had help on her side, she wasn't going to be resigned to Keros just yet. The representative stayed silent for a while, seconds dripped by into minutes, Lizbeth nervously tapped on the table.

"We can have representatives come to Miras within the next cycle, Medic Park, we request that you and your caravan be present to meet them as well. Over."

"For what?" Finch whispered, paranoid of the representative hearing her even with the button unpressed.

"They probably want me to verify or help set up the terms of your medical leave." Lizbeth shrugged.

Finch remained unconvinced, the Council hadn't been all too concerned with securing representation for her or other workers beforehand. One's understanding of a contract was not mandatory for one to sign it, and even in cases like this Finch couldn't imagine the Council would care about medical input. What did they want with Lizbeth?

* * *

A few days later, Finch and Lizbeth, and the other people of Miras crowded doorways and windows to see who had derailed the steady march of time and sent it into a stampede.

Time in the Basin was measured against the flow of trade; the caravans were structured in such a way that each town should see one every four weeks. Balancing the number of caravans and their routes was as important as the trade and services they carried. If too few caravans were on the road, then time slowed down and the towns stagnated, but if there were too many then time sped up at an unreasonable pace.

When the CCC had said the representatives would come within the next cycle Finch had expected to have a lot more time with Lizbeth. Having her expert eyes on her recovery, having

her pleasant presence in orbit around her own, procrastinating drafting the letter to her sister. Yet here was time spinning off its axis.

Fueling trucks, the scent rolling off them cleared out the curious onlookers quicker than a sandstorm. The townspeople disinterested in the lack of trade and the pungent reminder of the Council's power.

Keros workers were immediately identifiable: filth covered jumpsuits, sand masks with charcoal and cloth filters, and the stench that had seeped into their skin. The protective layers and streaks of dirt and filth unified them, hid away the person they were before they broke a contract, as if they never existed.

Three people who were not workers got out of a much smaller truck, two of them walking away quickly from the smell and over to Enid's shop, Finch's representatives. But the third one didn't flinch at the smell or even walk towards the store, he was a dark-skinned man wearing a long cloak, the dust and sand caked on it turning the black fabric brown. He looked around the plaza, exchanging a few words with the fuel bearers before taking off, even from a distance Finch could see his steely-eyed focus as he caught sight of Lizbeth's van.

Core Council member Shepard, one of the only arms of the Council Finch had had any favorable experience with. She'd only spoken with him once, a few years back, when he'd first gotten the spot on the Council. He'd been in Grainer to shuttle Storytellers to Veneer for the radio when she had come to trade. He'd approached her, speaking familiarly for their first meeting, asking for her advice on the best way back to Veneer.

She'd taken his map and given directions and was set to turn away when he'd stopped and asked her, "How is the Basin? You know her better than me."

“She could be better, but she could be worse too, she’s different every day.” Finch had responded after mulling over her answer for a long few moments, wary of upsetting the fresh new Council member.

But he had just nodded thoughtfully and looked out to the shoreline of The Hole, visible from anywhere in Grainer. “And the water?”

“It’s leaving a lot of people high and dry, they need help, but it doesn’t know that.”

Finch sometimes saw him in passing, though they didn’t speak again, always busy, always on the move, dirt under his nails like everyone else in the Basin.

Behind her Finch heard Lizbeth inhale sharply as she recognized the Council member as well, and Finch realized that he was why they’d asked Lizbeth to stay. Shepard was well-known for executing the Council’s plans and initiatives, and change followed him like a shadow.

“What is he doing here?” Lizbeth said absentmindedly as she walked out to meet him.

Finch watched her from the doorway, watched Shepard walk quicker once he spotted her, watched them shake hands and greet one another amicably. They knew one another, she asked after the health of his father, he asked about members of her caravan. Council members often were raised or passed through the Library, the kids there grew close, of course Lizbeth knew the Council.

“A medical leave for a driver contract seems fairly small for you to adjudicate on, Shepard.” Lizbeth said with an appraising gaze, glancing back at the storefront that the two representatives had disappeared into.

“I just brought them by, I’m not here for contract writing.” Shepard said with little humor in his voice, turning to address Finch as well. “The Council extends its condolences for your accident, and we hope to come to an amicable conclusion to your contract issue.”

Finch nodded, feeling awkward under his intense gaze, and wheeled out of the apartment, heading over to the storefront.

Lizbeth moved to follow before being stopped by Shepard's outstretched hand. "I have something to discuss with you, Lizbeth. Council business."

"She's my patient, Shepard, I'm not just going to leave her to fend for herself."

"Contract signing is private, you know this."

"I would say this is special circumstances, I need to be there."

"Council rules are strict, Lizbeth, you can't."

"You're the Council, change the rules." Lizbeth spoke, frustration boiling in her words. Shepard's mouth twisted into a bitter knot, his hand never faltering.

"You can't go in." Shepard turned to look at Finch once more, a hesitant smile breaking through his turbulent expression. "And Finch Gaffer has signed more driver contracts than anyone else in the Basin, I believe she can handle herself."

Lizbeth groaned, looking between Shepard and Finch, trying to gauge Finch's reaction. Finch felt torn, on one hand he was right, she didn't need help when it came to this, and Liz couldn't go with her, but she wanted to take Lizbeth away from Shepard.

Not through fear of him doing something specifically, but there was nothing more threatening than the phrase 'Council business'. But if Lizbeth was helpless to Council posturing and demands, then Finch was less than nothing to them. Fighting would only make hers and Lizbeth's situation worse.

So, she shrugged and continued into the store, feeling small and inept, like a beaten dog running into the shadows.

* * *

The Council representatives rubbed Finch the wrong way, a man, and a woman, matching soft cream clothes, clean, cleaner than anything she'd ever seen. Even though they sat inside across from Finch they still hadn't taken off their sand masks. Marbled glass obscured their mouths, making it unclear whether they were frowning or smirking at her. They wore them everywhere in town, like even one little bit of sand would be too much to bear. They looked at Finch like she was one of those grains of sand.

The man opened the slim folder in front of him, taking out two pieces of gray pulp paper, contracts made from contracts, the ink never quite disappearing. Finch saw, as he placed them before her, that two separate ones were written up. The woman clasped her hands together and spoke primly.

"As you cannot drive in your current state, we are allowing you to sign a repair contract, upkeep the station in town. You will have three cycles, then you will join a caravan."

She had to be a newly trained representative, usually they talked in circles for a while, giving false niceties on behalf of the Council and buttering her up about the value of the drivers before trying to short her with a bad contract.

"You're *allowing* me?" She'd only ever signed one type of contract, she'd only ever been good for one thing, so what were they trying to stick her in?

"You're a very competent driver and the Basin would be at a loss if you took any more time off." The man said, trying subtly to elbow his compatriot, her senior trying to berate her without letting their opponent know they were divided. "We need your expertise, even if it's not behind the wheel."

"Yes, the Basin needs you." She said, laying it on thick.

“You want me fixing up a damn radio station? We’re in Miras, get a mechanic to do it.”

Finch was trying not to yell at the reps, really, she was, she just wasn’t doing a very good job. She wanted to snatch the words out of the air, contract dealings didn’t improve if the Council folk felt defensive and petulant, but this was bullshit.

“Without you on the road that’s a full branch of communication and transportation taken away from the people of the Basin, fixing the station here will help to mitigate that.” The man tapped emphatically on the repair contract; Finch felt a headache threatening to press at her temples at the sight of the thick blocks of text. The thin, spidery writing of a scribe pressing the words to the very edges of the page. “It is either this or you resume your driver’s contract.”

“I can’t walk, I can’t drive right now, I don’t even have a truck.”

“Exactly.” The woman smiled at her eagerly, glad that Finch finally stumbled into the corner they’d backed her into.

Finch sighed, scrubbed a hand over her face, and picked up the pages, beginning the painstaking process of reading a contract that wasn’t meant to be read. Words written too closely together, bumping up against the edges of the pages, faded marks from previous contracts dulling sections to near illegibility. But each curve, each sharp jutting line, Finch carefully took them in, mouthing the words to herself, trying to make each sound make sense, trying to grasp the comprehension that seemed so far from her.

But just as the old driver that’d taken her out of Barrair had taught her, the mind is a curious thing, and it wants to know what the complicated shapes and lines mean as much as you do, eventually everything will shift into place.

An expectation of a fully functioning station by the end of three cycles, she'd only ever fixed up her truck radio before, a lot of smacking it around until it stuttered staticky voices; she doubted she could do that to the station.

“Your assigned caravan should be in Miras at the appointed end date for the repair contract, if your work is not up to standard by that time there will be repercussions.” His cheery tone of voice sounded poisonous as he threatened her. “Be excited! You and the boss will have three new drivers to guide and teach, your experience will be invaluable.”

Finch frowned and leaned forward. “Why so many folks? Ain’t seen a caravan this big maybe ever.”

“Well in addition to your route being lost we’re also needing to compensate for a second caravan being taken out of the cycle.” The woman said, looking over at the file in front of the man, tilted up in such a way that Finch couldn’t look at it herself.

“A whole caravan? What happened?”

The man closed the file and folded his hands over it, the woman mirroring him. “Council business.”

Chapter Five: Cleave

This was what recovery was.

Nights where her legs were too prickly and hot to sleep, mornings where they couldn't take her weight, days in her wheelchair, cursing at the stubborn wheels locked with sand, nights where she slept deep and hard and woke not remembering the tree, days flexing her toes and rolling her ankles to remind herself they were still there. Lizbeth rubbing pungent ointment on the jagged scars on her thighs, Lizbeth wheeling her out to the outhouse and helping her at her most embarrassed and vulnerable, Lizbeth and her going to the town market to get food cause neither of them cook, Lizbeth laughing at her jokes in the quiet way she did, Lizbeth teaching Trinity how to be Finch's caretaker, Lizbeth holding her hand when the pain got too much, Lizbeth meticulously organizing and reorganizing her medical implements on the table, Lizbeth taking patients in the front room and always keeping an eye on Finch, Lizbeth, Lizbeth, Lizbeth.

It was two days past since the representatives had come and gone, since Lizbeth and Shepard had spoken in hushed tones in the street. Finch's belly roiled in anxiety over what her future looked like in a caravan, but mostly she was anxious about Lizbeth. She hadn't said anything about her conversation with Shepard. But Finch often caught her staring blankly out the windows, or polishing one scalpel incessantly, far away.

Finch didn't know how to broach the topic, didn't know how to pierce the fog that seemed to layer Lizbeth each time she went far away, and a selfish part of her didn't want to. Finch feared what change that would bring, change had taken her truck, had turned her legs into a question mark, she wasn't quite prepared for change.

Yet change came like the sandstorms outside the walls, often and with little warning.

Almost a week after the representatives had left and the contracts had been signed, Finch had awoken both feeling her legs and not overwhelmed with the pain; it was there, it was always there, but it was background noise. Lizbeth examined them as Finch ate, testing her reflexes and ability to feel them, and looked up with a smile. “Why don’t we try the crutches today?”

The leather of the crutches was cold at first, they’d been untouched since Marta, but soon they warmed to the temperature of her skin. They had to adjust the length of them as she was significantly taller than whoever had used them last, but with Lizbeth’s help she was standing, having grown two more aluminum legs. Trinity stood at the other end of the room, her point B, the goal of today was just to walk from one end of the room to the other. She’d counted it as Lizbeth had walked, 6 steps to Trinity.

“You’re going to be wobbly at first, but I’m right here, and if you need to stop at any time just let me know.” Lizbeth spoke up behind Finch, her small hands cupping Finch’s elbows, steadying her. Trinity had her arms out, ready to catch Finch if she fell.

It was just a step, move the crutch, move the foot, move the crutch, move the foot. Just a week ago this wasn’t an action to think about, but now it took all of Finch’s focus and effort to even stand. Lizbeth was at her back, Trinity was up ahead, Finch moved the crutch forward.

6 steps for Lizbeth turned out to be 20 steps for Finch, not including the steps of the crutches. 20 steps of shuffling feet and sweat beading on her brow, 20 steps until Trinity’s hands were on her shoulders.

“You did it! You did it!”

Finch didn’t have the energy or the breath for words, she nodded at her chair and Trinity was very quick to bring it around, help Finch back into it, unlatch the crutches and put them back against the wall. Finch, still breathing heavily, turned to grin at Lizbeth. She was exhausted, sure,

and part of her wanted to be embarrassed that just 20 steps were enough to weaken her so much. But a much larger part of herself was astonished, she still had her legs. She'd felt so disconnected from them in the last couple days, but today she found reconciliation.

She wasn't walking yet, maybe would never walk consistently again, but the crutches made the world seem a little bigger. She knew she would have to grow accustomed to the new appendages she'd gotten, the wheelchair and the crutches, but she was excited to learn.

She had expected Lizbeth to be excited too, as eager as Trinity or as satisfied as herself, but when she looked back at the medic, she only saw blank resignation. Like she'd reached the end of a route and only saw the next route to go. The blankness disappeared and Lizbeth smiled and congratulated her, but Finch knew what she saw.

* * *

"What do you mean you're leaving?" Finch felt the petulant question leave her before she could stop it.

Trinity had left Finch and Lisbeth alone in the apartment, forgotten lunch, medical instruments and heavy words taking up the space between them.

"The Council has a mission for my caravan, we're supposed to head out as soon as we can, I wanted to make sure you'd be alright without me first."

"I mean I'm still recovering, are a couple steps enough to be 'alright'?" *Please don't go.*

"Trinity will be here every day to watch over you, she did this with her mom. I don't have anything else to teach her. You'll be fine." *I have to, I don't have a choice.*

"What do they even want with y'all? Why do you have to go too?" *I don't trust them; I don't trust them.*

“They said it was a mission of utmost importance, I won’t know what they want until I get there.” Lizbeth fidgeted with a scalpel, flipping it around her fingers, the sunlight glinting off its polished metal. “Core member Genevieve is a good friend of mine, I’ve known her since I was very young, I trust her judgment.”

Genevieve was the newest Core member, three years ago her father had stepped down and handed over the seat to her. She was young but she acted like she’d had the position her whole life, inheriting her father’s politics and ideals as easily as she’d inherited his title. She wanted more people to learn, but she wasn’t interested in making it easier for them to do that. Finch did not trust her judgment.

Finch took a deep breath, ready to dive into her opinions on the Council and their dealings and Core member Genevieve, but before she could talk Lizbeth cut her off.

“Let’s write that letter to your sister.” Lizbeth put down the scalpel like a split-second decision, it jumbled against the other tools leaving them all in disarray.

Finch gnawed on her lip. She didn’t want to write the damn letter, she wanted to talk to Lizbeth, wanted to make her stay. But no good relationship was built from making anyone do anything, Lizbeth was her own person, if she wanted to go off and get lost in Council nonsense then that was her prerogative. If Finch’s chest hurt with preemptive anxiety and loss, then that was hers.

“Fine.”

With the stalemate the paper and the ink returned to the scene, bleached and sun worn from where they’d rested beside the window. Lizbeth moved to a seat next to Finch and they began to write.

Each word was agony to come upon, each sentence a crucible of pain, and it was all the worse knowing who the recipient of her dull, rambling speech would be. Lizbeth wrote without judgment, taking her best to write slowly so her words remained legible instead of the impenetrable scrawl she usually wrote in. She wrote as much as she could on a single side of each paper before moving on to the next, leaving the back sides blank for a return letter.

Hours later there was a letter on the table. Despite the heavy tension between the two of them, despite the grip Finch's throat became around each unwilling word, despite the myriad of anxiety riddled outcomes Finch predicted; there was a letter. As they finished, she realized she was crying, not sorrowful or happy tears, but more the relief of getting all the feelings out of her and on something else. She felt lighter even.

Much of the letter was apologies and explanations and informing Jay on what had happened to her, and it wasn't going to fix anything, but it would start a dialogue. She knew tomorrow she'd be mortified at the idea of the letter out there for someone else to read. But for now, she was glad for it, a tremendous burden lifted from her shoulders.

Despite the small relief of the letter Finch couldn't shake the lingering anxiety about this call to action from the Council, selfishly she wanted Lizbeth to stay, to keep tending to her, to not follow the whims of her supposed friends in their tower.

"Do you even know what you're getting into?" Finch said, quiet, half-hoping Lizbeth wouldn't hear her.

Lizbeth stiffened across from her, her hand freezing where she'd been trying to dry the ink. "I really don't see how it's of any concern to you."

"I'm your patient, of course it concerns me." The selfish voice was speaking, trying to pretend it was reasonable and responsible and not desperately lonely and scared.

“I was always going to leave, Finch.” Lizbeth said, exasperated, picking at the quill in her hands, tearing off tiny clumps of barbs in her frustration. “The caravan was going to leave, I would have had to go attend to other patients, this isn’t- this was never permanent.”

Finch knew that this was temporary, but it didn’t make Lizbeth’s words hurt less, and it didn’t make her own words less venomous. “I’m not upset cause you’re leaving; I’m upset cause you’re smarter than this. Council only ever looks out for itself, don’t trust them so blindly, you’re only gonna get burned.”

“Whenever I want your opinion, Finch, I promise I’ll come ask for it.” Lizbeth spoke through gritted teeth, standing abruptly and toppling the inkwell. Simultaneously Finch and Lizbeth lunged for the little bottle, trying to protect the vulnerable letter. In the commotion Finch ended up with a handful of dark ink and the bottle lay shattered on the floor, spatters of ink crawling up Lizbeth’s pants.

They stood, staring at the mess, breathing hard from the sudden spike of adrenaline before, without a word, Lizbeth left.

* * *

Two days came and went, and Finch had to wonder if there was something wrong with her heart. It hurt constantly, the pain of her upcoming separation from Lizbeth, the guilt from their argument, deep gnawing fear at what would become of her. All her anxieties stored in the tense muscle behind her ribs, a knot that couldn’t be rubbed away.

She sat now in the town square surrounded by rumbling trucks, the scent of fuel turned the anxiety into piercing, unrelenting longing for her own truck. She rubbed the spot over her aching heart and looked around at the throng of people that joined her in the center of town,

grateful patients come to thank Lizbeth, gifts in tow, Enid, and a few other shopkeepers with correspondence for other towns and caravans, and Trinity waiting with Finch.

Finch hadn't sent off a caravan since she was much younger, before she'd been a part of one herself, it felt wrong, opposite. She wanted to go back to her bed and sleep until the world was right again. Lizbeth waved and smiled at her from across the way and Finch resigned herself to stay.

"I wonder what the Council is cooking up," Trinity said beside Finch, hand on her hip as she scanned over the departing caravan.

"Can't imagine it's anything good," Finch said with a grumble.

"Really? Think they'd do that to one of their own?" Trinity jutted her chin out towards Lizbeth.

"She ain't one of them, she's one of us."

"You think that all you want but once a Library kid always a Library kid."

Finch wished she could disagree.

When Lizbeth saw Finch and Trinity at the edge of the square, she graciously broke away from the townsfolk to hurry over to the two of them. Finch shifted uncomfortably in her wheelchair as Lizbeth got closer, feelings and conversations nipping at her heels, but Finch just smiled wide and tried to hide the ever growing hurt in her chest.

"You're gonna be well missed, Lizzie, thanks again for all the help you've been." Trinity said, grasping Lizbeth's hands in her own. Lizbeth smiled and accepted the thanks, but her eyes kept shifting over to Finch, her lips a tight line as she tried to keep back all the things she wanted to say.

Trinity shook her head and laughed, like they were unruly children before drifting over to her wife, leaving the two of them alone. The square was loud with chatter and laughter and over it all Finch could hear Frank and Dennis arguing about something. Marta was up on top of her uncle's truck, kicking her feet and staring out at the sharp, jagged wall surrounding the town.

"I'm sorry I can't stay."

"I'm sorry too," Finch said, genuinely, Lizbeth made a face at that, as if Finch had said 'I told you so'.

"Ey, Liz! Let's get on the road!" Frank called out from his truck, leaning on his horn.

Lizbeth scowled over her shoulder, "Impatient son of a bitch."

Finch chuckled, the tension in her heart eased by the contentious interactions of Lizbeth and her crew. She wasn't exactly looking forward to being a part of a caravan herself, but it would be nice to be around people, she was being spoiled here in Miras. Spoiled by Trinity and Enid and Lizbeth most of all, it would be difficult to be alone again.

The thought stuck with her as Lizbeth leaned down to hug her, she hugged her back tightly and tried to remember the feeling of Lizbeth's breathing under her palms, or the smell of her hair, or the quiet murmuring of advice and instructions of recovery.

"Be careful with yourself, Finch, people don't get better by rushing themselves."

"I will as long as you will."

Lizbeth let out a huff of amusement, "Who's the medic now?"

Quiet breathing and the sound of truck engines starting up.

"Thank you, Liz. You're a lifesaver," Finch said, her voice thick with sincerity.

Lizbeth leaned back enough to see Finch's face, her brows raising in surprise at unshed tears gathering in Finch's eyes. "Don't cry."

Finch huffed and wiped furiously at her face, “Damn dust, it’s killing me.”

Lizbeth suddenly hugged Finch hard, hard enough that Finch could feel her collar bone pressed against her own.

“I’m just your medic, you don’t need to cry.”

“You’re my friend too.”

Lizbeth pulled away quickly at that, her expression shuttered and professional. “I hope you hear back from your sister.”

“I hope your mission goes well.” Finch wanted to eat her words, swallow that spiteful tone, bury it with the memory of their argument and go back to before Shepard ever came to take Lizbeth away.

“It will.” Lizbeth spat back, the professional visage broken at her feet, her hackles thoroughly raised. And when Frank leaned on the horn and yelled again Lizbeth didn’t yell back, just turned on her heel and stomped to her van.

Finch cringed at the roar of the van, like a slap in the face, and to her shock she felt a hot tear fall on her hands. Suddenly, vehemently she wished she was a different person, someone who knew how to talk to people, someone who could say they were wrong, say they were sorry.

Lizbeth’s side mirror had a crack running through it and a thin layer of dust, so Finch was sure the wobbly lip she saw was just a trick of the light, a mirage in the grime.

Lizbeth Two

Written overtop previous notes, the sheet turned sideways, words and sentences bumping up against each other. The purpose is not to read it but to get the words on the page.

We just got in last night, and I forgot how big Council Hall is. Especially compared to Miras where everything is dirt packed and low to the ground. The radio tower seems on level with the mountains across the Basin, and we all were given individual rooms to stay in if we wanted. Dennis and Marta are squirrely though, they don't trust the trucks alone.

Something weird is going on, all the Core members that are here are being very attentive. They're asking about the Basin and our routes and after Finch's health and they've fed us and let us get cleaned up and been generally good hosts, but I see them whispering to each other when we're busy, they're all excited about something.

I've never heard of the Council opening their rooms to regular Basin folk, sure they're probably just unused rep dorms but still. They're being so nice to Frank and Marta and Dennis; I can tell it's all fake but the fact that they're doing it at all is telling.

I don't know how I feel about how I'd expected my caravan to be mistreated, I don't particularly like them most days, but I should at least expect the Council to respect their own drivers, right?

Finch was a bad influence on me, I keep second guessing everything Genevieve says, and they still haven't told us why they called us out here. I don't want to doubt my friend, Genevieve is a good person, she's just very much her father's daughter. Yet I still have to wonder what she is up to.

Written in a beautiful journal, a brand-new journal. Paper and ink from Seron, leather binding from Dentra, a message from the Council. "For our outland Diplomat."

They finally gave it up, they want us to go out into the Beyond, of course they've all been so weird. This would be the first time in our recorded history that we've staged an expedition into the Beyond, outside of Dustwalkers.

Which, speaking of, this whole thing absolutely explains why they've been so cordial to Frank and Marta, their whole family is Dustwalkers. Up in Klorik traveling out onto the brim to

look for scraps, it seems like an awful lot of work for not that much reward, but Marta still talks about it with stars in her eyes.

"You'll really appreciate everything we have when you see everything that isn't."

"I get to see my dead daddy again and he always shows me where the best scrap is."

"It's beautiful if you're lonely."

She's an odd girl.

I am feeling...conflicted about this whole thing.

On one hand whatever voice they heard could be a promising lead, if there are other people we could work with it's certainly worth it to try. But we can barely move between towns on foot, what with the sandstorms, and the distance, and getting lost and dying, and finding Beyond creatures and dying, and dehydrating and dying. I can't imagine going out there will be doable.

Mostly I think they're using this as an excuse, if there's a mission out there then they can focus on that rather than the Hole and the waterless towns. But what if this is the way we find more water? There are so many unknowns out there, how can I blame the Council for trying to figure them out?

Marta and Frank are to be our guides, and Dennis is there to protect us I suppose, but the Council wants me to act as a diplomat. If we find other people, I'm going to be their first point of contact from the Basin, I'm going to be the Council's direct extension into the Beyond. If this turns out well it's a lot of pressure for me, but if it goes well, I think it's going to be the best thing that's ever happened to the Basin. But if anything goes wrong, we're dead, there is no room for negotiation there.

I want to believe the Council has the Basin's best interest in mind, I don't want to feel hopeless and bitter, I'm not going to listen to the little Finch voice in my head.

I'm going to do it.

Prepping for the journey is taking longer than Genevieve expected, but she's not the most patient person. We have to wait for food and water and fuel to be brought to Council Hall, with the incoming caravans. And though I can be patient the whole scenario is making me want to throttle Genny.

Why weren't we assigned to go pick up our own supplies? We've been waiting in the hall for half a cycle now, we could've been halfway through a route by this point. Sometimes the Council gets an idea in their head of the way in which something should be done, and they just can't let it go.

Genevieve should know by now, from all her years of living in the Basin, routes aren't completed promptly. They might have gotten stuck after a landslide, or maybe they hit an animal and had to deal with the body, or maybe they need to help harvest the goods in Grainer. It's never as simple as going and getting the trade and bringing it to the Council.

In any case if Genevieve comes to me asking if she should radio the caravan again, I'm going to smack her.

Dennis has family here, grandparents and brothers, and he was determined to go spend Sweeping Day with them. Barnaby tried to be strict and stop him, but Dennis surprised me by standing up to him. Usually if he's yelled at or admonished, he just shuts up or tries to leave, but apparently not when it comes to his family.

Conceptually I know what Sweeping Day is, out with the old in with the new. At the end of every year everyone takes the time out of their day to sweep out all the dust and sand that builds up, and in Veneer they really make a thing about it. After cleaning the house from floor to ceiling, neighbors get together for a communal dinner, easing the burden of cooking.

It was so important to Dennis that he stood up to a Core Council member, I'm still a little stunned at the memory of it. But once he got his way Marta and Frank were only too eager to come with, tired of staying in one place for so long.

I did not expect them to invite me, I'm not very close with them, but it is in all our best interests if we maintain positive relationships. So, I went.

Dennis' grandparents are very lucky he left home; I think. Dennis and his brothers are a bunch of assholes, I can tell amongst them there's a lot of love, but standing on the outside I am glad to not have a family if this is what it's like. In any case though together they are all very chaotic, and Marta absolutely did not help matters.

I've never participated in it before, and even though it's just cleaning there really is something joyful about seeing the clean corners and white walls, and it's all the better that I'm

doing it for someone else. I only manage to keep my van clean because it's detrimental to my patient's health if I don't, but when I still lived at the Library, I was not nearly so organized.

Marta had a lot of fun sweeping too, she didn't do it well and generally she made more of a mess, but she did it with style at least. She would hold the broom with a wide grip and sweep the broom high above her head, making a wide arc and brushing the ceiling every time.

Frank, the lazy ass, sat with the grandparents and smoked, griping all together about their rowdy kin. He does love to complain, good for him I suppose.

Dennis and his brother's, despite their yelling and wrestling and lewd jokes, are a very organized team when it comes to their duties. Years of practice honing their edge. They wrapped their hands in rags and got on each other's shoulders, getting into the corners. They'd get down low to check for holes where pests and bugs could sneak in, sealing it up with clay from the garden.

One of Dennis' younger brothers, who couldn't be more than 12, found a rat and tried to chase me around with it. His grandmother was quick to catch him, grabbing his wrist and taking the rat. *"If you frighten the medic, she'll break your bones!"*

Then she threw the rat out the window by its tail, swinging it around till it arced like Marta's broom through her home. A few moments later the rat ran past the door, perfectly fine, except for the small crowd of children from the neighborhood that followed it. Squealing and laughing in delight as the creature tried to escape.

I forgot to ask why she said I'd break his bones, maybe I'll ask Dennis if that's a common threat in his family.

With all 7 of us cleaners at work the house was spotless in no time. I had expected that to be the end of it but once his grandparents determined it was clean enough Dennis and his brother's grabbed their rags and swept Marta and I out the door and to the neighbors. And the process started anew. We helped clean three more homes before everyone in the neighborhood was done.

Dennis' brother found a snake in one of the homes, he came out with it wrapped around his arm, the creature luxuriating in body heat. He didn't try and bother me with it this time, instead did his best to hide it from his brothers, intent on keeping it for himself.

The communal cookout started with much excitement as everyone was glad to be done with the cleaning. Some folk started getting cooking fires and grills going while others prepared

food. I was praised over and over again for my potato peeling ability; it's not that different from a scalpel. Marta and Dennis had fun entertaining all the little kids, running around screaming with them making a contest over who could throw a rock the farthest.

Usually when I'm in a town I'm flooded with patients, desperate for care that there are too few of us to provide. But no one knew I was a medic, I was just Dennis' guest, just another pair of helping hands, another mouth to feed. For the first time in months, I got to enjoy the crisp evening and the setting sun, without worrying about patients and responsibilities. The smell of the roasting birds and bubbling stew, thick, homey scents, of dried peppers, horseradish, and mustard turning the skin of the birds into dark, glossy flesh.

Dinner was delicious, the homes were clean, and we managed to see a glimpse of the moon past the clouds and dust.

I hope Finch was able to sweep out her place.

The pleasantries have been abandoned. The Council tried to suggest we only take one or two of our vehicles instead of the three we have, implying the use of my van over anything else. Marta about jumped over the table at them.

Shepard is the only one of the Core who has any experience behind the wheel so I can't fault them too much, but they have certainly crossed a line. It's not just a driver and their truck, it's a driver's truck, a truck's driver, it's part of us.

My van is my toolkit, I save lives with a big metal box, and though I'm less attached than most people I don't like being away from it for too long. The others live in their trucks, work in them, it's like a family member to Frank and Marta. If they had to leave it behind unattended, or worse, under someone else's care, it would be devastating.

I saw it with Finch, the loss of her truck almost killed her, and Genevieve and Vivian and all of them could never understand that.

If they wanted to reduce fuel expenditures, they should have enlisted fewer people.

I keep trying to Sense what will happen in the Beyond. For one it's a good excuse to get away from everyone, we're all on top of each other in the Hall, it's exhausting. But mostly I want to be prepared.

But I can't see anything, this has never happened before. I see all the paths before us, I see the different routes we can take to leave the Basin, I see the landscape of the Beyond. Marta was right, it's beautiful. I see a few days of travel, and then it's all gone in sand.

It's not death, I've seen my death before and managed to evade it, I've seen the deaths of my patients countless times. It's cool darkness and deafening silence, it's not sand. I don't know what this means, and I'm wary of asking for anyone's advice about this. People don't like it when the Seer doesn't understand what they're seeing.

I suppose I will define it in the Beyond.

Chapter Six: Light

The forward momentum that Lizbeth's presence had given Finch faded as the rumble of the trucks did, and over the course of the next few days she found it was less and less important to get out of bed. The sun would rise and greet her through her threadbare curtains, and she would just roll over, too cold, too warm, too empty to even consider getting out of her covers and into her chair.

Her chair that sat within reach, within view, mocking her. She couldn't have the wheels of her truck, not for a long time, so she had to make do with the inefficient offering of her chair. She'd say it was a constant reminder of her condition, but the pain did that for her. Sometimes it was like she could still feel the rest of her legs, sometimes it felt like she was still pinned against that tree. Sometimes Finch woke up and for a second it was like nothing had changed, then it all came crashing down.

Were it not for Trinity Finch probably would have just withered away in her little borrowed bed. Every day, soon after the sun would greet Finch, Trinity would come in and force her to eat, spooning her sweet oatmeal and watching her carefully. Trinity looked formidable, tall, and wide with thick curly black hair, gray shooting through it like lightning, but really, she was as bright and eager as a kid. Her constant smile highlights the wrinkles in her well-loved face.

It didn't take her long to tire of Finch's depressive lay about, and on the third day Finch was awoken not by the gentle trickle of sunlight, but instead by the searing downfall of the sun through the ripped open curtains.

"Trinity! What the fuck, I was sleeping."

“Oh yes, Finch, I’m aware, you’ve been asleep for twelve hours now, just like the day before, and the day before that. Come on, you’ve done enough resting.” Trinity grabbed the chair and rolled it even closer, staring at Finch expectantly.

Finch ignored her, instead rolling over and throwing the blanket over her head but Trinity just tore it away.

“Leave me alone, ‘m tired.”

“Not a chance, come on, get up, we’re going for a walk.”

Finch shot her a scathing look.

“What? Do you want me to say wheel? Get up.”

Trinity scoffed and walked out of the room, clearly expecting Finch would follow her, and after a few minutes of deliberating, and some very exaggerated groans and sighs, Finch got in her chair. Trinity was shaking out rugs in the front door when she wheeled out and she finished with one definitive snap before turning around with a grin.

“Good morning, Finch. Lovely day isn’t it.”

Finch grumbled and grabbed the warm bowl of oatmeal. “Must be for you to be so damn *peppy*.”

“Yep, I have some exciting things to show you. Onyx has been chomping at the bit to talk to you.”

Finch tilted her head to the side, the prospect of talking to the wild child made the sting of being awake less painful, but she wouldn’t let Trinity know that. “Alright, I’ll bite.”

It didn’t take long until they were out of the small apartment and onto the dusty streets, Trinity walking briskly, pushing Finch along, stopping occasionally to talk to other townsfolk, her tone ranging from concerned to annoyed to joyful laughter.

Usually, Finch didn't need help getting around, she was perfectly content to push herself under the power of her own strength, but the longer Finch had the chair the worse it was to use. It was old, like the crutches, and it hoarded sand in its wheels. Turning a once fluid motion into a vicious battle of wills. So, she sat and let herself get pushed around, even though it made embarrassment heat up her face, even though she felt small and weak.

By the time they'd made it across town to Onyx's garage Finch was regretting coming out at all, it only reminded her that the world still existed outside of her bed. She still had responsibilities and contracts to fulfill, a station to tend to, she had a life to live, and it was nauseating to think about. Before she could spiral much more Onyx came running out, their bright yellow patchwork jumpsuit smeared in oil.

"Finch! Just the woman I wanted to see! Come in, come in! I've got *things* to show you!"

Their enthusiasm and energy made Finch want to feel the same way, made her want to sit up and smile and laugh, but at the same time she felt like dead weight. Like a cracked pitcher, unable to hold any emotion or thought long enough to feel it, empty.

The inside of Onyx's garage was just as chaotic as she'd assume, half started projects and smoking remains littered everywhere, partially built engines hung from the ceiling and threatened to smack Onyx and Trinity in the face as they maneuvered delicately through. Onyx shoved something out of the way and through all the debris Finch could see what was left of her truck.

Before she could linger on it Onyx was hustling her over to a long workbench in the back of the garage, piled high with tools and scrolls of leather. Two scrolls were laid out with charcoal diagrams drawn onto them. The first was obvious to Finch, the inner workings of a truck cab, but with no foot pedals, instead an additional handle on the wheel.

“If I can figure it out that’s how the truck will go, but that’s just one thing I wanted to show you.” Onyx grabbed the leather and rolled it up, throwing it on top of a pile of other scrolls, sending the whole thing tumbling to the ground. Onyx stared at it for a second before shrugging and pulling the second scroll closer. “*This* is what I really wanted to show you.”

Scrawled on the sheet were numerous drawings of wheelchairs, some of them were scratched out, a few had obnoxiously large wheels and flames coming out the back with question marks around them, but luckily sanity had prevailed. In the center was a chair with large wheels and a low back with the words ‘collapsible’ ‘lightweight’ and ‘durable’ written around it.

“That’s a tall order, kid.” Finch felt something stirring when she looked at the chair, it was like when she first got her truck, something all her own, something she was in control of. It wasn’t her legs, and it wasn’t her truck, but it was something big; something important.

“You’re going to be ripping around town next thing you know, you just gotta have some faith.”

“I got all the faith in the world in you, Onyx.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

* * *

Finch used the opportunity of having been made to leave her cozy bed and dark room to finally visit the radio station she had been tasked to maintain. It was near Onyx’s garage, close enough to the scrap piles that the spindly radio tower blended in. The tower was built on top of a squat one-story building, all the windows boarded up, neatly abandoned.

“I forgot we had this.” Trinity said as she opened the door for Finch. “Ain’t no one come out for it in a while.”

“It’s going to be hard to forget now, I can’t imagine I’ll be spending time anywhere else.” Finch said as she rolled into the stifling darkness of the station, the door emitting a block of light that hardly penetrated the room.

“You done hiding out?” Trinity asked as she felt her way over to one of the windows, opening the curtain and taking out the scrap metal that further blocked it.

“We’ll see.” With more light Finch could see that not only was this place abandoned, it was a mess. It was just barely big enough to fit her, Trinity, and the large workspace in the corner as it was, but piles of trash and scrap and journals took up what little other space there was. On the workstation there were a couple of the simple two-way radios, like Enid had, but more importantly there was the big black box that made the station the station: the interface for the tower above.

Finch had seen one or two in her time, having had to contact the CCC from across the Basin meant she couldn’t use her truck radio or other personal ones. She was lucky that Miras was so close to Veneer, or it would have been a much bigger hassle contacting the representatives at all. She wheeled over to the worktable and idly began picking through the various tools and wires that were piled up in knotted nests. The rubber on the wires cracked and fell away as she touched them, and everything was covered in a fine layer of dust.

This would be a lot of work.

“This looks like a lot of work, Finch.” Trinity said, her hands on her hips.

“Of course it is, it’s Council work.” Finch grumbled, still picking through the worktable. A few radios were stacked up in the back corner, many of them open with parts ripped out for spares, Finch reached over to see how salvageable even of them would be and was surprised when from the carcasses an orange paw shot out to swipe at her. “What the hell?”

Trinity came behind Finch's chair, leaning over to look behind the barricade of radios.

"I'll be damned, you have a visitor."

The other woman reached over and picked up a thin cat by the scruff from the workbench, an orange cat with too big ears and thin, scraggly fur. The poor thing tried to struggle and fight out of Trinity's grasp but was too small to really do anything.

"How'd he get in?" Finch said, pushing the radios aside to see a pile of bitten cables and wires and a dead mouse or two. "He must have been living the high life here."

"Well, I'll throw him out and you can get to work." Trinity said, going to the door, the little cat still dangling from her hand. Finch felt a bit bad uprooting him from his spot, he didn't know she'd been given a contract, he was just a baby.

Trinity opened the door and swiftly bowled the cat out into the open, Finch watched as the little thing scrambled to his feet and ran around the building, his orange fur nearly blending in with the dust of the road. "I'll be back in a bit, have fun in the cave, Finch!"

* * *

Finch discovered later that the little orange cat liked bread.

Trinity had brought her shredded meat sandwiches, she could not confirm what type of meat, and Finch had gotten through about half of it before getting distracted by another stack of half-eaten journals. Whoever had tended to the station before had left a lot of their notes on the correspondence received and the fixes needing to be made, but only about half of each notebook survived. When she turned back to the workbench with a new pile in her lap the little cat was back and crouched over her lunch trying to eat the bun that was half his size as quickly as he could.

“You little shit!” Abandoning the notebooks to the floor Finch tried to wheel over quickly to snatch him up, but he ran away into the dark before she could.

And the day continued in much the same way, Finch trying to work, trying to parse through layers and layers of trash, and the little orange cat getting in her way. He knocked over the piles she built, he chewed on wires and cords, he got under her chair and scratched up the seat. He was driving her crazy.

When she finally snapped and went to get Trinity to root out the little beast she was surprised once more when he jumped into her lap and curled up. He was pitifully small, she could cover most of him with one hand, paper and wires weren’t the most nutritious for a growing cat. Looking at the size of his paws and ears she could bet he’d be a big cat, part of her wanted to see how big he could get.

She’d met some drivers who had truck cats, and now that she was sitting all the time, she was just a moving lap for him to sleep in. She traced a finger over the white fur of his cheeks and smiled when he sighed in his sleep.

Trinity was never going to let her live this down.

Lizbeth Three

Written in the journal gifted by the Council, sand lines the spine and rains from the pages with every movement.

Having the Sense can make life very boring. If you use it consistently then you see every path before you and those around you. Choices can affect the path chosen but in the end each outcome is as known as the next.

Seeing the Beyond was not one of those experiences.

I saw it in visions, I saw it in Frank and Marta's Stories, old tales of Dustwalking. But none of that prepared me for seeing it when we crested the hill out of the Basin.

Flat red land that pushes up against the horizon, cracked earth holding scrub and brushes, trees and cacti that stand higher than our vehicles with thorned, grasping arms. It had been a stunning view from behind my windshield, but I could feel belligerent winds rocking my van and heat, unbearable heat, seeped through the glass and cooked me.

Dustwalkers come into the Beyond covered head to toe, sand masks and heavy robes and wrappings, letting no bit of skin out exposed to the elements. I can't imagine how stifling that would be. Just driving in it makes me want to peel back my skin in the hopes that it'll be cooler.

Marta had hopped on the radio immediately, cheering loudly. "It's a good day for pickin'!"

Soon after Frank took the receiver from her and responded to her call, "It's a hot day for pickin'."

And before I could have finished it Dennis called out, "But a good day nonetheless."

The Dustwalker mantra we'd been taught the night before made the expanse seem more approachable, less impossible.

So, we put our heads down, willed our vehicles to stay intact, and kept on driving.

Why the fuck are the animals in the Beyond so fucked up? I've never thought about it before, just avoided them like everyone else, but genuinely, why? Nothing else is like that, the trees are normal, if bare, and the cacti are as formidable as ever. But the animals are just wrong.

We got swarmed this morning, we woke up, checked in with one another over the radios and then the sky went dark.

Hundreds of thousands of birds overtaking the hazy orange of the sky, and promptly dive bombing us. The sound of so many tiny bodies pelting the outside of the van was the loudest thing I'd ever heard. Louder than hail, louder than thunder, louder than my heartbeat in my ears. The metal dented in from the force of them hitting it and I was scared they'd break through the windshield and pummel me to death.

The storm of birds was gone in a moment, but our vehicles remained dented and bruised, caving in from the pressure of the birds' assault. The silence that followed was broken by Frank hopping on the radio to say, "Dinner's served, y'all!"

I watched in horror, still with my hands frozen around the steering wheel, as Frank and Marta hopped out to get to work. The two of them scattered to find dry, spindly, bare branches, for a small cookfire and skewers. Soon after Dennis took over for Marta, sharpening and pruning branches with his pocket knife, while she went around gathering and plucking the slick, slimy feathers from the birds.

I could not stop staring at the littered bodies, at the birds' milky white eyes and their horrid feathers that followed Marta like a trail, or the mysterious, thick, dark, sticky ichor that dripped from their open beaks.

Frank waved me over and I reluctantly released the wheel, stepped out into the dense heat, and called out to the three of them.

"We're not seriously going to eat them, are we?"

Marta let out a bark of a laugh and skewered a nearby slick, wet bird. "A bird's a bird, food's food, Lizzie!"

They tasted awful, but I ate them, I sat with my caravan and ate fucked up birds in the Beyond. A wholly unique experience that I never wanted. I tried to remember the pickled cabbage sandwiches and fried snake that I always got in Mille, the fresh bread soaked in the strong brine, the light, flaky meat a deep and crispy brown after being dunked in hot oil.

The birds were dry and tasted like rot.

If there are truly people out here, I can only assume they must fly. We've been out and driving for maybe a week now and see no evidence of anyone else. No footprints, no trails, no tire tracks, not even our own. Before we even have the chance to look back and see where we've come the wind has swept it clean.

It's like we're not even here.

Luckily, despite no physical evidence, we can still pick up voices in the static, just like the Council said there'd be. Every night, or even on the long crawls through the Beyond, we tune our radios and try to find it, try to divest ourselves through sand and nothingness.

Each time we listen in it's a different voice, but I swear the more we listen the more familiar they get. There's something about them that's nagging me; something I'm missing.

We're down to just a few days of rations and we still haven't found anything. I keep asking if we should turn back but every conversation we broach about it we all eventually come back to the fact that we've come so far. If we turned back and over the next ridge was civilization, then all of this would be for nothing.

Therefore, we keep going forward, seeing the same trees and cacti, the same scrub and brush, the same awful wolves and deer and bears that we see far off into the horizon and the same sky-blackening assault of birds every couple of days.

The last bird dive bombing cracked Dennis' windshield so severely that his passenger side door broke in and a dozen birds rapidly shot in, dying on the windows, and slicing him up, leaving behind thick, black ichor in his wounds.

It'd taken almost all my antiseptic to get it off him, and a crude bandage of cords and cloth to cover the window.

Even Frank and Marta have lost the enthusiasm for the meal that follows, the damage we sustain makes a bad meal worse.

I hope these people we find in the Beyond will have a better preparation for these birds, maybe they've unlocked the secret to making them taste good, and if they must deal with them as much as we've had to then they've had plenty of time to practice.

I must take a moment to thank my van. I don't usually think of it in this light, it's just a method of transportation. But she has truly done her best, all the trucks in our caravan, we wouldn't be here without them.

Dennis' truck got stuck in a ditch and Frank and Marta got it out easy enough, telling loud stories over one another of busted vehicles and scrap they'd found before in the Beyond on

their Dustwalking ventures. Loud stories of things they'd done together to each other, the activity instead becoming a contest of who could tell the shared story louder and more ridiculous.

Later the tow truck stalled out and we started it back up with Dennis' truck, returning the favor, braving the cutting wind, and trying futility to keep the sand out of the engine block. And at night when we're feeling lonely and isolated, we all bundle up in my van.

I wish we hadn't run out of fuel. Our vehicles have been running on fumes for the past 20 miles, and they gently died after coasting into a cradle of dunes.

We haven't really talked about it, there's nothing to say, we're fucked. If we even try walking back, we'll starve or die of thirst, or bake to a crisp under the sun. Or maybe the birds will finally get us.

We're having as much of a celebratory feast as we can, a toast to the end of our journey. The rest of our water combined into a pot, dried veggies and meats, and the weird pepper paste that Dennis snacks on. All together for a delicious soup, only lightly touched by sand from where it snuck in between our huddled bodies.

Dennis seems shocked, he hasn't really spoken since we stalled out. I wish we hadn't met his family before heading out, now I can perfectly picture the people that will mourn him. Frank is drinking and smoking everything he can get his hands on trying to numb himself or make a fuel source in his stomach. I can't tell which. Marta just keeps staring out at the horizon, just watching the sun and wind, mouthing something to herself. I don't know where her head is but it's far from here.

I'm in the same boat as Dennis, I don't know if it's quite hit me yet. I keep trying to think if anyone will grieve for me like they will for my crew members. I don't have family like they do, but maybe the folks at the Library will be sad when they hear the news. Even though Genevieve is my friend I think she'll mourn the mission more.

But Finch, if she doesn't hate me, if she can stop being smug about being right for two seconds, will be sad. I don't want her to be sad and it makes me sound awful but knowing that someone will miss me makes me feel a little less expendable.

As I'm writing this I'm still listening to the radio. Digging in the hot knife of failure as I hear those voices; closer than they've ever been. So close and yet so far has never been so aptly applied.

Written with frantic desperation, words cutting into the pages.

The voices.

They're ghosts, I recognize them.

They've died on my table, in this van, under my hands.

I watched their lives end.

We're being haunted, and it's getting closer.

Chapter Seven: Jumpstart

Over the next couple cycles the little orange cat earned a name as well as more than a few tongue lashings.

“C.B.? like the radio?” Trinity asked, holding the little tomcat high above her head.

“That’s cute.”

“No, C.B. like Crazy Bastard,” Finch answered as the crazy bastard in question spun and thrashed out of Trinity’s grasp, leaving scratches all up and down her forearms to match the ones that Finch had earned.

Though he was a riotous and spirited animal he remained at the radio station, C.B. liked the dark nooks and crannies that the radios and journals made, and it was where his favorite person was the most.

It had taken Finch days to clean out the station, made even more difficult by C.B.s presence, but once she had she got down to work. Wires to replace and fix, sending Onyx up to the roof to make sure the tower itself was in working order, opening the transponder, and examining the guts of the machine.

Once Finch had gotten the station up and running it seemed impossible that it had taken her a cycle to do it. Now that she had the knowledge that she did, the lens through which to see through radios and their parts and their wants and needs, she had to wonder why she didn’t just do it quicker. Why couldn’t she have just walked into the station and known exactly how to fix it?

But at the same time, for every few days inside the station toiling away, playing with C.B., there was a day where she was resigned to her bed, unwilling to test the forgiveness of the pain in her body, unwilling to threaten the feral animal that lived under her skin.

Don't make eye contact, don't assume dominance, don't let it see you're afraid.

And for every success she had there were three times as many mistakes she made. The knowledge was a prize for the crucible of her effort.

It was a week into her final cycle before the caravan showed up, and she was standing in the station, the crutches seeing more and more use from her, with C.B. winding around her ankles, both aluminum and flesh. She held a receiver in her hand and took a deep breath, willing the station to work, willing the tower to be receptive to her demands, before tuning the dial and clicking in.

For a moment she was afraid that in fact nothing was fixed, all that was there to greet her was static. She fiddled with the dials some more, peering round the back to make sure her amateur patch job hadn't failed her; but the static only got louder. C.B. yowled and darted out of the room, Finch grew more frustrated as her failures seemed to compile and went to far as to just turn the whole thing off and try again tomorrow.

But the static remained, it continued to grow in volume, grew and grew until it sounded like the droning buzz of the Roadbeetles. Finch felt like she'd never stop hearing it. Then, under the static, voices. Familiar voices, heartbreaking voices, murmuring and whispering, nothing so concrete as words. Finch wanted to run away, she needed to stay, her hands itched for a truck beneath her hands to follow an urge.

Then, silence.

Finch stood in the center of the station, breathing unevenly, waiting for the wave of adrenaline that had built up in her body to go away. "What the hell was that?"

Silence still.

She hesitated to name what had just happened and would rather go about her day to return home and forget about it entirely. Tentatively, she turned the receiver back on, and was relieved to hear no static. Once more, she clicked into the receiver and spoke.

* * *

INT. COUNCIL HALL - RADIO STUDIO

Across the Basin, on the other end of the radio, COUNCILMAN DETRICK sits in the recording studio, fussing over gutted receivers, the room behind him a barricade of mess. Every few seconds he spares a glance to the window in the door before returning to his work, when one of the radios goes off, he jumps so badly the tiny screwdriver in his hand goes flying into the room behind him.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK

Damn it.

FINCH (O.S.)

Hello? Is anyone hearin' this? Over.

It takes the Councilman a couple tries to find the correct receiver to the correct radio, lost amidst the ones opened for surgery beneath his hands.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK

Yes, yes what is it? This is the CCC, state your business. Over.

A crow of delight is heard from the other end.

FINCH

Oh, thank Oblivion, I was goin' start smashing shit if this didn't work. Over.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK

(bored)

Are you currently in distress and in need of assistance? Over.

FINCH

No, no I'm Finch Gaffer, I'm in Miras, I signed a contract to get the station up and running and I did! Over.

Councilman Detrick furrows his brow and reaches into a side bag on his wheelchair, pulling out a journal and flipping through for a bit before grabbing the receiver again.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK

You're done already? You've had no prior experience with radio work, correct? Over.

FINCH

I've fixed my truck a few times before, it was annoying but not too different. Over.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK

I'm impressed, especially for what looks like an impromptu contract, well done. Although I should have a word with whoever executed this, not all random drivers will be able to maintain my stations. Over.

A long pause from the other end, Detrick checks the wiring of the receiver for damage.

FINCH

I'm sorry, I should have asked sooner, who am I speaking with? Over.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK

Councilman Detrick, now what was the state of the station when you started working in it? Over.

FINCH

Oh lord, Councilman I'm so sorry for my rudeness, that was inappropriate. Over.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK

I couldn't care less, what was the state of things? Correspondence history, status of the equipment, details Ms. Gaffer, details! Over.

FINCH

Yeah, lots of journals helped me get it up and running in the first place, and records, which I can send along if you need. Oh! And a little cat, doing his best to eat all the wires available, but don't worry there was enough to salvage. Over.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK

Oh, dreadful, was the little beast alright? Over.

INT. MIRAS - RADIO STATION

Finch chuckled, sitting on the unstable station chair, crutches leaned up against the wall, and C.B. purring aggressively in her lap.

FINCH

Yes, sir, he's never been better. Over.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK
Has he been assisting in your repairs? Over.

FINCH
Certainly not. Over.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK
I would expect nothing less. Question for you, Ms. Gaffer, I can see that you'll be joining a new caravan soon, could I ask you to check in on the stations as you go? Reps are so unreliable for this sort of thing. Over.

FINCH
You think they'd be able to do their job, right? Over.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK
Councilman Barnaby has made it very clear that the importance of their role lies in executing contracts and finding contract breakers. We disagree. Over.

FINCH
I mean I can make stops, but I can't guarantee much. Over.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK
All I need is feet on the ground and eyes on the radios, if you can do that then that's sufficient. Over.

FINCH
Hope wheels on the ground are good enough. Over.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK
Are you in a chair as well? Over.

FINCH
I am, if you are, Councilman. Over.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK
When I was sent to the Library I was secured one, where did you get yours? Over.

FINCH
Mechanic in town helped me out. Over.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK

Even more valuable than since we're at eye level. Over.

FINCH

You got that right, I'll be signing off now, but I imagine we'll be speaking real soon,
Councilman. Over.

COUNCILMAN DETRICK

I look forward to it. Over.

Finch smiled and scratched under C.B.s chin.

* * *

Soon after speaking to Councilman Detrick, something Finch never would have thought she could say, Onyx came by with Finch's new chair and truck. The rumble of the engine coming up to the building and idling just outside nearly sent Finch to tears, like the sappy old woman that she was. She came out in her rusty, old chair as quickly as she could and grinned so hard it hurt her face.

A truck, her truck, its paint job mismatched and patchwork with different colored doors and hood, the cage over the bed of the truck jingling gleefully as the fierce shaking of the idling vehicle sent the hooks and things on it rattling. The tires were new, but still well dusted and large, not easily punctured or shifted. Mufflers stuck up from behind the doors, to accommodate the fact that the body of the truck sat about 6 inches lower to the ground than was standard. At the front, just below the grill was a plow, sharp and dangerous looking, strong enough to cut down whatever was put in its path. It was perfect.

"Onyx! This is incredible!"

Onyx stuck their head through the passenger side window. "Hold on!"

They retreated into the cab and Finch could hear them throw open the driver side door, and then something clattered to the ground. A second later Onyx came around the front of the truck, sitting in Finch's new chair.

They were saying something as they tried to balance only on the back two wheels, but Finch paid them no mind. The frame of the chair was bright orange, easily seen in low visibility, the wheels matched the diagram she'd seen a week or so ago: big and strong. There were even pouches on the back so she could store things, it reminded her of herself, sturdy and practical. She rolled over and grabbed one of the big wheels, dumping Onyx out of the seat and examining it appreciatively as they cussed from the ground.

"Now, now kid, I think it's mighty rude to deprive an old woman of her brand-new chair." With only a moment of hesitation Finch leveraged herself out of the cast-off chair she'd had to make do with the past couple weeks, and into her new set of wheels. When she sighed and ran a hand over the spokes of the wheels Onyx smiled and crossed their arms from where they sat on the ground.

"So, it's good?"

"Nah, Onyx," Finch reached a hand out to squeeze their shoulder hoping it'd get across the genuine joy and relief she felt. "It's perfect."

"That's great! That's awesome, I'll have to teach you how to drive with the crank but it's not that hard." They were already distracted from their pretend petulance, preferring instead to prance and preen about their handiwork "And I have *better* news. I just found out that my sister, Copper, is in your new caravan! I just spoke with her. They'll be here at the end of the cycle."

Ah, yes. The caravan.

Very soon Finch would have to give up her solitary lifestyle and learn to work with others. Soon she would have to meet people and talk to them and know them and allow them to know her in return. Returning to the world of driving only to see it so irrevocably changed for her scared Finch, if her truck and her solo riding and her body were different then was it even the same? What would she be returning to? Who would these people be that would make up the landscape of her days from now on?

But then again, she reminded herself, her world had already changed. She'd already bridged the gap from solitude to community, Onyx, Trinity, Enid, C.B., Lizbeth, tethers and connections, reminders that she was more than hands on a steering wheel.

"I'm excited to meet her, kid." Onyx stood and gave Finch a grin, before sauntering vaguely towards their garage. Finch watched them leave, gratitude that she couldn't express building up in her chest, then she thought of them and their sister, staying in contact despite their busy lives, and that gratitude twisted into guilt.

Finch's thoughts drifted to Jay, had she read Finch's letter? Finch had never received a response, but surely by now whatever caravan Lizbeth had sent the letter along with would have reached Barrai. She had to figure Jay was angry with her, unforgiving of the long years without contact, rebutting the olive branch with her own silence.

Not for the first time Finch asked herself, what was Jay doing at this moment?

Jay would have been in the shop for many hours now, she'd fallen into sandmask making as their father had, so she'd be working at a gloryhole alone. A few other workers in the shop perhaps, but each to their own. Over and over today she would've done the same thing, stick the pole in, roll the liquid glass, get it evenly hot, pull it out and blow. Get the bubble to the right size and thickness, click it off the pole and go about cutting it.

The cutting was always what impressed Finch, the ability to do it consistently and well, each mask alike. Even Jay, who had been well on her way to being the best in Barraí, would smile with surprised pride, like she had expected it to go wrong. Like she was doubtful of every success and moment of perfection, as if her skill was unknown even to her.

Chapter Eight: Restart

Soon after receiving her truck Finch was once more taught how to drive. The difference between the classic pedals and the new hand crank that Onyx had to install was drastic and it took many days of trying to start to internalize it. Sometimes she'd forget about the hand shaft and her legs would twitch as if there were pedals for her to use, but Onyx was good at their job, and the more she got used to the changes the better they felt. It wasn't easy, and it wasn't like how it had been before, but it felt good to be back behind the wheel, no matter what she'd had to go through for it.

The truck was new to Finch, but all its parts had lived full lives, the leather of the wheel was cracked and worn, as was the leather of the seats, feeling more like cotton than true leather. There was air conditioning, but only enough to make you want more. The heat of the day magnified by the windshield felt like it was trying to melt her to the truck, and she welcomed it.

Even as she looked around and saw everything that would need fixing in the future, every mistake waiting to happen, even when she breathed deep and smelled the burning shit smell of the fuel, she welcomed it. She'd been confined to one chair, to one room, in one town for so long, the rumble of the truck was practically screaming freedom. She could feel the vibrations of the engine in her fingers, in her bones. So deep that she felt like a part of the truck, like if she revved the engine and opened her mouth the fearsome growling of machinery would come from her. All the trouble, all the pain, none of it mattered, she was home again.

They were driving around the outskirts of Miras again, circling the glittering piles of scrap. C.B. had even joined them, curled up on the dashboard drinking in all the bright heat. The rumble of the truck engine, the purr of the cat, the shaking and jangling as she drove over uneven

territory, Onyx drumming on their legs and singing a campfire song to themselves; the mundanity of the inside of a truck was a scene Finch missed beyond words. It soothed the anxiety that had built up in her over the last two weeks.

Good thing too, when she turned a corner and faced the hill that led down towards Miras she saw a caravan coming down, dust billowing behind them: Onyx's sister's caravan, *her* new caravan. No matter how much it pained her, she needed to get off on the right foot with these folks, she'd be in their company for a long time. Onyx was in the middle of a passionate drum solo on their thighs, so they hadn't noticed the oncoming trucks yet, Finch reached over and pushed their shoulder, pointing out the oncoming dust cloud and those within it.

Onyx cheered and drummed on the dashboard excitedly. "*Copper!*"

Finch shifted gears and turned them back towards Miras, "Let's go meet them."

Soon the Miras town square was full of trucks and people scrambling to see what they brought. The same wall of noise and smells that came with every gathering greeted Finch as she slowly made her way into the crowd, stepping carefully around others with her crutches to avoid getting knocked over.

Onyx had already run off ahead and Finch watched as a tall skinny woman who looked exactly like Onyx but with long braided hair launched out of her truck to greet her sibling. The two of them nearly falling over as they tried to pick up each other, and even from this far away Finch could tell they were speaking a mile a minute.

Copper had a massive transpo truck that looked reinforced to all hell. She could recognize Onyx's touches from a mile away, doubled up back tires, tire wells with scrap welded on like armor, and a massive shell over the back that turned the bed of the truck into a mobile shelter for travelers.

Together the two of them opened the back doors and started helping out the people waiting inside. Their conversation was rapid-fire and unbreakable even as they set children down and grabbed dust-covered duffel bags, dodging moving people to keep eyes on their not so long-lost sibling.

Finch had never considered ferrying people around, but she appreciated those that did; she'd never have gotten out of Barraí without them.

Once all the people were out of the truck, Copper stood on the tailgate and grabbed letters and small canvas wrapped packages from the mail bag on her waist. As she started calling out the recipients there was a big crash from the trucks behind her.

Two skinny men, twins by the look of it, cussed loudly and scurried around their dilapidated cargo truck like nervous mice searching for the disturbance. Thick jugs of cider haphazardly stacked against cracked windshields now lay in pieces on the ground, the golden liquid seeping into the sand.

They got on their knees and started picking up the broken pieces, yelling and blaming one another all the while. The sight of the familial duo reminded Finch of Frank and Marta and thus Lizbeth, with effort she pushed her out of her mind, now was about the present and the future.

"That better not be what it sounded like, boys!" A clear, stern voice hollered across the way and the twins sheepishly receded into their shoulders.

"It ain't that bad!" One of them called out in a high, nervous voice.

"So, it's worse!"

Finch turned to see who was berating the boys, assuming she'd find the leader of the caravan, who else would be yelling at the two like that besides their boss or their mama? Finch

found, leaning against another cargo truck, a woman, older than her with brown hair steadily turning gray, staring right at Finch.

Finch ignored the shiver of anxiety that raced down her spine and carefully made her way through the crowd to where the other woman leaned against her back bumper, casually as if she had no truck full of trade to deal with. Sweat gathered on Finch's brow, this was perhaps the most important first impression she'd ever had to make.

"Ma'am, nice to meet you, name's Finch." She held her hand out to shake, and as the moments dripped by with the shake left unreciprocated her hand felt heavier and heavier.

"Rhea," The woman said stiffly, waiting even longer before reaching out and shaking Finch's hand, maintaining the grip as she spoke. "I've heard about you."

"Yeah, Onyx and I have gotten pretty close over the months."

"I heard about you before. You were the solo runner."

"Yes, ma'am."

"We're happy to have you, but don't forget, you're here to do a job." Rhea gestured behind her at the scene of the younger drivers. "Need you to help me get these kids in line." Rhea pointed accusingly at Finch, just short of jabbing her shoulder. "You ain't gonna be able to pull that solo shit here."

"I understand." Finch felt an uneasy twist in her gut. She'd barely said anything, and things were already bad.

"I was thinking I'd put you to work, a little test before we get on the road."

Finch nodded; she could do this.

"I can do that."

Rhea smiled for the first time and gestured to her overladen truck bed, Finch stepped closer and pulled some of the boxes closer to her, rifling through them a bit before slipping into a comfortable role.

Finch was a large woman, and she had a big chest, to house big lungs, to make a big voice. And she used this to her advantage as she called out to the surrounding people the wares that Rhea had brought to trade. A variety of medicines wrapped in wax paper and tied with twine, a box of empty jars for personal canning use, and jars of canned vegetables and fruit, root vegetables with herbs, spiced apples, pickled cabbages and brussel sprouts, as well as many varieties of honey and best of all 2 barrels of clean, warm skeins of yarn.

The goods went fast and soon Finch forgot about the pressure of Rhea's eyes on her, only looking over at her to check if a deal offered was sufficient. And within just half an hour everything on the truck was gone, a good portion of it to Enid and other shopkeepers like her, the rest going to just regular folks. Seeing the replenished with traded goods, it was like coming home. She didn't even feel anxious as she looked over to Rhea to receive her judgment, she knew that she was good at her job, and Rhea would be a fool to say otherwise.

Rhea looked her over with her inscrutable gaze before breaking into a broad, crooked grin and sticking out her hand as Finch had done earlier. "Welcome to the team, Finch."

* * *

Later that night they all sat around a campfire, their trucks pulled up in a circle around them, celebrating their successful day and getting to know one another. Finch sat in her chair beside where Rhea was sitting on a large flat rock, the two of them watching over the rest of the rambunctious crew. Copper and Onyx were throwing things into the fire to change the color,

purple, blue, green, laughing as it climbed higher and higher, until a sharp word from Rhea made them stop.

Finch had since learned the twins were named Hop and Skip, ridiculous names, coming all the way out of Dentra. When she'd spoken with them, they'd talked of their grand ambitions and desire to see the rest of the Basin and get the repute and trade to help get their mom her very own dairy farm. They were sweet boys beneath the bluster and the stupid and they, unfortunately, reminded Finch of herself when she was younger. As she watched them, they were rapidly approaching drunk as they drank beer too strong for their frames.

Amidst all the familiarizing someone asked Finch if she was nervous to start driving with a group, Onyx watched her with scrap-sharp eyes, the joy of seeing their sister again not enough to sweep their concern for Finch aside.

At the beginning of the day Finch would have lied and said no, despite her very real, very present worry. But after she'd met them, now that they were people she knew instead of the idea of people she didn't, she'd been able to answer earnestly and honestly that she wasn't worried, but excited even.

She found she was itching to get moving, the campfire too calm and sedate for her. If she had her way, they'd start driving tonight but considering what driving too late had done to her, she just kept her mouth shut and nursed her beer.

She nearly spilled the whole thing down her front though when a loud burst of static sounded over the group. The rest of the group turned to see the source of the noise, not seeing the shaking in Finch's hands. She hesitated, listening carefully, but when the static stayed static, she took a deep breath and turned as well to see Copper halfway in her truck, banging on the radio to

try and get it to work. Onyx was talking loudly after her, giving her advice on what to do, to which Copper responded by kicking them away.

“What the hell are you two doing?” Rhea barely leaned forward or made any effort to speak up louder than her regular tone of voice, Copper still scrambled out of the truck to whip around and look at her.

“Sorry for the noise, Rhea, we’re trying to find a Storyteller or some music on the radio, since we’re around the campfire and everything.”

Rhea raised an eyebrow.

“Less you want Hop and Skip to sing again.”

Rhea and Finch grimaced as the two men threw their arms around each other and started warbling and screeching in a poor facsimile of song.

“Alright, go on.”

Copper gave a little salute and turned to get back in the truck but was affronted to find Onyx already in there working on the radio.

“I said I got it! Get out of my truck.”

“I made your truck! Now back off.”

There was some scuffling where Copper tried to pull them out and for a moment, watching them, Finch felt a swoop of homesickness. She and Jay used to fight like that when they were younger too, even throwing punches and busting lips and bruising eyes, but at the end of the day they’d still be close. She was moments from falling down that pit and fretting about the letter she sent out when sound broke through the static.

“Citizens of the Basin listen closely.” Councilman Detrick’s voice burst at the seams with excitement. Such a drastic change from when Finch last spoke to him that for a moment she

questioned if it was him. “For the first time, we are sending an expedition into the Beyond, to look for other civilizations like ours. Our Seekers departed early today, and we shall eagerly await news from them on their journey so that we may relay it to you. Pray to Oblivion for their fortune, pray that they shall find what remains of Everything!”

Around her the rest of the caravan broke out into conversation, idle curiosity over what the reason behind the expedition could be and what could be found by them. Finch was having a heart attack.

Her heart beat against her ribs like it wanted to run away from her, her skin grew damp and sticky with sweat and no matter how much and how quickly she breathed her lungs felt empty. Liz was one of those Seekers, Liz was leaving the Basin. *Council Business.*

“Well damn, if I knew that was an option I wouldn’t have applied to be in the Caravan!” Hop said, toasting his brother who nodded in agreement, the two of them laughed like loons and paid no mind to the beer that sloshed over the tops of their cups. Rhea smacked Hop in the back of the head and the man just kept laughing.

The twins were joking, even Rhea had a wry smile on her face, it was a joke; but as she was dying Finch couldn’t tell.

“You think this is funny? You think this is a good idea? They could die out there!” *Stop it, shut up.*

“That’s a bit extreme, Finch-”

“It’s too dangerous to move without a truck *here*; you’d die out there.” *Shut your stupid mouth, you’re ruining it already, they’re going to leave you behind like Lizbeth.*

“It’s not like they’re walking around all by themselves out there, they’re gonna be in trucks.” Skip said, pointing at her, like they were in an argument, and he’d made an irrefutable point.

Finch remembered being in the supposed safety of her truck and drowning in sand, nothing was irrefutable.

“What about when they run out of fuel? Sure, they’ll bring canisters to refuel, but what about when those run out? We don’t know if there’s anything at all out there, so they could be driving into the Nothing forever.” Her words caught in her throat, but she pushed past it, her words raw and rough. Everyone around the fire had stopped pretending to ignore the three of them, they looked stricken and scared, as scared as Finch felt; Onyx sniffed loudly.

“You don’t know that, Finch.” Rhea said, an underlying warning in her words. The twins had given up, they sat on the log looking over the line they’d crossed. Finch’s hands felt chilled now.

“Yeah, well neither does the Council and they’re the ones that started it.” Finch said as she put her half-finished beer aside before wheeling away from the campfire. Colder now that she’d left the light and companionship, colder as she kept thinking nonstop about what Lizbeth could be thinking on her way out of the Basin.

* * *

Finch’s sleep was restless, and she woke up repeatedly, memories of sand caught in her mouth. And the ever-persistent thought of never seeing Lizbeth again. When the sun broke past the curtains to shine into the apartment for the last time Finch’s stomach curdled. Heavy and empty with the lack of sleep, a headache from the force of her thinking; an inauspicious start to her new life in the caravan.

A knock at the door pulled her out of her thoughts, Enid and Trinity holding a parcel and a very irate C.B. The orange cat finally kicked its way out of Enid's grasp and sprinted beneath Finch's chair, growling ominously, but accepting the cheek scratches Finch offered.

"Good morning, stinky." Finch couldn't help but smile as she felt C.B. purr like a motor beneath her finger.

"We wanted to send you off before you left today," Enid said, leaning back to sneak a peek at the cat, chuckling when he hissed at her. "And if you're ever in Miras come see us, the station will miss you, we'll miss you."

Trinity beside her handed over the package, looking misty eyed and resolute.

Finch stared at the bundle in her lap in shock. "This is too much."

"I hope you and that awful cat find something good out there on the road, Finch, you deserve it." Trinity said, subtly trying to wipe her eyes, "Now open your gifts, come on, we don't have all day."

Finch hesitated. "Did you y'all hear the announcement last night?"

Enid sighed. "Never thought I'd see the day the Council would one up themselves in stupidity."

Finch picked at the twine wrapping around the bundle of cloth in her lap. "Do you think they'll be ok?"

"I think worrying about things we can't control is a good way to drive yourself crazy," Enid said, putting a hand on Finch's shoulder. "If they come back, we'll gather round to hear what they saw, if they don't, we'll go from there. That's all we can do."

"Lizbeth is out there."

“Even better then,” Enid said with a chuckle, Finch whipped up to look at her, ready to explain that this was very much not a good thing. “She’ll make it home, she’s a smart one, trust in that at least. Now go on, open ‘em up.”

Finch let out a held breath, even if Lizbeth was crafty and clever that didn’t make the circumstances less dangerous, but Enid was right, she couldn’t do anything about it. So instead, she untied the twine, tossing it to C.B. who chased it eagerly, and pulled off the cloth to reveal a container of beautiful, delicious looking slices of fruit, apples, melon, pears, even some blueberries thrown in. As well as a pair of fine leather fingerless driving gloves, to replace the pair she’d lost in the crash ages ago. She slipped them on immediately and put the fruit away for later.

“Thank you, both of you really, thank you.”

“We could go back and forth thanking one another until the sun goes down, but you’ve got to get going. Got to bring me some more goodies,” Enid said with a wink as she grabbed Finch’s bags, handing the crutches over to Trinity who took them gently. Finch clicked to C.B. and was pleased when he immediately peeked up from where he’d been stalking the defenseless string, he trotted over to her chittering all the while, tail and ears tall and proud and leaped into her lap, wasting no time getting comfortable.

As Finch wheeled through town and out to the outskirts, she felt sentiment catch in her throat. This was the longest she’d spent anywhere besides Barra, this was her home as much as her truck was. The borrowed apartment, a chrysalis to grow wheels and aluminum legs, a chrysalis to learn new things and make deep friendships, a chrysalis she now abandoned. She was leaving her borrowed room a different person than she’d entered, a driver still, but a driver

with a caravan, a driver with personal wheels, a driver with a cat. Silently she thanked the room and the town that held it, and she pushed forward to her next transformation.

The trucks were where Finch had left them last night, all circled up and sleeping, except Hop and Skip's. The absence of their vehicle made Finch's gut twist in anxiety, had what she said last night pushed them away? Had she already messed this up? Though it was hard to tell if she should follow this anxiety as Rhea sat calmly stoking the fire and brewing coffee in a dented, old, copper pot.

For a moment the beckoning smell of the coffee wiped Finch's mind for a second, she hadn't had any coffee since the accident, and she'd been missing it something fierce. The only place to get it in the whole Basin was from a woman named Baraka. She had a greenhouse attached to her home that she grew the finicky plants in, but even with the dozen or so trees that she had it was still hard to produce a lot.

So instead of supplying the whole Basin she used her crop to pay for her whole life by trading it for supplies whenever caravans came into town. As such only drivers got coffee, even the Council had a hard time getting some. The thought of the dark bitter drink was making Finch roll over just a bit quicker. But her anxieties could not be so distracted and as she rolled up to Rhea, her worries came back in full force over what Rhea might have to say.

"Morning, boss."

Rhea nodded in greeting to Trinity and Enid who went to deposit Finch's things in her truck, she looked over at the cat and scoffed as it curled ever more decadently against Finch's stomach. When she cautiously reached out to touch his head he stretched into it, pulling a smile closer to the surface of Rhea's face. When steam started swirling out of the pot Rhea took it and

poured a cup for Finch before pouring herself a much bigger cup. “Mornin’ newbie, who’s this little fella?”

“Oh, this is C.B., my truck cat,” Finch said with a laugh, it was more accurate to say he was her station cat, but he didn’t need to be in that room of half-eaten rats and wires, all he needed to do was stretch out on her dashboard and soak in the sun. “Where, uh, where are Hop and Skip?”

Rhea eyed her over the rim of her cup before smacking her lips and speaking. “They went out to Onyx’s shop to sell some of the scrap that they got.”

Finch couldn’t help the sigh of relief she let out, “Well that’s good to hear.”

“You know, after you left last night, Hop and Skip were the quietest I’ve ever seen. You gave ‘em a good scare.” Rhea put a hand over the cup stopping Finch before she could take a drink. “They should’ve backed down and you should have walked away sooner but they were drunk, and I could tell you were all out of sorts about it.”

“I-I know, I’m sorry.”

“Listen, as long as we all can work together, I don’t really care if y’all fight, but you’re with a group now, gotta act like a team player.”

Finch nodded contemplatively and finally took a sip of her coffee when Rhea turned away. Eventually Hop and Skip came back, ready to head out, and they awkwardly waved good morning to Finch, even handing her a stuffed sausage roll they’d gotten from the market that morning. An apology in a warm, greasy, richly scented parcel. Finch gave them glistening melon slices and poured them coffee.

C.B. greeted the caravan members with bitten fingers and cat fur on their legs. Enid spoke to all the drivers, having gathered the requests from some of the shopkeepers in Miras as

to what they might need when the caravan came back around. And together the five of them, their little caravan, worked together to choose a route.

It was strange planning with other folks, she hadn't done it in years, not since she was young and green behind the wheel. But it was a good strange, a welcome strange. Figuring out what they needed and what they could do without, every stop decided was another promise to one another that they'd follow the plan and trust one another.

Before the sun hit its peak they said their final goodbyes, Copper loaded up her new passengers and they headed out. The excitement of a new route, of new people to meet and deals to make, the rumble of the truck below her and the warm, cracked leather of her wheel beneath her palms, all of it together had Finch's heart blooming. This feeling, this was what kept her driving.

The blooming excitement was short-lived. Every thought led back to Lizbeth, every moment of silence another opportunity for anxiety to make itself known. Like a beast in her cab, leaning over her shoulder, breathing down her neck, constantly reminding her of everything she couldn't do. She couldn't tell off the Council, she couldn't stop Lizbeth from ever going, she couldn't do anything but grip the wheel and drive.

Part Two

One Month Later

Chapter Nine: Reunion

For all its pitfalls and danger and despite her better judgment, Finch missed driving solo. Working with a caravan was equal parts frustrating and rewarding, sure they could go longer, drive farther and trade more. But Finch was tired of squabbles and compromises and the simple fact that Finch was nearly twice as old as most of them and their energy tired her out.

But everyday Finch found a little more patience, a little more tolerance for nonsense, and a little more affection for these stupid kids. Along with learning how to be around people she was also figuring out how to do her job going between the wheelchair and the crutches, but she did it, and she did it well, and Rhea noticed. She came to her more and more often to help with sticky decisions, and last month Rhea had decided to take a break and stay with her daughter in Ulys, leaving the caravan up to Finch.

They had just left Seron, having slept through the day there. The past couple weeks there had been more and more storms, which had been especially dangerous when they were up in the mountains. And Finch found it safer to sleep through the day when the storms were worse and travel slow through the night. Knowing that she wasn't alone outweighed her fear of the dark outside her windows, and she checked her cab twice over for tricky Roadbeetles.

She'd gotten much more comfortable with her new truck and was able to unfocus and drive while she ran through a million things in her head like she used to, though she tried to always remain cognizant, knowing the danger of being lax.

Finch was busy calculating how long it'd take them to get to Ulys at the pace they were going when they turned a bend. As the truck straightened out and her headlights illuminated the road ahead all her calculations and guess flew out of her head

Someone stood in the middle of the road, framed by the glowing beetles in their grass, a shaking, filthy, terrified woman.

Finch pulled the handbrake with a deafening screech, CB on the bed in the back let out a similar yowl. Despite the storm and the painful barrage of sand she was enduring and the fact that a truck had stopped just a few feet away from her, the woman stayed in the middle of the road.

She was glancing over her shoulders, flinching at every sound, and cowering in the face of the bright truck lights, but she didn't move. The few times she looked over at the trucks Finch could swear she saw the multiple eyes of the Sense, reflecting the light of the trucks like an animal.

Lizbeth.

Alone, and shaking, looking nearer to death than life, but Lizbeth, nonetheless. Finch slipped on her sandmask, preparing to dismount when the shabby radio on the dash started speaking with Skip's voice. "Boss, what's going on? Over."

"There's someone out there." There was a shake in her voice, she didn't like that. "I'm going to bring them in. Over."

While talking Finch kept an eye on Lizbeth who seemed to be looking directly at her, despite the storm and the dark and the windshield and blindness to the present the Sense gives you. Despite the impossibility Finch moved slowly, like she was frozen in the gaze of a predator, telegraphing her movements to someone who couldn't possibly see her.

She slowly holstered the receiver and opened the door, wincing at how the wind pushed back, but she just pulled a lever and popped out the door jamb from the bottom of the truck to keep the door propped open. And with that scant protection from the wind, she pulled her chair

out from its spot and flicked it open before dropping it and leveraging herself out of the truck and into it.

She edged out of the way, slammed the door shut and with immense strength began wheeling herself around the truck and towards the woman. For a moment they just stared at each other, and beneath the dirt and sand and blood Finch could see a glimpse of the woman she knew. Lizbeth stared unseeing at Finch, her many Sensing eyes rolling around in her head, stuck in the many futures that sprawled out before her.

Finch had nearly reached her when the wind picked up, a horrible whistling, moaning sound, accompanied by the frenzied beating of the sand. Lizbeth blinked and her eyes were back to normal, and with a shriek she finally moved, running out of the road, through the grass, and to a tree a couple yards away, spindly and burnt, killed by lightning ages ago.

The tenuous anxiety that had been brewing in Finch since she'd seen Lizbeth standing in the middle of the road shot up to white-hot panic as she watched the woman run off into the darkness without a sand mask. Finch didn't even have a spare, *stupid*.

With only a moment of hesitation before passing the barrier of the glowing grass Finch wheeled herself off the road and towards the tree. In all honesty it wasn't that difficult to get to her, the wheelchair was designed to cut through dirt and gravel, but the sprawling, tangled roots of the dead tree threatened to tip her over. She persevered and made it to where she could see Lizbeth crouched behind the tree, biting at the beds of her nails so ferociously that a slick red river cut through the layers of dirt and sweat that covered the woman.

"Hey there." Finch felt foolish and a little frightened, she had her hands out, talking low and soothing like she was talking down a rabid dog. Lizbeth's face could barely be seen through her long, tangled hair, hair like dead roots of a dead tree, but what little she could see was the

expression of a cornered animal. As she got closer Lizbeth whipped around to look at Finch with a gaze that pinned her to the spot.

“Liz, Liz it’s me Finch.” Finch followed Liz’s gaze out to the darkness, but beyond the dark she knew was The Hole. The wind sounded different the closer you got, wind from water not from sand, wind that wanted to be wet instead of dry. Finch knew that The Hole stretched up north, extending into the Beyond, getting its water from a place they would never see. Animals would follow the river, follow it right up to The Hole, and they’d protect the scant, silt filled water with teeth and claws. “Come on, we have to go, it’s dangerous here.”

Finch flinched as the wind picked up and the sand started beating against in earnest, like it was trying to whittle her down all the way to her bones. Through her mask Finch watched as Lizbeth jumped to her feet, pressing her back to the tree, screaming when the wind reached a fever pitch. In the few moments that it quieted Finch could hear her sobbing, the first words Finch had heard her say, in a voice so torn and hoarse it was a wonder she’d ever spoken before.

“It's coming, it's coming, *it's coming.*”

It took a couple minutes of gentle persuading before Finch was able to pull her from the tree. As soon as she let go, she tossed her jacket over Lizbeth's head, clenching her teeth against the biting sand and quickly hustled her into the passenger side of the truck. Finch wheeled as quickly as she could to the driver’s side and threw open the door hard enough to pop open the door jam, and to make Lizbeth shriek in surprise.

Finch winced but continued climbing into the truck, there was a rope tied to the handle on the ceiling with a little noose on the bottom. Finch looped the noose around one of the handles of the chair and used the rope to climb up into the truck. With two quick hand over hands she was up and in the driver's seat, and with one yank she pulled up the chair, folded it up, and shoved it

into the back. Finch ripped the sand mask off and dropped it down beside her seat, breathing heavily, before looking over at Lizbeth.

She was pressed up against the door, backing herself into a corner and staring at Finch with an unrelenting gaze. Finch tried to smile reassuringly but it felt more like a grimace on her face. So instead, she reached behind her chair and grabbed the old, dented flask that was in there. And carefully, so as not to spill a drop, she poured out a cup of stew.

“I got this back at the last rest stop we were at, this woman there makes the best goat stew you’ve ever had, real spicy, it’ll warm you up quick.” It was easier to talk about little inconsequential things, easier to ignore the buzzing questions that gathered in her mouth. Instead, Finch handed over the cup slowly, making sure Lizbeth was holding it with both hands before leaving her to it. Finch watched her eat out of the corner of her eye as she pulled out a blanket from behind the other seat. She didn’t rapidly scarf it down like Finch had half-expected her to, instead she held the cup close to her chest, pressing the fading warmth against her, and took deep breaths, occasionally glancing over at Finch.

By the time Finch had taken her jacket back and spread a well-loved quilt over the woman’s shoulders she had calmed down enough to sip at the stew, and she nearly spilled it all when the radio crackled with Skip’s voice “Boss? You got ‘em? Can we head out now? Gettin’ treacherous out there. Over.”

Finch grabbed the radio quickly before he could say anything else. “Quit your yawning, I got her, and we’ll head out when we head out so sit tight and shut up. Over.”

“You have people now.” Liz’s voice was still hoarse and cracked and was just barely louder than a whisper.

“Yeah, yeah I do, bunch of live wires and they’re still learning patience.”

“Are they good people?”

Finch smiled despite herself and the situation. “The best.”

Lizbeth nodded jerkily but continued sipping her stew, every taste of it seemed to make her eat it faster, like she was starving but had forgotten how to eat. Finch poured more stew when the first cup was gone and remembered to pull out her giant aluminum water bottle, allowing Lizbeth to take messy, greedy sips. When she was calmer and sipping steadily at her second cup Finch got the courage to speak up once more.

“Liz?” Finch croaked, “What...what happened to you?”

Finch reached out to brush a clump of hair away from Lizbeth’s face, or to touch her shoulder, or to wipe off the streaks of sand still stuck to her face. Anything to reckon with the fact that this was Lizbeth, Lizbeth who had obviously gone through something horrific, but Lizbeth all the same. But just the slightest bit of movement made Lizbeth flinch so bad that she dropped the water bottle, the noise of which overwhelmed her further. So, she just sat, stock-still, staring at the water dripping from the mouth of the bottle, picking silently at her fingernail beds with a ferocity that scared Finch.

She couldn’t help it though, her soul ached for the other woman, her savior, her friend. So as slow as she could, Finch reached out and grabbed Lizbeth’s filthy bleeding hand. Holding it gently in her own heavily calloused palm. Lizbeth’s slight frame started shaking minutely, tears washing her face clean, but she painstakingly slowly turned her hand and grabbed Finch’s in return. Looking at the driver through her hair.

“I’m right here, Liz, I’m gonna help you, you just gotta trust me.”

Lizbeth nodded slowly and brought her knees up to lay her head down, never letting go of Finch’s hand. With that tenuous deal struck, Finch started up the truck again, prepared to

leave this place. But when she turned the headlights on again, she saw that lone dead tree, nothing else but Beetles and grass.

“Liz? Where’s your people?”

The subtle tremors running through Lizbeth became full on shaking and she dropped Finch’s hand to claw at her head, pained whimpers leaking out from her clenched teeth. Her frightened, weary voice was now a frenzied, panicked whisper, and the sound of it gripped Finch’s heart with icy fingers. “I want us to leave here, I want us to leave and go far, *far* away.”

Finch watched as Lizbeth tugged viciously at her hair and started rocking in the chair, whimpering like she was out behind the tree again. Finch frowned but put the truck into drive and started moving forward, followed soon by the rumbling sounds of the other trucks. Quickly abandoning the tree to the rear-view mirror.

Lizbeth Four

Written on the inside of Lizbeth's skull, burned into her tongue, carved into her teeth, a mantra repeating forever and ever. A reminder for someone who will never need to be reminded. A warning received too late. A song stuck in her head if the song had become a part of her, coded into her genes, carried in her body. If ever she had children, they would be born saying these words. A burden, an unforgettable burden.

It's coming.

Chapter Ten: Unfamiliar

They pulled into Ulys when it was hazy with sunrise, the early light peering through the surrounding dust and clouds lighting up the whole sky in rosy pinks and reds. No one could be seen on the streets, so nothing felt real.

Finch led the caravan to the lone inn in the city, the one Rhea's daughter ran. It'd been the plan all along to come and stay here after the long route, but after the night she had Finch really needed it. But now, after the night she'd had Finch really needed it.

The innkeeper, Tula, a prim woman even at this hour, came out and approached Finch's door, letting her know that her mother had headed to Veneer for a couple days on business. Finch told her they had one more person and she'd greatly appreciate it if a bath could be run and Tula just nodded and smiled, before going inside, discreet like all good innkeepers. As the rest of the drivers parked their trucks and got out, going in to grab their rooms, Finch turned with a sigh to Lizbeth, who was curled up against the door, twitching slightly in her sleep.

She needed a bath and a roof over her head, and a better meal than stew from a busted flask. She needed a lot of things, but this, Finch could do. So as gently as she could she reached over to shake Lizbeth awake, who jumped up with surprising ferocity for someone who had just been sleeping. Lunging at Finch, pressing her up against the driver's side window with a snarl.

"Don't you dare." She spoke in dark quiet tones, like the last rush of water before you drowned. Finch instinctively shot her hand up to wrap around Lizbeth's throat, her fingers tensing for a second, threatening. But just as quickly as she grabbed her, she let go, dropping her hand like it burnt. Lizbeth wouldn't hurt her; she wouldn't hurt Lizbeth.

Moments dripped by slowly, Lizbeth's heavy breathing punctuating each one, before her eyes focused and her snarl fell from her face. She withdrew slowly, looking at every inch of the

truck, drinking in the details. Finch watched all this, stunned, unsure of how to approach Lizbeth at this moment. Until finally Lizbeth calmed, if she could ever be such a thing again, and her eyes met Finch's and stayed there, slowly remembering where she was.

"You're real?" She said in a tremulous whisper, a portent of a dam about to break.

"I am."

"And you're alive." There was no question, no relief or surprise, just a statement like she was confirming the date of an appointment.

"As much as you are." Finch was so thrown by the conversation, she couldn't even begin to salvage it, and she knew she'd said the wrong thing when Lizbeth groaned and dropped her face into her hands.

"But *why*?"

"Now, Liz, I think it's too early to be asking things like that, let's go inside, then we can talk."

Lizbeth didn't move for a moment, ignoring Finch until the driver reached out to grab her fragile wrist. "Let me take care of you, Liz. *Please*."

"Ok." Lizbeth sounded too tired to fight, but that was enough, Finch could work with that. She opened the door and dropped down her chair and got out, and once Lizbeth joined her, frightened, nervous, hiding her face behind her hair, the two entered the inn. Finch could feel the curious gazes of her caravan, but she ignored them, focusing instead on Tula handing her a pile of towels, clothes, and soaps, guiding them to the bathing room.

Finch gestured to the door and waited for Lizbeth to go in and clean herself off, but the woman paused, wavering on the edge of a decision.

“What if...” Her voice was haunting, like the sound of wind going over bones picked clean by scavengers. “What if I wash it off and it was never real?”

“What-”

“This!” Liz gestured to herself, to the dirt and sand and blood caked on her clothes and skin and hair. “This is irrefutable evidence that what I went through, was real, that It was real. And what happens when it’s gone? Did I imagine It?”

Finch sighed and scratched her neck, this was something too big to deal with this early in the morning, this soon after a drive. So, she reached out and touched Lizbeth’s arm, drawing her attention down to Finch. “Do you want it to be real?”

Liz shook her head, choking out a sob. “No.”

“Alright then, listen, Liz, I don’t know what you saw or what happened to you, but it’s in the past. It can be as big or small a part of you as you want, but right now you have a chance to get clean, so please, go take your bath, I’ll be right here.”

Lizbeth nodded, her gaze far away and finally went into the bathing room, with only one glance over her shoulder at Finch. Checking to make sure she held up her end of the deal.

* * *

Lizbeth was in the bathing room a long time, so long that the rest of the drivers passed through and went on to their rooms for the next few nights, waving at Finch in tired acknowledgement, or even asking after her new passenger. So long that Finch knocked on the door a few times and didn’t stop until she heard Lizbeth say something. She was in there so long that Finch had just made up her mind to go in there and check on her when the door finally opened. Looking at her Finch realized what had taken her so long: her hair was gone.

Chopped and hacked off, her once lovely auburn locks turned filthy matted chunks, all of it gone. The few strands that survived hung around her face unevenly, some parts shorn nearly to the scalp, others hanging down to her chin. The sight of her hair distracted Finch so much that she nearly didn't notice the horrid bright red scratches and scars on her arms. She hadn't seen them all under the dirt before, it looked like she'd been attacked in some way, possibly by herself.

"Liz, what-"

"I kept seeing It." Lizbeth was holding herself tightly and looking off into the middle distance, but she looked more like herself, just barely. More like a woman on edge and less like a vessel for pain and misery. "It was just my hair out of the corner of my eyes, but every time I thought it was It. It had to go; I need to be vigilant."

"Vigilant against what? What's happening?" The shock of her new appearance was fading, but the brusque way Lizbeth spoke of an It worried Finch.

"It let me get this far, but I'm not going to let It find me again." Lizbeth turned on her heel suddenly, moving towards the front of the inn and the trucks. "We have to go."

Finch grabbed Lizbeth's arm as she passed her. "Liz, we can't, we have business here, I can't just leave the caravan."

Lizbeth snarled and pulled away. "You put up such a fight when they put you in a caravan and now what? I'm trying to *protect* you, Finch."

"And I can protect *you*, Liz. I'm not going to let whatever is after you get to you," Finch bit her lip and watched the side of Lizbeth's face, it was screwed up in concentration and she was just barely hovering on the edge of stomping out of here and away from this conversation. "But the last thing you need is to be on the run. You need to rest."

Lizbeth grimaced and turned on Finch, her fists clenched. “I’m a medic, you don’t tell me what I need, Finch!”

Medics always made the worst fucking patients. “Liz, I’m sorry, I have no idea what you went through, but if I *had* gone through what you had, what would you advise me to do?” Finch knew she’d reached her when Lizbeth groaned in frustration and covered her face with her hands. “Would you tell me to keep running, to never rest or calm down?”

“That isn’t fair! This is different-”

“Do you trust me, Liz?” Finch regretted the question as soon as she asked it, terrified Lizbeth would answer negatively. And why shouldn’t she? Finch had been only looking after herself for most of her driving career, and she wasn’t even able to do that well. She’d been scared when Rhea had put her in charge, terrified of ruining everything including the tenuous trust her caravan had in her. Looking at Lizbeth, her friend, her once savior, who was holding herself together with spite and momentum, Finch found she was far more afraid of losing her trust.

“It’s kind of hard to trust anyone right now.” Lizbeth’s fists had unclenched but she was looking away and Finch felt the bottom of her stomach give out. Until Lizbeth looked back at her, meeting her eyes for the first time since she left the bath. “But I’ll try.”

Finch let out a sigh of relief, “That’s all I ask, now come on, let me fix your hair.”

* * *

It was about midday by the time Finch and the rest of the caravan made it back out of the inn to offload their goods. The market of Ulys was the best of its kind, colorful tents bursting with trade and food, thick, flavorful smoke curled in the air, intertwining with the latent dust, and throwing a haze over the scene. More people hawked their wares, shared stories, sang, ate,

laughed, and gathered in sticky, sweaty clumps than anywhere in the Basin except Veneer. There was barely enough room in the street for the people to part and let the trucks through, excited shouts and louds bangs followed them as the people smacked the trucks passing them by.

Liz flinched every time a hit landed on the truck and Finch worried her lip. The medic had flat out refused being left alone while the caravan conducted their business, just the mere suggestion of it had her panicky. So, Finch loaded her up in the truck and hoped for the best, but she had obviously hoped for too much. All these people surrounding them, all the noise and activity; it was sending Lizbeth to shaking. Her gaze bore into the dashboard, staring at CB curled up in the sun, her hands scratching fervently at her arms. Finch slowed the truck to a stop and turned to her passenger.

“Liz, look at me.” A few tense seconds before Lizbeth finally turned to her. “We have to trade, we have to offload all this, but you can stay in here. There's a bed in the back behind the curtains, just get some rest.”

Lizbeth pretended for a few seconds that she would fight Finch and get out and help, but one look out the windshield and she was ducking behind the curtain, wrapping herself up in as many blankets that Finch had despite the stifling heat outside. CB stood up, stretching luxuriously, his yawn twisting into a yowl as he did. Finch reached out to massage one of his ears, chuckling as he leaned into her hand aggressively.

“Keep an eye on her for me, little man, and don't chew on her.”

In response he bit her finger as she pulled her hand away before he leaped behind the curtain to join Lizbeth. Her soft noise of surprise made Finch smile as she popped open the door, wincing against the absolute wall of sound and smell that greeted her, she barely had enough room to get her crutches out and get on the ground. She smiled and greeted the people around

her, shoving them out of her way if needed, announcing she was open to trade with the clattering sound of the tailgate falling open.

“Goat jerky from Dentra! Herbs and veggie seeds from Grainer! Honey and incense direct from the Seron gardens! Bottles and bottles of beer!”

In a market as big and wild as this the trading was less of a conscious action, and more of an instinct. She’d call out a product and someone would shout out an offer or hold up their own trade, Finch would rapid-fire answer with a shake of her head or a piercing whistle and a gesture to the truck. She was one of the only drivers on the road who let other people get in her truck bed, but it was easier than leveraging herself up with the crutches. And with the pressure of the crowd and the weight of her gaze none of them were bold enough to try and steal more than they bargained for.

After just an hour she’d had a full turnover of her inventory, as had the rest of her group, and they were ready to head out, satisfied with a good day’s work. The crowd didn’t have the ability to disperse fully and leave them, so their vehicles just became fixtures in the dense market, bulwarks for the tides of people to move around. As they were packing their trucks up miraculously Finch picked out a single conversation that made her stomach turn.

“Did’ja hear that the Council are looking for new Seekers? They wanna send them South, see if there’s less storms.” The man who was talking was speaking to a younger boy, gesticulating excitedly, sparking up that same excitement in the kid. It reminded Finch of Hop and Skip when she’d first met them.

“I wouldn’t apply if I were you.” She caught their attention easily and they turned around to see who’d spoken to them, the kid looked just as excited to talk to her then he had been just listening to the older man. Kid seemed to be chasing every dream there was.

“And why not?” The man looked at her suspiciously, she could only guess how much the Seekers were being offered, especially since there’d been no word back from the first group and doubts had started to swirl in the public eye. This man wanted that trade, the security offered by working directly for the Council, and he was willing to throw the boy, his son probably, into the Beyond to get it. Finch decided she didn’t like him.

“I’ve seen lots of dangerous things come in from the Nowhere, and I’ve seen lots of things need fixing in the Basin. If the Council really wanted to make things better, they’d focus inward, this is just a distraction, don’t fall for it.”

The two nodded slowly, judging by the fine white dust on their clothes and the residue of orange splashes on their pants Finch would hazard a guess that they were from Veldyl. With all the rockslides and sinkholes and dirty drinking water they had to deal with they knew more than anyone what the Council wasn’t doing.

The kid asked her a barrage of questions, mostly about life on the road, and one shy one about if he could join their caravan when he got his driver’s contract. Finch answered all his questions with the excitement of a Storyteller and sent him on his way, locking eyes with his father who looked away in shame. They’d be fine.

Lizbeth though...

When she turned back towards her truck, she saw the door shut quickly and groaned. Of any conversation from anywhere in the Basin this was the last one Finch would have wanted her to hear.

Slowly and with much trepidation she hopped into the driver’s seat, greeted by the sound of Copper coming through the radio and CB scratching up her chair.

She tossed her crutches into the passenger side, shooed the cat away and grabbed the receiver, glancing back worriedly at Liz. The curtains were open, and she had become one with the blankets, nothing more than a shaking lump on Finch's bed.

"Hey, Boss, are we heading out? Over"

"Give me a moment, Copper. Over."

"We're gonna get swarmed if we don't go soon. Over."

"Just a minute! Over." Finch groaned and let the receiver rest in her lap as she turned to touch the edge of the mattress, not sure if Lizbeth would appreciate touch at this moment.

"Liz?"

"They're sending out more?" Liz spoke through gritted teeth. "They don't even know if we survived and they're sending out *more*! They're insane!"

"You gonna tell them you survived?"

Liz shot up, fighting her way out of the blankets to hiss at Finch. "I didn't *survive*, It just hasn't gotten me yet! We're all going to die and it's the Council's fault, no one survives!"

"Liz, what are you talking about? What's after you?" Finch didn't want to hear this, she didn't want to see Liz on the edge and terrified, it was anachronistic of the woman she'd known before. But maybe she was right, maybe that woman didn't survive, and that scared Finch.

"You wouldn't understand!" Liz was yelling now, getting more and more in Finch's face.

"Then make me understand! You obviously need to tell someone if you want to stop those new Seekers, so let me help! *What is after you?*"

Liz stopped short, whatever response she'd been building up before Finch started talking, dying in her throat. Her breath came out in short quick bursts, her eyes unfocused, and slowly she melted back into the blankets, gripping the mattress like she'd gripped the tree; desperately.

“It’s coming, It’s coming, It’s coming.”

Finch groaned and rubbed her face; she’d fucked it up. She reached out a hand to Liz, anything to remedy the situation, but the medic rolled over, her breaths coming ever faster.

Finch stared at Liz's shaking back and admitted defeat, hopping back on the radio, and telling everyone to head back to the inn.

The sound of the rumbling truck almost covered up Liz’s sobs, almost.

Chapter Eleven: Catharsis

Lizbeth didn't talk to Finch for the rest of the day. As soon as they'd pulled up to the inn she'd exploded out from the curtain and jumped out of the truck, barely letting it stop. Finch watched her stomp in with an unpleasant taste in her mouth, and for a moment anger of her own rose up in her chest. It was like walking on glass with intermittent bear traps, like everything she said could set Lizbeth off. She already wasn't great at talking to people, but she felt wildly unequipped to deal with this.

Her more pragmatic side was contemplating leaving her here, she'd be safe, she could probably get a job at the inn, and she could work through her whole shit on her own. Finch sat and felt the anger for a couple seconds, letting it course through her, before it drained out of her, leaving her tired afterwards. Lizbeth was more than entitled to feel the way she was feeling and just because it was difficult didn't mean Finch wasn't going to try and help her.

Helping her would have to wait until later though, when she got in the inn Tula came over to tell her that Lizbeth had been a whirlwind, rushing to her temporary room, barely even acknowledging Tula. Finch apologized for her brusqueness and headed off to her own room, giving Lizbeth's door a long stare as she passed it. What she had said had obviously irritated Lizbeth, but there wasn't anything that she could do for her now, no sense trying to help someone who didn't want to be helped.

So instead, she let herself be intercepted by the caravan, conferring with what they'd all got and the deals they'd made, where they'd need to go and who Copper would be given a ride too. C.B. luxuriously stretched out on the table between them all, accepting scratches from all sides, biting hands if they strayed too close to his temptingly white, fluffy belly.

After the seemingly endless day Finch had had the usually easy conversation gave her a headache and she left the boisterous younger drivers alone for the night, allowing Copper the rare treat of C.B. sleeping with her tonight. The ratcheting and pounding in her head would not be able to withstand C.B.'s typical serenade of caterwauling in the dead of night.

As she wheeled away to leave, Skip spoke up, looking up from the falling apart, chicken scratch filled ledger the boys shared. "Is that woman you found a passenger too? Does she need transpo?"

"If she's lookin' for transpo we'll need trade." Hop responded, balanced precariously on two legs of his chair, using a toothpick to wheedle at something stuck in his teeth. "Not that it looked like she had anything."

"You're going to stab yourself you idiot." Copper said, as she kicked at his chair, sending him flying off it, miraculously not stabbing himself with said toothpick. "But he's right, what's the deal with her, Finch?"

Hop grumbled and kicked Copper's chair in response but got up to stare at Finch with all the rest, their questions hanging in the air.

"Call her...call her temporary crew, she ain't got nothing and nowhere to go, I'm just helping her get back on her feet." Finch hadn't thought of how to explain Lizbeth to the caravan, had almost forgotten she was a real, living person, and not just a specter come to haunt Finch. She'd certainly not thought of cover stories and lies for Lizbeth, but there was barely any truth she could provide as she knew about as much as the young drivers did.

"Rhea ain't goin' like that." Said Skip, reminding Finch of yet another collection of consequences that had slipped her mind.

“I’ll deal with Rhea, y’all don’t worry about nothin’ I got it handled.” With the uncertain statement Finch turned away and went to bed alone, hoping fiercely that things would magically be easier in the morning.

* * *

She’s pinned against the tree, never to be found.

A storm rolls in and the wind rips the roof off her truck, rips the wheels and paint and bones and muscles away from the truck until it’s just Finch and the seat, and the wheel, and the tree.

Exposed to the elements: the sun and sand burn and beat her skin and cook the numb, dead parts of her.

Little scavengers come to feast on her flesh, she doesn’t even feel it as they nibble and bite her, as they tear chunks off her. It’s not until the birds that she feels it.

They come for her eyes, she bats them away, they go for her hands and rip off her fingers. A crow on her legs pecks at her sternum, pecking at it like it’s trying to break through. And with one awful crack it does.

When she looks back down the crow is pulling out her heart, tugging at it, fighting the many veins that hold it in, her breath flutters as she watches it beat from the crow's beak. The other birds come back for her eyes, and she can’t care enough to stop them.

Finch wakes with a start, her breath coming in fast and hard, and she feels pressure on her chest, right where the crow broke through. Quick as a shot she grabs the perpetrator, only to realize it’s Lizbeth’s little hand she’d clenched in her own, and not a flesh-hungry bird.

She drops it and looks over to see Lizbeth hunched over Finch, her breath uneven, the moon coming through the window just enough to see her glass-eyed stare.

“Liz, you can’t just, can’t just sneak up on people when they’re sleeping.” Finch’s grips the spot where her heart is trying to beat its way out of her ribs, wincing at the bruise soreness in her muscles from her nightmare.

“I woke up alone and I had to make sure I wasn’t the only one left.” Her voice was small and so far away, but her hands shook furiously where they sat on Finch’s stomach. Her mind and body split and running from one another.

“I’m right here, Liz, I ain’t going anywhere.”

Lizbeth’s face twists as she tries to suppress a sob, and Finch can see her holding her breath, trying to keep the dam shut, but the dam breaks, she breaths out, and it all comes rushing forth.

Finch quickly sits up as best as she can to pull Lizbeth into an embrace, hesitating only for a second, before Lizbeth plasters herself along Finch’s side, her face buried in the crook of Finch’s neck.

“I saw It again, in my dreams, but we were here in Ulys. It followed me all the way here, It’s going to follow me until it gets me, then it’s going to get you.” Lizbeth gripped Finch with a towline strength, taut and ready to snap. “I’ve been seeing it all day; I wake up exhausted and I just want to sleep but then I see it all over again.”

“I’m not going to keep pushing you about it, Lizbeth, you deserve your privacy if you want it. But if you want to tell me what’s going on I’m here for you.” Finch held Lizbeth closer, with one hand coming around to cup the back of her head and distantly she could feel Lizbeth’s eyelashes brush against her throat when she blinked.

“It’s awful, you don’t want to hear it.”

“Maybe not, but I want to support you, that’s more important.”

Lizbeth takes one last shaky breath and starts talking into the quiet space between Finch's neck and shoulder. Talking about the Council and Sweeping Day, rats and snakes and anonymous cookouts, details the drive out to Beyond, despite her terror her voice slips into awe when she describes the landscape. Her words get smaller and smaller, and she pushes the story to a circle of trucks in the center of dunes. Small and insignificant and against the sheer size of the sky above them.

Finch rubs her back and holds her tighter.

Lizbeth chokes on a breath and sobs.

The story continues.

Sand cutting around dunes, caving the world in,

in,

in.

Cutting their eyes, nipping at their skin, they retreat to their vehicles silently.

If they open their mouths to say goodnight or plan for the coming days, they'll choke on the wind. The words of doubt, of fear, of homesickness are trapped behind their teeth, each tooth a tombstone for the dead and buried words.

In a metal box Lizbeth closes her eyes in one reality, and she opens them in another.

In the morning she will look out the window and see the sand whipping past, she'll turn away and go back to sleep. When it is safe, when the air is empty of sand, she will exit, and fall upon her knees.

Like statues, her caravan lay dead around her. Marta, on her side outside their truck, her hands clasped in front of her, like she's praying, like she's pleading. Frank laid across her,

throwing his body on the line for his niece. Dennis, in front of Lizbeth's van, reaching for her, trying to warn her of what was coming.

Yet for all the story of their positions they leave a much bigger story untold. Eyes, plucked out, gaping red holes where they once could see. Hands and feet cut off, the bones drying out in the heat and wind; except for Marta's clasped hands, her plea answered in a way.

But beneath the pleading hands her chest has been cracked open, as have Frank and Dennis', their hearts missing. The cavity filling up with sand.

Lizbeth vomits, she cannot help it.

Lizbeth weeps, this too is inevitable.

She is immersed in her grief, stunned by the ferocity of it and the scene around her, but then the scene changes, or at least, her perception does.

The sand has not stopped, it will never stop, but it does not blow through the dunes and their vehicles, it swirls around it. The carnage lay in the eye of a cyclone, and when Lizbeth looks up, when she realizes, she sees something else.

A shape in the sand, lanky and fluid, imperceptible except for its silhouette, and its impossibly bright teeth, white beneath the blood, dripping with red. A laugh seeps from it, whispers in Lizbeth's ears.

For a moment it is the teeth of animals, surrounding their camp, ready to attack when their guard is down, hungry, and desperate. In the next second it is a horde of people, lost souls, happy to see others amongst them. Lizbeth's eyes are tricking her, her grief is playing tricks on her, as she can see the face of every lost patient in the sand, every cancerous tumor, empty stomach, purulent, rotting wound.

But it is only an illusion because It stands alone. Lizbeth stares at it, It watches her. Then the sand crashes in on her and she is choking. Pressure at her eyes, pressure at the back of her skull, too sharp, too full of intent to be anything but long cruel fingers drive Lizbeth to run.

She runs and runs and runs, away from her van, away from her caravan and their sightless gaze, away from a creature she does not understand. It follows behind, just out of her peripheral, just out of her Sight.

The story ends with a sob, punctuated with a long, pained moan. Ripping through Lizbeth like the sand through the dunes. “It let me get away, It *wanted* me to get away!”

Finch sat speechless, there were no words big enough to fill the space the story left, no condolences enough for the heaving terror that possessed Lizbeth. Except: “I believe you. I’m sorry, Lizbeth I’m so sorry.”

“I know It’s coming; I know It’s looking for me, I need to get out of here.” Lizbeth shoots up, her wild animal eyes are back, flight or fight rippling through her, her legs twitching with it. When she tries to run off the bed and out of the room, out of the inn, Finch grabs her wrist and brings her to a halt.

Finch looked at the woman poised to leap off the bed, really looked at her. Her pale skin crisscrossed with tan lines and stretchmarks and so, so many old scars and red scabs. Finch couldn’t see her forearms from this position, but she knew they were the worst, with scratches made in a panic by whipping winds and broken fingernails. She looked up to Lizbeth’s now shaved head, Finch knew it was soft like down. Lizbeth was lithe and deceptively strong; she was beautiful, and she was terrified. Mostly Finch just saw a woman in need of a friend, of a support system.

It wasn't Finch's responsibility to fix her. But the truth was, she didn't really need fixing, she just needed time to grieve and heal and pick up her shattered pieces, in that order. And Finch wanted to help her, she wanted to be that support system, because, and this was her soft heart and dumb mind talking, she wanted to be needed, even a little bit.

Beyond being a body behind a wheel and a pair of hands carrying supplies, Finch wanted to be a pair of shoulders to cry on, and a heart to feel for others. She wanted Lizbeth to *want* to be by her side, she wanted to hold her hand, she wanted to help her like how Lizbeth had helped her.

"You don't gotta go anywhere, Liz, we can figure this out together, I ain't gonna let It get you."

"What's there to figure out! I'm being hunted! If we stay in one place It's going to catch up, It's going to get you too." Lizbeth was gesticulating and shaking underneath Finch's hand, not pulling hard enough to wrench herself free but the desire to leave still there. "Come on, if we leave now maybe we can shake it for a few days."

Are you sure It's on the way here? I ain't doubting you but can you Sense it?"

Lizbeth's face crumbled and she buried her face in her hands, still within Finch's grasp. "I can't, It's hiding from me, I can't see It, I can only see sand when I try and Sense it."

"Well how about this? You stick around for one more day, and tomorrow we go find another Seer, half of the Basin is in Ulys there'll be someone, we see what they have to say and then we can leave, ok?"

"What if they can't?" Lizbeth's voice was muffled and whispered behind her hands, barely audibly in the small room.

"We find someone else."

Lizbeth pulled away from her hands and looked up at the ceiling, tears falling back towards her shaved head. “I’m so tired, Finch, I’m so, so tired.”

“So, sleep in here tonight, I’ll be right here.”

With little fuss or fight Lizbeth nodded and melted into the bed, asleep before she hit the pillow, the adrenaline leaving her more exhausted than she was before coming into the room.

Finch sighed deeply, visions of empty eye sockets and chest cavities in her mind, visions of a sandstorm holding a monster. This was too much to process. So, she laid down beside Lizbeth, their arms and legs sealed together with feverish, scared sweat, the bed too small for them to not touch, and grounded herself with the feel of warm skin and the sound of deep breathing.

“I’m so glad you made it out, Liz, I’m glad you’re here.”

The words seemed to lay over the room like another blanket, cushioning them from the outside. It seemed impossible that anything could break this sacred silence, the aftermath of such release, so Finch slept secure in the knowledge that at least for that night Lizbeth would be safe.

Chapter Twelve: Premonition

Finch woke up the same way she did every morning after she'd had poor sleep, slowly and with great reluctance. By the angle of the sun coming in and hitting the wall before her she guessed it was nearly 9 am, it'd been a long time since she'd gotten to sleep that late. She watched the movement of the sun on the dusty walls and took stock of her body.

There were no immediate stabs of pain, no hot tracing of her wound scar around and around until all she could think of was it. She wiggled her toes and felt them move and she cautiously stretched and was not punished for doing so: a crutches day. As she stretched and tentatively felt out the limits of her body, she looked over to see Lizbeth, still deep asleep, twitching slightly as she dreamed.

Had it been anyone else, Finch would have left her sleeping and gone to get breakfast for the two of them, but she could only hear the panic in Lizbeth's voice when Finch had tried to leave her for the market. She couldn't risk the woman waking up and finding herself alone and didn't want to strain the fragile trust she'd gained yesterday. So, she reached out and shook Lizbeth awake, figuring her peace of mind was more important than a couple extra minutes of sleep.

Lizbeth awoke just like she had in the truck yesterday, quickly and with surprising ferocity. She sprang away from Finch and rolled off the other side of the bed, frantically looking around at her surroundings before she calmed down enough to look back at Finch.

"What is it? Is It here?" Lizbeth was working herself up into a panic, her eyes clear despite having just woken up.

“Liz, Liz calm down, nothing's wrong,” Finch winced through her words, her reasons for waking Lizbeth up seeming trivial and stupid in the face of her immediate panic. “I was waking you up for breakfast.”

Lizbeth stared blankly at her before exhaling shakily and standing up. “Breakfast, food, right.”

“There you go, you got it.” Finch hauled herself up and gently threw her legs over the side of the bed, grabbing her crutches that leaned up against the wall just within her reach. As she adjusted the straps and stood up, going for a change of clothes, she looked over to see Lizbeth watching her with shiny eyes.

“Looks like you got it too.”

“Ain’t too bad once you keep trying.” Finch felt uncomfortable with the attention on her, with the teary pride Lizbeth was showing her. A couple of weeks ago she would have been ecstatic to hear Lizbeth’s praise, but now that it was such an ordinary part of her life, she didn’t need it. Uncomfortably she cast her gaze around the room to find a new conversation topic lingering in the corners and instead her eyes landed on Lizbeth’s gray, over-washed, ill-fitting clothes she’d been given by Tula yesterday.

“We need to get you some new clothes while we’re out, Liz. You’re doing a great impression of a sack of grain.”

After Lizbeth’s bath yesterday Tula had thrown away the filthy, ragged tunic and cargo pants they’d found her in. “Unfixable.” Tula had said, holding the muddy, ripped, bloody clothing between two fingers. A driver’s whole life could fit in their truck, and Lizbeth’s van was no exception, after the Beyond she had nothing except a stranger’s clothes. Finch figured the

least she could do was buy Lizbeth some more, surely her truck would be enough to hold both their lives for a time.

“Oh.” Lizbeth looked down at herself, took in the utilitarian fabric that swallowed her up. “I forgot.”

It wasn’t clear if she meant the clothes or the fact that everything she owned was slowly being buried in sand out in the Nowhere.

Loss in the Basin was a funny thing, death of friends and family or livestock were widely mourned, and even celebrated in a way. The passing of a soul into Oblivion, recognizing their feats in life. All of it was done together, mourning and tragedy was so tied up in folklore and traditions and togetherness, that when there was solitary loss it hurt more. No one to help you bear the burden.

Finch grabbed Lizbeth’s hand, squeezing it to get her attention. “We’ll get you something nice, there’s got to be someone in this heap that’s got stuff worth buying. And then we’ll find you that Seer and get everything sorted out.”

Lizbeth huffed out a small laugh, “You’ve gotten a lot more optimistic than I remember.”

“Someone’s gotta be.”

* * *

The low hum of chatter and the clinking of utensils on plates greeted them as they walked into the dining room, as well as the delicious smells of whatever Tula was making in the kitchen. Finch could see her through a half door, swaying softly as she tended to something on the stove, a small boy sat on the counter next to her, a determined furrow in his little brow as he peeled an orange.

The rest of the caravan were already up, just barely judging by Copper's bleary unfocused stare and desperate grip on her coffee, the four of them sat at a long table by the single window in the room. Looking out on a dry grass field with laundry lines crisscrossed all throughout, sheets fluttering in the lazy breezes that swept past.

Between the dancing sheets Finch could see glimpses of the spry, orange body of her cat, his stance low and his haunches wiggling in anticipation as he watched a hare nibble on grass. Luckily for Finch C.B. could cover his own food costs. So she turned to the table and mentally wished the cat good hunting.

Without looking Hop kicked out the seat at the head of the table for Finch, allowing her to slip in and take off her crutches easily. She greeted the caravan members absentmindedly and received distracted waves and grunts.

Lizbeth cautiously sat on the edge of a bench near her, her back ramrod straight, staying still as if to fool them into thinking she wasn't there. The set of her shoulders and the jut of her chin and the ever present shaking in her hands told a story of a foundation of a house, strong on the outside, but slowly fracturing within.

Her narrative was only noticed by Finch though, next to Lizbeth was half-asleep Copper and across was Hop and Skip, arguing over their egg sandwiches. Nuts and seeds from the bread flying everywhere as the boys gesticulated animatedly.

Hop sprayed his brother with crumbs as he said, "I'm telling you; a swarm of bee-sized goats is way scarier than a goat-sized bee."

Finch groaned as she realized what the boys were talking about, and Copper nodded in response. Lizbeth blinked in surprise, and her body language relaxed as the anxiety she'd shrouded herself in fell away for a moment in the face of the bizarre conversation.

“Hop, you’re stupider than you look, I don’t think you’re fully understanding how big a goat-sized bee would be, it’s stinger would be the size of your forearm!” Skip nearly threw his own sandwich across the room with the dramatic sweep of his arm to punctuate his statement.

“Yeah, but you’ve seen goats eat!” Hop was standing with the passion of his argument. “If they were as small as bees, they would devour everything in their sights, we’d have nothing!”

“I bet that’s what happened to Everything.” Copper was mostly talking into her coffee, but the boys still turned to look at her. “Bunch of tiny goats, that’s really what the Nothing is.”

Hop and Skip laughed uproariously at the image and sat back down to finish their breakfast, repeating the image to themselves, and starting up their laughter over and over again. Over cups of coffee Finch and Lizbeth shared a smile at the antics of the younger drivers, the levity was like a sigh of relief after the last 8 or so hours the two of them had had.

A few moments later Tula and the little boy walked, and toddled, out from the kitchen. Tula had three plates balanced across her arms but still watched carefully as he brought a basket of toast. Finch noted in amusement that he still had that determined furrow in his brow. Quickly the innkeeper distributed the plates of fried eggs and sausage patties between Finch, Copper, and Lizbeth, before picking up her son so he could place the basket as well.

“Who’s this little guy?” Finch grabbed the little socked foot nearest to her and shook it slightly, making the little boy duck into his mom's shoulder, suddenly much shyer with the attention on him. Tula smiled tenderly and cupped his soft blonde curls.

“This is Morgan,” She turned to talk softly to the little boy next. “Can you tell the nice lady how old you are?”

Morgan shook his head and clutched onto his mother’s neck tighter, Tula and Finch chuckled. “Rhea never mentioned a cute little grandkid.”

Skip rolled his eyes, “Rhea never talks about herself, I’m sure if we didn’t have to stay here, she never would have told us about you either.”

“Hey, speaking of Rhea, what’s she doing in Veneer, do you know?” Hop said through another mouthful of food, and the whole table turned to look at Tula, everyone wondering the same thing. Except Lizbeth who Finch noticed was cutting up the food on her plate in tiny bite-sized pieces, her stare somewhere far away, her movements fastidious and slow. The sight of the minced eggs and sausage soaked in yolk made Finch nauseous.

“I’m not sure, the Council wasn’t very forthcoming apparently, but I heard back from her last night that she’s coming back today.”

“She say why?” Copper asked.

Tula bit her lip and bounced Morgan. “No, but she sounded mad.” Tula brightened up in the next second. “I’m sure it’s fine. Mom hates going to Veneer even on a good day.”

Finch nodded and turned to her own food, allowing Tula to return to the kitchen. As she grabbed slices of toast and started making her own sandwich, she tried to ignore the nervous twisting in her stomach. She’d never trusted the Council but everything Lizbeth had told her last night made their every move seem malicious and violent. Lizbeth seemed to be thinking along the same line judging by the way she picked her nail beds. Finch reached over to stop it, holding her gaze for an extra moment longer, trying to tell her that she wasn’t alone in her suspicions.

Lizbeth nodded slowly and put down her knife, looking down at her macerated breakfast before scooping up forkfuls and eating it, tiny bites at a time. After making sure that she’d eaten some, Finch finished making her sandwich and took a big bite, realizing she was hungrier than previously thought. Or maybe it was just the quality of the food that made her want more.

The bread was crusty and hearty and was covered with sunflower and pumpkin seeds. The fried eggs had crispy lacy edges and yolks that were golden and soft, and which soaked the bread deliciously. And the sausage was better than Finch expected, she'd brought meat from town to town before and she knew that innkeepers usually bought the cheapest selections, the offcuts, and undesirable pieces, to make into sausage just like this. But the warm spices and herbs within the meat disguised that fact. Even Lizbeth in her fragile mood seemed to be enjoying the meal.

* * *

Just after breakfast people who'd bargained for a ride started showing up at the inn, everything they owned strapped on their backs, three men, a woman, and two small children.

The woman was hyper-vigilant, like women traveling with everything they owned, and two small children tended to be, she kept a vice grip on her children's little hands and never got too close to the rest of the group. But It was the last man that Finch paid attention to, he had clean clothes and only a small bag, definitely not everything he owned.

He stood silently and watched the proceedings of the caravan and Tula welcoming the drifters in. He didn't say anything when Tula told them there weren't enough rooms and merely settled in a corner when she told the men they could stay in the dining hall for the night. He was quiet and unassuming, which told Finch that he had something to hide. On top of all that, the only emotion that had cracked the smooth facade of his face was confusion when he saw Lizbeth, like recognition was just barely out of reach for him.

Before he could grasp it, Finch hustled the other woman out of the inn and into her truck quickly, the pretense of their errand into town the perfect excuse to get away for a few hours. But once her hands were on the wheel and the lazy midmorning sun was in her eyes, she felt a bit

silly. She was suspicious, it was natural with her profession, and even before her accident she wasn't the most trustful, but she'd never run away from someone like that. Lizbeth's paranoia was rubbing off on her it seemed.

"Hey, did you recognize any of them folk?" Finch asked, watching Lizbeth out of the corner of her eye, trying, and failing to sound nonchalant.

"No, why, did you?"

"No, I was just curious cause some of them seemed...off."

"You mean the Council rep?" Lizbeth looked away from the derelict buildings she'd been staring at and locked eyes with Finch. "Don't worry, I saw him."

Finch cursed under her breath, of course he was Council, if something didn't fit, they were usually to blame. "You gonna be alright?"

"Depends on what he does, I don't think he recognized me though." Lizbeth was looking just over Finch's shoulder, picking at loose strings on her sleeve, picking and picking and picking.

"What happens if he recognizes you?"

Lizbeth swayed with a barely concealed flinch, her picking growing more aggressive. "He'll probably tell the Council; they'll probably try to find me." She blinked and slipped into the Sight, her many pupils roving around in her skull, dizzy with all the possible futures. "They'll want to know what I saw; they'll ask me questions. They won't believe me."

"What will you do?" Finch watched as the picking steadily became tearing, as the Sight disappeared, and the distant stare returned.

“I’ll probably try to kill them.” Lizbeth’s voice was flat even as she just about ripped the sleeve off her shirt. There was no doubt in her mind that given the chance she’d get revenge, no cap to her anger.

Finch couldn’t decide if it was her place to encourage her or stop her. Instead, she reached over and grabbed the hand that was still savaging the ruined sleeve. “We’re gonna need to get you a lot of clothes if you keep this up.”

Lizbeth finally broke her staring contest with the middle distance and looked down at the mess she’d made of her borrowed shirt. Before slowly grasping Finch’s hand and meeting her gaze full on. “Thank you.”

“I’m just doin’ what anyone else would do.”

“No, you’re not.” Lizbeth leaned over and hugged Finch, as best and tightly as she could in the awkward position, pressing so hard like she was trying to take refuge inside of Finch. Finch gave as good as she got, nearly pulling Lizbeth out of her seat. And for a few precious moments it was just them, bruising one another with their affections. Until someone pulled back, and soon enough the truck pulled away from the Inn and towards the town square.

* * *

Even though it had just been a day since they’d last been at the market at least half of the merchants Finch had dealt with had already left. The turnover in merchants at Ulys was as quick as the migration of sand in the Basin, the wind pushing them ever onwards. But despite the new faces Finch was easily able to suss out the drapers amongst them.

There were three of them, hiding out from the sun under the shade of upper levels jutting out onto the road, three women whose faces were leathered from years under the wind and sun. Their enormous bags of cloth and materials sat between the three of them, never lost from

someone's sight, and embedded in the ground next to them were three huge poles with premade tunics, pants, jackets, shirts, everything packed on to them. None of them stood up when Finch and Lizbeth approached, just watched them with their dark glittering eyes.

“Y’all open to trade?” Finch pulled out the bags of spices and tobacco that she’d tucked into her chair, holding them out for inspection. The youngest woman stood and took the bags, handing them over to the oldest. The old woman smelled the contents of each bag deeply, before nodding and packing her own pipe with the tobacco, gesturing with it as she spoke.

“These are very good, our wares are very good, we can trade fine.” As she spoke to Finch she examined Lizbeth, taking in the ill-fitting, gray clothes she wore. “Mahika will have what you want.”

The third woman stood up as her name was spoken and invited Lizbeth to look through the heavy boughs of the tree of clothing that sprouted beside her. Lizbeth kept her gaze locked with the older woman for a few tense moments before turning and beginning her search through the boughs.

“Y’all coming or going from Veneer?” Finch asked.

“Where did you get these?” The older woman’s words came out on a cloud of smoke, her gnarled hand pointing to Finch’s crutches.

Finch blinked at the sudden conversation shift and looked down at the aluminum legs she supported herself on. “They’re not for sale.”

“I’m not asking how much, I’m asking where did you *get* them?”

“My papa lost his leg after his foot died, his cane helps but it’s hard, mama wants to know for him.” The younger woman piped up before her mother could get any angrier.

“Mechanic in Miras, named Onyx, they got them for me, sure they could get some for your husband ma’am.”

“I make clothes for the Council.” The older woman’s leaps in conversation were going to give Finch whiplash. “I make them for 30 years now. My husband lost his leg 8 years ago, they never tell me where to get him a good chair. Councilman Detrick has a very, very nice chair, but he would never tell me where it came from. Crutches will do just as well, Thank you.”

Internally Finch winced, she’d spoken with the Councilman a few more times since that day in Miras and she knew by now that once he got absorbed in work the rest of the world fell away. She would bet he just never remembered the question asked of him.

“Onyx will be able to help get him a chair too, they do it all.” Finch watched Lizbeth grab random clothes from Mahika while keeping an eye on the older woman all the while. “Workin’ for the Council, huh? Pretty nice gig you got there.”

“Yes, I am the best there is, and the Council loves the best. When I die Mahika and Jaina will be the best, so they are coming to learn.” The woman spoke the grim proclamation with utmost certainty, and her daughters nodded sagely in response.

“Is that so?”

“Mama has the Sense.” Mahika spoke up from where she was getting down a jacket that hung high up for Lizbeth, who was frozen in the face of the new subject. “She saw her death, it’s coming soon, but we have time to prepare.”

“Is that so? Liz and I were comin’ out here lookin’ for a Seer, could you help us out?”

“Can you read me?” Lizbeth moved away from Mahika who was skillfully folding up bundles of clothes, never taking her eyes off Lizbeth.

I don't do readings for others, I'm not a fortune teller." The woman's smile went sly around her pipe. "Especially not for people who can read themselves."

"Please." Lizbeth paused to, Finch assumed, use her Sense, her voice going slightly hollow as she spoke. "Geetika, there's something coming that I can't see. It's hiding from me; I need your help."

Mahika and Jaina were exchanging confused looks, behind Lizbeth's back, but neither her nor their mother paid them any mind. The air between the two of them was growing tense, the weight of their Sense palpable, like a lightning storm, raising all the hair on Finch's arms.

"If it's hiding from you do you really want to see it?"

"Would I be asking you if I didn't?"

Geetika sighed and took a long draw from her pipe, her eyes closed in concentration, but when she opened them the many eyes of the Sense looked back at them, at all of them, in all times and places. She sat there quietly observing for a while, before suddenly resurfacing with a gasp. Her expression twisted in concern and confusion, a far cry from her previous smooth facade of confident observation.

"Something evades my Sight as it evades yours." She took a steady pull on her pipe. "I don't know what can be doing this, but I see many, many futures, where a sandstorm blows over the Basin and leaves all of us dead and mutilated. If this comes to pass you will be the last to die, only once you've seen every other body shall you die."

Lizbeth's face paled and for a moment Finch was worried she would throw up, Finch felt nauseous herself, remembering Lizbeth's vivid descriptions.

"Is that all that you, see?"

“No, stupid girl.” Geetika jabbed Lizbeth’s arm with her pipe, a sneer pulling her mouth.

“Stop looking for yourself, look for everyone around you and you’ll see the other path. Your fear is blinding you from the choice you need to make.”

“Of course, I’m scared!” Lizbeth cried out, pushing the accusing hand away from her.

“You just saw why! It’s not that easy.”

“And now I am scared.” Geetika said, her tone firm. “But I will get up and continue my life, live out my days taking care of my people, and until I die, I will wish that you had not asked me to read you.”

“I’m sorry.” Lizbeth sounded so small. “I needed to know.”

“I know you did.” Geetika waved Lizbeth away, taking the final draw of her pipe and exhaling with enough smoke to almost obscure the haunted, weary expression on her face. “Now please, go.”

Part Three

One Week Later

Chapter Thirteen: Closure

For what felt like the fiftieth time since they'd gotten on the road Finch worriedly looked at Lizbeth in the rearview mirror. Each time the same sight greeted her, a stern bundle of blankets turned away from her, with C.B. snuggled up against her back. After their talk with Geetika a few days ago Lizbeth had grown quieter and quieter, the inconclusive result from her fellow Seer throwing her down a deep pit of uncertainty, and if that wasn't enough Rhea's news had made nothing better.

She had confirmed what the two men in the market had claimed: The Council wanted to send out more Seekers. Either to find the lost group or to go South and explore uncharted territory, as if any of the Beyond was charted or known. But this time they weren't pulling a whole caravan off the road, some sense must have found its way into their talks, though the alternative was not much better.

"Each caravan must provide a Seeker." Rhea had said with a scowl etched into her face and vitriol in her words. "The Seekers are due at the next contract upkeep for each caravan, and if we try to abstain, we're all breaking contract."

Though it had just been the caravan meeting to discuss it, outside while doing maintenance on their trucks before heading out, Lizbeth had heard, eavesdropping from the kitchen window. And when Finch returned to her room the medic was already mute with panic, sitting frozen on the bed, nails digging into scars, teeth digging into a lip, fear of the future pouring off her in waves.

And to top it all off, the first stop on the new route was Klorik. Klorik where the Dustwalkers lived, Klorik where the rest of Frank and Marta's kin were. Kin who had no idea that they were grieving a lost brother, sister, son, daughter, uncle, niece, blood, and bones they'd

once called family. Lizbeth was barely eating at this point, the stress and despair of the last few days too heavy to bear.

Finch had tried to divert the route from Klorik as best she could, but it was a nonstarter. The routes had been decided on days, if not weeks previously, Finch participated in the decisions as much as anyone had, and they'd already sent their route to the Council. And if the finality of the Council wasn't enough the eagle-eyed mother and her children had already arranged for transpo to Klorik, and after Finch vaguely explained and pleaded to Rhea about why Lizbeth was suddenly joining their caravan Finch was on very thin ice with the caravan leader.

The one small relief amongst all the trials and hardships was that the Council Rep had quickly left the caravan, getting off at Seron for some Council business or another. Leaving without having recognized Lizbeth, giving her a few more days of blessed anonymity.

C.B. hadn't left Lizbeth's side since she'd started to shut down, taking to her like she was a starved, shaking kitten pulled from the Hole. He sat up against her back or right on her chest if he could manage it, purring like a truck engine, occasionally licking her scalp like he was grooming her. If Liz wasn't in such a wretched state Finch would have a good laugh about it, but she was, so she didn't.

With a plunge of dread, Finch crested a hill behind Rhea and saw the glittering crow's nest that was the town of Klorik. Homes small and built partially underground, unassuming, to direct all attention to the rather impressive stack of scrap they had, flowing through the town like water. Dribbling down alleys and sprinkled across streets, pooling into a massive heap in the center, where everyone could add and take as they needed. And snaking up and away from the town was a well-worn path, seen from this distance by the chalky powders applied to it, pinks

and blues, purples, and greens, swirling together up the trail and over the crest of the hills and into the Beyond: the Dustwalkers road.

Finch didn't say anything to announce their arrival but all the same she heard a rustle of blankets behind her and turned to see Lizbeth leaning between the front and passenger chair, staring at the glittering pile of Klorik with a carefully blank face.

"How long until we get there?" Lizbeth's voice was rough, days of not talking.

"Won't be more than an hour, we need to take this downhill slow." Finch said as she shifted gears with the hand crank and slowed way down, falling into a snail's pace along with the rest of the caravan. She swore she could feel the tension of the suspension in the truck, the tenuous grasp the tires had on the ground, she gripped the wheel tighter as if she could reach down and hold onto the road herself.

Beside her Lizbeth climbed over the median and fell into the passenger seat, reaching back to scratch C.B. who remained sprawled in his undignified way. The two of them were silent for a while, Finch could practically hear Lizbeth thinking and Finch had to focus on the treacherous road ahead of her, even its lazy curves became dangerous at the angle they were coming into them at.

"Do you think I should-" Lizbeth started but was interrupted by crackle of the radio.

"Deer ahead, don't swerve, steady on. Over." Rhea's words were clipped and strained; Finch knew she hated the deer. At one stop a few weeks ago over a dying fire and warm beers the caravan had gone around talking about gruesome animals they'd spotted from the Beyond.

Rhea had creeped them all out with her vivid description of a whole herd of deer she'd seen once going up the mountain roads. Dozens of them, standing shoulder to shoulder, squeezed up against the cavern like walls of the roads, forcing drivers to drive through them and try to

ignore the flickers of eyes and ears and teeth that passed through their dashboard and truck, that passed through them and sent chills down spines.

Lizbeth leaned out of her seat, trying to catch a glance of the deer ahead of them, Finch gritted her teeth and tried not to see it. But passing through Rhea's truck bed was a sickly, bone thin deer, and behind it a sightless fawn, no eyes to stare down the headlights with, but its gaze never moved away from the truck ahead of it.

As she drew nearer Finch held her breath, old superstition, hold your breath so the deer don't suddenly become corporeal when you run them over, she didn't think it made any difference, but it made her feel better. She could almost feel all the drivers behind her mimicking her, Hop, Skip, Copper, and all her passengers, half a dozen people together hiding in plain sight from creatures that couldn't hurt them. But the fear made them tangible, and their held breaths made them strong.

Finch didn't loose her breath until the deer disappeared from her mirrors.

"What were you sayin', Liz?" Finch says in the breathy gasps of too many words and too little air. Lizbeth didn't respond for a while, and Finch hesitated to look away from the road for even a second, so she worried that the conversation had officially died when Lizbeth spoke up and revived it.

"I've never seen the deer, I kind of thought people were making them up. Weird."

Lizbeth murmurs. "I'm glad it wasn't the birds; I hate the birds."

"Might want to brace yourself then, if I remember correctly there's always a few in Klorik."

Lizbeth sucks in a quick breath and groans. "Of course, of course there's birds there, why wouldn't there be birds, that's perfect."

Finch hears Lizbeth sigh forcefully before slamming her head against the headrest, and she can't help but chuckle. "You're really being put through the wringer, huh, Liz?"

Lizbeth lets out a humorless chuckle. "Yep." Popping the 'P' loudly.

"Don't forget, Lizzie, I'm here with you, I'll scare off all the birds for you."

"That presupposes a lot about their psyche if you think they can be scared, I've seen them in the Beyond, they're ruthless."

"A bird's a bird, just cause they're spooky doesn't mean anything."

Lizbeth laughs at that, too loud and too long for what Finch had intended to be a comforting statement, and for a moment Finch feels hurt, until she hears the wet hitch of a sob amongst the laughter.

"Marta said something like that, right before she and Frank skewered and barbecued some of them. They taste awful."

"I bet."

"I should tell their family, right?" Lizbeth sounds like she's standing at the edge of a very tall cliff, one foot out, ready to take the plunge, but desperately wishing someone will pull her back. Finch wished she could see her expression, wished she could try and gauge just how ready she was to take the plunge, wished she could measure the toll these past few days have taken on her.

Finch doesn't respond for a moment, pretending to concentrate on the twists she's taking. Debating if she should pull Lizbeth back, if she should give her an out from this most dreadful of tasks. The family doesn't know that tragedy struck their loved ones, and if Lizbeth needed an extra month or so to tell them, then they still wouldn't know. She's the only one that knows, but on the other hand, she's the only one that knows. She has a responsibility to the family, a

responsibility to gently give terrible news, a medics secondary job. She's surely had plenty of practice.

"Yeah, I think you should."

Lizbeth sighs, but she is not hurt, or surprised, she knew the right answer when she asked the question, and she knows what Finch knows. Not only is she the only person who can deliver this news, but she's the best person to do so.

They lapse into silence again, Finch carefully watching the road ahead of her, Lizbeth looking out the window and up at the sky, carefully watching for wheeling birds.

* * *

If trucks could sweat the caravan would be dripping as they trundled into Klorik, the strenuous ride down to the sparkling town blessedly over; with only one other deer encounter on the way down. Finch had done this drive plenty of times in the past, and she was pleasantly surprised that the new hand crank set-up had performed just as well. Though discovering any sort of flaw during that drive would have been disastrous.

What remained the same as her previous visit to Klorik though was the strange disinterest the people seemed to show the caravan. Every other stop their trucks would be swarmed with eager people looking for new things, useful things, delicious things, anything, but not in Klorik. They were tight knit and strange and Finch could see them in their windows just above the dirt street watching the trucks with appraising eyes.

More interested in the trucks than in their contents.

Finch wondered how Frank and Marta ever got involved in caravan life; she would never have expected it from former Dustwalkers.

As they pulled into the town square, parking at the base of the giant scrap heap, Finch hopped out of the truck, pulling herself forward in her chair, to get into her truck bed and pull out their ace in the hole: a box of broken down, beat to shit radios.

She'd grabbed the useless machines when she'd stopped into the Ulys radio tower, checking it over on Councilman Detrick's request. The station worked, it had to, it was so pivotal for the busy town, but it had been as cluttered and dark as the one in Miras had been. Cycles and cycles of records piled up, closing in on the lone chair where the lone Council rep sat, frantically notating the flood of requests and communications that passed through the station.

They'd barely looked up when Finch came in, barely acknowledged her statement about coming on behalf of the Councilman, just waved her over to the switchboard and generator that kept the station running.

Instead, she'd started digging into the unstable towers filling up the small room, wanting to rip into the journals and manuals and organize them, but Lizbeth had been huddled and frozen in her truck, just a few minutes after the confrontation with Geetika, just a couple minutes after her last hope had slipped through her fingers.

So, Finch had moved quickly and grabbed the biggest things cluttering the small space, methodically hollowing out the station of old radios and filling up her truck bed with them instead. Bringing them forward to their final resting place, and when Lizbeth was out of the truck, called Detrick to let him know of the stressful backlog of the Ulys station, hopefully he'd free up another Council Rep to relieve the Atlas-like figure in the station.

In that dark room the radios had been clunky building blocks of oppressive structures, out here in the light, in front of the glittering scrap, they were like little treasure chests, and the citizens of Klorik eagerly left their caves to inspect them.

Once the ice had been sufficiently broken trade could continue as normal, dispersing a portion of the goods they'd gotten in Ulys, the food getting picked over in favor of anything else traded for mish-mash scrap contraptions. Water catchers, filters, rat traps, looms and even a sewing machine loaded up into the twin's truck.

Amid the hustle and bustle of trade Finch could not help but watch as the mother and her children climbed out of Copper's truck, watched as her sharp gaze picked over the crowd of people like the townsfolk had picked over their trucks. Until landing like a dart on a similarly intense looking man.

The two pushed past people, pushed deeper into the crowd to unite, their hands outstretched to one another's till they could collide and become one. He did not drop his dour expression, and her eyes never stopped scanning the people around them, but they held each other gently, and their children with great love.

When the man, the father and husband presumably, lifted the older child, a young girl in too big clothes, up onto his shoulders, he smiled just a bit, a flash of mirth. And when the mom hefted her little boy onto her hip to let him cling to her neck her flint and spark eyes softened for a moment.

Finch followed them as they exchanged words and trade with Copper before finally disappearing into the crowd, and as she watched them leave, she saw Lizbeth staring at them through the window. Her gaze on them heavy, as if they were a mirage and would disappear if she looked away, as if they were a portent and would punish her if she ignored them.

A family, reunited in Klorik, something that could never be said of Frank and Marta again. Finch could see the moment Lizbeth had the same thought, flinching away from the window before coming back to scan the crowd. Looking for faces she could compare to her

former crew members. Who did Marta get her nose from? Who did Frank share his deep olive complexion with? Where did their blood flow in this sea of bodies?

Finch had largely finished up her trading and was engaged in conversation as she watched all these moments begin and end and birth new ones. There were several older folks who'd come over to ask about her chair, her truck, all the mechanical bits of her anatomy. They reminded her a lot of Onyx and she missed the kid a lot but missed no chance to talk them up and brag about their technical prowess.

They'd been discussing the differences in foot pedal and hand crank driving, Finch petering out when they started arguing vehemently, though Finch could tell they were just arguing for the love of the sport not because they particularly cared one way or another. The two men were working each other up into fits when Finch absentmindedly interrupted them, staring at Lizbeth as she spoke, not even meaning to ask until she did.

"Y'all know the McKay's?"

"Yeah, everyone knows 'em, good folk that, weird though, some of them headed out to join you on the road."

"Guess the best way to find scrap is to run it into the ground yourself." At that the two men burst out into chuckles, immediately forgetting their previous arguments.

"Where are they at?"

"You'd know better than us, out on the road somewhere."

"Seein' the whole Basin like that Marta wanted to."

"Why she'd want that is beyond me though-"

"Not her- them- I meant the family, where are they in town?" Finch didn't want to hear about Marta, about her hopes and dreams and desires, those belonged to the dirt now.

“Oh, well head on down that road.” One of the men pointed past the scrap heap, to one of the spokes that came out from the central hub of the town.

“All the way down, they’re real close to the trail, love of hunt runs in them veins.”

Finch nodded, thanked them, and slowly closed her truck bed, Frank and Marta’s family were within walking distance, or wheeling distance as it were. She and Lizbeth were theoretically sharing the same air as them, if only they could pass along the news through that air, if only the family could inhale and understand.

Instead of attempting to develop telepathy Finch climbed into her truck, shutting out the noise of the crowd as she slammed the door and turned to Lizbeth.

“I found ‘em, I found your people.”

Lizbeth gulped, frantically petted the cat, and nodded. Then the truck rolled on, past the glittering scrap pile and collision of noise and conversations, further away towards one of the many buried homes, to a road that led out to the trail to the Beyond.

* * *

Darla McKay was painful to look at, as she was so clearly the mother and sister of Marta and Frank. She had the same narrow, shrewd face as Frank, but the easy, excitable body language of her daughter. She’d been eager to let Finch and Lizbeth in for the chance to peek at Finch’s chair, taking the two of them deeper into the cool dark house.

Past the dining room with a massive table, half of it taken over by two young kids picking at pieces of scrap, intently trying to make something out of nothing. The other half an elaborate potato dumpling making station between a woman close to Darla’s age and a much older woman, her skin and hair deeply worn down by years of Dustwalking.

More kin.

Darla did not introduce them to the folks at the table, and the folks at the table blessedly did not acknowledge them. Instead, Darla brought them into the deepest part of the house piled with chairs fashioned out of old tires and pillows made from seat upholstery, no sunlight broached the thick darkness and the hazy candlelight and incense smell made Finch feel as if they were deep in a dream.

Darla showed Lizbeth to a chair and left to find refreshments, leaving Finch and Lizbeth alone in the dark, hazy room. Lizbeth's leg was jumping madly as she repressed the urge to run and Finch leaned over to touch her shoulder, rubbing it comfortingly.

"You got this, Lizbeth, you've done it before."

"This is different." Lizbeth said, shrugging off the hand. "What if she blames me for surviving when her family didn't? I'm sure she'd rather I died, and her daughter came back."

"Maybe so, but that doesn't change the facts of the matter."

"So, you agree? You think I should have died?" Lizbeth whirled around anger and fear fighting for dominance on her face.

"I didn't say--"

"I found some cider! It's dusty but it'll still taste good." Darla said, rushing back into the room, carrying a thick bottle with a thicker layer of dust and two chipped, mismatched cups. She poured generous servings to her guests before drinking directly from the bottle. "Now, what can I do you for?"

Lizbeth gulped and shifted, opening, and closing her mouth, working on what she needed to say like trying to pry meat off a bone. Finch remained quiet; this was not her conversation to have.

"I was a member of your family's caravan; my name is Lizbeth I was--"

“The medic, you were the medic in the van.” Darla very quickly grew serious and quiet, leaning forward in her chair to hear everything that Lizbeth had to say. “Marty told me about you, said you were real nice except for the stick up your ass.”

Lizbeth huffed out a laugh. “That sounds like her.”

“What happened? They in town?”

“No, they...this is a different caravan...did they tell you about the Seeking mission from the Council?”

“Frank said the big folks needed Dustwalkers to show the way, where are they?”

“We went very far out into the Beyond and encountered something terrible.” The nervous frightened energy that had been carrying Lizbeth into the house fell away as she started giving the news, suddenly she was that sharp-tongued, eagle-eyed medic that had pulled Finch out of her truck. The weight of the responsibility, once unbearable, straightened her posture, evened out her words, molded her into the authority figure she’d been before the Beyond. “I’m sorry but your family didn’t make it out.”

Darla stuttered, physically stuttered. A hand goes to her mouth in shock, her leg twitches to get up, another hand clenched as if she would strike something. “How far did y’all make it?”

“It was hard to keep time, but I think we were about a week and a half out.” Lizbeth said tentatively, confused as to the extreme change in conversation.

“You were in the van, they probably had to slow to match you, and y’all gotta conserve fuel so 10 miles an hour, you drive dusk to dawn?”

“Much as we could, sometimes we couldn’t move because of the storms.”

“Underestimate then, so I’d guess about 1100 miles out.” Darla stood suddenly pacing excitedly, shaking her excess energy out her hands. “1100 miles out! My baby girl went farther than the sun! My big brother saw beyond the Beyond!”

“You’re...happy?”

“I’m astounded, I’m tearing myself apart inside, I’m ecstatic, I’m furious, ain’t nothin’ going to fix this, but at least I know they were champions before they passed, at least they were already in Oblivion.” Darla stopped abruptly in her tracks in front of Lizbeth, grabbing her hands in her own thin, calloused hands, “Thank you for telling me, thank you for coming to me.”

“Of course-”

“What was the something terrible?”

“What?”

“What got them? Was it those bears? Always thought Frank would pick one fight too many.”

“N-no it was something else, something in the sand.”

Darla nodded and sighed, standing up once more. “There’s a reason we don’t go out too far, not enough fuel, not enough food, not enough scrap. But mostly it ain’t our place, we don’t belong in Oblivion until we’re dead, maybe something out there was looking to rectify that.”

* * *

Emerging from the dark home into the blinding light of sun reflecting off the scrap mountain was painful and disconcerting. They had been loaded up with potato dumplings and unloaded with the weight of the grave secret.

As they got back into the truck to return to the caravan Finch reached out and squeezed Lizbeth’s hand. “I’m so proud of you, that must have been hard.”

“What if we alerted it?” Lizbeth was staring far off into the distance. “What if it didn’t know where we came from and we just walked right into Its territory and laid it all out?”

“What are you talking about?”

“It let me go, It followed me here, It’s hunting me.” Unlike the Lizbeth a few nights prior this was said with less fear and more careful consideration of the situation at hand. Not so much a terrible circumstance but a single thread in a larger tapestry.

“So, what does that mean? What are you going to do?”

“The only thing I can: prepare.”

Chapter Fourteen: Foresight

After Klorik Lizbeth did not stick quite so close to Finch and the rest of the caravan, some nervous energy made her unable to sit still and occasionally if you listened, you'd hear her muttering under her breath. The realization she'd had in Darla's living space had cracked open her tough exterior and inspired her.

What it inspired her to do was still unknown to Finch, she'd caught glimpses of Lizbeth sneaking away from their group to talk to older folks in town, but each time she acted as if she'd never left. And the night before they headed out Finch had been woken up by Lizbeth getting back into the truck, the sound of the door slamming and the smell of ozone on the wind behind her breaking the silence and thick humid heat in the truck where Finch slept.

There had been a terse back and forth, Lizbeth trying to avoid Finch's questions and instead trying to turn over into sleep. She'd tried to smooth it all over with repeated, "I'll tell you later, when I'm ready to tell you, let's just sleep." Eventually Finch let the issue go, more tempted by her pillow than by unraveling the mystery.

The answer came much later, after they'd left Klorik for Mille and completed their trade, a miracle considering that Finch, Copper, and Rhea couldn't stop sneezing at the ambient cloud of pollen and chaff that followed the people of Mille. Finch and her crewmates had camped out on the side of a dry grassy ridge to drink some of the rich beers and ales they'd procured, looking over the grain crushing windmills that dotted the town when they heard voices behind them on top of the ridge.

"Well like I said we're pretty self-sufficient, the trade is nice an' all but it's mostly for distributing our crops." The voice of one of the town leaders, Darren, Finch, and Rhea

recognized him and looked at each other in confusion. “Only thing is that there’s never enough people for as much as we have to do.”

“So, if you had more folks helping out, you’d be pretty set.” When Lizbeth started speaking Finch turned around to look up and see her, standing in the poor shade of an unkept tree with Darren. Rhea was whispering to her, trying to ask Finch what the hell she was doing, but Finch didn’t know either.

“I suppose, yeah, though I don’t know why you’re asking, ma’am, I ain’t heard of no trouble from no one, especially not from the Council.”

“I know just...be watchful and take care of your people.”

“You do the same.”

Finch watched as Darren and Lizbeth shook each other’s hands and looked out over the town, Darren with pride in his community proudly written on his face and Lizbeth with a stern furrow in her brow, thinking. The two had a moment of just appreciating the view before they recognized the caravan below them.

Darren waved at them happily, “Howdy, folks!”

Lizbeth beside him had the look of someone who had been caught, Finch was sure she had the look of someone who had done the catching. Unfortunately, even after having been caught Lizbeth was still dodgy about what she was doing, to the constant aggravation of Rhea.

“Finch, if we don’t know what the hell she’s up to, why is she still here?” Rhea’s anger, covered in tight professional courtesy, made Finch’s skin crawl. “I get that she needs help, and I ain’t opposed to you helping her, but we’ve got jobs to do and us worrying about her ain’t helping us do them.”

“I’ll figure it out I promise, just give me till Dentra, she’s just not ready to talk yet.”

Rhea pinched the bridge of her nose and grumbled, “You know I didn’t think it’d be you I’d have a problem with hiding girls away in your truck, thought for sure it’d be Copper breaking hearts all over the basin.”

“We’ve still got half a route, don’t doubt her just yet.”

So, with the most tentative agreement Lizbeth continued with them, assuring Finch repeatedly that she was almost ready to tell her.

The road between Mille and Dentra was not nearly long enough for Finch to contemplate whether Lizbeth’s secret was worth all this fuss. She was glad that Lizbeth seemed to be recovering from herself. She still slept terribly, plagued by nightmares and visions, though during the day she was confident and focused on her plan. But all the good news could not amend Rhea’s declaration, and Finch just wanted this all swept under the rug so that her friend would stop pissing off her crewmate.

Regardless of the drama amongst her caravan the drive remained monotonous and to try and alleviate it and keep Lizbeth grounded in the moment with her Finch kept asking Lizbeth to point out things she saw on the drive.

“There’s a bunch of stones stacked into a tower.”

“That patch of Roadbeetles is awake in the day.”

“I think I saw some little owls scurrying around.”

“It smells awful here.”

You could always smell Dentra before you saw it. Animals and their shit made the air thick with stink, the same scent of fuel only rawer, more fecund, the smell of fuel before it’d been processed. Despite it, Finch still felt her stomach growl at the idea of the food awaiting them.

Minced beef in a 24-hour stew, hot curried goat legs, grilled intestines, pickled pig's feet and snouts, a buffet of meat, an abundance known only in Dentra.

Even Lizbeth, as distracted as she'd been the last couple days, emerged from the dense fugue she'd been submerged in to salivate in anticipation. "Do they still make those braised hearts? I always liked them more than the livers."

"Last time I was there they were stuffing them with cheese and mushrooms and roasting them."

Lizbeth groaned and knocked her head back, "I'd kill for that right now, I'm tired of jerky."

"Don't say that in Dentra, kind folks there made that jerky."

"Listen we all have different opinions, and some of us prefer fresh meat instead of month-old leather pulled out of your backpack."

"To each their own I guess."

The two giggled to each other at the little fake argument and spent the rest of the ride dreaming about the meals they'd get in Dentra, counting down the Roadbeetle bushes until they finally got there.

* * *

As they rolled into town, passing stone enclosed ranches, hearing only faintly the squealing of pigs, and braying of donkeys, Hop and Skip jumped onto the radio.

"Home sweet home! Over"

Finch grinned affectionately, she knew that they hadn't been back to Dentra since they'd signed their driver's contracts, coming up on 6 cycles ago now, and they'd been buzzing out of

their skin in anticipation of returning. But as they drove further into town Finch had the feeling that the town was not waiting excitedly for them.

The streets were empty, no people out cooking or breaking down animals, no children and dogs running pell-mell between buildings. Unlike Klorik where an olive branch had to be extended every cycle, Finch had never known the Dentran streets to be bare like this. Dentra was one of the top food providers in the Basin, trade with them was important for every town their trucks passed through.

They came to a stop in a shuttered marketplace, with every table shrouded and empty of activity. For a moment Finch held still, as if the whole town had been joined together to surprise the next caravan, but with every moment that the marketplace stayed empty Finch grew more anxious. Beside her Lizbeth was no better, every moment without confirmation of living people was another moment that sand could sweep over them, that the It could come for her after tearing through the town and its people.

The tension was broken by Rhea and the rest of them hopping out of their trucks, feet hitting dirt, questions thrown out to one another, calling out to Hop and Skip specifically, evidence of life. Finch shook herself off and stepped out of the truck, tightening her grip on the handles of her crutches repeatedly.

“Boys, what the hell? You know what’s going on?” Rhea yelled out; her voice strained as she stretched the knotted mess of her back.

Hop and Skip scanned the empty expanse of their hometown, their eyes narrowing in confusion. Hop started knocking on nearby homes, and Skip wandered the tables of the marketplace to see if it could provide any answers. When neither produced people they came back together, looking as if they’d gained insight from the nothing they’d found.

“Hope Ma’s goats are ok.” Hop said, craning his neck around to look over the trucks as if their mother would be hiding behind them.

As Rhea and Finch shared a synchronous “Oh” of understanding Lizbeth and Copper shared a look of confusion.

“They stopped everything for a cow or something? Seems like a big fuss.” Copper said.

“Those animals feed the whole Basin, we treat ‘em like one of us, and when something kills ‘em we get to looking how.” Skip shot back, crossing his arms, and trying to make his wire thin frame more intimidating than it was.

“Why don’t you lead the way boys, find us your folks.” Rhea piped up, trying to stop a fight before it could erupt. Hop and Skip eagerly took to their new task, turning towards one of the many branching roads from the marketplace. Before they could even properly get out of the circle of trucks Hop stopped his brother, looking back over his shoulder.

“It might be a bit of a trek, Finch, do you wanna get the wheels out or are you good with the sticks?”

“There mud out there?”

“Does shit count?”

“I’ll go get the chair.”

* * *

Finch couldn’t imagine a better tour of the many homesteads and ranches that lay around than on the heels of two ornery, arguing, returning sons. For every fence they peered over looking for the bulk of the town one or the other would have a story about the sort of trouble they’d get up to in their young days. Teaching goats to hop over fences, stealing mules for joyrides, and unleashing herds of sheep from their pens.

“Mr. Hal would always threaten to have us strung up and hung in the middle of town every time he caught us around his gates.”

“But Mr. Hal has a crap memory and he forgot who we were every time we left.”

“Glad he did too, there’s plenty of carcass hooks in town and I don’t want to meet the business end of one of those suckers.”

Nearly half an hour later the boys finally tracked down the missing townsfolk, standing in a clump in the northernmost field. From a distance the horde looked like a single mass, no individuals just a part of the greater whole. As they neared it was easier to pick out the people there, bowed heads and linked hands, and scattered around the groups and sometimes amongst the people themselves were cows.

At the gate Copper hesitated to enter the field, Lizbeth held onto the open gate, undecided.

“Are you sure we should be here for this?” Copper said nervously rubbing her arm. “It seems pretty intimate.”

“Skip wasn’t wrong earlier, animals here feed us, ain’t wrong to pay ‘em respect. Folks here will appreciate that we recognize that.” Rhea said, gingerly stepping around cow patties.

“Being a good trader is fitting in with all the people in the Basin, the good and the bad.” Finch responded, taking the time to look all her young crewmates in the eyes. Trying to seem wise and impart her hard won tricks of the trade.

Copper shrugged and followed the rest of the caravan, Lizbeth trailed behind, gently shutting the gate.

* * *

As Rhea and Finch had expected the townsfolk had been unperturbed by the caravan joining in on the mourning. Hop and Skip slipped amongst the people easily to slide in alongside their mother, who, without skipping a beat, put her arms around her sons.

Finch could not enjoy the sweet sight of their reunion for long as she finally saw the subject of the impromptu funeral. Half a herd of dead cows, all slashed down the middle to let many pounds of innards fester and rot on the ground, their hooves and eyes gone.

Behind her Finch heard Lizbeth inhale sharply, but there was a different weight to it than Copper's own sob-heavy inhale, it was heavy with understanding, with latent panic.

The farmer spoke kindly about the calves and milk the girls had provided, he talked about how they'd roll around in the dry grass and how he'd miss the full sound of the herd mooing, a sound less potent now that it was half-culled.

Finch tried very hard not to look at the dead cows, instead looking out at the horizon, at the rest of the field empty of evidence of intruders despite what the townsfolk around her theorized quietly. She tried not to look at the cows and see Marta or Frank or Dennis, tried not to see a dead future spelled out in spilled intestines and stomachs. The scene left very little room to doubt Lizbeth's story.

Once the farmer finished talking the crowd murmured apologies and thanks for the loss of the cows and the meat they'd soon provide. Once the farmer put his hat back on the folks with blood-stained canvas aprons approached the cow carcass' and set to the job of giving the beast its final sendoff: providing the best meal that it could, artfully cutting around the open wounds and spoiled meat.

Eventually the crowd recognized the traders in their midst, and Hop and Skip amongst them, the final meal of the cows becoming a celebration of the incoming trade and the returned

sons. Amidst the cooking and feasting and trading and storytelling Lizbeth sidled up along Finch, waiting patiently as Finch haggled with one of the blood-soaked butchers for good fresh meat to take up to Veldyl.

When Finch and the man shook hands and the trade was finalized Lizbeth motioned for Finch to follow her, taking her to the edge of the marketplace, standing for a moment to take in the sight of all the happy busy people, coming back to their lives after a moment of considering how it could end.

“You saw it right?” Lizbeth’s tone was an odd mix of eager relief and heavy dread; she didn’t want to be right, but she didn’t want to be the only one who knew the truth. She awaited more shoulders to help carry her burden.

“It’s terrible, Liz.” Bile rose as Finch remembered the sight of the cows, she wished Lizbeth had been making it up this whole time, an elaborate prank pulled by her and the cows and any minute they’d come knocking through the market baying and causing a fuss. But the delicious smell of roasting meat confirmed the very real danger they were all in.

“I’m trying to protect them, everyone, all over the Basin, that’s what I’ve been up to.” Lizbeth said after a long few moments of just watching the movement of the people, smelling the rich, freshly killed meat being grilled, dried, marinated, prepared in every way it could.

“I know you can be more descriptive than that, Lizzie.” Finch said, watching as Hop and Skip helped their mother, a wild-eyed woman barely above 4 feet tall, by flipping a massive rack of ribs on the grill as she dexterously slathered it in thick, glossy sauce.

“I know the It is coming. It's following me. It's skirting the borders, but I’m not going to let it kill everyone. I’ve been talking to people, telling them that they need to prepare for the worst, that they need to be able to survive with just themselves and their town, outside drivers

and the Council.” The newly found confidence that Lizbeth had found over the past couple days was evident in her tone, firm conviction, and relief at finally finding something to do in the face of the impossible.

“Trying to put me out of a job?”

“When the It comes, jobs aren’t going to matter, people being safe, people being fed and housed, that’s what’s going to matter.”

* * *

“What in Oblivion are you talking about?” Rhea was leaned up against her truck, her face was barely discernible as night had fallen thick and black over the town. It was not helped by the fact that on the other side of the line of trucks were massive campfires, happy people sharing food and talking to Hop and Skip about what they’d seen. The scant light showed flashes of Lizbeth’s face, but Rheas was lost to the shadows. “You were one of them Seekers and I’m only now finding out about this? When I was in Veneer Council was tearing their hair out ‘cause they hadn’t heard from you folks.”

“We were a little busy-”

“Being killed and traumatized I heard you.” Rhea got up from where she was leaning and started pacing along the length of her truck, revealing glimpses of her tired, frustrated face.

“Rhea, please just hear her out.”

“Gaffer, I ain’t happy with you neither!” Rhea said ferociously jabbing at Finch. “I understand you wanted to give Liz here time to recover or whatever, but this is big stuff! You need to tell me these things.”

“It wasn’t *my* news to tell!”

“It’s not *our* responsibility to fix the whole Basin! We’re just doing a damn job; we don’t need to be going around doing the Council’s too.”

“They’re not going to do anything; they don’t know everyone is in danger.” Lizbeth said, stepping forward between Finch and Rhea, doing a bad job of de-escalating their fighting.

“And whose fault is that Miss Sense? Don’t you think they’d do something if they knew?” Rhea came up into Lizbeth’s space, her frustration and irritation evident even in the dim silhouette of her tense back.

“Do *you* think they’d do something? I don’t even know if they’d believe me!”

“Well, we’ll never know now.”

“Ok, listen.” Lizbeth took a step back, holding her hands up. “Whether or not you agree with my choices doesn’t matter right now, what does matter is that people are in danger, and we have the power to help them. Will you please help?”

Rhea groaned and looked up at the sky, drawing the silence out longer and longer as she contemplated before finally looking over at Finch.

“If there isn’t actually a disaster coming to kill everyone I ain’t going to be happy with either of you.”

* * *

Between plates of food Lizbeth and Rhea talked to the other members of the caravan and leaders of the town, trying to pinpoint what folks needed to get safe and close up. Finch had participated in the conversation for a while but when her legs started flaring up in pain she quietly dipped from the conversation and turned down for the night. Taking newly made jerky and slices of raw offcuts from the cow into the truck with her.

For a while it was just her and C.B., her chewing on smoky jerky and him eating the slices of beef from her fingertips. About an hour later the truck opened and Lizbeth hopped in, and as soon as the door closed behind her Finch could see how stressed and overwhelmed, she was from the night.

So, without speaking Finch invited her into the bed besides her, Lizbeth took the invitation graciously, curling up against Finch, her head resting on Finch's chest while her other hand reached down to massage away the burning, prickling sensation around Finch's scars.

The only sounds were the engine-loud purring of C.B. who sat between Finch and Lizbeth's bodies, luxuriating in the warmth of his humans, and the distant muffled sound of conversation. Firelight lit the windows and mirrors a warm orange, and the truck was perfectly cold from the night chill. For a moment the only thing in the world was the three of them, surrounded by the sturdy frame of Finch's truck.

Chapter Fifteen: Surmountable

“We need to go around; this is going to take too long!”

“The road is fully blocked, and you want to just leave? They need help!”

“We got to go see your mom, jackass! My family is up there, and they might be in trouble!”

In the deep canyon leading up to the mountaintop town Veldyl, Skip, Lizbeth and Copper stood arguing in front of a monolith of crushed rock, scree, and mud from a rockslide that had blocked the path. Rockslides were uncommon, but not impossible, and Rhea was grouchier than normal having had their plans thrown out the window.

“Will you children *stop* fighting?!” She said slamming a hand down on the map spread across her hood that she and Finch had been looking over. The young caravan members quieted down, but Lizbeth’s face only grew redder in anger at the moniker being thrown at her.

“Then what’s the plan, Rhea?”

“We can’t hear ourselves think over here with all your squabbling’ we’re gonna need another minute.”

“Hey!” The reedy voice of Hop called out to them from on top of the rock pile, having delicately climbed atop to scout ahead. “It don’t go too far! It’d probably only take us a day or two to clear it out!”

“Thank you, Hop, now for Oblivion’s sake, get down before you kill yourself!”

Hop scoffed and went to brag about his skills before shifting rocks and gravel under his feet cut him off and he went very quiet and very still for a moment before climbing back down as quick as he could.

“Ok, boss, two days to clear this out then we’re back on track, we’re town heroes and we don’t need to report a change in schedule, pretty good, no?” Finch said calmly, trying to remain a steady, neutral presence between the many rising voices.

Rhea glared at the rocks as if she could move them with her mind. “If we’re late getting to Veneer, we’re contract breakers, and I don’t want to put the kids through that.”

“What if we cut a stop later? Like Miras or Barrai?” Hop said tracing a line of his proposed route on the spindly lines of the road map,

Finch froze, the memory of those cows flashed in her mind, there was very little time before Lizbeth’s fears became reality for all the Basin and Finch did not want the last memory of her sister to be the shape of her sleeping form as Finch snuck out of their house and past her room. She didn’t want 15 years of unbroken silence to be cemented by the It, she didn’t want that bastard to break her family even more than it already was. Damn the contracts, damn the It, damn this rockslide and their very limited timeline, she was *going* to see her sister.

“How about this, y’all get to work on the slide, and I’m going to call back to the Council, talk to my contact and see if I can’t get this sorted out.” Finch tried to give her best reassuring smile to Rhea and the rest of them, trying to project confidence she did not feel.

“You think that’ll work? We’re pretty far, what if you can’t reach the CCC?”

“If it doesn’t work, I’ll let you know, and we’ll be down the mountain.”

Rhea crossed her arms and surveyed the situation and the stubborn people around her, the heap of rocks blocking their path and the unseen lines of their route drawn in the sand before her. “Fine, but the instant it goes to shit you let me know.”

And with that Rhea was all in on clearing the rockslide, getting everyone else together to formulate a plan on getting through, and waiting in anticipation for news from Finch.

* * *

To Rhea's credit it took longer to reach the CCC than Finch had hoped, and even when the connection went through it was crackly and dim, like the radio waves were buried under the rocks that buried their road. It took long minutes of yelling into the receiver for whatever poor rep was on the other side to understand what Finch was trying to say.

Finally, *finally*, Finch got a hold of Detrick, and after another extended period of yelling in her truck she eventually got the situation laid out. The garbled response on the other end read as positive to her and she was grateful to be done with the bad back and forth. But as she went to holster the receiver she hesitated.

She had a senior member of the Council on the line, now was as good a time as any to let them know the situation, what Lizbeth had seen, what was coming for the Basin. But besides the fact that it was an absolute nightmare to communicate like this, Finch knew that it wouldn't do much at all.

Even if she got the message out and Detrick understood the weight of the situation, she knew he wasn't the most respected or appreciated voice within the Council. No matter the urgency of the situation there would be no dissemination of the news that would tear focus away from seeking missions or contract breakers. So, she let the conversation die, and watched from her truck as bit by bit the rockslide gave way.

* * *

Hop's estimation of how long it would take them to clear out the slide was thankfully an overestimation, by the end of the day they had gotten enough out that the trucks could fit in. The paint jobs would not survive the attempt, but it was a small price to pay to make it through.

Once they'd passed the slide everyone but Finch were too exhausted to keep driving so just a few feet away from the crevice they'd carved out they parked it and settled in for the night.

Finch tried to hide her nervousness at them staying amidst the canyon, worried that another rockslide would strike them while they slept, but more worried about scaring the rest of the caravan. So, she tried to distract herself with the beauty of the walls around them, smooth orange and red sandstone walls, curving gently from years of wind whipping around the corner and carving away at it bit by bit.

Copper as well, dirt covered and sweat drenched as she was, seemed deliriously happy with where they'd found themselves. She laid out on top of her truck telling ghost stories of miners haunting the mountains to scare Hop and Skip, lamenting that Onyx couldn't be there with her to return home.

The next morning, they drove slowly up the winding mountain path, Finch the only driver not as sore as a full body bruise, even Lizbeth in the passenger seat was grouchy with body pain, picking at cuts and whining. She wouldn't even let C.B. stay on her lap for all the pressure he wanted to put on her crying legs.

Her lamentations got cut short when she looked up and saw the freewheeling form of a bird, circling above the path they drove. Her whining stopped in a choke, and she tensed up for something terrible. Finch looked over when she suddenly fell silent and followed her gaze up to the sky, catching sight of the bird as well.

"Oh, don't worry about that, ain't one of those birds you met out in the Beyond. It's a hawk up there, it's hunting right now."

"A hawk?" Lizbeth said, not quite believing, but nonetheless she leaned forward to see the bird tracking its movement.

“Beautiful birds, saw one up close once, I’d gotten a flat tire in the middle of a drive and had to get out and I saw one dive for some Roadbeetles, it flew inches above me head; fucker tried to give me a haircut.”

They had passed the time up to Veldyl swapping stories such as that, weird moments on drives, superstitions they hadn’t quite shaken, even going back to childhood memories, reveling in the difference between life in Barrair and life at the Library. Literacy, books, and teachers surrounding them, a grand expectation of their role in the future of the Basin; life for Library kids was weighted as much as it was privileged.

Compared to Barrair: extreme heat, dwindling water resources, and being able to look at every adult around you and see exactly how your life would go, but there was also extensive time in the outdoors, elaborate games amongst the children, and the wonder of watching glass in every shape and form come from their loved ones.

Their discussion was interrupted as they got closer to the town by the sight of the mines. Along the road would occasionally be mine shafts leading deep down into the earth, where iron could be pulled and other precious metals and minerals for life in the Basin. As miners came out of mines for various reasons a cry went up at the sight of the trucks, excited yelling passing through like a wave over the evidence of the cleared road and the omen of incoming goods.

They didn’t even make it into town before the trade started, the miners came up out of the ground en masse, approaching the trucks and waving them down. What occurred was a convoluted mess of yelling and bookkeeping, even busier than the crowded streets of Ulys, Finch and the rest of the caravan would call out goods kept in their trucks and the miners would lay claim to units of trade, coming back with an offer of pulled material or goods kept in town, if the

deal went through the miners would give the caravan a name of a partner or family member in town who could fulfill their end of the trade and take the goods off the caravans hands.

Usually, it was up to drivers to remember all the names that went with which trade and what they were supposed to receive in kind, drivers had to have an ironclad memory to trade in Veldyl, and older drivers did, Finch and Rhea had no problem noting all the facets of the transactions. Luckily for the younger drivers though Lizbeth sat on the top of Finch's car keeping an ear out for confirmed trades and writing them down, doing the logs for the drivers who couldn't do it themselves.

Despite all the noise and craziness that they were all immersed in, Finch managed to catch sight of Copper reuniting with her family, and it nearly gave her a heart attack. Copper had been standing on her tailgate finishing up her trading, yelling out to Lizbeth to finalize the details when she spotted an older woman and a young man around her age, her aunt and cousin, who were fighting their way to Copper's truck.

The moment she saw them Copper shut up and dove for her aunt and cousin who seemed as startled as Finch watching her fall. Luckily for everyone Copper and Onyx's cousin was big and sensible and caught the wild young woman before she fell to the ground below the crowd's feet. Her bright smile and the excited, if harried, expression of her cousin was enough to sooth the fright of watching her jump off.

Though they finished up trading and the miners eventually dispersed the day wasn't done yet and Copper's aunt hopped into the truck with her, sending her son back to work, as the drivers continued into town to finish the transactions. And very quickly a mirroring of the road outside the mines occurred with wives and husbands balancing children as well as older relatives

and young gangly siblings and children all gathered to wait for their names to be called and the price to be named.

When the sun was setting and the trade was final done Finch looked around and saw the same exhausted, overworked expression on her crewmates faces that she was sure was on hers, and without even the pretense of post-trade discussion or attempts to fulfill Lizbeth's objectives, everyone fled to the nearest bed. They were all beyond ready for the difficult day to be over. Despite the hardship though, every one of them was able to go to sleep deeply and well, content with the knowledge of a hard day's work, even luxuriating in the hard-earned burn in their muscles.

Grateful for the reminder that they were alive and good at their jobs, and that together, not even a rockslide or the overwhelming waves of trade and noise could stop them from continuing to move forward.

* * *

In the still of the night, the radio crackles. The truck is long dormant, its driver and passenger sleeping, curled against one another against the chill of the night. Nestled between them: a cat.

The radio crackles without power, the humans stay asleep, eyelids part to reveal one irritated, green, feline eye. The radio snaps and pops, static pushing through the silence. The cat yawns and stretches, flexing his claws against the pale wall of his human's flesh. He jumps over her and bounds to the dashboard.

Static fills the space, taking up the warm spot where the cat was, replacing exhaled air, digging deep into bones and flesh. The cat smacks the dashboard, annoyed at the disturbance, the

static roars louder. The cat yowls startled and darts under his human's seat, luminescent eyes narrowed in hunt.

Wolves howl, teeth snap, the last sighs of the dying, the sounds of something coming closer, patient, constant, infatigable. The sound overwhelms the mind, destroys the silence, it is a story with no end, only ever marching forward.

The cat smacks the dashboard, and again, and again, trying to kill a persistent pest.

With one last burst of activity, one more moan of pain and malicious chuckle, the static dies down, lurking around the edges, but slinking away for now.

The cat licks his paw, and returns to his humans.

Chapter Sixteen: Reconciliation

Everything in the Basin could change and Barrai would remain the same, hot, sand-filled, and silent. They were entering around midday so most everyone in town would be asleep, waiting for the chill of night to continue their work, whether it was glass blowing or sand sifting.

Finch could remember the nocturnal routine even after all these years, the feeling of warm, silky sand running through her fingers as she scooped it into her sifter, the blast of heat like the sun when she came into the glassblowing workshops. The sight of her sister sweating in front of the bright light, blowing, and shaping the glass with such a casual confidence that it made the work seem effortless.

But Finch had never received a response to her letter, and the memory of her sister wounded her as much as she missed those simpler times.

Lizbeth kept looking over at Finch, twisting her fingers together endlessly as the tense silence persisted, unsure of how best to comfort Finch in the moment. Finch disregarded the many furtive glances and kept driving, trying to get her breathing under control as she rolled to a stop in front of the public house. Behind her Hop and Skip came to a stop as well, the absence of the rest of their caravan only another on a pile of things that was causing Finch stress.

When they were preparing to leave Veldyl they had further discussed Lizbeth's plans with the rest of the caravan, getting everyone on the same page before they moved out. And to Finch's surprise, Rhea had suggested she and Copper go to some of the dry towns to convince people to leave, and to transport them out.

Finch had expected Lizbeth to debate more over whether she would want to go speak with the people in the dry towns or to come with the other half of the caravan to Barrai, but it had been an instantaneous decision for her.

At the sight of the empty town the other crewmates looked to Finch in confusion, but she just shook her head and headed towards the inn, searching for rocks, and stepping stones beneath the sands with her crutches.

As they ducked into the public house, they had to pause to accustom themselves to the extreme darkness from the extreme brightness of the outdoors, the only light coming in came from slivers of cracked curtains covering the windows. At the bar was a bored looking woman mending clothes, the only person besides the newly arrived caravan who was awake in town.

She looked up in surprise when she noticed the people entering her establishment, as if she hadn't heard the trucks parking outdoors, and when she made eye contact with her Finch internally groaned.

Raz was the nosiest, most loose-lipped woman Finch had ever met, and she would not be surprised if by the time the rest of the town woke up, they'd already know Finch was back.

"Well, I'll be." Raz said, drawing out her words, before throwing her mending to the side and leaning over the bar to smirk. "Finch Gaffer, in the flesh, we all thought you'd died out there you know."

"No, you didn't." Finch said with a sigh, walking up to the bar, ignoring the bug-eyed looks Hop and Skip were sharing. She hadn't explained the difficulty of her return to her caravan, not interested in baring her wounds and tender past. But she was realizing now that it was probably just a coward's mistake. "Can we get some rooms, Raz?"

“What? No hello? No, how are you? No, how have the last 15 years treated you?” Raz said with mock offense, not even pretending to go for the logbook of the public house, far more interested in the story of the day that’d just walked in instead of doing her job.

“How’s Jay, Raz?”

“They make ‘em rude on the road, huh?” Raz said, picking at her nails. “Haven’t seen much of your sister since she got hitched and had those cute kids, ain’t no time for a drink with a full house.”

Finch’s heart dropped in her stomach, she was right, a sister-in-law, an aunt. Titles that had been waiting for her in this town, titles she wasn’t sure she deserved. “Kids?”

“Yeah, but you’ll have to meet them for yourself, won’t you?”

“Those rooms, Raz?” Finch said, suddenly overwhelmed with the news pouring in and the attention from her crew behind her.

“What’s with the crutches?” Raz said, ignoring Finch, in favor of leaning over the bar to better see Finch’s bottom half.

“Accident, rooms?”

Raz rolled her eyes and laboriously stood up to grab her log book. “Guess it wasn’t much of a good idea to leave after all, ain’t that right?”

“You’re a bitch, Raz.”

“Glad to see you too, Finch.”

* * *

In their rooms Finch had patiently sat through questions from her younger crewmates, watching their enthusiasm for her apparent secret fade with each difficult, heart-wrenching detail, until finally they slunk to their own rooms with lame excuses and apologies.

Finch had gone to bed, turning her back to Lizbeth before she could try and talk to her. Her patience and temper frayed with each minute they spent in Barra, each conversation she had about her decision 15 years ago, each foot she moved closer to her sister. So, she didn't stay awake any longer than she had to and let her troubles melt away in dreamless sleep.

Hours that felt like minutes passed and to highlight her exemplary hospitality Raz woke them up with a loud, clanging dinner bell, shouting up the stairs. "Traders get to trading!"

In a rush the twins ran from their rooms, stumbling as they shoved on their boots, cursing to themselves for sleeping so late as they saw the thick crowd that already encircled their abandoned trucks.

Finch did not move. Suddenly frozen at the idea that she was in the same town as her sister, same town that she'd grown up in, same place where her parents' ashes mixed with sand. For all Finch knew Jay was downstairs, she was right outside the door, she was on the other side of her closed eyelids; just waiting to say, 'I told you so'.

Finch didn't realize she'd started hyperventilating until she felt Lizbeth's firm hand rubbing soothing circles into her back, trying in vain to erase decades old knots of tension and stress, knots that originated not in the body but in this town.

"You're ok, everything's fine, deep breaths."

"Liz, I don't think I can see her, I can't do it."

"You can, you're already going to."

"How can you say that?"

"Because if we fail, you'll never get to see her again."

* * *

Finch sat in the middle of the town road and felt a shiver run down her spine despite the latent heat emanating from the sand around her. It looked the same as the night she left, immortalized in time, and yet she was so different. Moving through the crowd of townsfolk Finch had nervously hidden herself, ducking before eye contact could be made, moving away from people she vaguely recognized, and yet not one of them had remembered her.

She had aged, she'd gone through hell, but more importantly she wasn't nervously following her sisters determined pace. She had always been known as Jay's shy, awkward kid sister, Jay who was a fixture in the workshops, Jay who was outspoken with her ideas for how the town could be improved, Jay who was confident and reliable and respectable, Jay who took on the responsibility of raising her kid sister when she was just a kid herself after their parents died, Jay who'd been abandoned for all the good she'd done.

Finch was a different person then that wanderlust filled 15-year-old, but she couldn't imagine Jay as anything but her big sister.

She looked back over her shoulder and bit her lip nervously as she watched Lizbeth up on her truck bed calling out to folks below. Once Finch had gotten over her panic in the room Lizbeth had insisted, she take on the trading duties for Finch's truck. There'd been much arguing, responsibilities, contracts, family comes first, who's here to catch us? And in the end Finch gave in. She already had trouble saying no to Lizbeth, but when standing her ground meant facing a town full of people who suspected her dead and probably thought she was better off as such than she didn't much want to keep arguing.

So, Finch sat in the middle of the town road, paused in her journey to find her sister, all on her own. She remembered her parents' home, now Jay's home, knew exactly where it was. Down the road and turn left before the radio station, go past the Johnson's with their house full

of crazy kids and the Heartsfords who made bread in their ovens like kilns. Find the house with the naked tree and go through the broken gate.

Thick, dirt packed walls with windowless rooms that miraculously kept the rooms cool. Chandeliers in every room made by their father from glass scraps, colored glass throwing firelight into every corner, keeping it well-lit and brightly colored. Layers and layers of rugs from their moms' decades of weaving, making the house seem smaller but cozier. The memory of the smell of dusty rugs and pipe smoke curled in Finch's nose and threatened to bring tears to her eyes. As a child those small rooms seemed like the whole world.

But Finch didn't go down that well-trodden path, terrified of arriving and finding Jay's new family but no Jay, these fabled children and that boy, Cricket, now a man, her brother-in-law. Last time she saw him had been the night she'd left for good, he'd made dinner for the three of them, though she couldn't remember what he made, cause it'd ended up smashed against the wall and smeared on the floor after Finch and Jay had gotten in a terrible fight over her desire to leave.

She remembered his desire to be anywhere but witnessing a fight between his girlfriend and his kid sister painted clearly and desperately on his face.

So instead, Finch turned to the area of town that practically glowed, waves of heat emanating from it so thoroughly they could be seen like mirage sheen in the sky above them: the kilns. Jay would be working now that the sun had set, and even though disturbing her work was the last thing she wanted, she just needed to see her. All these memories laid so thickly in her mind, over her common sense, made Finch misty-eyed with nostalgia and bitter, familiar guilt.

The workshops were more of a series of interconnected buildings, each serving different purposes. The long flat kiln house where gloryholes burned bright and hot, sand went in and

glowing, bright, malleable pre-glass came out. Glassblowers and their assistants set on the glowing ooze quickly, shaping it and cutting it into what it needed to be. Finished pieces sent on to others for sanding, glazing, damage-checking, and sandmask making.

All the while kids working for family members, helping along the glassmaking, and earning more trade, would go out to the still warm dunes and sift the plentiful sand, bringing back only the finest buckets of sand.

As she rolled up in front of the building Finch could tell that work was only just barely getting started, the sun had only set a half-hour ago, folks were still waking up, still preparing to break their backs all night for the good of glass. Family units wandered in, little kids still growing accustomed to their new sleep schedule swaying on their feet and mindlessly chewing on bread rolls filled with jam.

Finch sat in the deep shadows of the nearby buildings and tried to get her heartbeat under control. She hadn't seen her yet but just the knowledge that Jay was close was too much to handle. Suddenly 15 years seemed like too short a time, too soon that this long, lonely chapter of her life could be closing; and the uncertainty of the ending was not helping.

Finch has not earned Jay's forgiveness, she knows, but the lack of a reply stings, and a part of her wants to feel slighted and spiteful, but her sister has long earned her time as the jilted party.

Contemplating the slights and wrong turns on the long road of their relationship, Finch heard a gasp, a small thing, barely audible over the bustle of the workshop, but it struck Finch to the core. She looked up from her lap slowly and for the first time in fifteen years, made eye contact with her sister.

Jay was sweaty and down to her undershirt in the heat of the workshop, busy already despite how early it was for her, carrying a bundle of blow pipes to distribute between the stations. She was older than Finch remembered, as old as made sense, as old as she herself looked, but it still caught her off guard. Thick, bold streaks of gray in her black hair, peppering the twisted knots on her head. Her dark skin didn't carry wrinkles but many burn scars from years at the job dotted up and down her arms, and her eyes, even from this far away, Finch could see how much worry and fire and exhaustion those eyes carried.

The blowpipes clatter against one another loudly as Jay scares a poor assistant thrusting them all towards him, not even waiting to make sure he has a firm grip before she darts out of the workshop. Her half-worn leather apron flaps loudly against the powerful strides of her legs as she crosses the distance between the workshop and her sister. Until she stops before the shadows that Finch sits in, wavering on her feet like the momentum wanted to carry her closer.

And for a moment they stare at each other. Jay's sharp eyes trace every line of the wheelchair, Finch tries to see motherhood and marriage in her sister, tries to see what changed while she'd been gone, but in the end, it was still her sister.

"Jay."

"Finch." Her voice was the same deep, scratchy alto Finch remembered. "You're here."

"I wanted to see you."

Jay bit her lip, flicking her gaze away for a second, so many possible things to say, all of them bubbling up to the surface, fighting for who goes first. Instead, she surges forward, leaning down to hug Finch as hard as she could, almost pulling her out of the chair with the force of it. "I *hate* you."

“I’m sorry.” Finch said, her words thick around 15 years of unshed tears sitting at the back of her throat. “I’m so sorry.”

* * *

Sitting in her old home, filled to the brim with her crewmates, her friends, and her sister's new family was bizarre to say the least. Her two worlds had collided so swiftly and easily that it was a wonder there'd been any fission between them in the first place. Cricket was going in and out between the cook pit in the yard and the prep he was doing in the kitchen, trying to make enough food for all the people that filled his home.

He was just as Finch had remembered, still an odd piece in the odd couple that made him and Jay. Where she was angular and slim, he was big and tall, Finch had always thought that she and him looked alike, except that sparkling grin of his, neither Finch nor her sister had ever mustered as much unrestrained joy in their whole lives as he did in every smile. His grin was out in full force, always a jovial host, orbiting around his family stray touches to Jay's arms and shoulders, easily catching high-spirited children before they hit something.

Their kids, Jay's and Cricket's, Finch was still trying to piece together the fact that her family came in such small forms. The twins, Sparrow and Dove never were there cuter or more energetic little girls. They took quickly to Hop and Skip, delighted by the secret club they were in of twindom, they rode on their shoulders, told them rapid-fire stories, and squealed as, outside, the boys tossed them high into the air; their thick curls flying up like clouds around their heads.

And the littlest one, Soul, named after Finch and Jay's father, sat on Finch's lap, under the watchful gaze of his mother, making a fine mess of the mashed squash he'd been given. Lizbeth was right next to Finch, smiling wide and unapologetically, delighted at the homey family scene. When Jay was distracted from the conversation or had to get up to help her

husband with something Lizbeth would bump shoulders with Finch conspiratorially. As if to say, 'look you did it!'

She and Jay weren't square, though the scene looked beautiful and happy Finch knew that their relationship was still frayed. Outside the workshop, after long minutes of an overdue hug they'd agonizingly opened the tender wound of Finch's departure. Jay had been abandoned by the last of her family so soon after their parents died. Finch had felt stifled and unsupported in Barra, invisible to everyone but Jay most days. Finch's letter had been long, *long* overdue and did not even begin to fill the ocean of apologies that was necessary. Finch had been deeply hurt by the lack of a response.

They'd started yelling, like they always did, never able to get through an argument without somehow reverting back to childhood. Arguing over toys and roles in whatever play session they had, the only difference being that as adults the argument didn't end in a fight. But eventually enough of their old pains were drained, even hurting less at the rare occurrence of being with one another.

But it was a victory nonetheless, despite the fighting, despite all that remained unsaid, she'd done it, returned to a place that the very intimation of its name had made her flinch in guilt and reunited with the last person she'd figured would want to see her. Yes, a victory.

In a day or two the caravan would leave, continuing their route, finishing their jobs, even going so far as to save the Basin if Lizbeth's plan worked, but Finch knew now that she had a little section of the Basin that was hers. People who'd think of her, miss her, want to see her for her. Family to see, like everyone else in the caravan. For the first time since she'd been on the road, she had a port to return to.

Yet she knew it was just a stop, as happy as she was to have rejoined her family, becoming a part of it at last, it didn't take away from her love of the road. Yes, the Council was a pain in the ass, and it'd damaged her terribly, but it was where she belonged. Hands on the wheel, wheels on the road, painted vistas of the Basin crawling through her windows, seeing everything and everyone.

The hand not securely around the infant Soul reached out under the table to grab Lizbeth's, who took it easily, not stopping in her conversation with Jay, curling their conjoined hands closer to her body, so they were as close as could be. Without the road Finch wouldn't have the life she had, a life she enjoyed, with people she loved, and she wouldn't have met Lizbeth. Incredible, strange, lovely Lizbeth, who helped make the inside of her truck feel as much like home as the warm room they sat in.

Finch shook herself out of her reverie and jumped into a story from the road, reentering the conversation and the circle of people, trying to distract herself from the happy tears that were threatening her.

She must be getting old if little things like long lost sisters and happy, healthy nieces and nephews, and wild, loyal crewmates and good, good friends would make her cry. Lizbeth squeezed her hand under the table and for a moment Finch felt joy enough to rival Cricket's grin.

Lizbeth Five

Wrote in the back of Finch's logbook, notes about inventory and trade are passed over for frantic, pen bleeding, writing.

The last time I had a vision in my sleep was the first time I ever had a vision. I was 11 and, in my sleep, I had foreseen the entire next day's lesson, who would teach it, what they would teach, who in class would misbehave, and who would get the questions right. Everything.

The next morning, I tried to convince my teachers that I had already sat through the entire day of lessons and shouldn't have to do it again. I cried when they didn't believe me, overwhelmed by the unfairness of the moment. To my little mind this was the biggest deal in the world. Eventually they believed me when I started predicting the lecture and behaviors of my class with frightening accuracy, and soon was released for the day.

The vision I had in my sleep this time was not so innocent, nor will be so easily resolved.

Storms covering the sun forever, the Basin reduced to Nothing, to join Everything in Oblivion. Teeth and bones, flesh, and blood, all gone.

It's coming.

It's coming soon.

We don't have much time.

Chapter Seventeen: Present

Very little in the world was better than drowsy half-sleep on a day with no responsibilities. Finch luxuriated in the ambient warmth of the room, of the body next to her, of the cat curled in the crook of her leg. The warm glow of sun on the far wall gave the room a dream-like quality, tranquility rarely found on the fraught road lived here in this room, in this half-sleep, in this time after the heavy work of mending a broken family. A light breeze fluttered the curtain and flitted across her, a perfect morning.

Except for Lizbeth frantically shaking her arm, that Finch could do without.

“Liz, what? I’m trying to sleep.” Finch mumbled, ready to turn over and away.

“Finch, we need to leave *now*. We’re out of time!” Lizbeth said, continuing to shake Finch’s shoulder, not letting her slip away for a second.

“Got plenty of time on the route, still got a few weeks.” Finch said, resorting to throwing the unused blanket over her head, her mind still far behind their conversation, still reaching for sleep and not conclusions.

“Not the route!” Lizbeth growled in frustration, ripping the blanket away from Finch. “It! It’s coming! We need to leave now!”

Finally, Finch’s mind caught up to what Lizbeth was saying and she rolled to her feet, with much cracking in her back, aches in her knees and grumbling. Similarly, C.B. yawned, showing off his pointed teeth and stood with an exquisite stretch, his back and tail curving like a tea kettle. Standing and fully looking at Lizbeth she saw a shadow of the woman she’d found on the road all those weeks ago, scared of her own shadow, paranoid to death, her hair was just barely growing back into a fine peach fuzz from her bout with the scissors.

“Ok, alright, I’m up, I hear you, everything is going to be ok.” Finch said, putting her hands gently on Lizbeth’s shoulders. trying to pull calm from the air, use it to put out the fires of panic Lizbeth was setting everywhere. “Deep breaths, you got a time frame for me?”

Lizbeth reluctantly took the advice and stopped near vibrating with anxious energy under Finch’s hands, taking deep, shuddering breaths, bringing her hands up to hold onto Finch’s, steadying herself. “I saw the full moon, and then everything was gone, that’s all I know.”

“Ok, the next full moon is in two weeks, we’ve got time.” Outwardly Finch hoped she seemed calm because inside she was freaking out. A part of her had doubted this was ever actually going to pass, she believed in Lizbeth’s story, believed what she’d seen in the Beyond, but she had a hard time believing it would come to them. That anything more dangerous than what they already dealt with in the Basin would approach.

“Not enough, we’ve only been through a handful of towns, hardly anyone knows they’re all in danger! We don’t have enough time to do this.” Lizbeth said tightening her grip on Finch’s wrists to the point of pain.

“It shouldn’t be our job to do this, Lizbeth, Rhea ain’t wrong about that.”

“But-”

“Council station can reach anyone in the Basin, they’re all working now, Detrick and I’ve been making sure of that, the Council needs to make the call, they’re the only ones that can.”

“But they’re-” Lizbeth cut herself off, gritting her teeth, staring into the middle distance. “They won’t care.”

“Do you want to go around the better half of the Basin in two weeks? That’s not near enough time.” Their current route had taken them a month to complete, though it had been long and circled the extent of the Basin, the territory they’d need to cover to hit every other town,

would be full of double-backs and going around the Hole. Not to mention however much time it'd take Lizbeth and their few caravan members alone to get people ready. No, overnight the job had become much too big.

“Well then we need to leave for Veneer, right now.” Lizbeth said, pushing away from Finch to grab their few belongings, jamming them into Finch's beat-up, dusty backpack that the two of them shared. “If the Council has to do it then we need to make sure that they do.

“I'll go get the others.”

Finch was stopped as she grabbed up her crutches by Lizbeth's hand in the crook of her elbow, staring far away with the Sight staining her eyes. “It'll take too long, traveling with a group, we need to leave *now*.”

Finch scoffed and finished latching her crutches, her actions angry and quick. “You're telling *me* to drive off on my own? You know exactly what that did for me, just because we're all in danger doesn't mean we need to go chasing it.”

The idea of driving solo, one truck on the big, empty road, felt like cold water splashed down Finch's back. The beetle in the cab, the sand in her mouth, her truck in that tree, she had learned the lesson the Basin tried to teach her that night, being on her own was a death sentence.

“You're not alone, I'll be with you, if there's any danger, I can Sense it.” Lizbeth said, talking low and slow, trying to instill Finch with the same calm she'd given to Lizbeth, like it was air they were passing back and forth. “And if you need to sleep, I can take the wheel, it won't be like last time, you're not alone anymore.”

“Well if It's coming why can't they come with? They're good kids, Liz, I don't want them to die-” The realization of the situation truly hit Finch in that moment, and she choked on sobs, suddenly overwhelmed with emotion. All these people that she knew and loved, if Lizbeth

was right, they'd all be gone in a few weeks, nothing but carcasses for the birds, like Lizbeth's caravan way out in the Beyond. She grabbed up C.B. despite his protests, as if the It would appear and go for her cat first among all the folks in the Basin. Her family, the people she traded with, the people who'd nursed her back to health and got her back on the road, all gone if they failed.

"We just need to get to Veneer as fast as possible, Finch." Lizbeth said, holding Finch's head between her hands, tears welling up in her eyes as she saw Finch's distraught expression. "We're not going to let them down, and we're not going to let them die, not if we leave *now*."

* * *

Fifteen minutes later and they were on the road, the sun warmed cab stifling with the added tension and anxiety of their mission. They drove out of Barrai alone and Finch's heart clenched painfully that she was leaving without saying goodbye face to face with her sister.

But bless Hop.

The young driver had been sitting in the main room of the public house eating cold breakfast that Raz had made and trying to hide his wincing of disgust with every sip of weak tea that he drank. Finch and Lizbeth, carrying a thoroughly annoyed C.B., had hurried down the stairs sounding like a rockslide approaching the front room, panic hastening them on. But when she saw Hop Finch immediately ran over and bear-hugged him, suddenly filled with so much emotion.

As quickly as she could, with Lizbeth trying to tug her out of the public house all the while, Finch explained the situation, explained that they had to leave, had to get to Veneer, that everything was about to start moving quickly. Hop had taken it all in stride, stifling the questions

that bubbled up and graciously agreeing to go pass on Finch's sincerest goodbyes and apologies to Jay; more then she'd done the last time she left.

For a long hour the tension in the truck remained, Finch's white-knuckle grip on the wheel and Lizbeth's fingers drumming up and down the arm rest of her chair. C.B. was blissfully passed out on the dashboard, undisturbed by his upset humans. Then, like they'd passed some invisible barrier their shoulders relaxed, their jaws unclenched, and Finch began to have feeling in her fingers once more.

They were on the road, they were headed to Veneer, Hop and Skip would take care of things in Barrai and with the caravan, they had done everything they could conceivably do, now all they needed to do was drive.

It took them a while to work up to talking and passing the time, guilty for wanting to take pleasure in one another's company when the stakes around them were so dire. But then Lizbeth recognized a clutch of plants that they passed as medicinal and started explaining how one harvested and utilized the miraculous looking clear, green goo that came from the spiked leaves. And Finch remembered a funny thing that'd happened to her at an old fork in the road they passed, circling up with another caravan, and challenging one another to increasingly impossible and stupid tasks as the night went on and the beers went low.

After describing how Finch had captured a field mouse in a beer bottle Lizbeth was in tears with laughter.

"I swear you've never seen a group of men more excited than when that little furry butt popped into the neck of it. They were calling me a witch, got me up on their shoulders and paraded me around the campfire like I was a Council member." Finch had to concentrate on not

shaking the car with her own laughter, keeping the wheel steady even as she couldn't stop giggling.

"How'd you get it out?" Lizbeth asked through her own laughter.

"Dropped the damn thing when they hoisted me up and the bottle broke, I watched it run away, fine as anything, but I swear it turned around and flipped me off." Finch tried so hard to finish her story out stoically, but Lizbeth's scream of delight ruined it. "Now don't get me wrong I deserved it, but I found it awful rude."

Eventually sanity prevailed but once their heads' cleared Finch was surprised anxiety did not pounce on her, yes, the circumstances were dire, but there wasn't anything else she'd rather be doing then sitting with Lizbeth, isn't anywhere she'd rather be. She couldn't help but glance over, hoping to catch a glimpse of the peaceful face Liz made when she zoned out staring at the road and was surprised to find Lizbeth staring back at her.

"Something on my face?" Finch asked, knowing there wasn't.

"No, you just look handsome is all." Lizbeth said easy as anything, cause for all the strife they'd been through together, this was easy. The two of them, always within arm's reach.

"I was going to say the same thing."

"That you look handsome?" Lizbeth said with a cheeky grin.

"No, you do, well, not handsome, pretty." Finch tried to reign her words in, suddenly shy. "Your eyelashes, I could stare at them for days."

Lizbeth blinked in surprise and rapidly flushed red, turning away with a shy grin of her own. The sweet words swirled in the air between them, in his sleep C.B. twitched and batted at something.

“Once we’re done, we’ll have all the time in the world.” Lizbeth said finally, gently reminding Finch of their task, but not saying no, merely later.

Later was a time that Finch was familiar with. Everything happened later, and it didn’t feel real until it happened now. Finch had always said she’d reach out to her sister and go to Barraí later, never holding herself to it. She’d always join a caravan later, on her next contract, or the next. But she was beginning to understand that later wasn’t just a box in her mind to lock away the hard things, later was the now she hadn’t met yet. And every decision she made that now a much better one. So, this agreement, this promise between the two of them, made later triumphant, made it sweet, made it something to fight for.

Finch felt the rumble of the road below the truck and felt in her bones that she was ready to fight for that future. Ready in a way she’d never been before, she wasn’t going to wait for decisions to be made, wasn’t going to wait for later to magically shift into now. She was going to go out and defend her now, make it what she wanted it to be, make the later so much better than the now.

Chapter Eighteen: Penultimate

As much as Finch dislikes Veneer even, she can admit that it is a sight to behold. The low flat lands between it and Ulys place Veneer upon the horizon like a jewel, and as they close out the last few miles to the Council town the sun rises behind it, painting the sky gold and pink beneath the filter of clouds and dust in the air. The station tower atop Council Hall glitters in the sunlight, basking in the attention.

The eye-catching display of morning upon the large town is not enough to dissuade the apprehension that emanates from the two women. It is a momentous, and weighted view that heralds them to the final stage of their plan to save the Basin; that tower could save everyone, if only the Council agrees.

As they drive further into the heart of Veneer Lizbeth only grows more antsy, picking at her nails, scratching her head, drumming on the dashboard, her nerves getting the better of her. They had talked long into the night, trying to keep one another awake, trying to prolong their time on the road before eventually succumbing to sleep on a bush-ringed shoulder of the road.

Lizbeth had detailed her dread at returning to face the Council of people she had once considered if not friends then honorable members of the community. She spoke about her anger; how could they do this to her? How could they not know what they'd asked her to do? But all that was nothing compared to her determination to succeed.

"I don't care if they don't want to do it, I don't care if they don't believe me, they're going to do the right thing even if it kills them." She'd said with a hard set to her face, speaking words out loud that she'd thought for weeks.

So, with that mission statement echoing in Finch's head, she turns down a road she barely remembers, towards Council Hall, towards the grand radio tower to connect all towers, towards their rapidly approaching goal. But when she turns, she finds the way thoroughly blocked and can't help but cuss loudly, the street is swarmed by people, leading all the way up to the Council, Public day. They'd forgotten.

Half the Basin was here, as eager to see the Council as Finch and Lizbeth were. To each petitioner their dilemma is infinitely more important than their neighbors, each situation a matter of life and death, whatever answer they receive one that will change their whole lives. For some it very well could be, but only Finch and Lizbeth knew that their petition truly held the whole of the Basin at stake.

"What the fuck are we going to do?" Finch said putting the truck in park with a little too much aggression. "It's going to take all day to get through this line."

Lizbeth glared at the scene outside the windshield, as if with just the power of her stare she could part the sea of people before them. When she spoke, it was so quiet that the crowd of people around them easily drowned it out. Finch leaned in closer.

"What was that?"

"We should call the Council, tell them we're out here."

Finch balked. "You wanna call everyone's attention down on you? You're going to get swamped by them."

"It's what needs to happen." Lizbeth said, her voice only quivering a little as she reached for the radio. She turned it on and before she could even switch to the CCC channel the cab was filled to the brim with the sound of static. High frequencies that strained the ears, low thrumming

that made you sick, and the static of intended connections, the static of something approaching, the static of It.

Finch tried to slam the radio off as quickly as she could, but she heard those voices again and she hesitated, her mom's working songs, her dad's bawdy stories after a long night at the kilns. Voices of ghosts filtering through her speakers. Beside her Lizbeth was frozen, hand clenched so tightly around the receiver that her knuckles were pale as bone.

"It's so close." Lizbeth said through clenched teeth, her panic bringing back that wild animal look in her eyes. Then the panic morphed, hot, liquid, fire filled her gaze, fury like lightning blazing within her. She raised her clenched fist and slammed the receiver on the dashboard, screaming all the while.

"I'm not afraid of you! You hear me! You're. Not. Going. To. Win!" Each word punctuated with another dent in the truck. After her final hoarse screech, the static suddenly gave out, like it could no longer sustain itself. Finch's ears rang in the silence.

Lizbeth breathed heavily, shaking with the exertion of holding so much anger in her body, and when a voice came through the radio, she startled so bad she dropped the badly abused radio receiver.

"Council Communication Channel, who am I speaking to? Over." The bored voice of a lazy council rep, Finch almost wanted to laugh.

"You go get Genevieve right now-" Deep breath, holding down on the button as if it would run away from her. "And you tell her Lizbeth fucking Park is alive. Over."

* * *

Just as Lizbeth had hoped the Council had quickly cleared the way for Finch's truck, the petitioners stacked five deep along the sides of the road glared at them as her truck rumbled down the now quiet road. Privilege was a line cutter; privilege was an unwanted neighbor.

Finch kept her eyes forward.

Next to her Lizbeth was practically luminescent with rage, any nervousness or anxiety she'd felt before had burned away. The radio static sparks a long overdue flame. Each moment they drew closer to the Council Hall was another nail in the Council's coffin. Finch could practically hear Lizbeth formulating her argument, preparing counter arguments, picking exactly how she was going to insult each of the people that sent her to die.

Finch wondered how necessary she was even going to be for this, if they'd need anything more than Lizbeth's quick, furious wit, to plow through the indecisiveness that plagued their leaders. She did not have long to second guess her presence, as quickly as the crowd had parted they had driven into the circular courtyard that preceded that Council Hall. Awaiting them were young Council Reps, craning their necks to be the first to see the miraculous return of the missing Seeker, and the Councilmembers. Eagerly watching Finch's truck roll to a stop, waiting with bated breath for Lizbeth to step out, like wolves waiting for a rabbit.

Finch makes eye contact with Detrick through the window, he doesn't know it's her, but she can pick him out from the crowd awaiting them. Small in his big wheelchair, excited for the grand news that awaits them but nervous to be out in the open. Before her accident, before this route she would have never presumed to once be familiar or friendly with a member of the Council, but despite what Lizbeth went through Finch still grabs her wheelchair from the back, wanting to meet Detrick eye to eye.

The instant Lizbeth is out of the truck she is swarmed by the Council, trying to assess her, trying to ask her questions. What did she see out there? Who is out there in the Beyond? Where are the rest of the Seekers?

Finch worries Lizbeth is going to start swinging at them, so she rolls forward and speaks loudly, her trading voice out in full force. “We’ve come to speak with you and propose something, will you hear us out?”

Lizbeth wrenches her arm out of Genevieve’s tight grip and retreats to behind Finch’s chair, attempting to take advantage of the limited space between her and all the Council’s many questions to regain her composure.

“Of course, we will hear out our Seeker, there is no question of that!” Genevieve doesn’t look away from Lizbeth for a moment, her anticipation undiminished by the rejection. Her eyes are wild like a haphazard pen across paper, ideas coming in too quickly for the ink to match, paper tearing beneath the force of the nib.

“Both of us, both of us are here to talk to you.” Lizbeth clamps on to Finch’s shoulder, solidifying them as a unit.

Genevieve blinks and looks down at Finch, noticing her for the first time. “Oh. Well, yes that’s fine I suppose.” Her enthusiasm returns quickly. “As long as we hear from you dear Seeker you can bring the whole Basin in!”

Lizbeth nods slowly, gritting her teeth, and is eventually coaxed within the walls of the Council Hall, not leaving Finch’s side for even a moment.

They’re taken into the inner meeting chamber of the Council, circumventing the larger hall where petitioners are brought in to have their requests heard and answered. Finch felt bad that their momentous arrival effectively derailed and shut down the Public Day for everyone

else. She is only marginally comforted by the fact that their issue will affect the whole of the Basin, everyone's lives, their good days and bad, rests in the Council's hands.

Sitting now in the chamber Finch has to hope that they will be able to think beyond themselves. They're on the second floor, a ramp enabling Finch and Detrick to make their own way up, where the walls are entirely glass. Massive windows that would have taken many days and many workers back home in Barrai to make. Allowing the occupants to look down on the busy hive of the streets of Veneer, but the view is quickly obscured. Thick, colorful, beautiful, dyed wool curtains from Dentra, enough to cover the floor to ceiling windows. Cider and glossy slices of fruit from Grainer sit on the table, like an afterthought.

The wealth of the Basin is stifling in the candle lit room, Finch can't help but count how much each element would be worth in trade, how much each was worth in time, months if not years of work surrounds her. The Council does not notice or care of Finch's turmoil at the sight of such riches, Lizbeth is too focused on the goal of the hour to notice either and they all settle in for what one party believes to be wonderful news on the miraculous return of their Seeker.

Their belief is quickly squashed as Lizbeth launches into the story of her time in the Beyond. She goes between trying to stay impartial and clear on the facts of the expedition, and slowing down to explain in great detail what horrors she saw. Her instincts swing between trying to stay a formidable and respectable opponent and trying valiantly to scare some sense into the Council.

She talks briefly about the work she's already done; about the conversations she's had with town leaders to prepare them for impending doom. She tells them about her vision, about how quickly it could all go away, about how they must do something about it.

“As Council and stewards of the Basin it is your responsibility to prepare for this incoming danger, you need to send out messages instructing people to prepare as much as they can to not leave their towns until it is safe. We need to shut down the Basin or risk all our lives.”

She ends her long spiel clearly and directly, giving them no room to misinterpret her ask of them, hardly asking them to do it at all but distilling into her words the unavoidable importance of their next decisions.

The Council remains silent for a few minutes, each member considering what Lizbeth has said, Finch tries to gauge their reactions, never a strong suit of hers. Most of them are contemplative, Detrick looks confused, but Barnaby looks at them with cool indifference, hiding a much deeper current of emotion.

“Shepard.” Barnaby says in a clipped tone.

“Yes, Barnaby?”

“Have you received reports of incidents such as what Miss Park has described?”

Shepard furrows his brow. “There’s been more accidents and animal deaths to the north than usual, that could be a result of this-”

“But have you heard reports of this, quite creatively named thing, the It?” Barnaby’s words are burrs in the sand, unsuspecting at first glance but digging in sharp barbs underneath the undisturbed surface.

Shepard frowns and turns more fully to Barnaby. “If there were sightings, I suspect there wouldn’t have been a survivor to report to me based on Lizbeth’s story.”

Barnaby stands. “So, as you say there are only coincidences to support Miss Park’s story, nothing more concrete than a few dead animals, and if Miss Park is not to be believed then this *work*, she’s been undertaking is criminal at best.” He begins to count off on his fingers as he

rounds the table. “Shirking contracted duties, taking on Council representative duties outside a contract, and *lying* to your leaders. A contract breaker if I have ever seen one.”

The room was dead silent after he spoke, young council reps furtively looking between Barnaby and Lizbeth. Fear still heavy in their eyes after Lizbeth’s story, but their fear of Barnaby sat deep in their bones, hunching down under the pressure of his presence.

“You just don’t want to lose your grip on Klorik!” Lizbeth jumps up from her chair, slamming her hands on the table. “You care more about staying in control then taking care of people. You’re a snake, Barnaby!”

“Lizbeth!” Vivian put a hand to her chest and gasped, truly shocked at the display from the Seeker.

“Do you doubt me?” Lizbeth looks over at the rest of the room, her eyes skating over Barnaby, making eye contact with every remaining member of the Council. “Do you think I’ve lied to you? That I would lie about the wellbeing of my crew and the results of our expedition?”

The Councilmembers share looks.

“Well it is quite a fantastic story you’re spinning for us.” Vivian says, shrugging at Barnaby.

“I don’t think you would lie.” Genevieve said paying careful attention to the grain in the table. “But I have a hard time believing what you’ve said.”

“What of the voices? What of the people in the Beyond?” Detrick seems genuinely distraught, hardly paying attention to the conversation.

“Whether or not y’all believe Lizbeth doesn’t matter.” Finch says speaking up at last, Detrick finally looks up from his lap at the sound of her voice, seeming to recognize her through

the haze of his grief. “What matters if y’all are going to take the bet that everything’s fine and risk everyone’s lives or if you’re going to do something about it.”

Once more the Council shares secretive looks, trying to communicate with one another and hide it. Finally, Shepard stands, moving between Barnaby and Lizbeth, hands up in case the two of them break out into venomous words again.

“I think we all need a break; give us a moment and we shall discuss what you’ve proposed. It is not something to be done on a whim.”

Lizbeth barely let him finish his sentence before stomping out of the room, leaving Finch with no choice but to follow, the heavy doors of the chamber slamming behind them.

The Last Stop

FADE IN

INT. COUNCIL HALL - INNER CHAMBER. DAY

The room is dark and tinged with incense smoke, thick curtains make the large room seem claustrophobically small. Only the core Council members remain, SHEPARD and BARNABY stand, arguing forcefully, VIVIAN and GENEVIEVE sit between them, biting their nails and looking furtively between the other members; DETRICK sits on one side of the table alone.

Uncertainty penetrates the room in a way the sun cannot.

SHEPARD

What happens when we turn away this warning and are wrong? Can we really sacrifice our people for our pride?

BARNABY

What happens if we bend to the whims of every vagabond that comes traipsing through our halls?

Vivian nods in agreement and stands with Barnaby.

VIVIAN

Yes, even trustworthy voices can lie.

Genevieve sighs and leans far back in her chair, staring holes into the ceiling like it will provide reprieve.

GENEVIEVE

I've known Liz a long time and she has never been one to mince words or tell tall tales, if she believes a threat is coming then I am inclined to believe her.

DETRICK

I want to hear the static again; I want to meet the outsiders.

Genevieve lunges forward, her chair clacking loudly as it comes back on all four legs, gesticulating angrily towards foggy-eyed Detrick.

GENEVIEVE

Oh, Oblivion, get it together, Detrick! We're discussing something serious!

VIVIAN

He's just confused Genevieve, there's no need to snap at the old man.

GENEVIEVE

Then why on earth is he even here! We're having a hard enough time coming to a conclusion without one-fifth of our debaters addled and delirious!

A knock at the door startles the gathered Council and before they can respond a COUNCIL REP enters.

COUNCIL REP

Councilman Detrick

BARNABY

We are in discussion! Leave at once.

COUNCIL REP

Councilman Detrick, you've locked the studio again, we can't get in for the mid-morning messages.

Genevieve gestures overdramatically at Detrick to Vivian.

Detrick blinks and shakes his head slightly, the clouds parting enough for him to make eye contact with the young representative and frown.

DETRICK

No, I've not. I left the key with the leather strap upon the hook.

COUNCIL REP

Well, it's gone Councilman-

Barnaby strides over and grabs the rep by the shoulder, hauling them back towards the door and pushing them out of the room. The snarl on his face withers any retorts from the rep, but before Barnaby can punctuate the eviction with an impressive slam of the door, he stops short.

BARNABY

Where has the Seeker gone? She was instructed to wait here.

The Council rep huffs and straightens their uniform.

COUNCIL REP

I don't know, sir, they weren't here when I left earlier, and they weren't here when I came in to speak to Councilman Detrick.

Barnaby ignores the pointed tone in the Council Rep's voice, instead analyzing the empty landing area with his chilled, furious gaze. Realization hits him like the door he didn't get to slam, making him waver on his feet.

BARNABY

Son of a bitch.

INT. COUNCIL HALL - RECORDING STUDIO, INTERIOR. DAY

The innate clutter of the Council Hall recording studio has been pressed into service as an impromptu barricade.

LIZBETH stacks boxes of journals and files and parts in front of the door, balancing half-broken radios atop it. At the desk FINCH reads from a hastily scrawled message, periodically wiping her sweaty hands on her pants as she talks.

FINCH

I repeat, all fuel workers are to return home or seek shelter in Miras, dry town residents are to seek transportation to Grainer, Mille, Seron, or Dentra. A threat is approaching the Basin and citizens must take shelter and prepare your stocks of food for no trade for the foreseeable future. Over.

Pounding at the door startles Lizbeth so badly she drops a radio from her tower and glowers at the face of Barnaby that fills the small window of the door.

BARNABY

Exit the studio at once! This is for Council business only.

LIZBETH

Keep going, Finch.

The door quakes under the pounding and kicking on the other side. Lizbeth puts her back to the barricade and digs her heels in, determined to keep the door closed.

INT. COUNCIL HALL - RECORDING STUDIO, EXTERIOR. DAY

Barnaby beats at the door and shakes the handle to break through while Council reps try fruitlessly to talk him down from his rage. The pounding on the door drowning out their words. Genevieve, Vivian, Shepard, and Detrick watch the scene in various levels of horror and shock.

GENEVIEVE

What is she doing?! This is insane!

VIVIAN

They're ruining everything!

BARNABY

(To Council Reps)

Help me break down this door, you worthless lay bouts.

DETRICK

But my studio!

BARNABY

The door is a small price to pay for reclaiming our authority.

VIVIAN

I find this makes Lizbeth's earlier warning less and less believable, if she is so unhinged as to do this, who knows what she saw in the Beyond?

SHEPARD

You're not seriously still considering more Seekers after all we've heard?

VIVIAN

Well look at her!

Vivian gestures to the small window in the studio door where Lizbeth is flipping off Barnaby.

VIVIAN (CONTD)

Obviously, we made a poor decision in sending her and her crew out, we'll do better next time.

SHEPARD

There shouldn't be a next time! People don't just randomly say their crew is dead or hijack Council property, Lizbeth certainly wouldn't. I believe in her claim, we need to prepare-

The loud cracking of wood kills the discussion, Barnaby and the Council reps have wedged a crowbar into the doorway and are splintering and shattering it to let them in.

A tense moment of held breath, of the reps and Barnaby leaning on the crowbar, and with the next exhalation the door slams inward, sending piles of junk crashing to the floor.

Detrick gasps and puts a hand to his chest while Barnaby rushes in.

BARNABY

Lizbeth Park you are in violation of Council law and shall be taken in as a contract breaker immediately!

INT. COUNCIL HALL - RECORDING STUDIO, INTERIOR. DAY

The recording studio is suddenly overflowing with people and archived things, Lizbeth is tense and ready to fight.

Finch grabs her wrist and hauls Lizbeth into the corner of the room behind Finch's wheelchair, sealing them into a tomb of radio equipment.

Before Barnaby can reach them, the many radios scattered throughout the room, active and working or not, suddenly erupt into static. The static fills the room in such deafening waves that there is no other sound in the world.

The Councilmembers stop hard, Council reps bumping into their backs as they eagerly listen.

DETRICK

It's there! They're back!

VIVIAN

You see! She just failed to-

FINCH

Wait! Listen!

Finch's commanding presence silences the Council members, even for just a moment, long enough for them to hear the voices, really hear them.

Lizbeth digs her nails into the back of Finch's chair, the static pounding away at her skull.

GENEVIEVE

Father? That's impossible...

DETRICK

Mom? Where are you?

Barnaby groans and falls to the floor, clutching his head as the static grows louder and louder.

BARNABY
It's...too much.

Dead council reps, dead fuel workers, dead dry town members, dead families with nowhere to go, scream at Barnaby, batter his ears until he's whimpering.

FINCH
You had your seekers out chasing ghosts, and now the ghosts are chasing us.

LIZBETH
(softy, to Finch)
Oh, oh no I can hear Marta.

Tears fall quickly and suddenly from Lizbeth onto Finch's shoulders.

MARTA (O.S.)
Please Oblivion, please sand, don't take us all. Let someone see the light again, let them return home and love and laugh and cry and live and protect our people. Let there be Everything again.

Lizbeth shudders and crouches, trying to stop her heart from breaking to pieces and tumbling to the floor.

FINCH
Our stations can save the Basin, Detrick, ain't that beautiful?

Detrick focuses on Finch, shaking himself out of the fugue the static sent him into. They keep eye contact for a long time.

DETRICK
They brought the voices to us, are they so bad? Are they?

In a flurry of movement Lizbeth stands and moves out from where Finch has caged her in, approaching Barnaby who is still on the ground groaning at the onslaught of noise.

LIZBETH
Will you try and stop us? Will you reverse our course?

BARNABY
(Through gritted teeth)
It is the Council's responsibility, it is our Basin, not yours.

Lizabeth crouches down to look Barnaby in the eyes.

LIZBETH

The Basin is everyone's and it is everyone's responsibility to keep it and ourselves safe.

Lizabeth stands once more, staring down each Council rep and member until they shy away before looking at the desks full of radios.

LIZBETH (CONTD)

We're going to be ready for you, Marta's going to get her wish.

The static dies and Finch grabs the sweat-smudged paper, once more giving the warning.

FADE OUT.

Epilogue

If you ask, many people will say the protective measures, the endeavors to halt trade and return wayward souls to homes and towns, was an overreaction. Many will doubt the necessity, many will never believe the threat that was reported, will never believe that It came to the Basin.

They will say that the onslaught of sand and thunderstorms after the towns closed in were natural, that the dark mountains of clouds that filled the sky to the brim was to be expected of the season. That the handful of people who died outside the walls were lost to lightning or other mundane methods, that the cracking open of their chests, their missing eyes, and appendages, all the fault of scavenging beasts.

Those that knew, those that looked for teeth in the sandstorms, would wait with bated breath every time a storm rolled over, expecting this to be that day that closed walls prove not enough for the stalking predator outside their doors.

But eventually there would be a day when the storms would lessen, when the sand would settle, when sunlight, that had become so rare and so precious, would blossom across the sky, dappling the Basin in warm strokes of light.

Eventually the predator would leave, seeking easier prey, and the remaining rabbits could come out of their dens and mourn the lives lost, and rejoice the closeness to their fellow rabbits in the proximity of panic. Communities more solid and whole than ever before, lives less lashed to impromptu trade and rain.

And on that day, two people, shaking in relief and holding one another as if it was all a dream, would step out from their shared apartment in Miras. An apartment that held memories of their journey, of their strife deep within the bricks of its foundation. They would stand in the sun,

one on two legs, one with crutches, and they would look up at the streaks of clouds tangled and strewn across a perfect blue sky, they would see no sign of sand or teeth or ghosts awaiting them.

They will embrace, as lovers, as friends, as survivors, they will feel the rhythm of life beating frantically into one another's chest, they will take comfort in this reminder that they are alive, together, after everything, they are alive.